

The Ocean on Fire: Pacific Stories from Nuclear Survivors and Climate Activists

By Anaïs Maurer

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In a 2015 interview, following the publication of his third volume of poetry, *from unincorporated territory*, renowned CHamoru poet and academic Craig Santos Perez remarks that “attention to the Pacific will hopefully encourage scholars to realize that a multiply layered methodology is required” in order to understand “the complexities of empire and the literary voices of those striking back from even the most far-flung island territories” (4). Anaïs Maurer’s extensive research in *The Ocean on Fire: Pacific Stories from Nuclear Survivors and Climate Activists*, published nearly a decade later, can be read as a response to Perez’s invocation to bring new methodologies to Pacific literary works. Maurer’s study, which focuses on the context of the nuclear tests carried out by the US, Britain and France in the Pacific Islands in the wake of the Second World War, draws on the region’s oral and visual traditions to analyze Pacific (post)apocalyptic nuclear stories from 1945 to the present. Focusing on a range of narratives that include print, oral, digital, embodied, and visual literatures – composed in multiple languages including English, French, Hawaiian, Spanish and Tahitian – Maurer gives the reader a broad sense of the region’s literary output and shows how it subverts the classifications of genre. She also shows how it contributes to alternative modes of environmental understanding. Pacific literary narratives, Maurer argues, underscore resilience, regeneration, and ways of mourning what has been lost, as opposed to conventional environmental discourses that involve “simplistic messages calling on individuals to go green” (9).

As Maurer explains in the introduction, her own background makes her a “product of French Imperialism” (25). Growing up in the nuclear colony of Tahiti, she witnessed the direct health consequences of nuclearization; since then, her personal experiences in both France and the USA have shaped her understanding of the nuclear arms race. Pondering the question of “Who retells stories? To whom? And why?” (26), the book begins with a valuable detailing of the author’s positionality and the ethics of sourcing stories.

Following the introduction, the first two chapters of *The Ocean on Fire* develop a solid theoretical framework that draws from the numerous ways in which the Pacific Islands have been historically conceptualized. The ideas conveyed in these chapters are perhaps the most significant scholarly contribution towards the growing body of research on Pacific Island literatures and theory. Maurer begins by

showing how critics in the West have long constructed the Pacific Islands as faraway spaces removed from modernity and incapable of sustaining civilization. Maurer terms this hegemonic discourse *Isletism* - a subset of Orientalism pertaining to the Pacific Islands. Where the Orient has been perceived to lag on the path to “civilization” (35), Isletism presents islands as outside of civilization altogether – too isolated from modernity to be influenced by it. Against the Isletist tropes propagated through early travel narratives and contemporary Hollywood productions, Maurer introduces the lesser-known concept of *Oceanitude*. Coined by ni-Vanuatu author Paul Tavo in his 2015 novel *Quand le cannibale ricane* (*When the Cannibal Sneers*), the neologism was inspired by the Négritude movement that arose across the Black Atlantic during the 1930s. Maurer clarifies that while Négritude has been defined on the lines of race, Oceanitude, “a literary, political and philosophical movement uniting decolonial writers, orators of Oceania” (53), centers on lineage, or the relationships uniting people and the places that sustain them. In the ensuing segment – consisting of three chapters on extinction, medical humour and mass migration – the author applies this concept to close readings of literary and visual materials by artists including Craig Santos Perez, Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner, Bobby Holcomb, Cronos, Chantal Spitz and THS!. She asks: how can these works, as forms of Oceanitude, help us to process the feelings of loss generated by nuclear contamination? How do they allow us to mourn the death of a more-than-human? And how can artists restore the emotions lacking in scientific discourses?

While the discussions of Isletism and Oceanitude are significant highlights in *The Ocean on Fire*, the influence of oral and visual methodologies from Pacific Island creative traditions is also a major source of originality. This is evident, for instance, in Maurer’s reading of how Perez’s *One fish, Two fish, Plastics, Dead fish* is infused by a traditional CHamoru mourning ritual. It is also evident in the discussion of the influence of Ari’oi comical theater and Fale Aitu comical sketches in the works of Cronos, THS! And Albert Wendt; and in the analysis of the prominence of weaving and healing in Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner’s video poem *Anointed*.

The discussion of the concept of “solastalgia” (136) in Chapter Five, detailing the environmental contexts shaping feelings of homelessness and its origins, is thought-provoking and worthy of further analysis in future research. True to Maurer’s claim in the introduction, *The Ocean on Fire*’s reference to a plethora of creative works prove that Pacific Island stories cannot be classified into pre-determined genres. The work is a valuable repository for those interested in Pacific Islands studies, owing not only to the analysis of Pacific stories but also to the vast number of secondary sources upon which Maurer relies. As the body of scholarship on Pacific literature continues to grow – with titles by academics including Candace Fujikane, Elizabeth DeLoughrey, Rebecca Hogue, Brandy Nālani McDougall and the late Caroline Sinavaiana-Gabbard – *The Ocean on Fire* is a productive and enriching addition to recent work in the field.

Works Cited

- Washburn, Kathleen, “‘No Page Is Ever Truly Blank’: An Interview with Craig Santos Perez,” *Postcolonial Text*, vol. 10, no.1, 2015, pp. 1–13.