**Re-reading Simone de Beauvoir’s *Les Belles images*:The Global Politics of (Not) Eating**

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Surprisingly, the critical potential of food in Simone de Beauvoir’s 1966 *Les Belles images*1 has yet to be exploited, although the novel features a succession of meals and recurrent references to (not) eating. Indeed for all Beauvoir’s deliberate narrative innovation,2 representations of food in the novel appear to function rather conventionally: as structuring devices, vehicles for characterization and for ostensibly thematic reasons. Some critics have noted how tropes of (not) eating – and of force-feeding and vomiting in particular – underscore representative characteristics of 1960s French bourgeois bad faith. Food brings to the fore unquestioning consumption, swallowing of media myths and the repression of responsibility for the suffering of postcolonial famine victims.3 However, food in fiction exceeds its structural and symbolic roles. A basic physiological necessity, food is also at once material, symbolic and political. Food, as a language, and like a language, is always already part of an infinite weave of meanings. Eating necessarily involves tensions between inclusion and exclusion, freedom and constraint and pleasure and danger; and the construction of class, gender and other ideological distinctions; as well as desire, lack and the return of repressed trauma.4 Thus, although food may initially appear to operate as a conventional trope in *Les Belles images*, representations of (not) eating invite multiple re-readings, with far-reaching global implications.

Whilst Beauvoir no doubt intends to raise questions of bourgeois bad faith and responsibility, this article identifies how examining representations of (not) eating allows the narrative to be re-read as elucidating recurrent trauma bound up in the global politics of food. Food in the novel (as in lived experience) is fraught with tensions and ambivalences, which is no doubt why Beauvoir draws so extensively on food-related tropes. Yet these, in turn, link advertising, conflict in self-Other relations and domestic political wrangling with French co-implication in global politics: from the slave trade and colonialism to a strikingly prescient reflection of today’s global marketplace. In spite of Beauvoir’s dim view of psychoanalysis, when considered from the perspective of Lacan’s thought on lack and the return of the repressed the unanswered questions in *Les Belles images* raised by recurrent food-related trauma also point to issues of global co-implication. Throughout the novel, images of (not) eating link post-War France to traumatic cycles of consumption: the slave trade, colonialism, and in the postcolonial global marketplace. This article re-reads food-related trauma in *Les Belles images*, suggesting it at once fuels the novel and, enduringly, the inequities – and iniquities – of global food supply.

**Re-reading Feeding in *Les Belles images***

*Les Belles images* can be read – and re-read – through, between and beyond meals. The novel revolves around Laurence, who plays the roles of bourgeois wife to architect Jean-Charles; daughter to estranged parents; mother to Catherine and Louise; sister to Catholic housewife Marthe and lover to colleague Lucien at an advertising agency where she has worked since her second nervous breakdown ostensibly precipitated by the Algerian War (an earlier breakdown in 1945 is evoked). The narrative opens on a Sunday lunch party at Laurence’s mother Dominique’s rural getaway. Here Dominique, her partner Gilbert and their acolytes trade anecdotes about fashionable places to eat, game drives in Kenya, social engagements and technological advances. At subsequent meals, Laurence’s stomach is turned by yet more such exchanges in bad faith, as well as by Gilbert’s confidence that he is about to leave Dominique.

Before yet another Sunday lunch, Laurence has to finalize the images for an advertisement for tomato sauce. Gilbert is in attendance despite having broken up with Dominique, and conversational topics include a reception held by Madame de Gaulle and a dinner in aid of famine relief. Later, Laurence is nauseated by the news that her shame-wracked and sleeping-pill-guzzling mother is planning to send a vengeful letter to Gilbert’s new partner, but seeks to console her with a light lunch in a fittingly out-of-the-way restaurant. A dinner takes place at Marthe’s home on New Year’s Eve, this time including Laurence’s humanist, culture-obsessed father. Worries about meagre fare are unfounded: the foie gras bought by Laurence’s mother and her father’s champagne supplement an already excessive spread. The men compete over wine knowledge and anecdotes about scientific advances are exchanged, along with festive gifts. Such bourgeois bad faith once again leads Laurence to lose her appetite and resolve to end her affair. She then excitedly agrees to accompany her father on a trip to Greece. However, disappointment ensues: Laurence sees through the tourist images, her father’s pride in finding an ‘authentic’ taverna and his belief that it is possible for the Greek peasants to live in contented austerity when all that can be bought at the local market is rotten eggs.

