

NUKES AND NUDES: COUNTER-HEGEMONIC IDENTITIES IN THE NUCLEARIZED PACIFIC

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Abstract

France's current status as a leading world power results directly from its decision to develop a nuclear strike capability. After the loss of most of their empire, the French decided that their territories in the Pacific should remain an integral part of France. There followed an extensive programme of nuclear testing in the region, causing ongoing environmental damage and radiation-related illnesses throughout these remnants of the French empire. The present article examines contemporary francophone Pacific literature as a corpus shaped by France's nuclear colonialism. Focusing on novels by Déwé Gorodé and Chantal Spitz, I show how these authors replace the colonial imagery of the welcoming native with anti-colonial narratives of radiation-induced diseases and ambient morbidity. I argue that these novels, often critiqued as essentialist, should be read as a reformulation of strategic essentialism putting ecocriticism at the heart of postcolonial thinking. This discussion brings Pacific theories of identity into dialogue with other postcolonial theories such as *créolité*, Negritude, and critiques of orientalism, suggesting that, in a context in which *métissage* and multiculturalism have become ideologies in the service of nuclear colonization, root-based strategic essentialism still has an important role to play in postcolonial narratives.

Rester seule sans aucun souvenir... Oublier l'alcool qui tue notre peuple. [...] Oublier ceux que la bombe et le cancer ont tués. Oublier ceux qui sont devenus miséreux parce que d'autres sont devenus si riches. [...]

— La vie n'est pas si mal que ça, hein? Il n'y a pas de guerre ici à Tahiti. Il ne neige pas. [...] On dort bien à la belle étoile.

— Ils disent que nous sommes au paradis!

— Rai Chaze¹

In the closing pages of *Avant la saison des pluies*, the debut novel by the Tahitian writer Rai Chaze, the main narrator bitterly retraces her lifelong resistance to nuclear testing in the Pacific. At the beginning of the novel, when the narrator is only a child and her islands have not yet become a nuclear playground, she claims that she does not have an issue with her mixed-race genealogy: 'on n'a aucun

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¹ Rai Chaze, *Avant la saison des pluies* (Mahina: Éditions présumées, 2010), pp. 231–32.

problème avec le métissage. Je n'ai pas, comme j'entends souvent le dire, le cul entre deux chaises.² However, at the end of the novel, it is a narrator crushed by half a century of unsuccessful anti-colonial struggle, whose grandmother, mother, and friends have died of cancer ('Qui ne mourrait pas de cancer dans nos îles?'; *ibid.*, p. 308), who concludes her story with the seemingly contradictory statement: 'Les occidentaux sont venus dans nos îles. Et nous sommes nés. [. . .] Parfois du viol. Mais souvent de l'amour! Nous sommes là, et aujourd'hui se bousculent en nous, nos sangs mélangés' (*ibid.*, p. 350).

This paradoxical ending, in which the narrator bemoans her failed anti-nuclear struggle, suggests that fifty years of French nuclear testing has radically changed Pacific identity politics. The French nuclear agenda made this character go from being indifferent to her mixed-race background to feeling as though her Western ancestry was gnawing away at her insides ('se bousculent en nous, nos sangs mélangés'), just as the radiation-induced cancer had previously done to her kin. *Avant la saison des pluies* thus intimates that conceptions of identity are not linked to biology, but rather to the political context in which biological mixing occurs. The leitmotiv of the cancerous woman structuring the book can be read as a literal and metaphorical signifier of contemporary colonial oppression, insinuating that nuclear testing in the Pacific, far from encouraging the harmonious hybridization of cultures, threatens the very possibility of life.

Hybridization is a process that can be reduced to neither biology nor its colonial context. All cultures contain elements of hybridity. As the Tongan anthropologist Epeli Hau'ofa puts it:

[Oceania's] cultures have always been hybrid and hybridizing, for we have always given to and taken from our neighbors and others we encounter; but the 'dominant culture' is undoubtedly the most hybrid of all, for it has not just borrowed but looted unconscionably the treasures of cultures the world over.³

The interpretations of hybridity are thus ethically rather than biologically determined. While it can signify openness and diversity in certain settings, it can also connote morbidity and sterility in others.

This article suggests that the French nuclear tests conducted in Oceania function as a structuring principle informing both the politics and the poetics of Pacific francophone literature, most remarkably in recurrent critiques of hybridity and in metaphorical evocations of the physical toll that nuclear testing has had on island populations. Indeed, the death and suffering omnipresent in the Pacific corpus has thus far been largely ignored in scholarship on the region. However, after conducting archival work in the Pacific gathering the corpus of Pacific francophone works of fiction, I concluded that about 80 per cent of the novels and autobiographies published since the 1960s feature characters dying of cancer, and/or suffering from the loss of a foetus or a child. Intimate narratives of

² Chaze, *Avant la saison des pluies*, p. 44.

