Intertextual Geopolitics and *La Carte et le territoire*: A Cautionary Tale for UNESCO and the *repas gastronomique des Français*?

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**Abstract**

*La Carte et le territoire* features a France in decline, saved, *entre autres*, by attracting foreign tourists with ‘heritagized’ French food. Eight days after the novel won the Prix Goncourt, the *repas gastronomique des Français* was inscribed on UNESCO’s Intangible Cultural Heritage list (ICH). Considering Houellebecq’s use of tropes of culinary heritage alongside the French ICH bid reveals parallels in their manipulation of culinary heritage to create globally-marketable products. Yet the motivations and ramifications of the ‘gastrodiplomacy’ in the novel and in the French state’s arguably neo-imperialist initiative differ tellingly. Houellebecq’s novel brings into cautionary focus how responding to perceived geopolitical imperatives by creating narratives of cultural heritage can instead eradicate the conditions of renewal upon which it depends and limit cultural diversity. The instrumentalization of food heritage by a global corporation, national government and UNESCO—an ostensibly benign supranational institution—risks creating new conditions of global competition. However, comparing the novel and the narratives surrounding the *repas gastronomique des Français* nonetheless suggests that, representations of food—like language—can exceed authorial intention, and the gastronomic miscegenation that is strategically missing from Houellebecq’s noveland elided in the ICH bid may yet continue to feed French food heritage.

*La Carte et le Territoire* représente une France en déclin, sauvée, entre autres, par la promotion d’une cuisine française ‘patrimoinisée’ visée à attirer des touristes étrangers. Huit jours après que ce roman a emporté le Prix Goncourt, le repas gastronomique des Français a été inscrit sur la liste représentative du patrimoine culturel immatériel de l’Humanité de l’Unesco (PCI). A force de comparer les représentations du patrimoine culinaire qu’utilise Houellebecq avec celles du dossier d’inscription PCI, on constate des parallèles dans la façon dont des concepts de patrimoine culinaire sont manipulés afin de créer des produits commercialisables à l’échelle mondiale. Cependant, la ‘gastrodiplomacy’ du roman a des motivations et des ramifications qui sont très différentes de celles impliquées dans l’initiative néo-impérialiste de l’Etat français. Le récit de Houellebecq est édifiant: créer des récits de patrimoine culturel pour répondre aux impératifs géopolitiques supposés risque d’éliminer les conditions de renouvellement du patrimoine et de limiter la diversité culturelle. L'instrumentalisation du patrimoine alimentaire par une entreprise internationale, un gouvernement et l'UNESCO—une institution supranationale apparemment bénigne—risque aussi de créer de nouvelles conditions de concurrence mondiale. Cependant, la comparaison du roman et des récits impliqués dans le repas gastronomique des Français suggère que les représentations de la nourriture—comme la langue—peuvent dépasser les intentions de tout auteur, et que le métissage gastronomique critiqué à des fins stratégiques dans le roman d’Houellebecqet que le dossier d’inscription supprime pourrait encore continuer à nourrir le patrimoine alimentaire français.

Keywords: *La Carte et le territoire*; Michel Houellebecq; le repas gastronomique des Français; UNESCO; cultural heritage.

**Introduction: A Vintage Year for the Story of French Food Heritage?**

On November 8th 2010, the Prix Goncourt was awarded to Michel Houellebecq’s *La Carte et le territoire.* The novel, his fifth,imagines the responses of artist Jed, a writer named Michel Houellebecq and the global corporation Michelin to the potential obsolescence of art and literature—and, implicitly, of French cultural and economic influence—in the global marketplace. Indeed, some commentators deemed the awarding of the Goncourt to Houellebecq symptomatic of the terminal decline of French literature, and accused him of writing a novel more palatable than his previous works in order to secure France’s most important literary prize.1 Meals are notably more abundant and sophisticated in *La Carte et le territoire* than in Houellebecq’s earlier novels (Quaranta 2016, 181). The narrative is fuelled by a succession of representations of more or less traditional French food, including *cuisine à l’ancienne*; bought-in *traiteur* dishes; ‘creative’ culinary fusion; luxury hotel fare; a problematic jumble of *terroir*2 products at a violence-tinged party thrown by a heritage-championing TF1 anchor freshly poached by Michelin’s new TV; the engineering of a simulated ‘*expérience gastronomique* vintage, *voire* hardcore’(Houellebecq 2015 [2010], 120)3 across Michelin-rated establishments; home-cooked *cuisine de grand-mère* and *terroir*-ish fare bespeaking a perceived French *art de vivre* invented to attract foreign tourists. The novel leaves open the question of the capacity of representational practice to survive in the neoliberal global economy. Moreover, after Barthes,4 by staging the death of an author ‘Michel Houellebecq’, it invites intertextual readings, such as that which follows of a potentially cautionary tale about instrumentalizing cultural heritage to geopolitical and global-economic ends.

