

A ‘National Beverage’: The ‘Sugary’ Tea-Ritual in Nancy Cato’s *Brown Sugar*

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Nancy Cato was born in 1917 in South Australia and was an art critic, wrote historical novels, biographies and volumes of poetry. Before she became a full-time writer she worked from 1935 to 1941 as a cadet journalist for the *Adelaide News* where she recalled that, as a woman, she had to fight to get into the reporters’ room. She was an advocate for the Jindyworobak Movement and edited the 1950 *Jindyworobak Anthology* with the aim of promoting indigenous Australian culture. As for the many themes developed in her works, which included environmental issues, Cato paid particular attention to the story of those groups excluded from the mythology of the nation. Among the many characters in her novels, many feature two legitimised as ‘excluded subjects’: women and coloured people. On the one hand, strong outback women such as Philadelphia Gordon in *All the Rivers Run*—a saga of life set on the Murray River and published as the trilogy of *All the Rivers Run* (1958), *Time, Flow Softly* (1959) and *But Still the Stream* (1962); Aboriginal women in *Queen Trucanini* (1976); two generations of outback and wartime nurses in *The Heart Of The Continent* (1989); and, a character who wanted to become a famous newspaper reporter in the 1930s in *Marigold* (1992). On the other hand, in a non-fiction work she deals with the story of Daniel Matthews and his Maloga Mission to Aboriginal people on the Murray River in Victoria, *Mister Maloga: Daniel Matthews and his River Murray Mission to the Aborigines* (1976); and novels other than those mentioned above, such as *Brown Sugar*, dealing with the exploitation of those Pacific Islanders called ‘Kanakas’ (1974).

The two themes that unfold in many of her literary works are developed in a novel that was acclaimed as successful and that Cato herself considered to be her ‘best structured book’ (de Berg 1975): *Brown Sugar*. The novel tells the three-generation history of two Scottish-Australian families named Duguid and Johnstone and traces several intertwined stories. At the head of the Duguids, Reverend Andrew Duguid is a poor missionary wanting to plant the word of God in the Pacific Islands and then in Queensland. Of his four children, three of whom die before the age of 4, the survivor, Emily, marries the Pacific Islander Efate, who works on Mr Johnstone’s plantation. In order to live her life with him she defies her parents’ will and unveils the contradictions embedded in their beliefs. Emily and Efate have four children: Tula, who marries an Aboriginal woman and returns to the Pacific Islands to spread God’s word; David, who dies at the age of eight, poisoning himself by mistake while playing outside the house; Fiona, who marries a white guy and fights for her people’s rights; and, May who marries Tombua. As for the other family, Mr Angus Johnstone is a member of the sugar aristocracy in Queensland that exploits indentured labourers ‘blackbirded’ from their Pacific Islands and obliged to work on the plantations for three years. He has three children: Dougal, as cynical as his father, who takes advantage of an Aboriginal woman (Estelle) who will bear him a child, Tombua; James, who does not agree with his father’s exploitation of the coloured labourers; and Helga, who rebels against the patriarchal values of the family and abandons her husband to set off for Europe where she succeeds as an opera singer.

First published in September 1974 by the London publishing house Heinemann and listed for the Miles Franklin Award of the same year, the novel came out in Australia five months later in February 1975 (de Berg) and was also published as a mass market paperback under the title of *Chindera* in 1976 and 1985, by Dell Publishing and Signet respectively. As for its writing, the year 1972 was paramount for the development of its themes and the researches behind it. Cato shared part of her time with two great women whose life, whether incidentally or not, contributed in encouraging the writer's historical research in support of her novel. Judith Wright, a widow as was Cato, in 1972 had a reading tour scheduled in Noosa and Cato went with her for company. Seizing this opportunity and having already been fascinated by the sugarcane 'when I came here the first time for my honeymoon' (de Berg), Cato went to all the sugar towns in the area interviewing the descendants of Pacific Islander victims of the exploitation suffered on the sugar plantations. Kath Walker, the other important figure, spent some time at Cato's house after staying with Judith Wright—they had already met in 1967 in Brisbane when Cato moved to Queensland from South Australia with her husband to settle in Noosa. The two had a lot in common, as Cato herself wrote in a newspaper article celebrating Kath's life and work after Kath passed away (Cato 1993, 20). Certainly Kath's appeals for justice for her people, her lecture tours on the civil-rights movement during the 1960s, and her taking part in the campaign to preserve her ancestors' island where she lived from sand-mining, all encouraged the importance Cato herself gave to the process of recognition of minorities and the awakening of 'the consciousness of white Australians' (Cato 1993, 20) in order for 'minorities' to be part of the social fabric of Australian society and not second class citizens or, even, non-citizens. Therefore, it comes as no surprise that she dedicated *Brown Sugar* to Kath Walker, an Aboriginal poet who fought for Aborigines who were at that time considered less than people, not counted in the census and who still suffered under restrictive laws, but this dedication gives a significant importance to the value and the social function she gave to this specific novel in relation to Pacific Islanders' fight for recognition. Again, the two themes of her works can be traced in the life of a woman who was a member of a minority community excluded from the construction of the nation.