³ Epeli Hau'ofa, 'Pasts to Remember', in *We Are the Ocean: Selected Works* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i press, 2006), pp. 60–79 (p. 63).

hysterectomies, child mortality, and sterility may at first glance seem unrelated to colonialism, yet, the Pacific corpus's foregrounding of these issues plays a central role in underlining the devastating consequences of what has become known as 'nuclear colonialism'.⁴

Much of the postcolonial theory developed in the francophone context has drawn attention to forms of encounter and mixing such as hybridity, *métissage*, creolization, and multiculturalism, particularly in archipelagic contexts such as the Caribbean. The terms have various nuances: 'hybridity' tends to be used to refer to the nature of cultures; whereas '*métissage*' puts more emphasis on race; while 'creolization' refers to the creation of a new elements, both racial and cultural, out of old atavistic ones. These dominant concepts, while not synonymous, can still be used somewhat interchangeably. What is striking is that they have all been rejected by most anti-colonial Pacific writers, who do not align themselves with any of these available models generally used by foreigners to describe their islands. Rather, they tend to promote 'root-oriented' identities, which can be seen as a form of strategic essentialism used in the face of environmental concerns, foreshadowing the increasing importance of bridging anti-colonial and environmentalist politics in this contemporary age of environmental crisis.

Pacific writers are not, as some scholars have argued, refusing to be conciliatory,⁵ lacking 'un regard pluriel sur le monde',⁶ or propagating 'idéologies marxisantes'.⁷ On the contrary, their promotion of root-oriented identities can be read as an anti-essentialist stance. Their literature suggests that it can be reductionist to promote hybridity systematically, without taking into account the historical and cultural contexts in which cultures hybridize. The Pacific corpus thus contributes to debates about biopolitics by showing that *métissage* can take opposite connotations in different settings.

The Caribbean context, in particular, constitutes an important example of an alternative situation in which *métissage* has not always been synonymous with deculturation. Indeed, the Caribbean invention of *créolité* emerged in reaction to the essentialisms that have structured philosophies of identity across the Atlantic Ocean: the oppressive essentialism of slavery and the perceived essentialism of the Negritude movement. The specific history of the philosophies of racial identities in this region led Caribbean Creolists such as Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphaël Confiant to reclaim racial and cultural hybridity, basing their arguments on an analysis of creole languages and cultures. But these anti-colonial intellectuals theorize the creolization of their society in a very different political context.

⁴ The expression 'nuclear colonialism', popularized in the 1990s, designates dynamics of colonial exploitation in which nations militarily occupy and irreversibly pollute the lands and natural resources of other (often racialized) people, in order to further the development of their own civil and military nuclear capacity.

⁵ Virginie Soula, *Histoire littéraire de la Nouvelle-Calédonie: 1853–2005* (Paris: Karthala, 2014), p. 166.

⁶ Daniel Margueron, *Flots d'encre sur Tahiti: 250 ans de littérature francophone en Polynésie française. Essai* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2015), p. 391.

⁷ Sylvie André, *Le Roman autochtone dans le Pacifique sud: penser la continuité* (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2008), p. 191.

In the Caribbean, 'identité racine' (referred to as Negritude) can be perceived as less emancipatory than 'identité rhizome' (referred to as *créolité*).⁸ Chamoiseau, Confiant, and Bernabé interpret Negritude as resisting the essentialism of the colonizer's racist thought through categories developed by the West: 'Si, dans cette révolution négriste, nous contestons la colonisation française, ce fut toujours au nom de généralités universelles pensées à l'occident et sans nul arc-boutement à notre réalité culturelle.'⁹ These authors condemn Negritude as a 'libération selon les lois de l'agression',¹⁰ whereas *créolité* is presented as an emancipatory label, eschewing over-determination by colonial essentialist categories. From this perspective, rhizomatic identities are seen not as anti-identitarian, but rather as labels that allow the promotion of a unique regional cultural identity: 'Ni Européens, ni Africains, ni Asiatiques, nous nous proclamons Créoles.'¹¹

There is something paradoxical about the fact that these theories, while condemning the essentialism of Negritude, offer a somewhat essentialist definition of hybridity. In these works, Caribbean people are reduced to an essence, namely their hybridity. Édouard Glissant, for example, opposes the rhizomatic thinking of archipelagic cultures to the atavistic tropes of continental ones, reducing people's identity to geographic determinism. Such essentialist praise of creoleness has been criticized by other Caribbean scholars such as Ama Mazama, Maryse Condé, and Doris Garraway, who accuse it of replicating a neo-liberal agenda and remaining blind to gendered dynamics.¹² While *créolité* constitutes a problematic theory of identity even in the Caribbean, it is therefore not surprising that it is often outwardly rejected in the Pacific, where, as we shall see, colonial oppression takes the form of the dilution of indigenous identities into a romanticized hybrid melting pot.

The literature of the francophone Pacific manifests crucial developments in contemporary racial justice by developing new theories of identity as a response to the specific form of environmental racism developed in the region. Yet this corpus remains unknown to most postcolonial and francophone scholars. This lack of critical attention is partially due to the fact that Pacific literature is often described as an 'emerging literature', a recent cultural development. The label 'emerging literature', however, has been rightly criticized for its Eurocentric overtones. It does not take into account the large corpus of journals, genealogies, songs, and transcriptions of myths that Pacific people have been producing since the implantation of the first missionary schools in the region. More importantly, it does not consider the secular oral literature in which much of contemporary

⁸ Édouard Glissant, *Introduction à une poétique du divers* (Paris: Gallimard, 1996), p. 23.

⁹ Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphaël Confiant, *Éloge de la créolité* (Schœlcher: Presses universitaires créoles, 1989), p. 21.

¹⁰ Patrick Chamoiseau, *Écrire en pays dominé* (Paris: Gallimard, 1997), p. 58.

¹¹ Bernabé, Chamoiseau, and Confiant, *Éloge de la créolité*, p. 13.

