

Aanchal Saraf Reviewing Anaïs
Maurer’s *The Ocean
On Fire: Pacific Stories
from Nuclear Survivors
and Climate Activists*
(2024)

What scientists predict as the future consequences of climate collapse, Pacific people have already experienced. Over the course of her stunning monograph, Anaïs Maurer contends that these experiences—with nothing less than apocalypse—offer lessons we desperately need in the face of ongoing environmental ruin. Pacific encounters with forced migration, mass species extinction, and the proliferation of diseases have generated what Maurer calls ‘Pacific (post)apocalyptic stories’: an assemblage of print, oral, digital, embodied, and visual literature that describe nuclear imperialism and climate change as the consequence of racism, militarism, and carbon-fueled industrialization. These stories, Maurer argues, help us apprehend climate collapse on a global scale. Eschewing affective stances of despair and inaction, Pacific (post)apocalypse stories instead narrate examples of radical political change and the power of collective action. As Maurer so movingly states, “[t]hey teach how to mourn for what has been lost and how to find the strength to keep fighting for that which remains” (2024, 10).

The analytical framework of Maurer’s monograph is transnational, examining works in English, French, Hawaiian, Spanish, Tahitian, and Uvean as well as visual arts by painters from across the region. This tremendous archive is accompanied by heretofore untranslated stories from the French-occupied Pacific. Maurer’s English translations, in response to Pacific Francophone authors’ expressed desires, are no small feat. The tremendous and careful work of translation across the monograph breaks

down linguistic boundaries, encouraging the transnational solidarity characteristic of the Pacific antinuclear movement.

Maurer's theoretical contributions animate the decolonial potential already present in her translations. *The Ocean On Fire* is, as such, effectively split into two parts: the first half introduces these key theoretical concepts, which the second half of the book then mobilizes to close read a variety of Pacific stories. In her introduction, Maurer differentiates post-1945 colonialism and nuclear imperialism from the systems of domination that preceded them. Under international pressures to relinquish their colonial possessions, imperial countries replaced large scale colonialism by instead acquiring small areas of militarized lands in independent countries that allowed them to develop their nuclear strike capacity. Nuclear colonizers located many of their 'testing' sites on low-lying atolls, which means that the archipelagoes most threatened by climate change also forged solidarities across decades fighting for a nuclear-free and independent Pacific. In her focus on nuclear imperialism and climate change as related cataclysms, Maurer convincingly argues that these processes inflict not a slow violence, but a *slowed* violence: a violence that slows down as it travels through space. The devastation is both immediate and part of a much longer *durée* of environmental racism, but its recognition as violence takes much longer to reach the academic centers of nuclearized nations.

The other key terms Maurer introduces us to are also the titles of her first and second chapters: "Isletism" and "Oceanitude." Maurer describes Isletism as a subset of Orientalism through which the West ideologically constructs tropical island cultures. Isletism places the 'islander' outside of historical time and civilization altogether, which, in turn, enables an 'annihilation racism' that presupposes the inevitable disappearance of Pacific people as a supposedly 'prehistoric' race. In her elucidation of Isletism, Maurer stages an extended discussion on the applicability of the term 'genocide' to describe the colonization of the Pacific. While epidemics were the primary cause of mortality, Maurer contends that Western indifference to the Pacific epidemiological crisis was undergirded by Isletist narratives and an annihilation racism that, together, had genocidal outcomes. Intent was eclipsed by the deadly consequences of passivity. In a moment where doubt surrounding the applicability of the term 'genocide' to describe Israel's siege on Gaza has obscured widespread death and disablement, Maurer offers necessary clarity on the meaningfulness of the term outside its international legal definitions. That her theoretical framework so powerfully pulls on the work of Edward Said only serves to underscore the usefulness of her argument in the fight for a free Palestine.

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In their own struggles for freedom, Pacific writers and artists have produced what Maurer calls the literature of Oceanitude. Oceanitude was first coined in 2015 by ni-Vanuatu novelist Paul Tavo as a collective Pacific identity that is rooted in a shared genealogical relationship with the ocean. While Maurer writes beautifully of Oceanitude as a philosophy that venerates a radical interdependence, she argues that Oceanitude “goes farther” than Negritude in dismantling Cartesian ways of ordering the world: Oceanitude understands other-than-human life as totally entangled with human life, whereas Negritude still maintains a separation between the human and other-than-human even while embracing the other-than-human’s undeniable vitality. While there is value in parsing out the distinctions between these differing oceanic philosophies, recent scholarship in Caribbean Studies on Black diasporic entanglements with the ocean suggests that these distinctions may not be ecological, but genealogical. For example, in 1982, Aimé Césaire (one of the preeminent philosophers of Negritude along with Léopold Sédar Senghor) published a collection of poems titled *moi, lumineaire* [I, laminaria]. Black studies scholar Jessica Marion Modi has argued that Césaire’s serial poetry articulates a uniquely Antillean sovereignty that does not depend on “French departmental laws that encircle the island” of Martinique (2024), but rather connects the islands of the Caribbean through coral, algae, volcanoes, and lava flow. Modi’s reading of *moi, lumineaire* reveals Césaire’s genealogical relationship to the ocean, which is nonetheless distinct from the genealogical relationships Maurer argues are expressed through Oceanitude. These two oceanic geographies are not in a teleological relationship, but instead encompass specific histories which in turn produce specific relationalities between humans, other-than-humans, and the oceans and islands they call home.