At what transpires to be the final family meal, Laurence is sickened by her parents’ pragmatic decision to resume their lives together. Moreover, against her will they and Jean-Charles all concur that Catherine, who is having nightmares, should go into therapy and be forced to end her friendship with Jewish orphan Brigitte. Thenceforth, Laurence shares no more meals and takes to her bed. There, by turns, she refuses or accepts then regurgitates the soup Marthe encourages her to consume. in between flashbacks to Greece, thoughts of the traumatic media images and the bourgeois values and market-driven myths she feels have been rammed down her throat. A doctor simplistically diagnoses anorexia, and Jean-Charles exhorts Laurence to ‘snap out of it’. In the end, Laurence resolves to eat again, if only to attempt to save her daughters from being force-fed with the same values she has sought to throw up.

This article re-reads *Les Belles images*, supplementing Beauvoir’s deliberate use of food-related tropes by identifying how during and between meals, ambivalence, tension and media images raise questions of the global politics of food. Involving *not* eating and related trauma worldwide, these images fuel at once Laurence’s crisis and the narrative. Thus, when not at grisly gatherings or marketing industrial foodstuffs, Laurence worries that Brigitte is feeding her daughter Catherine ‘inappropriate’ images. The first of these is a poster of a famine-stricken boy which, linked to news headlines of violence worldwide, brings back to Laurence memories of the depression precipitated by her reactions to the Holocaust, Hiroshima and to the Algerian War: trauma which now appears to return and be further fuelled by different but associated traumatic media images. Although Laurence cannot field Catherine’s queries about famine, she is annoyed when Jean-Charles feeds their daughter a fantasy about cultivating deserts and providing food for all. Soon afterwards she learns that Catherine and Brigitte now believe that they can cure the world’s ills by becoming a doctor and an agricultural engineer. Laurence’s distress on failing to respond to Catherine’s questions about starving children and to engage with exploitation and violence worldwide is further fuelled by the girls’ distress over child workers in a fish-canning factory. So whether deliberately or not, *Les Belles images* raises questions not only about individual responsibility, but also about French co-implication in the return of repressed trauma linked to globalized exploitation and consumption.

**Ambivalence, Tension and Alimentary Co-implication**

One reading of the veritable ordeals by meal Laurence undergoes is that they fit Beauvoir’s expressions of authorial intention: an implicit criticism of French bourgeois consumers’ wasteful bad faith, unquestioning swallowing of media and marketing images and their failure ‘en situation’ to grapple with issues like world hunger. Beauvoir’s hope is presumably that by reading of the ways in which her cast of bourgeois characters avoid embracing their responsibility, readers will be encouraged to embrace their own.5 However, the succession of meals is marked by tensions which extend beyond a representative microcosm of the bourgeoisie in 1960s France. If the novel opens on a lunch described as ‘perfect’, featuring ‘les steaks épais, les salades, les fruits, les vins’ (9), the conversational fare is Gilbert’s sickening news and thinly veiled jockeying for superiority. Regretting the time lost at work, and judging her vengeful mother, Laurence goes through the motions of consoling her by ordering: ‘une omelette, des soles, du vin blanc’ (127). The New Year’s Eve dinner involves a celebratory bill of fare which jars with the grimly competitive conversation. Along with the foie gras (with its connotations of force-feeding) and the champagne (with its ephemeral ebullience) there is ‘le bœuf en daube, la salade de riz, les amuse-gueules, les fruits, les petits fours et le whisky’ (141). Instead of the comfort that might be expected to be derived from keeping up such rich alimentary traditions, tension exudes from these excruciating gatherings and from the dialogue they facilitate. Descriptions of meals involving conventional food choices suggest that the bourgeoisie remain unaffected by and oblivious to the social, economic and material challenges of post-War modernization, whilst also providing a grimly amusing backdrop for conversations fuelled by a voracious, competitive appetite for demonstrating knowledge of the latest technologies. These meals are far from festive, for, just as food always already is, they are rife with far-reaching tensions.

Indeed, as well as insufferable snobbery and further evidence of the conflict between Dominique and Gilbert, the discussion of a champagne reception brings the issue of the politics of food to the fore:

- Moi aussi je pensais que ça ne serait pas drôle; […] mais tout de même ça valait le coup; il y avait là tous les gens qui comptent à Paris. Le champagne était convenable. Et je dois dire que j’ai trouvé Mme de Gaulle beaucoup mieux que je ne m’y attendais […].