¹² Ama Mazama, 'Critique afrocentrique de "l'Éloge de la créolité"', in *Penser la créolité*, ed. by Maryse Condé and Madeleine Cottenet-Hage (Paris: Karthala, 1995), pp. 85–99; Maryse Condé, 'Disorder, Freedom, and the West Indian Writer', *Yale French Studies*, 2 (1993), 121–35; Doris Lorraine Garraway, *The Libertine Colony: Creolization in the Early French Caribbean* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2005).

printed literature is rooted. Remembering this disregarded production helps to nuance paternalistic notions of ‘emerging literature’ and ‘cultural revival’, and leads to question in different terms the marginalization of Pacific artistic production in the humanities. Indeed, the academic marginalization of Pacific literature correlates with the geopolitical marginalization of Pacific islands as expendable nuclear testing grounds. The neglect of this corpus is symptomatic of the very imperialist tropes and apparatuses that this study seeks to deconstruct.

While analysing trends that inform the entire Pacific corpus, this article focuses on novels by Déwé Gorodé and Chantal Spitz, two anti-colonial and anti-nuclear activists, respectively from Kanaky and Mā’ohi Nui, the countries also known as New Caledonia and French Polynesia.¹³ Both Spitz and Gorodé have dedicated their lives to opposing nuclear testing and colonization.¹⁴ In this article I begin by providing historical background about the nuclear tests in the Pacific, and outlining the leitmotiv of hybridity and *métissage* informing much of the literature by foreigners visiting the region. I then contrast this travel literature with Spitz’s novels, which counter this dominant narrative of the sexual availability of the native by suggesting the impossibility of *métissage* under nuclear colonialism. I turn thereafter to Gorodé’s works to discuss the poetic parallels being made between the slow violence of environmental racism, and the diffuse oppression of indigenous people under neo-colonialism. Finally, I analyse Spitz and Gorodé’s rejection of hybridity by highlighting the specifically ecocritical dimension of their theories of identity.

After the Second World War, the power of a country was determined more by its nuclear strike capacity than by its empire. Yet France, the United States, and the United Kingdom all developed nuclear bombs through experiments conducted in the remnants of their empires: their Pacific colonies. France conducted nuclear experiments in the Sahara until the Algerian revolution, when it was forced to relocate to the Tuamotu Archipelago in Mā’ohi Nui.¹⁵ Between 1966 and 1996, France detonated 193 nuclear and thermonuclear devices in the Pacific. These ‘tests’ yielded the equivalent of 8,000 times the blast of Hiroshima, and spread

¹³ In this study, I use the names of the *collectivités d’outre-mer* chosen by the main pro-independence parties, Kanaky and Mā’ohi Nui, rather than those chosen by their colonizer. I also refer to them as countries rather than territories. Mā’ohi Nui became a *pays d’outre-mer* in 2004, and, while Kanaky is still officially a *collectivité d’outre-mer*, I refer to it as a country in keeping with the nationalist framework favoured by the authors studied in this article.

¹⁴ Déwé Gorodé was imprisoned in Camp-Est, Nouméa, for organizing unauthorized demonstrations and publicly burning the French flag. She also took part in the founding conference of the Nuclear-Free and Independent Pacific movement, which took place in Fiji in 1975, and she travelled to New York to fight for Pacific People’s right to self-determination. Chantal Spitz has also published many writings denouncing French colonialism and neo-colonialism in the Pacific, and has crisscrossed the world to promote anti-nuclear policies and decolonization. She was the honorary opening speaker at the 1995 Sydney rally against France’s nuclear tests, in which she addressed a crowd of 15,000 to call for a nuclear-free and independent Pacific.

¹⁵ France also began its rocket launching tests in Algeria, and initially considered also transferring this aerospace centre to the Tuamotu Archipelago, although it was ultimately decided that it would be more cost effective to move it to French Guyana instead. French-occupied Guyana and Mā’ohi Nui suffer from similar issues. The Guyanese people of Kourou, primarily racialized Creoles, were displaced in the wake of the aerospace centre, and are impacted today by the same structural underemployment and racial inequalities as Mā’ohi people wronged by the nuclear testing programme.

radioactive elements in the biosphere that will contaminate ocean life for the next 240,000 years.¹⁶

Even though France put an end to its tests two decades ago, nuclear contamination continues to have a devastating impact throughout Oceania. Local populations' health was sacrificed in order to further France's military powers, resulting today in unprecedented incidences of cancers, leukaemia, stillbirths, and other radio-induced illnesses.¹⁷ Nuclear colonialism is also responsible for ongoing socio-political issues. As the Centre d'expérimentation du Pacifique (CEP) began employing one quarter of the active population of Mā'ohi Nui, social inequalities widened between rural islanders employed for short-term and underpaid manual labour, and the urban national elite working in public service and business sectors. Today, the country is profoundly divided by an artificial economy of transfer responsible for dramatic class inequality, by the destruction of family structures following the massive rural exodus of the 1960s, and by the imposition of a French educational system that leaves 45 per cent of the nation's youth without a high-school diploma.¹⁸ The islands' dramatically high rates of incarceration, substance abuse, teenage suicides, school dropouts, and domestic violence cannot be separated from the sudden militarization of the region in the 1960s.