The period of writing of the novel can be considered one of transition when after WWII Australian society was changing and so was the construction of the idea of the nation. After 1945, because of the changing ethnic fabric of the society—forty percent of Australians were of non-Anglo-Celtic origins (Turner 50)—and because of the failure of the assimilation policy, the idea of the nation was shifting from the one promoted by the "Australian way of life" to a multi-cultural, pluralistic, tolerant society; in other words, from the White Australia policy to integration. However, the paving stones were rather uneven and revealed the difficulties of following this new path. In mainstream culture the narration of a 'national unity' was still conveyed through the bush-worker, the soldier and the lifesaver (White 155), all promoting the array of values of the Australian way of life (egalitarianism/fair-go, mateship legend, tolerance; Hage 70–73, Mcleay 42–43, Goldsworthy 219) excluding women and non-Anglo-Celtic people. It was from the 1970s on that writers started to shake up the mono-cultural discourse and to unveil its cracks: the 'Australian type' and the Australian way of life were considered racist, sexist and jingoistic (White 168) and the importance of the process of recognition was pointed out.¹

These cracks and contradictions in the official narratives of the nation ironically encouraged other perspectives that can be embedded in a process of construction leading to the 1990s concept of hybridity (Turner 82). After all, hybridity means accepting other identities, constructing a nation of multiple identities and, in the case of Australia, coming to terms with its own past history of colonisation, exclusion, exploitation and racism. It is in this scenario

that Cato's *Brown Sugar* unfolds the past to answer to the present in a process that goes from national purity to that idea of hybridity suggested at the end of the novel:

At Childers, Bundaberg, Maryborough, Mackay, Rockhampton, Townsville and along the Tweed River south of the border in New South Wales, the descendants of the Islanders who remained in Australia can still be seen. [...] The dry bagasse is flung into the furnace and consumed in the fierce heat; but some obstinate black smuts remain, which are carried high into the air and descend to smuggle the clean white sheets of housewives washing their linen in the sugar towns. (Cato 1988, 256)

The aim of the novel, as far as it is interpreted in this essay, is the recognition of a tale not told and, as a consequence, the reinterpretation of the identity of the nation from an inclusive perspective. In this light, the novel is in line with those critical thinkers of the 1970s and it anticipates those theories of the 1990s that will support an idea of the hybrid nation including all ethnic identities and women as expressed by Graeme Turner, Richard White, Susan Sheridan, Vijay Mishra, Bob Hodge, Benedict Anderson, among others.

As a fictional work of literature, the novel rethinks recognition, multiculturalism, and national mythology through the metaphors of sugar and the tea-drinking ritual which, rather than being simple descriptive elements, trace the path from class distinctions, racism and a white culture to the polyphony of national identities. It is to this literary device that I will now turn to develop the aspects discussed above.

Inventing Rituals of an 'Artificial' Egalitarian Society

In this section, the opposition between the tea-ritual as a metaphor of civilisation and its real social significance as shown in the excerpts below, will not be contextualised solely in the past but also in relation to the time when *Brown Sugar* was written. The importance of the novel in the 1970s is that, by giving voice to the Pacific Islanders' perspective of their history, it focuses attention on the forgotten people, on rethinking the nation itself not as exclusively white, and on awakening Australians' consciousness in relation to Pacific Islanders' current situation. Key questions that emerge are: What is South Pacific Islanders' life in Australia today? Why does the novel point out that they are still 'visible'? Does this necessity stem from the invisibility they are doomed to by Australia's white policies? As a metaphor has its own vehicle and tenor, so the past can be read as the vehicle, though with differences, of the present (tenor). In the light of this, I will analyse both the meaning of the domestic and rural tea ritual in the past to point out the understanding of the idea of the nation in the 1970s, when the ritual was still popular, and its relation to South Pacific Islanders.