Eight days after Houellebecq’s Goncourt win, on November 16th 2010, the success of another narrative built around questionable concepts of French gastronomy and aiming to promote France’s survival in the global marketplace was announced: the *repas gastronomique des Français* had been included by UNESCO5 on its Representative List of the Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity (henceforth ICH).6 The bid document describes the *repas gastronomique des Français* as a four-course meal bookended with *apéritif* and *digestif*, served with appropriate wines and tableware and composed of carefully-chosen components. It evokes a celebratory practice transmitted and shared by all French citizens across centuries, regions and social groupings (UNESCO 2010). and putatively epitomizing a uniquely French *art de vivre.*

As well as some of the press coverage — (notably in *Le Canard enchaîné* and *Libération* and foreign newspapers (see MFPCA 2011, Pelletier 2012b and Tornatore 2012)7—a growing body of academic work in the social sciences provides critical perspectives on the narrative of the *repas gastronomique des Français*. These also have telling intersections with Houellebecq’s deployment of representations of French gastronomy in *La Carte et le territoire.* Sidonie Naulin describes how what became a bid with global economic ambitions began with the 2002 creation of the Institut Européen d'Histoire et des Cultures de l'Alimentation. Led by Francis Chevrier, the IEHCA sought to have French culinary heritage in its broadest terms recognized by government as a key element of French culture to be defended and celebrated. The attempt effectively fell on deaf budgetary ears until UNESCO opened up the ICH list in 2008, and the opportunity was seized by the government to promote French gastronomy worldwide as ‘la meilleure du monde’ to quote an off-brief (and famously food-disinterested) Nicolas Sarkozy at the launch of the bid to secure UNESCO Intangible Cultural Heritage listing for the *repas gastronomique des Français* (Tornatore 2102, 10). What ensued was a ‘top-down’ process whereby the Mission française du patrimoine et des cultures alimentaires (henceforth MFPCA) sought to make the perceived imperatives of what Rockower (2014) calls ‘gastrodiplomacy’ fit the UNESCO brief.

This narrative was presided over by ex-President of the Sorbonne, geographer and food scholar Jean-Robert Pitte, who, with Francis Chevrier, successively co-opted a team including Paris 1 historian Pascal Ory; Lyon 2 historian Julia Csergo; chef Guy Savoy; and representatives from Fondation Nestlé France, France Farine and Relais et Châteaux. The MFPCA sought to avoid metaphors that might link the protection of French food culture with elitism, for example by tempering the high cultural connotations of ‘gastronomic’ with the more commonplace ‘meal’. However, as Sarkozy’s slip of the tongue suggests, they proved unable to avert the metonymic shift from the *repas gastronomique des Français* to *la gastronomie française* with all its elite connotations (and perceived export value).

If Francis Chevrier’s *Notre gastronomie est une culture* (2011) positions the MFPCA as heroically fighting to continue the history of French gastronomic excellence, erstwhile MFPCA member Julia Csergo’s polemic *La Gastronomie est-elle une marchandise culturelle comme une autre?* (2016) raises some important questions. Csergo criticizes—*entre autres*—the MFCPA’s focus on international marketing of a perception of elitist French gastronomy as opposed to a ‘bottom-up’ approach that foregrounds the people who produce, consume and thus create culinary heritage complete with safeguarding programmes supporting rural communities, small producers and farmers (Csergo 2016). Moreover, the MFPCA bid can only sustain its fiction of a universally-practiced ‘French’ meal by excluding difference. This involves a knowing elision, not only of any cultural specificity of *terroir*, but also of food practices of French citizens from non-metropolitan ethnic backgrounds. Bound up with the narrative constructing the *repas gastronomique des Français*, then, is the risk of whitewashing cultural diversity in the hope of better exporting a fiction of French gastronomic homogeneity. Csergo’s descriptions of narrative contortions of the bid process reveal howmuch the creation of the narrative of a universally-shared French meal has in common with the craft of the novelist: manipulating the fruits of research and surveys (including claims that more 95% of the retrospectively polled ‘representative’ sample identified with the *repas gastronomique des Français*); embellishing and eliding ‘truths’; selecting and rejecting vocabulary, envisaging its effects on readers as well, perhaps, on its commercial viability and, indeed, its ability to influence panellists with powerful endorsements to bestow.

Given such linguistic manipulation, it is not surprising that Sarkozy’s inaugural lapsus went on to be superseded by other metonymic shifts from a putative cultural practice to a putatively internationally-marketable brand. This tendency was also expressed in most mainstream French press responses to the news of the successful ICH inscription: to celebrate a victory for French gastronomy (see MFPCA 2011, Beaudoin 2010; Martin-Chauffier and Raya 2010; Pelletier 2012a and Tornatore 2012). Other subsequent examples of market-driven ‘mission creep’ include the Relais et Châteaux- and Moët Hennessy-sponsored celebration: a ‘dîner des grands chefs’ at the Château de Versailles. This ‘soirée à la gloire de la culture et de la gastronomie française’ (Relais et Chateaux 2013) was damningly appraised by the *New York Times*8(and, allegedly, also by UNESCO):

Unesco [sic] was not pleased that three-star French chefs used the designation to try to promote themselves, culminating in a grotesque celebration at Versailles last April where some 60 celebrity chefs largely prepared meals elsewhere […] for celebrity guests and the news media. […] the state has not done much to safeguard the tradition except to advertise it abroad under the slogan, ‘So French, So Good’! (Erlanger 2012).

There is reference here to another example of a gastronomic global exporting: the €2 billion ‘So French, So Good’ campaign, whereby 100,000 *repas gastronomiques des Français* were served internationally, and opportunities created for foreign chefs to train in France. Little short of a culinary *mission néo-civilisatrice*, then, complete with its own metonymic strapline ‘Gastronomie Française Patrimoine de l’Humanité’*,* and the aim: ‘regagner des parts du marché mondial de l’agroalimentaire’.9 (Other MFPCA-proposed actions, as yet unrealized, include a Festival des cultures culinaires du monde, an Observatoire pour la mise en valeur du repas gastronomique des Français and four Cités de la gastronomie, and a full report to UNESCO is due 15/12/2018.)