- On m’a dit que seules la finance et la politique ont eu droit à de la nourriture; les arts et les lettres, on leur a seulement offert à boire, c’est vrai? demande Gilbert d’une voix nonchalante.

- On ne venait pas là pour manger, dit Dominique avec un petit rire crispé (92–3).

The ambivalence of French domestic politics is expressed here in terms of the relative perceived value of the arts, but what is yet more significant is how this is bound up with the manipulation of food for political ends. What is more, short-term interpersonal conflict and longer-running and much further-reaching inequities are involved in the next account of another *mondain* engagement: a dinner in aid of famine relief. Beyond the ghoulishly humourous contrast between luxury foodstuffs and paying to forego them as a means of helping the starving, and beyond the conflicts between friends and ex-lovers and left and right, here the French political and chattering classes are co-implicated in exploiting the power relations inherent in global food supply:

- La dénigration systématique, je trouve ça écœurant. C’est quand même une jolie idée: au dîner du 25 janvier, au bénéfice de l’enfance affamée, on nous servira pour vingt mille francs le menu des petits Indiens: un bol de riz et un verre d’eau. Eh bien! la presse de gauche ricane. Que dirait-on si nous mangions du caviar et du foie gras! (100).

Whilst making a mockery of unthinking bourgeois consumption of food and drink – and of suffering – this experience by proxy might also be read as a precursor to ‘food tourism’. It certainly exemplifies the ongoing postcolonial consumption of populations whose hunger is at least partly the result of colonial exploitation and its aftermath. Thus whilst Beauvoir no doubt sought to demonstrate facets of bourgeois bad faith, the charity dinner andGilbert’s tales of game drives in Kenya also evoke the persistence of colonial patterns of consumption and their evolution into a form of neo-colonialism, continuing to feed off the suffering of others. Indeed whilst this succession of meals and their accompanying dialogue bristle with domestic tensions reflecting the bad faith of Beauvoir’s bourgeois characters, they also bespeak French co-implication in global cycles of consumption.

**The Politics of Food in the Global Marketplace**

As well as reveling in competitive meal-time conversations (and coincidentally revealing co-implication in the global politics of food) Beauvoir’s bourgeois consumers are differently susceptible to the media and marketing images that pervade both Laurence’s life and the novel more generally. These are tellingly food-related, and, along with tension and ambivalence, can be read as offering further supplementary perspectives on global questions of responsibility and exploitation. Soon after the first lunch when Laurence’s detachment is ascribed to her absorption in seeking another slogan, she is annoyed by a jingle emanating from the apartment above:

Même les gens de l’étage au-dessus, je ne les connais pas, pense Laurence. Ceux d’en face, elle en sait long sur eux, à travers la cloison. Le bain coule, les portes claquent, la radio déverse des chansons et des réclames pour Banania (26).

Beauvoir presumably intends to underscore the ubiquity of advertising messages and Laurence’s bad faith when it comes to her professional and personal ambivalence towards marketing. However the advertisement also resonates deeply with colonial exploitation, and suggests the kind of stereotypes swallowed daily by French children, feeding enduring racism.6 For the colonial and postcolonial history of the children’s fortified drink Banania reaches beyond France and its erstwhile empire, implicated in world conflict and colonial exploitation (of people as well as food commodities), and spanning the Antilles, Senegal and Nicaragua. It was in Nicaragua that founder Pierre Lardet discovered a drink, which he launched onto the French market in summer 1914 with the image of a French West Indian woman on the packet underpinning the exploitation of colonial products: cocoa, bananas and sugar. The First World War brought sales opportunities (Lardet sent supplies of Banania to the troops on the Western Front with a pragmatic change of image, replacing the woman with a broadly smiling *tirailleur sénégalais*, one of 30 000 West-African ‘sharp shooting’ infantrymen conscripted to fight for France). The accompanying slogan ‘Y’a bon’ is a putative approximation of Senegalese French, and was not removed until 1977 (the racist image remains to today, albeit in a modified form). Here, then, seeping through French domestic life, advertising not only brings with it questions of individual responsibility, but is also bound up with long-running exploitative global processes.