While the ladies of Maryborough, Sydney, and London poised their sugar-tongs over the steaming bohea or Ceylon tea, while silver spoons tinkled against translucent china and gay young blades in cutaway coats lounged against the grand piano, stirring the delicate cups, did they once think of the social significance of that bowl of white compressed crystals? The human misery of the slave trade, the ruin of West Africa, the depopulation of the Pacific Islands, the wealth of the plantation economies in America, Fiji and now Queensland?

...

They ate jams and preserves, condensed sweet milk, chutneys, pickles and sauces, syrups and cordials of every kind which contained sugar as a main

ingredient, apart from all the sweets, chocolates, cakes, biscuits, éclairs, marzipans and tarts consumed all over the civilized world. . . .

The demand seemed never-ending, from the old swagge who dropped half a handful of sugar into his billy of tea, to the tray brought to Queen Victoria at tea-time at Windsor Castle. . . .

Out of this need fortunes were being made. In Queensland alone, ten thousand tons of sugar were being produced every year. (Cato 90)

Although the shift of taste from Chinese ('bohea') to Indian and Ceylon tea leaves in the second half of the 19th century exemplified the relationship between Australia and the mother country opting for tea leaves produced within the empire in order to prove its own self-sufficiency, Australia developed its own identity in relation to the consumption of what historians agreed to be 'the national beverage' (Blainey 357). The novel itself takes for granted that tea, as both a domestic and rural ritual, defined national identity; in fact, it points out how common the tea-ritual and the use of 'white crystals' were also in Australians' everyday domestic and rural settings. It also makes the equation between the ritual and 'civilisation': all the sweet food that came with the tea-ritual and that used sugar as one of their ingredients were 'consumed all over the civilized world.'

Of the two rituals, the image of the bushmen 'round the campfire' using billy-cans as teapots and cups—a representation promoted through Lawson's poem 'The man who made Australia' (1901)²—symbolised those values of mateship, fair-go and egalitarianism of the typical Australian character even in the popular culture of the 1970s and after (Martin 91). The popularity of the ritual in the male world of the bush, gives away a lot more about the nature of the 'invention' of the idea of the nation than its 'artificial' egalitarianism. Homi Bhabha claims that nations are invented retrospectively. Although the domestic ritual was completely different from the rural practice because of its sophisticated etiquette and was identified with those values of stability and conservatism which mirrored the social hierarchical distinction at the centre of the Empire and which were perceived as a threat to national values (White 83, 101), the Australian domestic ritual was not always ignored as anti-nationalistic at the turn of the 19th century. The latter ritual was emphatically sponsored by the press of the time as quintessential to the Australian national identity since it was a beverage affordable by 'both rich and poor in the social world' (Knight 31); and in the city, when the plumber symbolised the fair-go value of the new colony, tea was usually drunk with the housewife (White 46). Thus, why has the domestic ritual been disregarded from representing the national identity? After all, as the novel suggests by mentioning both rituals, even the domestic one could have represented the identity of the nation with the same limits of the masculine representation of the bush ritual. As White claims, if the plumber was asked to tea, certainly no one would have asked the 'garbage man' (White 46). Instead, the nation that has been narrated looking back at the past is one still excluding the domestic sphere because of the artificial meaning given to it. The prevalence of one sphere—masculine and patriarchal—at the expense of the other, perpetuated even in the 1970s and beyond, the idea of a white Australian nation with no connection to Britain and which excluded women and certain other social groups. Having made this connection clear, it is obvious that Cato's novel points out the true nature of the 'invented' Australian nation.

I will now deal with the vehicle of the metaphor (the past) to better understand its tenor (the present). The equation between the 'white' crystals, the tea-drinking ritual and a pseudo-civilisation, justifying all its racial, exploitative and patriarchal consequences suffered by

coloured labourers and women, is also suggested in the novel through the character of Mr Johnstone. While the ‘merchandising’ of his daughter will be discussed in the next paragraph, his angry reaction to the accusation made by *Courier Mail* journalists of slavery being introduced in the colony and of ‘Kanakas’ being ‘taken by fraud . . . ill-treated, ill-fed and frequently flogged’ (Cato 1988, 51) shows that the rate of violence on his plantations was considered as simply acceptable and that in no way was it seen to taint the egalitarian, democratic idea of the nation and the frontier. After all, it was meant to be like that by Providence itself.

Mr Johnstone had taken up yesterday’s *Courier Mail* as he drank his tea. ‘Aye . . . aye,’ he muttered. Then he spluttered in his cup and put it down on the saucer with a crash.