**Reading Against the Grain of the Instrumentalization of French (Culinary) Cultural Heritage**

It is surely no coincidence that the government-sanctioned manipulation of ideas about the heritage of French food to gain valuable UNESCO validation by and the publication of Houellebecq’s Goncourt-friendly, most French-food-fuelled novel occurred at a time when one of the constitutive discourses of *l’exception française*—the belief that French gastronomy is the world’s best—was being challenged (Steinberger 2009). Both the single-authored novel and the committee-constructed bid document and the discourses and policies it generated can be read as responding to some sense of a broader *malaise français* (Fottorino 2016) that finds its expression in gastronomic narratives. Social scientists’ commentary on the MPFCA bid foregrounds how the representations of French food in the narratives involved in the *repas gastronomique des Français* exceeds understandings of ‘patrimoine alimentaire’ (Bessière **and** Tibère 2010) and food heritage (Matta 2016). The Sarkozy government’s motivations have been described as using the ICH bid to re-assert French prominence on the global stage and reap any outbound or inbound economic benefits (Naulin 2012). Meanwhile, Craig Adams argues that the UNESCO process fuels the French Republican universalizing impulse and its exclusionary implications:

such a “mono-culinary” representation of French foodways would potentially lead to significant portions of the population being left out of any such definition. Given the document’s reference to the Republic, the universalizing force displayed in the nomination file cannot simply be considered the result of the structure of UNESCO’s bureaucratic file, but should instead be understood as the expression of French Republican ideas of identity (Adams 2014).

Instead of safeguarding shared knowledge and skills, Jean-Louis Tornatore (2012) identifies a French state instrumentalization of anthropological techniques to achieve a shift from the cultural rituals of a meal to a label of excellence that bespeaks a re-nationalization of heritage. However, the novel and the discourses of and surrounding the *repas gastronomique des Français* are motivated, constructed and can be read very differently. the novel plays self-reflexively with its fictional status (including the way it plays with food) and comes with Houellebecq’s reputation for more-or-less presciently offering what Gavin Bowd describes as a unique perspective that is ‘critique et implacable sur notre monde marchandisé et mondialisé’ (Bowd 2006, ix).

As identified above in the MFPCA bid-writing process—and as is so often the case with Houellebecq—there is much more to digest in these representations of French culinary heritage. What is more, meanings are particularly slippery in representations of food, since food—like the language used to represent it—is always ambivalent. As Fischler (1990) elucidates, the incorporation of foodstuffs involves both pleasure and danger and it establishes identity within a group whilst also breaching that of the individual. Whilst culinary practices and uses of language reflect and inflect identity constructs, the narratives they create are necessarily and unboundedly multivalent, and representations of food always have the potential to exceed authorial intentions.

Considering Houellebecq’s use of tropes of more-or-less French food alongside the MFPCA bid and narratives surrounding it reveals telling parallels in their manipulation of notions of culinary heritage to create globally-marketable products. Yet the ramifications of the ‘gastrodiplomacy’ in the novel and in the French state’s arguably neo-imperialist initiative are very different. Houellebecq’s tale brings into cautionary focus how responding to perceived geopolitical global-economic imperatives by creating artificial products can limit cultural diversity, evacuate cultural heritage and eradicate the conditions of renewal upon which it depends. What is more, the instrumentalization of food heritage by global corporations, national governments and UNESCO, an ostensibly benign supranational institution, risks creating new conditions of global competition. However, comparing the novel and the narratives surrounding the *repas gastronomique des Français* nonetheless suggests that, representations of food—like language—can exceed authorial intentions, and the gastronomic miscegenation that is strategically missing from *La Carte et le territoire* and elided in the MFPCA bid may yet continue to feed French food heritage.

**Telling Stories of Domestic Consumption: *La Carte et le territoire* and the *repas gastronomique des Français***

In the hasty conclusion to his *succès de scandale*, *Les Particles élémentaires* (1998), Houellebecq uses fictional UNESCO funding to engineer the eradication of sexual failure in the neoliberal libidinal economy by replacing humans with sexually-unmotivated posthuman clones.10 The bulk of the novel dwells on the ultimately intolerable ‘atomized’ existence of those who, in Houellebecq’s neoliberal marketplace, may well be financial winners but are losers in the sexual economy as epitomized by his half-brother protagonists’ sexual failure and their linked patterns of consumption. Michel’s emotionally arid life is bathetically punctuated by excitement about the Monoprix Italian food fortnight. On his St Michel ‘parcours alimentaire’, student Bruno seeks to discharge the misery of his lack of sexual equity by bingeing on fast foods: pizza, hotdogs, cheeseburgers, kebabs, Coca-Cola and banana milkshakes ‘avant de se terminer aux pâtisseries tunisiennes’ (Houellebecq 1998, 150). Later, at the beginning of a momentarily buoyantly sexual relationship, Bruno shares meals of aphrodisiac *fruits de mer* with their female genital connotations and a post-fellatio *choucroute royale* topped with phallic ‘saucisses de Montbéliard’) (Houellebecq 1998, 201). Inexorably, the passion deflates and comes to a fatal end. Houellebecq, then, clearly relishes deploying tropes of eating and drinking in characterization and to develop thematic concerns, often with some humour, bathos and irony (sometimes premonitory).