The second half of *The Ocean On Fire* close reads Pacific stories that tackle mass extinction, death and disease, and mass migration. In “Atomic Animals,” Maurer focuses on alienation from biodiversity, not just through climate collapse but also through the irradiation of marine life under nuclear imperialism. Maurer shows how stories by Mā’ohi writer Ra’i Chaze, Māori author Witi Ihimaera, and CHamoru poet Craig Santos Perez illustrate the new solidarities that are possible amidst the collapse of multispecies relationships; underscoring Maurer’s argument that Pacific (post)apocalyptic stories are not speculative. These writers mourn the apocalypses Pacific peoples have endured and imbue their writing with righteous anger for their other-than-human kin, reconstruct multispecies relations, and provide refuge for the vibrant memory of all that has been lost. Particularly striking is the rage that pulses through Chaze’s work and

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Maurer's reading of it: a poetics connecting the contamination of fish, sea-shells, and Pacific women's bodies as scenes of psychological horror that, within them, contain a moral imperative to act.

"The H-Bomb and Humor," is perhaps the strongest section of the monograph. Maurer analyzes visual arts and fiction by Bobby Holcomb, André Marere, Cronos, THS!, Alexandre Moeva Ata, and Albert Wendt. These antinuclear works approach the death and disease wrought by nuclear imperialism with humor, parody, and caricature. They make use of traditional forms of Indigenous humoristic genres such as Ar'oi theater in Tahiti and fale aitu in Samoa to destabilize power and suggest the "cultural vitality of traditional clowning in the face of the apocalypse" (30). The visual artists lampoon a series of Isletist tropes, prominent among them the 'sexually available South Seas woman.' They portray wahine as smiling skulls, emphasize the mushroom cloud's phallic appearance, and ridicule French presidents who initiated and resumed nuclear weapons testing in Tahiti. Maurer places Wendt's novel *Black Rainbow* in this shared lineage of Pacific humor, framing the work as a satire that tackles the presumed absolute authority of science, medicine, and nuclear technology. Though the embodied and performative aspects of Ar'oi theatre and fale aitu are notably absent, their shared affinities for lampooning and absurdity are clear. The crux of this chapter lies in its close, where Maurer reemphasizes the use of traditional artforms to ridicule colonial mythmaking. The intervention of these stories is not just a critique, but a creation of new images and narratives that continue the age-old practice of clowning the imperial world order.

"Radiation Refugees," finally, explores performances by ri-Maje! spoken-word artist Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner, a novel by Mā'ohi writer Chantal Spitz, and songs by Teresia Teaiwa, who traces her lineage back to Fijian, Banaban, Tabiteuean, and African-American heritages. Maurer considers how these three artists build home away from homeland, as they come from peoples who have already experienced nuclear imperial displacement and permanent exile. These artists bring emotion back to conversations about climate collapse, pushing people to feel the scope of its wreckage. They also touch upon the complexities of the colonial present, such as with Spitz offering critiques of her people's complicity in their own displacement. Maurer also writes generously of the absence of Kiribati in Teaiwa's work, articulating the silences as reflecting unspeakable loss. It is evident in this chapter not just the carefulness with which Maurer approaches her texts and their makers, but also how their poetics inform her own thinking, which leads with an empathetic refusal of a Cartesian world order that devalues emotion and reveres distanced objectivity.

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Ultimately, *The Ocean on Fire* suggests that the stories contained in its pages cultivate “arts of living on a damaged planet” (169), encouraging the pursuit of love and beauty amidst nuclear ruin. Maurer does not purport to offer any solutions; in fact, she restates her feelings of loss and desperation in what feels like a losing battle against climate catastrophe. Her work continues to route me back to Gaza. How do we grapple with the insurmountable loss of life in present genocidal conditions? How do we provide true refuge to those (human and other-than-human) fleeing from unspeakable violence? How do we tear down ecocidal infrastructures and build instead a world that affirms life itself? Like Maurer, I am often without answers. But such is the work of the Pacific (post)apocalyptic stories Maurer has so carefully curated. They dislodge us from despair, direct us back into our broken world, and inspire us to keep fighting for what is left.

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