

Anaïs Maurer, *The Ocean on Fire: Pacific Stories from Nuclear Survivors and Climate Activists*, Durham: Duke University Press, 2024. ISBN: 978-1-4780-3004-1 (paper); ISBN: 978-1-4780-2486-6 (cloth); ISBN: 978-1-4780-5905-9 (ebook)

Nuclear and climate politics are entwined in the Pacific in a way that is often omitted by narratives of sinking islands or climate vulnerability. Anaïs Maurer's debut book, *The Ocean on Fire: Pacific Stories from Nuclear Survivors and Climate Activists*, directly addresses that separation, showing it to be a failure to understand the history of either politics, or to pay enough attention to the region.

Maurer is an Assistant Professor of French and Comparative Literature, whose work covers Pacific Studies, Decolonial Literatures, and Ecofeminism, among others. In *Ocean on Fire*, she weaves together insights from these fields to bring an analysis that centres the Pacific in its own history, analysing Pacific texts that address the multiple, overlapping forms of violence in the region. As Maurer reminds us:

... issues perceived as imminent threats in mainstream climate discourse have already been experienced to their fullest deadliness by Oceanians. Climate scientists warn of an apocalyptic future of climate refugees, global pandemics, and mass extinction ... But it is often forgotten that Pacific people have already undergone multiple occurrences of forced migration, massive waves of death and diseases, and alienation from biodiversity. (p.8)

What this analysis does so well, is place climate change in an historical geography of the region, a history of "cyclical apocalypse" (p.102). It also makes two key contributions: empirically, Maurer's translation work will be extremely important, as literature from non-Anglophone Pacific countries is "significantly undertranslated" (p.21); and theoretically, the concepts of Isletism and Oceanitude also bring insights from French-language theoretical work that will be appreciated. In this review, I will focus on these two contributions in turn, then reflect on Maurer's contribution to debates around hope and resistance, and the debate of genocide and intentionality.

The first important contribution of *The Ocean on Fire* comes from the author's positionality. In a section called "Personal Background" (p.25) Maurer describes how she was raised in the "nuclear colony" of Tahiti, the largest island of Mā'ohi Nui (French-occupied Polynesia). This section is interesting and useful for showing how French imperialism interacts with race and class to reproduce its hold on colonies, including through encouraging settler migration. This is not a performative positionality statement, as powerfully critiqued by Gani and Khan (2024), but a statement of context. Maurer is white and French, and she grew up in Tahiti. This gives her knowledge of French coloniality, firsthand experience of the health impacts of nuclear testing in the region, friendships and connections with Pacific artists, scholars, and activists, and language skills that mean her book translates texts into English, some for the first time. From French, but also Hawaiian, Spanish, Tahitian, and Uvean. Not only is this useful for Anglophone Europe, but also for breaking down linguistic boundaries that "compartmentalize environmental and decolonial movements in the Pacific" (p.21).

The Ocean on Fire includes two chapters on concepts that Maurer develops for the purpose of better understanding, critiquing, and resisting the violent politics of nuclear imperialism in the Pacific. These chapters cover the related concepts of "Isletism" and "Oceanitude". These concepts are two sides of the same coin, where Isletism is "the latest stage in Orientalism" (p.31), a concept to describe the specificities of how the Pacific has been Othered, and Oceanitude is a development of Négritude, "a philosophy for the Anthropocene" (p.53), a concept coined by ni-Vanuatu author Paul Tavo to describe the decolonial work of Oceania.

Isletism is useful for unpacking the particular way that Pacific Islanders have been framed to enable and justify using the region for nuclear destruction. Maurer's Map 1.1 (p.14) breaks down the nuclear tests of the 20th century by yield, a method which shows very clearly that the Pacific was the centre of this experimentation. In the Marshall Islands alone, there was the equivalent of 1.47 Hiroshimas every day for 12 years. The violence of these tests across the Pacific, enacted by the US, France, and the UK, was done in an inhabited region, something that is left undiscussed by most accounts of nuclear armament and the Cold War. Isletism is described by Maurer as the ideology behind "annihilation racism" (p.16) which Others the Pacific and its people as doomed to uninhabitability, naturalising any

suffering that happens there as unavoidable. Whilst she draws on Edward Said for Isletism as a form of Orientalism, and Alban Bensa for annihilation racism, her ideas also bring to mind Paprocki's (2019) "anticipatory ruin". The recurring logic that is being reproduced in climate politics, is the use of "inherent vulnerability" to naturalise and depoliticise avoidable harm.