There are similar ingredients in *La Carte et le territoire*, ranging from fascination with developments in the retail grocery sector to meals charting the course of relationships (not only the predictably ill-fated sexual relationship between Olga and Jed, but also of the terminal stages of a dysfunctional father-son relationship and that between protagonist Jed and a Michel Houellebecq figure who becomes a murder victim) and also some self-reflexive fun poked at Houellebecq’s own media-fuelled wine-soaked persona (Cruickshank 2019). Here, and no doubt with his tongue in his cheek, among the many references to his own works in the novel, Houellebecq appears to feed intertextually on *Ennemis publics* (Houellebecq and Henri-Lévy 2008). In one letter in this battle of wits, he rustles up his own marketing strategy for France’s economic survival by dismissing the fears of the *terroir*-defending author of the *Dictionnaire amoureux de la France* (Tillinac 2011):

C’est exactement ce que viennent chercher les jeunes retraités anglais, fortune faite […] dans la City […]. C’est cela qu’espéraient de toute leur âme fébrile et financière, assoiffée d’harmonie, les nouveaux riches japonais et russes; [...]. Ils ont leur fromage au lait cru, […] leur confit de canard. Nous accueillerons avec la même bonhomie les nouveaux riches chinois et indiens.

Et comme activité économique pour la France de demain, ça suffira bien (Houellebecq 2015 [2010], 124–25, original italics).

Where *Les Particules élémentaires* concludes with a UNESCO-funded eugenic paradigm shift, in *La Carte et le territoire* the apparently throwaway 2008 quip is fleshed out into the Michelin-funded cultural and economic transformation that provides the template for ‘solving’ the putative problem that provides the ‘meat’ of the novel: a fictional example that may nonetheless be read as a cautionary tale for the *repas gastronomique des Français*.

As well as featuring more food than Houellebecq’s earlier novels, there are markedly fewer provocatively sexual scenes in *La Carte et le territoire* (although misogynist tropes recur as does the focus on cis, middle-aged, middle-class white men). Readers learn a lot about what lovers Olga and Jed eat (and what Olga thinks about its market value) and very little of their intercourse, and meals are suggestive less of sexual desire than of their potential for harnessing foreign consumer desire. (The novel might at a glance be seen to fulfil Bruno’s baleful comment: ‘Après quelques années de travail le désir sexuel disparaît, les gens se recentrent sur la gastronomie et les vins’ (Houellebecq 1998, 220)!) Whether reflecting an accommodation of the perceived palate of the Goncourt jury or not, there is none of the coincidental, putatively anti-Islamic prescience of *Plateforme*, published just before the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks in America, and a year before the Bali nightclub bombings, described by Keith Reader as focussing ‘attention on the properly tragic view Houellebecq takes of human—especially sexual—desire and its geopolitical effects’ (Reader 124). However, whilst it is certainly less provocative, Houellebecq’s take on the instrumentalization of food culture in *La Carte et le territoire* that raises important geopolitical and global-economic questions in and beyond the text.

The meals shared by Jed and his father are ostensibly a forum for Houellebecq’s take on problems facing art, writing and France’s cultural and economic influence in the global marketplace. These annual Christmas get-togethers are the first of several *mises-en-scène* of failures of community and transmission, which Houellebecq presumably intends to be inferred as endemic in France, but which also belie the dangers inherent in the instrumentalization of food cultures. The first Christmas Eve dinner described in detail is at Chez Papa, a restaurant branded as offering ‘une qualité traditionnelle, *à l’ancienne*’,12 the authenticity of which is undermined at once by the italics and the ironic qualification that ‘la promesse était, dans l’ensemble, tenue’ (Houellebecq 2015 [2010], 50). Certainly, the intergenerational transmission and celebratory social ‘glue’ claimed for the repas gastronomique des Français is markedly absent. The Martins plough awkwardly through four courses (including oysters, suckling pig, cheese and dessert). As they eat alongside octogenarian diners, the dire state of the relationship between Jed and his father may also be read as symptoms of a broader French *malaise*: ‘Il était pathétique et vain de vouloir établir une convivialité gastronomique […] qui n’avait vraisemblablement jamais eu lieu’ (Houellebecq 2015 [2010], 51). (This bathetic irony chimes with some of the critical discourses surrounding the MFPCA bid for ICH listing which implies that it may be pathetic, vain, or indeed, in terms of protecting culinary specificity, in vain.)

The second meal shared by Jed and his father is taken in the shadow of terminal colorectal cancer and suicide, evoking the imminent demise of the Martin family, and, perhaps, the fate of cultural production and community in France. Jed buys in out-sourced festive tradition from a *traiteur*, served with white wine after Champagne with which Martin *père* proposes an awkward toast to the news of his son’s success. The momentary alcohol-fuelled conviviality evaporates with the introduction of the topic of Jed’s mother’s suicide, served up along with the cheese:

Jed se figea. Ça y est, se dit-il. Ça y est, *nous y voilà*;après des années, il va parler. Mais son père avait surpris son changement d'expression.

— ‘Je ne vais pas te révéler ce soir pourquoi ta mère s'est suicidée!’ […] ‘Je ne vais pas te le révéler parce que je n'en sais rien! […]’.

[…] [I]l y avait des profiteroles au chocolat dans le réfrigérateur. Devait-il les sortir? (Houellebecq 2015 [2010], 228 original italics).