Laurence’s conversation with her father about an anachronistic treat for his granddaughters also foregrounds contrasting aspects of a failure to grapple with the ethical challenges of the evolving global marketplace:

je les ai emmenées dans une de ces petites auberges où on mange encore de la vraie crème, du poulet nourri avec du bon grain, de vrais œufs. Tu sais qu’aux U.S.A. on nourrit les poules avec des algues et qu’il faut injecter dans les œufs un produit chimique pour leur donner le goût d’œuf?

- Ça ne m’étonne pas. Dominique m’avait apporté de New York du chocolat chimiquement parfumé au chocolat (104).

To be sure, the exchange underscores the passively aggressive competition between Laurence’s parents: one with his nostalgic quest for what he deems to be authenticity, and the other in thrall to the technocratic myths of future progress. However, here, once again, if incidentally, tensions range far beyond the domestic. Even though she writes advertisements for convenience foods including breakfast oatmeal from America, Laurence joins in with her father deriding American industrial food production, so her ambivalence chimes with French exceptionalist discourses which simultaneously elide American economic support of France and bemoan American influence on the French marketplace. Whilst Laurence shares her father’s position of nostalgic retrenchment and implicit apprehensiveness about the growth of the *industrie agroalimentaire*, her stance also involves a choice of not engaging critically with her own and France’s imbrications in the global market.

Patterns of transnational exploitation and responsibility are also legible in Laurence’s father’s quest for an ‘authentic’ taverna in hunger-stricken (and civil-war-riven) post-War Greece:

un petit bistrot ‘typique’: une grotte, au bord de la mer, décorée avec des filets de pêche, des coquillages, des lampes-tempête. ‘C’est plus amusant que les grands restaurants que chérit ta mère’. Pour moi, c’était un piège à touristes comme un autre. Au lieu de l’élégance et de confort, on y vendait de la couleur locale et un discret sentiment de supériorité sur les habitués moutonniers des palaces. (Le thème publicitaire aurait été: soyez *différent*; ou, un endroit *différent*.) Papa échangeait quelques mots en grec avec le patron et – comme tous les clients, mais chacun se sentait privilégié – celui-ci nous faisait entrer dans la cuisine et soulevait le couvercle des marmites (156).

If Laurence judges her father’s susceptibility to advertising, as a copywriter able to both create and to decode ‘belles images’, she has no claim to a higher moral ground than him (or her mother). What is more, Beauvoir’s representation of shared bad faith here can also be read as bringing to the fore how empowered consumers profit from the imbalance between the consumption potential of France in the *Trente glorieuses* and the enduring penury in Greece. Through meals and marketing, then, from the early strains of the Banania jingle to the bad faith of the taverna meal; at family gatherings; in domestic politics and spaces and in ‘food tourism’, along with domestic ambivalence and tension, French co-implication is inscribed in representations of food.

Such readings also supplement a number of recent critical perspectives that, whilst not overtly engaging with representations of food, consider the impact of the Second World War, decolonization and the growth of consumer culture in the *Trente glorieuses*. Kristin Ross, for example, uses *Les Belles images* to elucidate her thesis that French experiences of modernization are inseparable from those of decolonization,7 but the global politics of food represented in the novel exceed her binary of France and its ex-colonies. The representation of food in *Les Belles images* also extends beyond Maxim Silverman’s arguments that Jewish orphan Brigitte is evidence of how ‘the unconscious subtext of French post-war modernization is determined by the aftermath of the Holocaust as much as by decolonization’.8 Albeit in ways perhaps unintended by Beauvoir, the global reach of her representations of (not) eating goes some way towards mitigating Margaret Atack’s concern that a focus on consumer patterns leads to omissions: ‘And what about Auschwitz, Algeria, the Third World?, any reader of *Les Belles images* might find themselves asking. If they espouse Laurence’s rather than Jean-Charles’ point of view, that is’.9 Similarly, re-reading *Les Belles images* in terms of the global politics of food might invite Blandine Stefanson to eat, or re-think, her words:

Although *Les Belles images* sets out to present a world divided between haves and have nots, the outcasts of the factories or distant countries remain tamely behind the newspaper headlines or TV screens. […] The teenagers packing herrings all day are given less attention than the representatives of three bourgeois women […] living through their heartbreaks. And the mere fact that of the three it is the granddaughter who cries about the hungry children of the Third World would be sufficient reason for us to classify *Les Belles images* among books about ‘the misfortune of the rich’.10

Indeed, whilst advertising and meals contribute to characterizing the consumption in bad faith of 1960s bourgeois French society, and, as critics have already suggested, may in addition offer insights into the impact of the Second World War and decolonization on metropolitan France, images of (not) eating also raise questions of the return of repressed trauma, on a global scale.