‘Lies! Dom’d lies!’ he cried. A vein stood out on his forehead; he flushed dangerously. There goes his good mood, thought Dougal gloomily.

‘Lessen to this, Julia! “This Colony has attempted to introduce slavery to her shores . . . Coloured labour means ruin, social and moral, to Queensland!”’ . . .

He picked up his cup and gulped tea angrily.

... ‘God made the tropics for the black folk tae worrk in; white men were never meant to worrk ootside in the tropic sun. Do ye want to fly in the face of Proveedence, then?’

Ironically, his convenient blindness to material violence is framed by the ritual of tea-drinking which reminds the reader ‘that his wealth was built upon flesh and bones’ (Cato 1988, 63) and that the tea-ritual was an iconographic metaphor of othering. This opposition is set in the same excerpt quoted at the beginning of this paragraph. The domestic and rural tea-drinking rituals and the ‘white compressed crystals,’ used to sweeten it, are put in contrast to its ‘social significance’ which is made clear in several occasions: the very title of the novel; in the title given to the first part of the novel, ‘Book One: The Dark Brown and the First White’ and it is also conveyed by the quotation from the ‘Report on the quality of the 1890 sugar yield at Bundaberg, Queensland’ found in its preface. The gradation of sugar symbolised ‘a society stratified according to race and class distinctions’ (de Berg):

The *First White* is a clear, dry, beautifully grained sugar

The *Second White*, though not so clear, is quite dry and would rate in the highest class

The *First Yellow* is dry, well-granulated and apparently as perfect as such sugar can be made

The *Second Yellow* is a very excellent sugar for domestic purposes, far removed from

The *Dark Brown* or ‘Ration’ sugar (suitable for Kanakas).

Two examples in the novel confirm the racism behind the above quotation and the artificiality of the egalitarian value: the Kanaka meal and the dehumanising language used to refer to the

Kanaka as individuals. As for the first, feeding coloured labourers on brown ‘ration’ sugar, molasses and watery tea—Kanaka meal⁶—meant that they were perceived as inferior, hence it was in the ‘natural’ order of the universe to employ non-white subjects for the tough work in the tropical cane fields as one of many important cost-cutting measures:

The obvious place for a careful manager to save money was on rations for the Kanakas; so meat was a rare treat, and rice and maize meal helped to fill even if it did not satisfy men working in the field from 6.00 a.m. to 6.00 p.m. with two breaks for breakfast and lunch. The tea was what is known in the bush as ‘clover-leaf tea’—three leaves to the pot—and might as well have been plain hot water.

The only food there was plenty of was sugar: sticky brown ‘ration’ sugar, and molasses, the black, bitter-sweet syrup left from the first spin. There were fifteen sugar-mills scattered about Maryborough, which produced about 180,000 gallons of molasses between them. It was fed to horses, mixed with their dry feed, and builders even mixed it with mortar to make a kind of cement. (Cato 92)

As for the second, through the dehumanising process taking shape within the language of the white subject, Kanakas were seen as tribal ‘savages’ always prone to irrational violence, to spontaneous fights and bloodsheds; briefly, ‘child[ren] of Nature’ (Cato 191). For example, Mr Grant’s brutal murder committed by a Kanaka was interpreted as a sign of a ‘primitive blood-lust’ and as their being ‘oot of mind.’ The brown subject was epistemologically domesticated as a part of nature, at the level of animals devoid of reason, ‘on whose nature/Nurture can never stick’ (Ashcroft 30). This representational power of the white language/culture is clearly symbolised in the novel by books—as Shakespeare’s Caliban knew too well. It is no coincidence that in *Brown Sugar*, Joseph’s son learned how his father was seen by whites through their books. After discovering that Lifu, the island his father came from, was part of the Loyalty Islands he looked it up in the 1874 *Imperial Gazetteer of the World*, which, significantly, belonged to his white grandfather. Staring aghast at the black print, he found out that his father’s people were depicted as cruel, cowardly cannibals (Cato 225).