When Jed does serve the profiteroles, his father contemplates them as though they are waste products not a celebratory delight to be shared:

Son père les considéra avec stupéfaction, comme un objet entièrement nouveau […] [les] considérant avec autant d'intérêt qu'il l'aurait fait d'une crotte de chien; mais il la mit, finalement, dans sa bouche. S'ensuivirent deux à trois minutes de frénésie muette, où ils attrapaient les profiteroles une par une, rageusement, sans un mot (Houellebecq 2015 [2010], 226–28).

The ensuing feeding frenzy with its latent conflict evokes the dangers bound up with the incorporation of food (Fischler 1990). Instead of the festive premise of the *repas gastronomique des Français*, then, Houellebecq brings up much that is hard to digest: artistic and professional failure because of global market economics; jealousy; suicide; encroaching terminal illness. These culinary examples of failure of transmission ‘de père (et de mère) en fils’ cast the first shadows of what, as Douglas Morrey puts it, culminates in a re-branding of a hyperreal France and ‘Frenchness’ (Morrey 2014: 22–24), descriptions which might also fit the MFPCA bid.

The meals Jed shares with a fictional Michel Houellebecq are more convivial and whilst not celebratory, they do involve a certain kind of cultural transmission, since this ‘Houellebecq’ is arguably an aesthetic father figure to Jed. In Ireland, conversation and creativity are fuelled by the products of a global gastronomic melting pot: New World wine washing down prawn cocktail, roast lamb and mint sauce and lamb curry in a pub-restaurant with a Pakistani chef and Polish waiting staff; and more New World wine accompanying French pâté, Spanish chorizo and Italian mortadella. Yet their final meal has the previously distinctly undomesticated Houellebecq figure cooks a classic of *la cuisine de grand-mère*—*pot-au-feu*—in his grandparents’ house in rural France served with Chablis and preceded by olives and *saucisson* and followed by Saint-Nectaire and Époisses and coffee, *macarons* and plum *eau de vie*.

The conversation over the meal feeds into the fictional Houellebecq’s proclamation of his own aesthetic accommodation with challenges of representational practice in 2020s France:

‘J'ai préparé un pot-au-feu hier, il va être meilleur. Ça se réchauffe très bien, le pot-au-feu’.

‘[…] je crois que j'en ai à peu près fini avec le *monde comme narration*—le monde des romans et des films, le monde de la musique aussi. Je ne m'intéresse plus qu'au *monde comme juxtaposition*—celui de la poésie, de la peinture. Vous prenez un peu plus de pot-au-feu?’ (Houellebecq 2015 [2010], 263–65).

Whilst it is not celebratory, as well as serving up most of the prescribed components of the *repas gastronomique des Français*, there is a sense here of the sharing of cultural practice which may survive because it is evolving. However, the meal is part of what appears to be a knowingly critical gastronomic narrative game. There is fun to be had: as a Burgundian Marc-washed cheese, Époisses shares the provenance of the chilled Chablis served, and is, no doubt, part of Houellebecq’s strategy in the novel of sending up his media image as an inveterate drunk. However, Houellebecq casting of his eponymous protagonist as the cooking a *pot-au-feu* in his grandparents’ house involves a dish that personifies myths of French gastronomy, and whilst evoking nostalgic visions of rural France, has long left home kitchens (Csergo 1999).

This ostensibly nostalgic nod to a superannuated culinary tradition is of course, a red herring, for this apparent aesthetic resolution andgastronomic revival is swiftly negated by the butchering of the novelist and his dog by a plastic surgeon. The murderer steals Jed’s portrait to add to his private collection, pausing to decapitate the Houellebecq figure and his dog, and to distribute their blood and laser-cut flesh in a grisly approximation of a Jackson Pollock drip painting. Soon after cooking *cuisine de grand-mère* in his own grandmother’s house, then, the fictional Houellebecq meets a definitively vomit-inducing market-driven end. The falsely ‘traditional’ iterations of French gastronomy Jed shares with his father and the Houellebecq figure’s red-herring-flavoured *pot-au-feu* are steeped in the symbolism of death. This suggests that a France with a field of cultural production predicated on nostalgia (and here the *repas gastronomique des Français* springs to mind) stands little chance of survival in the global marketplace, let alone of maintaining its cultural heritage.

**The Instrumentalization of Intangible Culinary Cultural Heritage in the Global Marketplace**

Jed’s relationship with the Russian Michelin brand manager Olga further explores the notion that art and literature, like food, are global market commodities. The meals they share raise questions on a global scale about the instrumentalization of intangible culinary cultural heritage. Jed and Olga first eat together Chez Anthony et Georges, a ‘French’ restaurant chosen (and reviewed) by Olga decorated with various ‘traditional’ touches; serving food such as *poulet aux écrevisses,* which can simultaneously be branded as heritageand light-touch *haute cuisine*; and full, notably, of overseas tourists:

— ‘Ça vous plaît?’ demanda Olga à Jed […].

— Je ... oui. C'est typique. Enfin on a l'impression que c'est typique, mais on ne sait pas très bien de quoi. C'est dans le guide ?’ […]

‘Pas encore. On va le rajouter dans l'édition de l'an prochain. Il y a eu un article dans *Condé Nast Traveller,* et dans le *Elle* chinois’ (Houellebecq 2015 [2010], 91).