**The Return of the Repressed: Traumatic Questions and Lack of Food**

The first- and third-person narration and the dialogue of *Les Belles images* are recurrently punctuated by unresolved questions, which serve Beauvoir’s existentialist purpose of highlighting individual responsibility. However, these questions also open up more widely, as they link images of inequities of global food supply to further, unanswered questions of co-implication: in the Holocaust and Hiroshima, in conflicts of decolonization and in a constantly evolving postcolonial global marketplace. Indeed, and no doubt unintentionally given Beauvoir’s disapproval of what she perceived as the determinism of Freudian psychoanalysis as well as its misogyny (here implicit in Laurence’s horror at the prospect of sending her daughter to a therapist),11 these unresolved questions with their traumatic food-related charges resonate with Lacan’s thought on lack and the return of the repressed.

Since it is itself intrinsically linked to nourishment – and (its) lack – Lacan’s thought is particularly apt when brought to bear on representations of food. For it is severance from the mother’s breast which brings entry into language, desire and lack. This originary trauma of individuation, the recurrent insatiable appetite of lack is the model for the return of the repressed, whereby a trauma returns, precipitated by other trauma in other, different but related forms.12 Re-read from the perspective of the return of the repressed it is in *not* eating and through the *lack* of food that trauma returns and questions – ever unresolved – are raised *Les Belles images*. Accordingly, the descriptions of hunger that might be ascribed to the disruptions of civil strife in post-War Greece may unwittingly recall the privations as well as the *guerre franco-française* of the Occupation. Arguably, along with the name ‘de Gaulle’, the anecdote of the champagne reception brings resonances of the conflict of the unresolved ‘resolutions’ of the Second World War and the Algerian War.

Meanwhile, the image that first traumatizes Laurence’s daughter – the poster of the famine victim – invites a re-reading of the novel as revolving around lack (of food) and the return of repressed trauma. Laurence’s failure to answer her own and her daughter’s questions demonstrates the stifling power of media images, but also evokes the urge to repress trauma along with the ethical responsibility of bearing witness to it. As well as self-deception and bad faith, the description of both the image and the text on the poster underscores the imbalance between bourgeois excess and the hunger of two thirds of the global population. What is more, the image of starvation precipitates other images of violence worldwide:

Pourquoi ne donne-t-on pas à manger à tout le monde? Laurence a de nouveau posé des questions et la petite a fini par parler de l’affiche. […]

Pouvoir de l’image. ‘Les deux tiers du monde ont faim’, et cette tête d’enfant, si belle, avec les yeux trop grands et la bouche fermée sur un terrible secret. Pour moi c’est un signe: le signe que se poursuit la lutte contre la faim. Catherine a vu un petit garçon de son âge qui a faim. Je me souviens: comme les grandes personnes me semblaient insensibles! […] La mauvaise conscience – sur ce point pour une fois, papa et Jean-Charles sont d’accord – à quoi ça sert? Cette affaire de tortures, il y a trois ans, je m’en suis rendue malade, ou presque: pour quoi faire? Les horreurs du monde, on est forcé de s’habituer, il y en a trop: le gavage des oies, l’excision, les lynchages, les avortements, les suicides, les enfants martyrs, les maisons de la mort, les massacres d’otages, les répressions, on voit ça au cinéma, à la télé, on passe (29–30).