Although the French testing sites were circumscribed to the atolls of Moruroa and Fangataufa, all of the Pacific countries used as French military bases during the Cold War fell under tighter French domination. In particular, when Nouméa harbour in Kanaky was turned into a military base for its nuclear submarine *Rubis*, the French government became 'unashamedly determined to lock [Kanaky] more firmly into [its] imperial orbit'.¹⁹ France had various motivations for maintaining control over Kanaky, such as an investment in its nickel mines and a commitment to the large local community of French settlers. However, the Kanak independence party's vocal anti-nuclear stance also played a decisive part in France's determination to quash Kanak people's right to self-determination.²⁰

The nuclearization of the Pacific also prompted the unprecedented immigration of enormous contingents of (mostly male) Western soldiers and civilians, who often outnumbered indigenous people and thus massively affected pre-existing racial demographics. The *métissage* of Pacific islands has been a reality since Westerners first imposed themselves on Pacific shores. It has thus been a major feature of travel literature since the beginnings of colonization. The ubiquitous

¹⁶ Bruno Barrillot, *Les Irradiés de la République: les victimes des essais nucléaires français prennent la parole* (Brussels: Éditions complexes, 2003), p. 6.

¹⁷ The incidence of radio-induced diseases and birth defects in Mā'ohi Nui is twice to twenty-six times higher than the French national average. See Commission d'enquête sur les conséquences des essais nucléaires, *Les Polynésiens et les essais nucléaires: indépendance nationale et dépendance polynésienne* (Papeete: Assemblée de la Polynésie française, 2005), pp. 49 and 249, and Béatrice Le Vu and others, 'Cancer Incidence in French Polynesia 1985–95', *Tropical Medicine and International Health*, 1 (2000), pp. 722–31.

¹⁸ Patrick Schlouch, *T comme... Tahiti: dictionnaire illustré des 'spécificités locales' polynésiennes* (Papeete: Éditions du soleil, 2009), p. 124.

¹⁹ Stewart Firth, *Nuclear Playground* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1987), p. 110.

²⁰ The terms Kanak and Mā'ohi were themselves coined in the 1970s by local anti-colonial activists. The mechanisms of this construction will be analysed below.

trope of the sexually welcoming native can be traced back to the eighteenth century, when a young Tahitian woman took off her clothing in front of the French circumnavigator Louis-Antoine de Bougainville, in what was interpreted as an attempted seduction. This gendered myth of sexual availability flourished in a large and broadly circulated corpus of critically acclaimed Western writers, from Denis Diderot and Herman Melville to Jack London and Victor Segalen.²¹ Although it has persisted since the eighteenth century, this myth has ‘hybridized’ with time. The welcoming native, reduced in early travel narratives to the eroticized island woman draped in a sarong and with a flower in her hair, became the new fantasy of the mixed-race islander by the middle of the twentieth century. This figure, presented as a symbol of post-racial utopia in travel literature, is clearly linked to the new demographic reality in the wake of the massive immigration of foreigners to the Pacific during and after the Second World War.

Authors with personal anti-colonial convictions have often lapsed into fantasizing about *métissage* as a redemptory solution to end white supremacy. Consider, as an example, Anne-Catherine Blanc, a Vietnamo-Catalano-Swiss author, born and raised in Senegal, who has embraced a ‘lutte quotidienne contre [...] une forme larvée de racisme’ that has won her the Prix des étudiants de l’université de la Polynésie française.²² Blanc’s first novel, *Moana blues*, is a moving exploration of transcultural relationships. However, despite scathing descriptions of the social ailments left in the wake of the CEP, the novel nonetheless suggests that the influx of white military to the island also contains the possibility of redemption. The narrator, for instance, concludes his radical critique of the militarization of Mā’ohi Nui by pointing out that ‘le seul avantage de ce grand gâchis aura été de ventiler un peu les gènes de l’espèce humaine: à regarder Moana, [...] ce *demi* [mixed-race person] si beau, on ne pouvait que militer pour le grand métissage universel’.²³ Since Blanc is largely viewed as a leftist, it is clear that literary works do not simply reproduce the overt political positions of their authors, and may reflect larger ideological trends.

This particular tendency to promote *métissage* as an alternative to white supremacy is also espoused by French institutions. The Matignon and Nouméa accords, negotiated between France, the Caledonian ‘loyalist’ party, and the Front de libération nationale kanak et socialiste (FLNKS) sought to transcend the ethnic divisions that tore Kanaky apart by recognizing the co-existence and mutual value of many cultures in the country, granting Kanak people (‘le peuple d’origine’)

²¹ Western writers travelling through Oceania before the Second World War were often flabbergasted by the depopulation of Pacific Islands, which lost between 70 and 95 per cent of their people to imported Western diseases. Segalen and London, to name only the most famous authors, drew particular attention in their work to the demographic crisis plaguing the islands. Their interest in Pacific morbidity, however, is framed in Social Darwinist speculations about the weaknesses and adaptiveness of different races; it is very different from the anti-nuclear morbidity shaping contemporary Pacific novels. See, among other texts, Jack London, *South Sea Tales* (1911; New York: Macmillan, 1961), and Victor Segalen, ‘Le Maître du jouir’, in *Œuvres complètes* (Paris: Laffont, 1995), pp. 294–348.

²² Emmanuelle Caminade, ‘Entretien avec Anne-Catherine Blanc’, *L’Or des livres*, <<http://l-or-des-livres-blog-de-critique-litteraire.over-blog.com/article-entretien-avec-anne-catherine-blanc-70969248.html>> [accessed 6 March 2018].