The vehicle of the tea ritual and its sweet ingredient—the white iconography of the nation and the lack of rights suffered by Pacific Islanders in the past—will help understand the tenor of the 1970s by trying to answer the key question posed at the beginning of this paragraph: has anything changed for the ‘forgotten people’? The social stratification, symbolised by the First White used in the tea drunk by the sugar aristocracy and the Brown Sugar intended for Kanakas, was more current than ever. As discussed above, the link between the past and the present goes without saying in a country where whiteness has always predominated at the expense of any political and social recognition of any minority group. In fact, imperfect democracy was still behind the social and political life of the 1960s and 1970s when the active political campaign for recognition and remembrance took place. It was with Faith Bandler that political agitation gained ground in the 1960s—until 1965 Islanders, though technically entitled to vote, were not practically encouraged to do so (Banivanua-Mar 177). This agitation continued into the 1970s and later, focusing on community pride and consciousness beyond the mere definition of the word ‘Kanaka,’ and which Pacific Islanders had started to shape as active resistance even during the time of the plantations. A proof of this is the 1906 Petition against deportation originated by the Pacific Islanders’ Association in

Mackay and signed by 426 people. There was a sense of community that emerged in their link to the homeland, their gatherings, the domiciled Islanders and the establishment of fringe communities (Banivanua-Mar 105, 107, 113, 115).³

In the novel, the refusal of a ‘white’ mythology of the nation comes from James. The narrator, suggesting his preference for coffee rather than tea, stresses his stand against what tea and sugar represented in relation to the brutality of the exploitation system on the plantations:

‘Well, you may be in the confidence of the Almighty, Father, but I wish I could be so comfortably certain. It seems to me we exploit them for our own ends, and then justify the means by calling it “the Will of Providence.”’

... ‘Some more tea, dear?’ interposed Mrs Johnstone smoothly. ‘James—coffee?’ (Cato 51–52)

The novel suggests a step further with two other fictional characters. In fact, stronger subversive elements characterise two female characters, both victims of the patriarchal national mythology: Helga and Emily. While Helga refuses the fate that will doom her to the domestic sphere of the passive woman and prefers coffee like her brother James, Emily will act within the domestic sphere, standing up for Efate, and in the tea-drinking scene taking place in their little house, will assume another significance. It will become a metaphor of a hybrid perspective of Australian identity that stems from the cracks of the ‘white’ fantasies shaping the invisibility of women, Aborigines and Australians of non-Anglo-Celtic background.

‘The Others Usually Took Tea’: Women and National Mythology

Although *Brown Sugar* is centred on the exploitation of coloured labourers on the sugar plantations, the novel points out the similitude between different forms of ‘othering’ and exclusion stemming from the mythology of a white, masculine and patriarchal nation, by sharing with the reader Helga’s thoughts and feelings when she looks out of her bedroom window on the Chindera plantation. The “patchwork quilt on her old doll’s bed” links up both the unfairness of women’s social exclusion and the back-breaking work of black labours in the fields through the ‘sweat,’ the ‘suffocating heat’ and the ‘stiff material’ of the hard work:

She could remember the quilt that had been given her for a needlework task one summer, when she was only eight or nine. She remembered the *still, suffocating heat* in the nursery, and her little fingers, sticky with *sweat*, trying to *push* the needle through the *stiff* material. One of the squares was a bright yellow brocade, terribly difficult to pierce.

Rebelliously she had set at her task, hearing through the window the shouts of her brothers swimming and skylarking in the river. It wasn’t fair! She would much rather have been born a boy.

She gazed now across the winter fields, spread under a sky of unbroken blue. Like ants among the roots of a giant lawn, black men worked in the *airless* channels between the rows. They wore blue denim trousers, wide felt hats, and a

variety of bright scarves as *sweat-rags*. Set in the midst of all the greenery was the small clearing of the Kanaka village (my italics). (Cato 93)

Focusing on Helga, this section will deal with her dismantling of the masculine representation which entraps her in the domestic role of passive wife, mother and daughter, and tries to block the fulfilment of her dream to become an opera singer. Helga's self-determination to study in Europe in order to become a famous opera singer clashes with two male figures. The first is her father, who understands play-acting as 'a most disreputable profession,' a malady from which only marriage and motherhood may 'cure' her (Cato 47). There is no place in this society for Helga as a singer, as there had been no place for Miles Franklin's Sybylla to be a writer in the bush (Walker 170). This reminds us of the obstacles Cato encountered as a cadet journalist or the difficulty of women who wished to be part of the lifesaving movement, and so on. The second is Mr Lindsay who, intimidated by her unconventionality, would have preferred her to have a good old English name such as Elizabeth, Ann or maybe a Richardsonian one such as Pamela (Cato 177), which would have expressed her banishment to the more conventional private sphere of the house or the damsel in distress.