The image of force-fed geese (perhaps connoting myth-gobbling bourgeois consumers) is dissonantly domestic, and runs the risk of trivializing the striking succession of traumatic events that follow. Nonetheless, this violent food-related metaphor triggers a series of images which link France to violence within and beyond its (neo-) imperial past, present and future. At a first glance, these may appear to concern in particular French wars of decolonization, for given her own interventions in the debate around Algerian independence, the torture Beauvoir mentions here is intended to refer to that of the Algerian War.13 Yet, proceeding from the arguments of Silverman and Ross, along with hostages and repression, torture brings with it traumatic echoes of the Occupation (and similarly the ‘maisons de la mort’ in Africa recall concentration camps, and thus French co-implication in the Holocaust.) Moreover, if the racist lynching Laurence mentions may be of North African immigrants in metropolitan France, it also evokes racist attacks in segregated America: leftovers of another earlier mode of global exploitation and consumption – the slave trade – in which France was, of course, co-implicated. The boy in the poster and the starving Indians whose plight is fleetingly the premise for a charity dinner are at once representative of postcolonial suffering and victims of a previous form of globalized exploitation: imperialism – French and British – and its production, consumption and human cost that continue to evolve in the postcolonial world. Just as Laurence forces her own questions back down and cannot respond to Catherine’s, the novel does not provide answers to ‘à quoi ça sert?’ or ‘pour quoi faire?’.

If such questions cannot but recur, then the narrative can be read as revolving around the question, ‘Pourquoi ne donne-t-on pas à manger à tout le monde?’, precipitating, in turn, a succession of further questions, likewise unanswered, but ever resonating with trauma. Beauvoir represents Laurence fleeing her responsibility to herself and her daughters by settling for a mendacious off-the-peg answer, whilst Jean-Charles reprises the assertion that media images attest to a desire to deal with the inequities of global food supply in a risibly delusional response to Catherine’s questions:

il a fait un petit discours très clair, très convaincant. Jusqu’ici les différents points de la terre étaient très éloignés les uns des autres, et les hommes ne savaient pas bien se débrouiller et ils étaient égoïstes. Cette affiche prouve que nous voulons que les choses changent. Maintenant on peut produire beaucoup plus de nourriture qu’avant, et les transporter vite et facilement des pays riches aux pays pauvres: des organisations s’en occupent. Jean-Charles est devenu lyrique, comme chaque fois qu’il évoque l’avenir: les déserts se sont couverts de blé, de légumes, de fruits, toute la terre est devenue la terre promise ; gavés de lait, de riz, de tomates et d’oranges, tous les enfants souriaient. Catherine écoutait, fascinée: elle voyait les vergers et les champs en fête.

- Personne ne sera plus triste, dans dix ans?

- On ne peut pas dire ça. Mais tout le monde mangera; tout le monde sera beaucoup plus heureux.

Alors elle dit d’un ton pénétré:

- J’aurais mieux aimé naître dix ans plus tard (30–1).

The vision with which Jean-Charles seeks to force-feed his own daughter culminates in the stomach-churning image of children ‘gavés de lait’, presumably seeking to highlight the power and duplicity of media myths of progress. However, it also reflects the situation of bourgeois French children, not only in terms of their consumption of commercial images, but also their access to the kind of excessive meals that punctuate *Les Belles images*. Meanwhile, two thirds of the world goes hungry, as underscored by Catherine’s ongoing questions about global inequities (and iniquities).

Having punctured Jean-Charles’s ‘belle image’, Catherine’s distress at the poster of the starving boy resonates again when Laurence picks up a copy of *Le Monde*, which brings accounts of violence spanning Europe, Africa, South East Asia and America:

Laurence tend la main vers *Le Monde* qui traîne sur un guéridon. C’est décourageant; il faudrait n’avoir jamais perdu le fil, sinon on se noie: tout a toujours commencé avant. Qu’est-ce que le Burundi? Et L’O.C.A.M.? Pourquoi les bonzes s’agitent-ils? Qui était le général Delgado? Où se situe exactement le Ghana? (43–4).14

Laurence’s questions also bring with them the still unresolved and recurrent trauma of the slave trade, imperialism (Belgian, French and British), and postcolonial exploitation. Formerly a Belgian League of Nations mandate colony, Burundi was separated post-independence from Rwanda, and, like Rwanda, in the wake of decolonization experienced recurrent Hutu-Tutsi conflict and genocide at the end of the twentieth century. So as well as remainders of French colonialism, future anterior traces of the Holocaust may be read in the haunting of genocides to come. The protests of the South Vietnamese monks ‘les bonzes’ – including the searing leftover image of the immolation of Thích Quảng Đức in 1963 – recall that the violence that marked the end of French colonisation in Indochina did not stop with the defeat of France at Diên Biên Phu in 1954. Instead, trauma returned recurrently, in the redeployment of France’s defeated paratroopers in the Algerian War, and, experienced by troops and civilians South and North Vietnamese, Lao and Cambodian as well as North American, as a result of America’s neo-imperialist Vietnam War. Meanwhile, as an economic body, the Organization Commune Africaine et Malgache (OCAM), evokes leftover colonial and ongoing postcolonial French economic exploitation in Africa.