²³ Anne-Catherine Blanc, *Moana blues* (Papeete: Au vent des îles, 2006), p. 110.

specific institutional rights inscribed in the French constitution. To reflect this promotion of institutionalized multiculturalism, so rare in the French colonial context, the country adopted a new official name, Kanaky / New Caledonia, and a new motto, ‘Terre de parole, terre de partage’ (my emphasis). Similarly, in Mā’ohi Nui, French governmental officials overwhelmingly tend to describe the islands’ culture as ‘Polynesian’ rather than ‘Mā’ohi’. As the anthropologist Bruno Saura has shown in his groundbreaking work, ‘Polynesian’ identity celebrates the complementary contribution of the Mā’ohi, Chinese, and French communities towards the construction of a multi-ethnic and multicultural French postcolonial empire.²⁴ Anne Boquet, Haut Commissaire and highest representative of the French Republic in the *collectivité d’outre-mer*, affirmed the colonial character of this identity in a 2008 speech: ‘Soyez convaincus que la France est polynésienne autant que la Polynésie est française.’

Considering the doctrine of ‘assimilation’ both within mainland France and in its *départements d’outre-mer*, it is striking to see the promotion of institutionalized multiculturalism in France’s Pacific colonies. This exception in the French colonial context must be considered in light of the Pacific’s differing colonial history. While the French military treated the islands as laboratories for deadly nuclear experiments, renowned French academics, such as the prize-winning anthropologist Michel Panoff, argued that Pacific islands are ‘laboratoires’ at the forefront of the universal and ‘inexorable’ hybridization of the world’s populations.²⁵ As Rod Edmond and Vanessa Smith have shown in their study of the place of islands in Western imagination, insular spaces have long been favoured locations for Western utopias and social experiments, and this is but the most recent instantiation of this trend.²⁶

Promoting racial mixing is, of course, not an inherently imperialist ideology in all contexts. It may contain within it the potential for a contestation of racial purity linked to ideologies of white supremacy. Yet, whilst extolling *métissage* and multiculturalism allows authors travelling to the Pacific to dismantle racist binary discourses, it has the unfortunate disadvantage of eclipsing contemporary imperial dynamics. On islands where racial mixing increases due to the massive state-subsidized settlement of military and civil French immigrants, *métissage* can constitute a form of total appropriation by the dominant power paradoxically packaged as a progress narrative. The point that I want to make is certainly not that Pacific cultures are in essence ‘purer’ or less ‘hybrid’ than any other culture; rather, I am questioning the prevalent progress narrative that presents the hybridization of cultures as a journey from a flawed insular essentialism to a morally superior

²⁴ Bruno Saura, ‘Contrepoint: l’idéologie polynésienne’, in *Tabiti Mā’ohi: culture, identité, religion et nationalisme en Polynésie française* (Papeete: Au vent des îles, 2008), pp. 286–303.

²⁵ Michel Panoff, *Tabiti métié: l’aventure coloniale de la France* (Paris: Denoël, 1989), pp. 13–14.

²⁶ Rod Edmond and Vanessa Smith, ‘Introduction’, in *Islands in History and Representation*, ed. by Edmond and Smith (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 1–32.

hybridity. The work of Pacific writers, such as Spitz and Gorodé, offers a different assessment of the Pacific Ocean's alleged 'inexorable' hybridization.

Chantal Spitz's œuvre is a weapon against bio-imperialism. Spitz's critically acclaimed debut novel, *L'Île des rêves écrasés*, forcefully criticizes France's nuclear test programme in the Pacific.²⁷ This groundbreaking work, the first novel ever published by a Mā'ohi writer, opposes Mā'ohi activists to racist and scornful French engineers. Published at a time when French nuclear bombs were still being detonated in Moruroa and Fangataufa, Spitz's first novel stands out for the powerful clarity of her political denunciation. In her subsequent works, however, Spitz presents a more diffuse critique of nuclear colonialism. She shifts from narratives of resistance to narratives of female morbidity, reflecting the insidiousness of nuclear colonialism.

Spitz's third novel, *Elles, terre d'enfance: roman à deux encres*, recounts the biography of a fictional upper-class mixed-race Tahitian woman, Victoria Strausser.²⁸ Victoria perceives herself as an exile in her own country, alienated both from lofty French colonizers and from working-class families of Mā'ohi descent perceived as less culturally affected by colonialism. The story unfolds from the perspective of two narrators: Victoria herself and her housemaid Marie, the latter occupying a peripheral position in the narrative. Victoria analyses at length her struggles against her own deculturation, shifting between traumatic episodes in her childhood and adult life.

Victoria's entire life is marked by the ebb and flow of two symbolic places: the cemetery and the hospital. The omnipresence of white walls and white tombs is an implicit metaphorical reference to European colonization. Her first immersion in the whiteness of medical rooms occurs in her early childhood, seemingly in the 1960s, as her mother slowly wastes away with breast cancer.²⁹ As the novel unfolds, Victoria makes more and more references to the hospital, all haunted by 'ce même drap blanc' covering the cadavers of her loved ones (*ibid.*, p. 158). In a central chapter, she intertwines the death of her only son, the death of her husband, and one of her closest female relatives' demise caused by what appears to be cancer (*ibid.*, pp. 156–57). In the last pages, the cadence of the heroine's encounters with death and violence intensifies even further as she must bury her first lover, then her grandmother, before getting stranded in the hospital on three separate occasions for injuries from domestic abuse, a suicide attempt, and an abortion procedure.