Jed’s comment about his meal being elusively ‘typical’ points to the problems of defining intangible cultural heritage in general, and those experienced by the MFPCA bid team in particular. Moreover, this artfully positioned blend of French ‘gastronomy’ and regional culinary ‘heritage’ is no act of safeguarding, celebration or transmission: its target audience are foreign tourists (here American, Chinese and Russian). On their second visit to Chez Anthony et Georges, the restaurant is empty save for a Korean couple: ‘Olga opta pour un gaspacho à l'aragula [*sic*] et un homard mi-cuit [*sic*] avec sa purée d'ignames, Jed pour une poêlée de Saint-Jacques *simplement saisies* et un soufflé de turbotin au carvi avec sa neige de passe-crassane (Houellebecq 2015 [2010], 108, original italics). The absence of clients implies the unsustainability of the changed menu, now offering amusingly unappetizing ‘fusion’ cuisine (including misspelt rocket ‘gaspacho’ and a curious yam purée mismatched with curiously-prepared lobster)*.*

The potential of culinary miscegenation is strategically dismissed in the text as an equally unsavoury alternative to re-packaged culinary nostalgia. As part of this narrative trajectory, Houellebecq invents a market model expressed by the glossy Michelin *French Touch* guide. This is edited by Russian Olga, whose expertise in milking foreign markets outweighs her lack of knowledge of the culinary culture she marketizes to attract foreign tourists with a fiction of French food:

De la France Olga ne connaissait au fond que Paris, se dit Jed en feuilletant le guide *French Touch*; et lui –même, à vrai dire, guère d’avantage À travers l’ouvrage la France apparaissait comme un pays enchanté, une mosaïque de terroirs superbes constellés de châteaux et de *manoirs*, d'une stupéfiante diversité mais où, partout, il faisait *bon vivre*’ (Houellebecq 2015 [2010], 94).

As well as mocking the detrimental power Olga has over what is effectively a foreign cuisine, Houellebecq no doubt intends readers to take with a pinch of salt the risible description of the high-end fare at the fictional Auberge verticale where the chef offers a ‘symphonie des légumes et des saisons’ (Houellebecq 2015 [2010], 124). There is indeed humour in skewering high-end hotel and catering hyperbole, as when Jed and Olga visit luxury Michelin-rated properties in *la France profonde*, Jed’s defence of the potential of the gastronomy which embraces otherness is shattered by Olga’s pragmatic reading between the lines of what Fox terms ‘gastrospeak’ (2007):

“Au cœur d'un Cantal mâtiné de Midi où tradition rime avec décontraction et liberté avec respect ...” […] ‘Ah oui, j'ai compris! ... […], elle a épousé un Arabe, c'est pour ça le respect.’

— ‘Ça peut être pas mal […]. Ils font peut-être de la fusion food franco-marocaine’. […].

— ‘Oui’ fit Olga, peu convaincue. ‘Mais moi je suis une touriste, je veux du franco-français. Un truc franco-marocain ou franco-vietnamien, ça peut marcher pour un restaurant branché du canal Saint-Martin; sûrement pas pour un hôtel de charme dans le Cantal. Je vais peut-être le virer du guide, cet hôtel ...’ (Houellebecq 2015 [2010], 118–19).

Houellebecq’s Russian marketing executive’s quest is not to preserve French gastronomy (or, indeed to embrace cultural difference), and instead to maximise profits (here by weighing up the potential of the post-colonial appropriation of a ‘truc franco-marocain ou franco-vietnamien’). As Olga asserts international tourists’ desire for ‘franco-français’ fare (Houellebecq 2010, 119), this justification of the unmarketability of fusion dishes may also betray some nostalgia in Houellebecq for identifiable, dependable markers of cultural identity. Nonetheless, the novel has Michelin commission a market-research report following Olga’s dismissal of Franco-Moroccan cuisine:

La cuisine créative, ainsi que la cuisine asiatique, étaient unanimement rejetées. […] Quelle que soit la région, les restaurants se prévalant d’une image ‘traditionnelle’ ou ‘à l’ancienne’ enregistraient des additions supérieures de 63% à l’addition médiane.

[…]*.* *Nos nouveaux clients* […] *sont au contraire à la recherche* […] *d’une expérience gastronomique* vintage, *voire* hardcore: *seuls les restaurateurs en mesure de s’adapter à cette nouvelle donnée devraient mériter*, *à l’avenir, de figurer dans notre guide*’ (Houellebecq 2015 [2010], 119–20).

The Michelin report seeks to wipe fusion food off the map and instate a re-imagined French gastronomic offering to be imposed upon all foreign tourist-consumers across the territory. Whilst this amusingly termed ‘hardcore’ gastronomy is clearly hyperbolic, there is a parallel here with the way the MFPCA bid conceals how selective reference to surveys is used to corroborate claims for the *repas gastronomique des Français* as practiced by all French citizens (including those in the DROM-COM).

Representing ethnic others only as unquestioning consumers of what is globally market as ‘heritagized’ French food, Houellebecq brings *La Carte et le territoire* to its peremptory end (even more peremptory than the swift UNESCO-funded end to humanity in *Les Particules élémentaires*)*.* This involves saving France’s economic bacon by taking a credulity-stretching giant step from a fusion-food-obliterating Michelin-commissioned report to a total re-positioning of a national economy (not to mention of its food culture). Not long before his death, Jed emerges momentarily from his reclusive existence into an erstwhile ‘village décrépit, ordinaire de la France rurale’ (Houellebecq 2015 [2010], 398). The novel’s final meal is one that has been created and curated to attract foreign tourists, a fiction of ‘French’ food neither eaten historically or in the fictional present by the French nor, indeed, ever served in establishments like those already rendered obsolete by Olga:

Il commanda un Menetou-Salon rosé, qu'il but pensivement en songeant à ces transformations. À cette heure matinale, le café était peu fréquenté. Une famille de Chinois terminait son breakfast limousin, proposé à 23 euros par personne (Houellebecq 2015 [2010], 399).