The range of feelings Helga experiences in Mackay, especially in the wet season—alienation, loneliness and incarceration⁴—stresses women's uncomplaining loyalty, ingenuity and perseverance which date back to the common iconography of the bush wife whose stoicism and endurance during the drover's absence were articulated in Lawson's 'The Drover's Wife' (1892). In other words, her passive life in Mackay, and previously in Maryborough, is functional as a ratification of the male Australian legend 'of power and masculine pride of achievement' which is conveyed by the phallic symbol of the towering mill chimney at Maryborough and the beer-drinking ritual at the pub in Mackay where her husband develops male bonds of mateship. Of this exclusion Helga is well aware as, for example, when pregnant she waited for her husband outside the pub:

She gazed impatiently at the hotel, whence gregarious noises and laughter issued, from which she was shut out.

"… he doesn't *need* me, Mamma. He has his men friends to go drinking and riding and shooting with, and he comes home only to sleep." (Cato 176, 182)

Helga rejects those distinctive qualities ascribed to women and is described to the reader accordingly through her physical appearance, animal imagery and her preference for coffee. As far as the first aspect is concerned, she has masculine features in her being a potential 'big woman,' (Cato 46) and 'her hands, though well-formed, [being] large and capable-looking' (Cato 54). These traits of her appearance mirror the unconventionality of her attitude for she gets bored by the 'swooning heroines in Gothic settings' (Cato 154) waiting for a hero to save them. This is confirmed by the narrator by means of a comparison between Helga and Rose. While the latter identifies with nature and specifically with those creepers that rely on mossy trunks to get towards the light which in gothic novels stood for the separation between the private and public spheres, the former finds the struggle of the forest plants towards the sun unbearable and thus the forest oppressive (Cato 79, 80). In other words, while Rose personifies the traditional view of womanhood, Helga rebels against the oppressive conception of femininity. Secondly, her true character is conveyed through the animal imagery⁵ of a bird which suggests not only her possession of a pure voice but also the freedom she fights for—both going in unison with her dreams of becoming a famous opera singer in Europe. It is no surprise that after initially turning down Mr Lindsay's marriage

proposal, she accepts it when she foresees the opportunity to visit London where her husband-to-be has an aunt, Lady Lindsay, wife to a baronet (Cato 152). As for the third aspect, Helga prefers coffee at breakfast: while ‘the others usually took tea,’ she ‘preferred to drink coffee in the mornings because she felt it was Continental and European’ (Cato 48). Her preference for coffee is, on the one hand, a refusal to accept the bush/semi-rural society as the egalitarian or caring community of Lawson’s dreams and, on the other hand, is certainly linked to her ambitions. It is no surprise, then, that ‘coffee’ for Helga symbolises the ideological opposition between a more egalitarian Europe, where women had the same opportunities as men, and Australia. Her national affiliation is confirmed by her initial attraction to the Englishman Mr Grant and to his superiority which he clearly claims with a sort of amusement during the grand ball: ‘on the edge of a vast continent . . . [Australian society, which has] evicted the original savages’ is merely a bad imitation of London society (Cato 96). Nevertheless, if the fox-hunting ritual seems to picture the old civilised world’s superior and knowing attitude,⁶ the ballroom scene is a turning point in Helga’s ideological opposition for several reasons. First of all, Mr Grant’s civilisation is belittled, since his country is involved in the eviction of the savages performed by its own settlers, who were sent there to conquer a land chosen by the imperial culture of the 19th century as a possible solution to its increasing overpopulation by criminals and the poor; secondly, Helga doesn’t ‘like being bullied, even in the most gentlemanly way’ and that is how she feels with Mr Grant who tries to exert his power over her via the number of dances she grants him. It goes without saying that these further aspects cast a new light on the egalitarian European world imagined by Helga where, as in Australia, she would have been considered as ‘merchandise.’

Helga’s rebellion, subtly and metaphorically linked in the novel to the othering of weak social groups, seems to mirror that of women in the 1970s and beyond against those social and political policies that ‘pretended’ the nation to be pluralistic. Women such as Faith Bandler, Kath Walker and Cato herself knew too well what it meant to be fighting and expressing themselves in such a society.