Victoria's generation is presented as victimized by the havoc wrought by the CEP, culminating in Victoria contemplating the end of her family line in the last chapter. Victoria's hysterectomy is described in cold technical terms not unrelated to descriptions of the atomic centre itself: 'Ils ont jeté mon ventre avec des ventres

²⁷ Chantal Spitz, *L'Île des rêves écrasés* (Papeete: Au vent des îles, 1991).

²⁸ Chantal Spitz, *Elles, terre d'enfance: roman à deux encres* (Papeete: Au vent des îles, 2011).

²⁹ Spitz, *Elles, terre d'enfance*, p. 25.

étrangers dans une poubelle avant de les brûler dans le drum métallique qui servait d'incinérateur.³⁰ As an only child, the now sterile heroine puts a definitive end to 'la perpétuité du ventre ancestral' (ibid.), interrupting the genealogy of powerful women in her family — the female 'Elles' of the novel's title who have all been annihilated in the white hospitals.

This novel, however, denounces death from cancer without explicitly denouncing nuclear testing. Consider this description of Victoria's mother's agony:

Elle est morte [...] comme de plus en plus de femmes et d'hommes de chez nous le corps rongé rogné grignoté à son insu par un cancer du sein à une époque où s'étaient dans notre île-colonie les posters colorés des champignons atomiques français rayonnant toutes nos morts [...] à une époque où se marchaient dans notre île-colonie les premières contestations des essais nucléaires présentées comme offense arrogance ingratitude forfaiture indignité excentricité.³¹

Her mother's breast cancer is implicitly linked to the nuclear tests, presented as a common cause of death after the implantation of the CEP, and yet, the precise actors of nuclear colonialism are not identified. Nuclear tests are presented indirectly, mediated through still-life posters. Even the protests against the bombs are described as dispersed and lacking powerful anti-colonial leadership. They are introduced through a non-idiomatic turn of phrase ('se marchaient [...] les premières contestations'), the narrator's choice of using the verb 'marcher' in the reflexive mode conveying a lack of agency of the protestors. Furthermore, when the narrator evokes the anti-nuclear demonstrations, she specifies that they are 'présentées comme offense arrogance ingratitude forfaiture indignité excentricité'. While all of these derogatory terms could refer to the atomic tests, the introductory past participle 'présentées' signals that the following nouns refer not to the nuclear tests, but rather to the protests themselves ('les contestations'). This mute additional letter introduces the colonial discourse indirectly, since only the colonizers could conceive of these protests as 'offense arrogance ingratitude'. By playing with grammatical conventions and unexpectedly inserting colonial perspectives in her narrator's convoluted sentences, Spitz suggests here that nuclear colonialism permeates all discourses. This stands in stark contrast with the tone she set in her debut novel, where colonial oppression was symbolically embodied by a few demonized politicians, and virulently opposed by charismatic anti-colonial leaders. Here, colonial voices are diffuse and omnipresent, suffusing every layer of writing; while nuclear colonialism is represented obliquely through the stealthy synecdoche of the white sheet, the stillness of photographs, and the unobtrusive addition of silent letters.

Interestingly, the most common types of radiation-induced diseases, thyroid cancer and leukaemia, are not the ones featured in the francophone Pacific corpus, which tend to focus instead on symbolic types of illnesses. While the overwhelming majority of characters suffering from tumours are female, more than half of them have breast or uterine cancer. This tendency to represent cancer as primarily affecting women can

³⁰ Spitz, *Elles, terre d'enfance*, p. 229.

³¹ Spitz, *Elles, terre d'enfance*, p. 25.

be understood as a symbolic response to the myth of the sexually available female native, and the related myth of the harmonious *métissage* of the Pacific islands.

In this respect, Spitz's work constitutes a powerful ecocritical text. If she does not describe a contaminated environment, she subtly maps this pollution onto indigenous female bodies, which become visible signifiers of an invisible signified. As the ecocritic Rob Nixon argues, the contemporary environmental crisis calls for renewed representations of what constitutes violence.³² Under nuclear colonialism, this representational challenge is doubled, as the structural violence of colonization is interwoven with the slow violence of nuclear contamination. Writers must find a way to articulate the pyrotechnic, spectacular, immediate violence of armed anti-colonial struggle with environmental violence occurring 'gradually and out of sight, a violence of delayed destruction that is dispersed across time and space, an attritional violence that is typically not viewed as violence at all'.³³

Tâdo, Tâdo, wée! No more baby by Déwé Gorodé explores this ecocritical challenge.³⁴ Gorodé is the first Kanak writer to publish a novel, and she wrote her first poems while incarcerated for anti-colonial activism. In *Tâdo*, Gorodé draws from her personal experience as an activist as she retraces the anti-colonial struggles of Kanak women through the biographies of three female characters with the same name across four generations of a family. The grandmother Tâdo recalls the resistance stirred by the arrival of over a million American soldiers on her island in the 1940s; her granddaughter, the main protagonist, participates in the liberation movements of the 1970s and 1980s; and little Tâdo, the protagonist's niece, is revealed in the last chapter as the narrator of the book.

This book is one of the first novels to draw systematically upon ecocriticism and postcolonial theory to narrate the construction of new Pacific identities. The novel is divided into two stylistically distinct movements. In the first part, through the tribulations of the second Tâdo, the reader follows the development of the so-called 'Kanak awakening',³⁵ from the Second World War to the murder of the pro-independence leader Jean-Marie Tjibaou in 1989. During these revolutionary years, Tâdo's close friends and relatives go from victory to victory as the narrator describes in thrilling scenes the successful boycott of the 1984 elections and the occupation of the north of the country by Kanak activists. However, at the end of this first section, the narrator's style — and indeed the book's very genre — changes. After the murder of Tjibaou, epic battles are replaced with domestic strife as Tâdo's relatives face various health issues. Tâdo's mother dies of uterine cancer, while her sister Alo gives birth to a stillborn baby, becomes sterile, and is eventually diagnosed with breast cancer. The narrative form reflects this shift from grandiose political

³² Rob Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2011).