Twenty years on from the fictional Michelin prescription of vintage, hardcore ‘French’ food, the ‘breakfast limousin’ featuredin the ‘heritagized’ Bar du Sport complete with Art Deco lamps sells at an *à la carte* price as inflated as is the false link to the *territoire* and *terroir* for, as the loanword indicates, the region has no specific breakfast tradition. At the end of what now looks like a gastronomic cautionary tale with very real intertextual resonances with the *repas gastronomique des Français*, like the fictional Houellebecq, French culinary heritage appears to be dead.

**The Cautionary Tale of Houellebecq’s Lobster: Re-thinking Intangible Cultural Heritage**

If Bernard Maris argues Houellebecq’s novels reveal the failure of economic theories (Maris 2014, 23), in *La Carte et le territoire*, Houellebecq—very much alive—succeeds in foregounding how food as a global commodity may threaten so many vulnerable evolving local cultural practices. The *repas gastronomique des Français* seeks to solve a perceived problem of French decline by inventing a codified ‘French’ meal which, as well as eliding cultural diversity, fails to grasp how food cultures survive by maintaining their currency through the negotiation of change and the accommodation of external influences. The kind of food practices and culinary miscegenation that may precisely ensure the ongoing evolution of the movable feast of ‘French gastronomy’ are curtailed in Houellebecq’s novel by the imposition of edible products which may connote heritage, but have no cultural roots. This resonates with how, by focussing on the global export market and fitting UNESCO criteria, the *repas gastronomique des Français* ignores the reality that cultural heritage is an organic, evolving, ‘bottom-up’ process of consumption and production by communities that cannot be legislated over by corporations, government committees or, indeed, supranational bodies such as UNESCO.

Houellebecq’s imaginary marketing ploy further flags up the problematics of the narratives bound up with the *repas gastronomique des Français* which may seek to promote a fiction of French gastronomy across the world. Houellebecq’s heritagized ‘carte’ no longer reflects French ‘territoire’ and is drawn up by Michelin’s marketing team to maximize foreign tourist income without any real knowledge of, or concern for, indigenous living food culture. Like Olga’s engineering of the exclusion of gastronomic expressions of multicultural France, the *repas gastronomique des Français* bid also flattens expressions of culinary difference. Instead of savouring the hybrid potential of existing practices in a culinary cultural melting pot, it whitewashes the cultural heritage of French citizens who are not *de souche.* The MFPCA’s elision of the identity narratives bound up with ethnic food cultures within France and of their contribution to the ongoing evolution of food practices considered ‘French’, like the Michelin strategies imagined by Houellebecq, reveal how mechanisms of exclusion and elision of cultural difference which lead to the potential extinction of cultural heritage may be institutionally sanctioned, both in France and beyond.

If the not-so-hidden governmental agenda in the *repas gastronomique des Français* initiative evokes a gastronomic *mission néo-civilisatrice* to shore up the reputation of French gastronomy and improve French economic performance in the global marketplace evokes a gastronomic *mission néo-civilisatrice,* the deployment of gastronomic tropes in *La Carte et le territoire*, then, also tells of how globalized late capitalism transcends nations states. This discussion of the geopolitics of *La Carte et le territoire* and of the MFPCA bid brings into question the ramifications of the appropriation of ICH safeguarding by problematic versions of ‘gastrodiplomacy’ (Rockower 2014). Raúl Matta (2016) cites the inscription of the *repas gastronomique des Français* on UNESCO’s ICH list as an example of how early attempts to safeguard food practices11 may emphasize ‘cultural continuity and intercultural dialogue’ but may also ‘operate more as an elite-driven competitive global concept than as a tool for cultural safeguarding and inclusive development’. Matta uses the *repas gastronomique des Français* to exemplify how the first food-related candidacies for ICH listing demonstrate how the focus of ‘stakeholders’ was ‘mainly on uniqueness, excellence and superiority on the global scale’. Inescapably, then, the most concerning result of reading *La Carte et le territoire* in the light of the bid for ICH listing for the *repas gastronomique des Français* is the realization that UNESCO’s inscription of national food culture on the Intangible Cultural Heritage has created new openings for ‘gastrodiplomacy’ in the global marketplace. Thus, whilst introduced by an ostensibly benign global institution such as UNESCO, admitting food onto the ICH list has unwittingly fuelled new symptoms of global market competition.

Yet narratives cannot fully circumscribe food or language: as the metonymic shifts from the *repas gastronomique des Français* to *la gastronomie française* demonstrate, food exceeds all manner of authorial intentions. Indeed, beyond the gastrodiplomacy deployed to ostensibly cautionary ends in *La Carte et le territoire* and those bound up with *repas gastronomique des Français*—and despite narratives of decline—French culinary practices do continue to evolve and to accommodate diverse populations and practices. Amusingly, Houellebecq’s novel has provide a material example of France’s culinary melting pot. When Jed and Olga visit the château de Vault-de-Lugny, Olga consumes a ‘pressé d’homard’ (Houellebecq 2010, 190). In a delicious irony, the château’s chef Franco Bowanee has created a *spécialité de la maison*, ‘Pressé de Homard “Michel Houellebecq”’ (Terroir des chefs), which blends French classics, *terroir* products and his native Mauritian flavours. Of course, this might also be construed as an example of cultural appropriation, as might the ‘integration’ of Bowanee into the Collège Culinaire de France in 2013. Notwithstanding such reservations, Bowanee’s own creation inspired by a novel that strategically demonstrates how food cultures can evolve by incorporating and exceeding narratives imposed upon them.