The narrative technique of unanswered questions returns when Laurence discovers that Catherine and Brigitte have been upset by television footage of girls working on the fish-canning production line:

Qu’est-ce qu’ils ont montré ces jours-ci? J’aurais dû regarder. La famine aux Indes? Des massacres au Viêtnam? Des bagarres racistes aux U.S.A.?

- Mais je n’ai pas vu les dernières émissions, reprend Laurence. Qu’est-ce qui vous a frappée?

- Les jeunes filles qui mettent des ronds de carotte sur des filets de hareng, dit Brigitte avec élan.

- Comment ça?

- Eh bien, oui. Elles racontaient que toute la journée elles mettent des ronds de carotte sur des filets de hareng. Elles ne sont pas beaucoup plus vieilles que moi. J’aimerais mieux mourir que de vivre comme ça!

- Ça ne doit pas être tout à fait pareil pour elles.

- Pourquoi?

- On les a élevées autrement.

- Elles n’avaient pas l’air bien contentes, dit Brigitte (79-80).

Once again, these questions link recurrent trauma and global food production. Beyond the ongoing French political and economic manipulation of its ex-colonies, France is co-implicated in the return of repressed trauma in a global marketplace linking past, present and future and slavery, colonialism and neo-colonialism. Throughout *Les Belles images* – and through the global politics of food – trauma returns. Thus, as well as fuelling ambivalence, tension and co-implication, (not) eating precipitates the trauma that runs through the novel, raising recurrent, unanswered questions of responsibility for colonial, postcolonial and globalized economic exploitation.

**From Force-Feeding to Ongoing Questions for Re-Reading**

Paradoxically, given this taste of how representations of (not) eating can open up re-readings of both *Les Belles images* and of France’s long-running exploitation of the global marketplace, it may be that such far-reaching implications have gone unrecognized because Beauvoir draws so extensively on the conventional literary potential of food to convey her authorial intention. In particular, the trope of force-feeding may occlude some of the supplementary insights that this analysis has provided. Indeed, the end of *Les Belles images* takes an abruptly domestic turn (in terms of Laurence’s family and of the bourgeoisie *en situation* she represents). Far-reaching questions of co-implication such as those outlined by this article are swallowed up in the family drama, occluding the critical potential of re-reading the novel as a strikingly prescient (if unintentional) reflection of French co-implication in the global politics of consumption:

Ils la forceront à manger, ils lui feront tout avaler; tout quoi? tout ce qu’elle vomit, sa vie, celle des autres avec leurs fausses amours, leurs histoires d’argent, leurs mensonges. Ils la guériront de ses refus, de son désespoir. Non. Pourquoi non? […] ‘Non’; elle a crié tout haut. Pas Catherine. Je ne permettrai pas qu’on lui fasse ce qu’on m’a fait. Qu’a-t-on fait de moi? Cette femme qui n’aime personne, insensible aux beautés du monde, incapable même de pleurer, cette femme que je vomis. Catherine: au contraire […], peut-être elle s’en sortira … De quoi? De cette nuit. De l’ignorance, de l’indifférence … Elle se redresse soudain.

- On ne lui fera pas ce qu’on m’a fait (181–2).

Here, not only are tensions and ambivalences of (not) eating reduced to metaphors of force-feeding and vomiting, but unanswered questions are also replaced by Laurence’s jarringly grandiose and unrealizable claims. There is no palpable plan of (authentic) action to address the unanswered questions raising at once issues of individual responsibility and of French co-implication in processes that allow two thirds of the world to go hungry whilst bourgeois consumers are fed with sickening ‘belles images’. Of course, as this article has suggested, trauma necessarily returns, and lack – resonating here in recurrent unanswered questions – goes ever unresolved. Yet, beyond the forcing back down of questions, and beyond authorial intention, re-reading the novel through its distinctly un-beautiful images of (not) eating can nonetheless seek to bear witness to trauma. Without laying claim to resolving them, harnessing the productive if provisional interpretive potential of food can continue to raise questions – still unanswered today – about French co-implication in the return of repressed trauma in global cycles of exploitation and consumption, from the slave trade to neo-colonialism.

