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### STORY DETAILS

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**Title:**

Bananas – Going, Going, Gone?

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**Summary:**

An essay on the history of diseases in bananas in Australia, exploring questions of memory, diversity, and loss in the colonial and monocultural space of the plantation.

**Author bio:**

Lorraine Shannon is a writer and editor. She has a PhD in postcolonial literature from Trinity College, Dublin and a non-traditional PhD in writing and ecology from UTS. She has published in a range of journals such as *The Australian Humanities Review*, *PAN*, *Island*, *TEXT* and *Societies*. She edited a collection of writings by Val Plumwood entitled *The Eye of the Crocodile* and is writing a book on gardening philosophy while establishing an eco-arts garden in Wentworth Falls.

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## **BANANAS – GOING, GOING, GONE?**

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Late in her life, my mother developed holes in her memory. This slow violence ate away at the links and connections in her mind, leaving her thoughts scattered like remnant ecosystems. In contrast to the rest of the family, she was unconcerned. Food, she said confidently, could fill these holes. It made sense, in a way, memory and food being so intimately linked. After all, Proust convinced us long ago that taste transports us into the past. His famous Madelaine with its distinctive ribbed shape, like a shell, is still sold as a souvenir – literally an aid to memory – to pilgrims on the Santiago di Compostela pilgrimage, whose emblem is a scallop shell.

My mother, however, wasn't interested in Madelaines – or in Proust for that matter. Bananas, she announced, were the answer. Once again, this made sense of a sort. After all, surely everyone in Australia had memories connected to eating bananas. Generations of babies were made replete and content on mashed banana; school children devoured the banana in their lunch boxes while ignoring unappetizing sandwiches. It was the favourite snack of adults on the run. If anything could reestablish lost connections it should be the ubiquitous banana. As Australians' favourite fruit it is firmly ensconced as a nationalist food tradition; part, you might say, of settler Australian cultural memory. And in place of the Santiago di Compostela's Madelaines thousands of Australians can make their own home grown pilgrimage to the Big Banana in search of a deeper, authentic experience of the essence of banana.

But sadly the banana evoked no reminiscences for my mother. Her memories were gone, tragically wiped out. Was it that the mighty banana was not as potent as she had imagined? It had, after all, over her lifetime, suffered its own taste extinction and was no longer the tasty repast it had been. In fact, the banana is not what it used to be. In the first half of the twentieth century families were enjoying the taste explosion of the sweet, creamy Gros Michel banana. But no more. The Gros Michel fell prey to Panama disease in the 1950s and is now merely a laboratory curiosity. Wiped out in other words.

Nowadays almost all bananas are the Cavendish variety, a more or less bland and boring replacement. But there is even worse news. Although the Cavendish is resistant to Panama disease it is being stalked by another fungal disease, Black Sigatoka, which first appeared in Fiji in 1963 and has been kept at bay by constant chemical spraying. Not only is Black Sigatoka becoming more and more difficult to control, Panama disease is making a comeback in a new form known as Tropical Race 4 (TR4). It attacks the Cavendish with particular virulence and destroyed the Northern Territory banana industry in the late 1990s. When it was

detected in the nation's dominant growing region in 2015 it looked like curtains for the banana.

Does it matter, you might ask? After all, many other foods that have slipped from memory and been lost are now being rediscovered. But although many heritage varieties of fruit and vegetables are undergoing a revival things are not so straightforward for the banana. For starters, it is genetically old and decrepit. In a way we can think of it as having lost its memory as it lacks the genes necessary to fight pests and diseases that are likely to create holes in the banana growing regions of the world. The Cavendish is the most viable large-scale variety but being a standardised food crop it does not have the robustness necessary to adapt and survive. Once Panama TR4 is confirmed as present, vulnerable banana strains can no longer be farmed in the area as fungal spores may survive in soil for up to 30-40 years. This is particularly concerning for the Australian banana industry as around 95% of its bananas are Cavendish. They are grown on monocrop plantations, some in Coffs Harbour but mostly in North Queensland within a 100km radius of each other. There appears to be no doubt that the disease will inevitably become endemic in the region.

So, despite having changed the landscape and food habits of Australians not only is the beleaguered banana sterile and unable to change itself, its continued existence is likely to be dependent on genetic engineering. At present new plants are started from cuttings and new banana trees are usually produced from an existing plant by replanting root stalks, known as rhizomes or shoots called suckers that grow from them. However, since 2012 researchers have developed and field-tested genetically modified Cavendish banana trees in Australia that have exhibited notable resistance to Panama disease. Well, then, you might think, all is not lost. It's true *all* is not lost but let's take a look at what *has been* lost.

To establish banana plantations large tracts of diverse flora and fauna were cleared, leaving holes filled by a plant that may have become emblematic of Australian nationality but is implicated in a forgetting, whether conscious or unconscious of what preceded it. In what were once tropical and subtropical forests Aboriginal people had shaped the biodiversity for thousands of years. Their knowledge systems also identified the links that created the region's biocultural diversity.

Sandra Pannell writes of tropical forest areas of North Queensland where, "beneath the palimpsest of European names that feature on contemporary maps of the region lies a dense and interwoven Indigenous semantic landscape where names not only signify Storytime events and beings but also refer to the flora and fauna of the locality." [\[1\]](#)

Back in the late nineteenth century, white ownership of land now devoted to monocropping bananas was leased to Chinese immigrants who had been lured to the country by political unrest in China and the promise of riches from gold mining. They brought banana plants with them and moved to clear additional land once their five-year leases expired. They played an important role in developing capitalist markets and wealth in the area but by the 1920s under the White Australia Policy their numbers declined and Chinese participation in the industry came to an end. The industry did not fully recover from the departure of the Chinese until the 1970s.

So, both imperial power and immigrant workers in search of betterment contributed to an ecological and cultural transformation in tropical Queensland, much of which settler Australians might prefer to forget. The Cavendish monocrops growing today could be described as a singular means to the singular end of profit-making. One that has replaced diverse ends and means. This is not good news. The Cavendish has been standardized for ease and predictability of market profit and growth. As a monocrop it is a stand-alone feature without connections to a larger whole. Such monocrops not only threaten biological diversity also often threaten cultural diversity directly and indirectly. And as varieties of food are lost through standardization so too are memories erased.

Like Proust we might seek to nostalgically remember the ‘good old days’ when bananas tasted as they should but perhaps life was simpler for Proust. For settler society Australians with our constant angst about who and what belongs in the landscape, a simple link to the past may be lost to us. There are many morals we might draw from the story of the banana but perhaps one simple truth is that to truly enjoy a banana we have to forget the past.

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[1] Sandra Pannell, ‘Cultural Landscapes in the Wet Tropics’ in *Living in a Dynamic Tropical Forest Landscape*, eds., Nigel Stork and Stephen M. Turton, Blackwell Publishing, Victoria, Australia, 2008.

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