³³ Nixon, *Slow Violence and the Environmentalism of the Poor*, p. 2.

³⁴ Déwé Gorodé, *Tâdo, Tâdo, wée! No more baby* (Papeete: Au vent des îles, 2012).

³⁵ See David Chappell, *The Kanak Awakening: The Rise of Nationalism in New Caledonia* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2013).

fight to personal struggle with cancer, as the rest of the novel consists of excerpts of Alo's journal, retracing her unsuccessful decade-long battle against the disease.

These two movements, however, are not disconnected. Tâdo's political speeches and Alo's intimate writings draw from the same lexical field. Cancer is described through military metaphors previously used to define the French colonizer: 'Le cancer est un général qui lance ses troupes à l'assaut du corps', 'en embuscade comme l'ennemi intérieur', 'gagnant chaque jour un pouce du corps que lui lâche le système immunitaire défaillant sous ses coups de bouloir'.³⁶ Moreover, the fight against cancer, like the fight against colonialism, is linked to a struggle for dignity and humanity. Alo's pleas to her own tumour employ the bellicose language of anti-colonial poets:

Laisse-moi la *dignité*
de la parole [. . .]
pour *résister*
et dire encore
en toute humilité
en ce *combat inégal*
ma part d'*humanité*.³⁷

The continuity of the lexical field that unites the novel's twin struggles, of people against colonialism and of body against a spreading tumour, suggests that female morbidity and sterility in *Tâdo* are endowed with a symbolic political dimension.³⁸

Literary critics have already noted that Gorodé's writing revolves

autour de la question du corps [féminin], du corps mutilé par la maladie et les traitements du cancer, et de la recherche du sens de cette maladie dans le cours même de la vie quotidienne avec toutes ses dimensions économiques, sociales, sentimentales.³⁹

Dominique Jouve has notably demonstrated that **diseased female bodies function as metonyms for the double oppression faced by Kanak women in a patriarchal and racist society**. Expanding Jouve's analysis, I suggest that the juxtaposition of cancers and sterility in *Tâdo* calls for an analysis of this leitmotiv in light of ecocritical theory. Cancer is a metaphor not only for the structural oppression faced by Kanak women, but also for the contaminated Pacific environment and for the degree to which nuclear testing has taken its toll on island populations across all of Oceania.

Consider, for example, Alo's cancer. She blames her cancer directly on sterility:

C'est à moi que disait l'infirmière australienne qui me préparait à la séance des rayons X, en voyant la cicatrice de ma ligature des trompes: 'No more baby!' Parce que je me suis fait couper le lien de vie et coudre le ventre. C'est pour ça que le Crabe m'emporte à mon tour.⁴⁰

³⁶ Gorodé, *Tâdo, Tâdo, wéél*, p. 249.

³⁷ Gorodé, *Tâdo, Tâdo, wéél*, p. 272; my emphases.

³⁸ It should also be noted that Gorodé's obsessive return to the themes of cancer and child loss reflect the fact that she is herself a breast cancer survivor, and that she tragically lost a son at a very young age.

³⁹ Dominique Jouve, 'Corps meurtris, femmes blessées', in *Sexe, genre, identité: approches pluridisciplinaires. Occident, Océanie, Océan indien, monde arabe*, ed. by Mounira Chatti (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2013), pp. 103–19 (p. 104).

⁴⁰ Gorodé, *Tâdo, Tâdo, wéél*, p. 330. Cancer and death are symbolically referred to as a 'Crab' throughout many of Gorodé's books, in reference to the slow violence of a legendary crab of a Kanak tale, who every day ate a little piece of a young girl until she manages to trap it in her cooking pot.

Her sterility can be interpreted in many ways. It can be read as a denunciation of strict customary roles, since she became sterile after her partner, Willy, left her in order to follow the path assigned to him by custom. It can also be construed as a denunciation of nuclear colonialism, as sterility and miscarriages are some of the most visible consequences of exposure to radiation.⁴¹ Alo's tragedy does not seem at first glance to relate to anti-nuclear struggle, yet her intimate narration of a traumatic hysterectomy subtly mirrors the main trope used by anti-nuclear activists in their political speeches. Gorodé's style thus mirrors the invisible contamination of Oceania: she denounces the deterioration of the human hereditary patrimony in between the lines, in oblique evocations of sterility and morbidity.