A Hybrid Tea: Recognition and National Identity

As anticipated above, Emily too rebels against the patriarchal system represented by her father but in this case her actions go a step further towards the process of construction of an inclusive hybrid nation made of multiple identities. If hybridity in the past brought to mind the horror of miscegenation without having to recognise any rights to half-castes, around the time Cato was writing her novel hybridity signified the meeting and recognition of different cultures and came down to the extension of social and political rights to those minorities within Australian society. Thus, the fear described in the novel can be interpreted on two temporal and social levels. However, because of the re-reading of the nation as multiple identities that this essay is exploring, Emily’s parents’ attitude towards Joseph, and Emily’s subversive choice of standing up for Efate will be understood as metaphors: the first attitude as a metaphor of the lack of recognition of South Pacific Islanders by the white community and, Emily’s, as that of the campaign for such a recognition by Pacific Islanders and white people too. It is interesting to note that Cato’s novel fits with the process towards that hybridity that would be encouraged from the bicentenary on. Those white people standing for the recognition of Aborigines’ rights during the 1988 bicentenary and marching along Sydney streets with them—a march that was patronised by the Australian media (Turner 83–85)—made Graeme Turner perceive this encounter of cultures as the new and true idea of a hybrid nation (Turner 82).

As for Emily's parents' attitude towards Joseph, this suddenly changes as soon as they know of Emily's commitment to him. The name 'Joseph,' like the term 'Kanakas,' had been given to him with the intention of erasing previous identity—a metonymy of imperial culture whose aim was to determine and delimit what he could say and do. Joseph, and by implication Kanakas, is not equal to white people and can act only within a specific frame of reference. His commitment to Emily is interpreted not as the result of his love for her but as an attempt to take advantage of Mr Duguid's hospitality and proof of his 'primitive' incapacity to recognise proper civil boundaries. The Reverend's changed attitude is evident in the language he uses to define 'Efate': the good, Christian Joseph is now a 'Kanaka,' a 'coloured labourer,' a 'cannibal' (Cato 137, 138). Mr Duguid's words—"And to think I ha'e nourished that Joseph like a viper in my bosom! And he wanting to take my only bairn." (Cato 139)—mirror those Prospero uses to address Caliban:

I have us'd thee,
Filth as thou art, with human care; and lodg'd thee,
In mine own cell, till thou didst seek to violate
The honour of my child. (Shakespeare 40)

On the contrary, Emily supports social equality against her own father's will. She represents those white people who stand for South Pacific Islanders: for Efate. Against her father's belief that racial intermarriage 'flies in the face of Proveedence,' she reminds him of his own words before Efate's proposal which recall the egalitarianism of which Australia has always boasted: 'And haven't you always said that there is no colour bar in the sight of the Lord: "For ye are all the children of God by faith in Jesus Christ . . . there is neither Jew, nor Greek, bond nor free"' (Cato 137–38).

Finally, it is the tea-drinking ritual in Emily and Efate's home that works as a metaphor of a 'new' hybrid nation. It no longer stands for a *locus* of definition via exclusion but for the encounter between different narrations; it is an egalitarian re-reading of the identitarian myths of the nation symbolised by both the domestic and rural practises of tea-drinking:

Emily gave them tea in fine china cups that had belonged to her mother. They sat on the edges of their chairs, drinking it awkwardly; they were more used to an enamel mug and a billy of tea in the open. The old clock that Andrew Duguid had brought from Scotland in 1853 ticked away quietly on the mantelpiece. Beside it, behind a magnifying glass and frame, was a picture of David Efate taken not long before he died. On the other side was a large, pink-lined shell, and behind it a paper nautilus. (Cato 241)

Even the narrative decision to describe the setting surrounding the ritual—with its 'china cups' and the 'old clock' from Scotland—recalls that of the tea-drinking described in the first section of this essay as if to invite the reader to compare the two scenes and re-read the ritual from a different perspective. In order to achieve this, the narrator adds new elements contributing to a hybrid idea of this new Australian family, such as the awkwardness of the way tea is drunk by a new generation of men who are used to tin billies and to squatting around the open fire, and now sit on the edges of their chairs. Two rituals come together but interpreted from a different perspective; what makes this possible is the symbol of Emily serving out the tea—a white woman who deeply believes in egalitarianism; Efate's re-reading of the past history of his community which means at the same time a re-framing of the white subject's narration and the possibility of renaming one's reality; the fact of discussing their

history of dispossession, kidnapping, deportation, the ‘irrational’ discrimination suffered, the hard work in the fields and their relation to a place which feels like home together with second generation Kanakas. And this means that, if it is true that ‘place is always *what it has become* rather than what it simply *is* because of the narratives in which it is represented,’ Pacific Islanders may claim Australia as their home through storytelling. It is interesting to note that while, on the one hand, South Pacific Islander started feeling at home also thanks to the possession of areas of land, on the other hand, their identification with their ‘new’ land seems reinforced in the novel by the fact that the heirs to the two white patriarchal figures of Mr Johnstone and Mr Duguid are both hybrid subjects, half-castes.