Oceanitude as the counter-concept is effective because of its focus on Pacific resistance, which immediately and definitively challenges the erasure of Pacific peoples in Isletism. Like Négritude, Oceanitude is a decolonial movement that is placed in the realm of scholar/poet/activists. It builds on the ideas of scholars such as Epeli Hau'ofa who worked with the concept of Oceania as a spiritual, cultural, economic, and political base for collective identity (Hau'ofa 1998). Oceanitude for Maurer represents a third revolution of redefining the human, after Cartesianism and Négritude, where humans are no longer seen as the hinges of the world but rather one of its many components, who suffer from any harm done to it (p.68). Being familiar with this literature, Oceanitude was an interesting new term for me to learn. I appreciate that it places Pacific anti-colonialism in relation to the Black Atlantic (see also Shilliam 2015; Swan 2022). Isletism depoliticises the Pacific, and Oceanitude is a strong tool for not only re/politicising the people of Oceania, but also placing its political resistance in conversation with other global anti-imperial movements.

As well as these contributions, Maurer engages in two debates that are particularly interesting. The first is that of genocide and intentionality. In a section titled "Imperial Obliviousness, or How Not to See a Genocide", Maurer explicitly addresses whether what has happened in the Pacific should be called a genocide. This is a stand-out section due to the ongoing case in the International Court of Justice (ICJ) regarding Israel's violence in Gaza. There too, intentionality is causing debate where the numbers suggest simplicity. Pacific colonial history is a history of extreme violence: by the end of the 19th century, 90% of the Pacific population was lost to disease (p.37). This was then followed by slavery, nuclear testing and its fallout, and now climate change. The case against using "genocide" is that the spread of disease was not "premeditated". As Maurer asks, "Should intentionality matter when passivity has such deadly consequences?" (p.37). I agree with her doubts, and think that passivity is still too generous a word, with the evidence that we have. Needing to prove intention is a distraction from actions and their effects. Climate change is being done in full knowledge of the harm it will cause in the Pacific, knowledge held since at least the 1980s.

To me, whether or not emissions are being done *to* harm is less important than the fact that emissions continue in the knowledge that they *will* harm. The first-order intention might not be to raise sea levels and cause increased weather events in the Pacific, but those effects are not being seen as a reason to change course. One thing is for sure, the word tragedy should not be used: there is certainly more intentionality than that.

The second debate that Maurer engages in, is the power and possibilities of resistance. The book opens with a vignette on the power of resistance, telling the story of two venture capitalists' dreams of artificial floating islands in Tahiti's lagoon; havens to escape the effects of rising sea levels. It's a perfect opener for the book as it ties in nuclear legacies, climate change, and the contradictions of Isletism as an ideology that sees islands simultaneously as inherently dangerous and as perfect places of escape, and—importantly—the Pacific as empty. It was this final error that prevented the deal taking place, as resistance was strong, and the Mā'ohi people won (p.8). However, this powerful opening of the book does not establish hope as the tone of the book. Resistance, yes, but not hope.

This is a difficult tension in the Pacific, where vulnerability is used as a strategic discourse in climate negotiations, but where research has repeatedly stressed the dangers of this discourse (Weatherill 2023) and resistance to it (McNamara and Farbotko 2017). What Maurer is arguing for, is resistance without hope. By historicising violence in the Pacific, she shows that for too many, the apocalypse has already happened. Death, disease, and displacement have all been catastrophic for hundreds of years, and climate change is yet another instance of this annihilation racism. Hope then, might seem naïve or ridiculous, especially when 1.5°C is now widely accepted to be unachievable. It is a tricky line to walk, that of resisting inevitability without naivety. For me, this book is doing some really interesting political work with resistance after hope as an idea, but I think that for readers beyond the Pacific, in the heart of consumerist empire, where action needs to be taken most directly, that lesson is not for us.

Overall, this is an important and timely book that assists in the ongoing calls from the Pacific to acknowledge that the region is still inhabited, still politically active, and still resisting—not drowning but fighting. Making this point, Maurer cites Elizabeth DeLoughrey (2019: 7): “The apocalypse has already happened; it continues because empire is a process”. The Pacific has long been used as metaphor, as testing ground, and as dump site. For those

interested in climate justice and a liveable world, or a world of life, the Pacific should be leading the way. Maurer's conclusion is powerful, reminding us that this is not a book about solutions to environmental collapse, but about insisting on life (p.167). The work of the Pacific that Maurer draws on shows that even when problems can't be solved, or the apocalypse stopped, life goes on. Mourning and fighting are not incompatible.

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