Furthermore, internationally-successful miscegenation is an important feature of the contemporary French gastronomic field. This is epitomized by OMNIVORE, created in 2003 by Luc Dubanchet who has gone on to be a vocal critic of the *repas gastronomique des Français*, and Le Fooding, a 40% share of which acquired by none other than Michelin in September 2017. These groupings bring together vibrant young chefs who mix elements of *terroir*, French gastronomictradition and non-French culinary cultures, creating meals that emphatically do not comply to the description of the *repas gastronomique des Français*, but do enjoy commercial success in France and abroad*.* Even the MFPCA inadvertently bears witness to the openness to renewal of French culinary heritage. Enduring MFPCA member Pascal Ory heads off criticisms of the concept of the *repas gastronomique des Français* (exceptionalist pride; mythologizing of heritage; misreading the threats of globalization; and puritanism) by describing French gastronomy as ‘une “grande machine à métisser”’ (Ory 2013, 74), and asserting: ‘Il n’y a pas d’identité sans confrontation à l’altérité, il n’y a pas de patrimoine sans sa transmission’ (Ory 2013, 39). In the MFCPA’s coffee-table book *Le* *Repas gastronomique des Français*, tellingly, there are only three contributions considering non-French influences. One, however is an interview with three-Michelin-starred chef Olivier Roellinger, who agrees that openness to different cuisines is the foundation of the putative ‘recréation permanente’ of the *repas gastronomique des Français* (Bienassis and Roellinger in Chevrier ed. 2015, 128).

In French homes many different celebratory food practices still continue to be transmitted from generation to generation, though no doubt modified along the way, and entering also into the ongoing story of French culinary heritage. These include, of course, the alimentary celebrations of French citizens who are not *de souche,* couscous, chả giò, ‘ceebu yapp’, cabrito assado or ‘carri’, for example, using serving conventions that neither neatly parse into four courses nor, due to religious prohibitions, include an *apéritif* or *digestif* (millions of French citizens open *iftar* during Ramadan with dates). To paraphrase and exceed the authorial intentions of Manuel Valls’ assertion on January 8th 2015 that ‘La France, ce n’est pas Michel Houellebecq’, then, the r*epas gastronomique des Français* is— in many ways—not representative of France. Reading *La Carte et le territoire* with the narratives surrounding the *repas gastronomique des Français* thus suggests that as well as being subject to instrumentalization, food practices—like language—can still productively exceed authorial intentions and evade prescription and circumscription, whether of a novelist, a government, a global corporation or a not-for-profit global institution.

**Notes**

1. See, for example, Moor (2012).

2. For a discussion of the evolution of the discourses and mythologies constituting *terroir* since the RenaissanceseeParker (2015).

3. All citations are from the 2016 Garnier Flammarion ‘édition avec dossier’ ed. Novak Lechevalier, Agathe.

4. Barthes, Roland. 1984 [1968]. ‘La Mort de l’auteur’ in *Le Bruissement de la langue.* Paris: Seuil, pp. 61–67.

5. Intergovernmental Committee for the Safeguarding of the Intangible Cultural Heritage, fifth session, Nairobi, Kenya, 15–19 November 2010, decision 5. Com 6–14.

6. The Representative List was created in 2003, to encourage ‘intercultural dialogue’ and ‘mutual respect for other ways of life’ (UNESCO 2003), by safeguarding intangible cultural heritage described as ‘[t**]**raditional, contemporary and living at the same time’ (UNESCO 2013).

7. See the MFPCA Revue de presse février 2011, http://www.repasgastronomiquedesfrancais.org/pdf/RdPfevrier2011.pdf.

8. *The New York Times* had already sharpened its knives before the RGF was listed (Sciolino 2008).

9. The original website has been replaced by <https://www.sofrenchsofood.com>, but see archives: <http://archives.gouvernement.fr/fillon_version2/gouvernement/campagne-so-french-so-good-encourager-la-gastronomie-francaise-a-s-exporter.html>. Accessed May 5, 2018. In another linguistic shift, a ‘So French, So Food’ gastronomic week has been celebrated in Israel since 2013.

10. Trading on Michel’sintellectual equity, Hubczejakmarketizes Michel’s research, and changes global opinion such that the cloning of a posthuman race is funded from 2021 by UNESCO.

11. Others include ‘Traditional Mexican cuisine – The Michoacán Paradigm’, ‘The Mediterranean Diet’ and ‘Gingerbread Craft from Northern Croatia’ (2010); the Turkish ‘Ceremonial Keşkek Tradition’ (2011); ‘Kimjang, Making and Sharing Kimchi in the Republic of Korea’ and ‘Washoku, Traditional Dietary Cultures of the Japanese’ (2013).

12. Given the difference in the cuisine marketed and the location, Houellebceq does not appear to reference the Sud-Ouest-themed mini-chain Chez Papa, <http://www.chez-papa.com/accueil>.

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