Conclusion

In *After Modern Architecture*, Antonio Portoghesi says: ‘[i]t is the loss of memory, not the cult of memory that will make us prisoners of the past’ (tr. Shore 5). If one assumes this statement to be true, it goes without saying, as S. Wills illustrates, that Australia, in negating *the other’s* memories, is prisoner of its own ‘lost’ past. Australia has, thus, to rediscover the memories of ethnic groups or, in other words, ‘to broaden the boundaries of memory in order to ensure the dignity of all’ (Wills 88). In this way, acts of memory, of recognition speak against the socialised forms of forgetting, as in the case of the novel here analysed, which can be considered as a ‘place of memory,’ unveiling the tyranny of language with its representational power, redrafting history. Memories, acts and writings are all *performative*, that is, in Judith Butler’s words, they are ‘statements which not only perform an action, but confer a binding power on the action performed’ (Butler 234). *Brown Sugar* performs the act of remembering as repetition and agency, since it creates ‘habitual places (texts)’ or in other words it helps, through women, to retrieve South Pacific Islanders in Australia from their invisibility and redefine what it means to be Australian by re-interpreting one of its many iconographies.

NOTES

1 Even in the following decades, which proved the true limited effect of this change, it comes as no surprise that academics and social critics pointed out the ambivalence of official documents such as the 1982 ‘white paper,’ *Multiculturalism for all Australians: our Developing Nationhood*, and political speeches such as those given by John Howard and Pauline Hanson in the 1990s which all reiterated the idea of a homogeneous dominant culture whose values or myths about national identity were set in a far from egalitarian period: the Gallipoli event (1915) and the Australian type of the soldier, the tradition of mateship, Australia as the outpost of democracy since the foundation event. Examples of such exclusion are easy to find: women were excluded from the lifesaving movement, where the “truly Australian spirit” of the lifesaver was perceived as the latest traditional Australian ‘type,’ till 1980 when the movement was not attracting enough males (White 155); Aborigines’ 1988 protest march would be represented in newspapers as something to fear and, thus, still confirming the artificiality of any pluralistic discourse of the nation (Turner 85).

2 In his 1901 poem, Henry Lawson portrays an iconography of the distinctively Australian subject who drafts a new national identity, by linking tea-drinking to the indefatigable bushman, masculinity and a setting manifestly far removed from the urban one. This narrative iconography was provided by both the Heidelberg School artists and periodicals like the *Australasian Sketcher* and the *Illustrated Australian News*, all contributing to the making up of the Australian consciousness.

3 Similarly, a body of studies about the Pacific Islander community carried out from the 1970s on has to be interpreted as a way towards recognition and as a proof of the limits of a celebrated pluralistic society: the Oral History Collection of the 1970s recorded by Clive Moore, Patricia Mercer and Matthew Peacock, or monographs by Moore (*Kanaka*, 1981), Mercer (*White Australia Defied*, 1995) and Carol Gistin (*Quite a Colony*, 1995) as well as personal histories by Noel Fatnowna (*Fragments of a Lost Heritage*, 1989), Mabel Edmond (*No Regrets*, 1992) and Faith Bandler (*Wacvie*, 1977) all testify.

4 Graham ‘was away from dawn till dusk,’ ‘toads, frogs and spiders invaded the house,’ ‘her whole wardrobe smelt musty,’ ‘she knew no woman well enough to talk to about her fears of childbirth,’ ‘the rain fell without pause’ and it is a place ‘where there is no music, no nothing’ (Cato 166, 167).

5 Animal imagery is used in the novel to mirror the innermost personality of its characters. Both James and Helga are compared to parrots, and Dougal to foxes and eagles ('grinning like a fox'; 'more aquiline than vulpine'—Cato 52, 44): while the first cannot accept the exploitation of Kanakas, the latter sees the cruelty of the indentured work on the sugar plantations as natural and necessary.

6 The fox hunting ritual reinforces this opposition with what might sound innocent language differences between the Englishman Mr Grant and the Australian Dougal. While for the man from the Old Country the colour of his fox-hunting coat is 'huntin' pink' and 'view halloo' is the strident typical call given to indicate that the fox has been seen breaking cover, for Dougal the coat is "bloody well red" and his less strident call is "There goes the little bugger!" (Cato 77, 78).

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