Notes

Simone de Beauvoir, *Les Belles images* (Paris: Gallimard, 1966); further references will be incorporated in the text.

The novel is narrated in the first and third person in a bid to convey an existentialist figuring of different forms of subjectivity and to avoid adopting an authorial stance of linguistic mastery that might limit the freedom of the reader.

1. For brief comments on the structural function of meals and the symbolism of force-feeding and vomiting see Terry Keefe, *Simone de Beauvoir:* *Les Belles images, La Femme rompue* (Glasgow: University of Glasgow French and German Publications, 1991) pp. 6–10; and Elizabeth Fallaize, *The Novels of Simone de Beauvoir* (London and New York: Routledge, 1988), pp.128 and 135–7.
2. The critical potential of representations of food is further elucidated in Ruth Cruickshank, ‘Eating, Drinking and Re-thinking: Duras’s *Moderato cantabile (1958)*’, *Forum for Modern Language Studies*, July 2013, 49:3, 300–20; and ‘Humans: Eating and Thinking Animals: Structuralism’s Leftovers’, *Contemporary French and Francophone Studies*, September 2012, 16:4, 543–51.

See, for example, Beauvoir’s indicative comments: ‘c’est un livre sur la vérité. J’ai été poussée à l’écrire par le très grand agacement que je ressens devant le monde du mensonge qui nous investît. La presse, la télévision, la publicité, la mode, lancent des slogans, des mythes, que les gens intériorisent et qui leur masquent le monde réel’. Beauvoir ,‘Simone de Beauvoir présente *Les Belles images*, entretien avec Jacqueline Piatier,’ in *Le Monde*: sélection hebdomadaire, 29 décembre 1965–4 janvier 1966, pp. 55–61, p. 59. Beauvoir later explains of the poster mentioned above: ‘Le problème du désespoir ne se pose pas ici. Le mal dont Catherine prend conscience, c’est le drame de la faim. Rappelez-vous, son amie veut être médecin, elle agronome. Ce sont des moyens de lutte’, p. 59.

1. See Jean Garrigues, *Banania, histoire d’une passion française* (Paris: Éditions du May, 1991).

Kristin Ross, *Fast Cars, Clean Bodies: Decolonization and the Re-ordering of French Culture* (Boston: MIT Press, 1995), pp. 145–50.

1. Maxim Silverman, ‘Interconnected Histories: Holocaust and Empire in the Cultural Imaginary’, *French Studies*, 62:4, (2008), 417–42 (p. 422).

Margaret Atack, *May 68 in French Fiction and Film: Rethinking Society, Rethinking Representation* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1999), pp. 9–22.

1. Blandine Stefanson ed., *Simone de Beauvoir, Les Belles Images* (London: Heinemann, 1980), p. 46.
2. See, for example, Ursula Tidd, *Simone de Beauvoir* (London: Routledge, 2004), pp. 59–62.
3. See Jacques Lacan, ‘Le Séminaire sur la lettre volée’ in *La psychanalyse*,2 (1957), 15–44, available online at <http://www.litt-and-co.org/psychanalyse/lacan-freud.htm>, [accessed 28 March 2013] and ‘L’Instance de la lettre dans l’inconscient, ou la raison depuis Freud’, in *La psychanalyse*, 3 (1957), 47–81, available online at <http://www.litt-and-co.org/psychanalyse/lacan-freud.htm>, [accessed 28 March 2013].
4. *La Force des choses* (Paris: Gallimard, 1963) presents a Beauvoir who had developed a position against racism in the wake of the Second World War, and rejoiced in the French defeat at Diên Biên Phu. See Tidd, *Simone de Beauvoir: Gender and Testimony* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), pp. 109–12. From the early 1950s Beauvoir campaigned for Algerian independence, against massacres and torture and against de Gaulle’s new constitution in 1958. She signed the 1961 *Manifeste des 121* against French policy in Algeria; was banned from television and radio appearances; targeted by the OAS and spoke out against the wrongful imprisonment, rape and torture of Djamila Boupacha. See Gisèle Halimi and Simone de Beauvoir, *Djamila Boupacha* (Paris: Gallimard, 1962).
5. The headlines were probably taken from *Le Monde,* 29-30 March 1965. See Blandine Stefanson ed., *Simone de Beauvoir, Les Belles images* (London: Heinemann, 1980), pp. 255–6.