It should be emphasized here that Gorodé has long been a prominent anti-nuclear activist, participating in international conferences opposing nuclear testing in Oceania. **Scholarship on her work, however, has overlooked her commitment to linking the struggles of Kanak and Tahitian people. In *Tâdo*, the history of the two countries is narrated in parallel, almost in superposition.** Her characters affirm that 'ils vont construire une base ou un nouveau camp militaire au centre de notre pays et carrément un centre d'essais nucléaires en Polynésie pour tester leur bombe *au dessus de nous*', 'à quelques encablures du pays'.⁴² She grammatically connects the linked destinies of Kanaky and Mā'ohi Nui in the same syntagm without even separating them by punctuation marks: despite the 3,000 miles separating Moruroa from Grande Terre, the nuclear tests are described as happening over their heads. The protagonists regularly evoke the CEP as the reason motivating the simultaneous construction of military bases in the two countries, or the trials against pro-independence leaders both in Pape'ete and in Nouméa.⁴³ Kanak protests for independence conclude with leaders chanting 'Kanak—Polynésie—Pacifique, même combat!' (ibid., p. 85). **Gorodé not only contributes to defining Kanak identity, but also suggests that indigenous people across Oceania, by virtue of having similar environmental concerns, share the same Pacific identity.**

The cancer trope also takes on a particular political signification inasmuch as it proliferates concomitantly with the development of neo-colonialism. Indeed, following the **Matignon Agreements of 1988, the Nouméa Agreements of 1998, the end of France's nuclear tests in 1996, and the accession to a more autonomous status in Mā'ohi Nui** in 2003, the *collectivités d'outre-mer* of the Pacific have obtained an ambiguously neo-colonial political status. While nuclear colonialism is officially over and Pacific leaders are ostensibly in control of their countries' political trajectories, the fight for recognition and reparations is becoming increasingly arduous. As the Mā'ohi novelist Rai Chaze eloquently puts it, 'contrairement à la lutte pour l'indépendance, nous n'aurons pas le luxe de combattre des

⁴¹ For statistics regarding sterility and miscarriages in a contaminated environment, see Barrillot, *Les Irradiés de la République*.

⁴² Gorodé, *Tâdo, Tâdo, wéél*, pp. 30 and 121; my emphasis.

⁴³ Gorodé, *Tâdo, Tâdo, wéél*, pp. 65 and 106. In 1958, Pape'ete was set on fire by an unknown arsonist, which led to the banishment of the anti-colonial leader Pouvanaa a Oopa, accused of having encouraged the crime. In Kanaky, the anti-colonial leader Maurice Lenormand was stripped of his civil rights in a similarly biased lawsuit for altercations in Nouméa.

colonisateurs. C'est nous que nous devons combattre.⁴⁴ For many activists, the new treaties and statuses unacceptably compromise their right to immediate sovereignty and independence. In Kanaky, even promised future referendums on the country's status did not quell their fears, as Kanak people are a minority in their own country and do not determine nationwide democratic processes. Djubelly Wea assassinated Tjibaou because he interpreted the Matignon Agreements as treason: 'We've gone back thirty years, just when we were on the finishing line.'⁴⁵

Tâdo reflects, to a certain extent, this post-Matignon impression of loss, failure, and lack of future prospects. The novel's protagonists are diagnosed with cancer only as the country becomes more and more hybrid. The first part of the novel, which presents Kanak people's fight for independence and their promotion of root-identities, shines with optimism: Gorodé lauds the successes of the 1984–88 Revolution and positions the FLNKS's fight in continuity with inspiring struggles against racist oppression, from the Algerian Revolution to South Africa's fight against apartheid.⁴⁶ Yet, this first movement is overshadowed by the pessimistic second part of the novel, under institutionalized multiculturalism, when the revolutionary group of protagonists has scattered, its members undergoing chemotherapy in different hospitals across the South Pacific. *Tâdo*'s parents, sister, and aunts, who had survived the violent revolutionary years, all pass away after 1988. Additionally, Alo's journal frequently introduces new characters for the first time at the moment of their death. Her diary even contains entries consisting simply of the description of other victims of cancer that she finds in obituaries. In previous works, Gorodé has described the fight against cancer in less tragic tones, portraying women who have undergone mastectomies as resilient 'amazones', but this silver lining is absent from Alo's journals.⁴⁷ The sudden incidence of characters fighting their tumour after 1988 — as Alo puts it, fighting against 'le corps qui se retourne[e] contre lui-même'⁴⁸ — could thus perhaps symbolize the anti-colonial activists' fight among themselves and against their own neo-colonial leaders following Tjibaou's death and the Matignon Agreements. The accords, which called for peaceful multiculturalism, have been celebrated as a path to mutual tolerance and a necessary departure from traditional French assimilationism, but *Tâdo* suggests that institutionalized multiculturalism can also be perceived as a politically coercive threat, materialized symbolically by the proliferation of cancers and pathologies under this new regime.

While Pacific writers' rejection of hybridity has often been condemned, Raylene Ramsay is one of the few critics to offer a generous reading of their frequent

⁴⁴ Chaze, *Avant la saison des pluies*, p. 346.

⁴⁵ Quoted in Eric Waddell, *Jean-Marie Tjibaou, Kanak Witness to the World: An Intellectual Biography* (Honolulu: Pacific Islands Development Program, 2008), p. 29.

⁴⁶ Just as the Haitian Revolution was long described as a slave 'revolt', the Kanak Revolution is usually referred to as a 'rebellion', an 'uprising', or even more euphemistically as 'the Events'. I use the word 'Revolution' here in order to emphasize both the scope of the fight and the imbalance of power relations.

⁴⁷ Déwé Gorodé, *Graines de pin colonnaire* (Nouméa: Madrépores, 2009), p. 55. For more on Gorodé's resilient amazons, see Jouve, 'Corps meurtris, femmes blessées'.

⁴⁸ Gorodé, *Tâdo, Tâdo, wéé!*, p. 98.

promotion of root-identities. Analysing Gorodé's poems and short stories, she describes what she calls Gorodé's 'parti-pris of indigeneity' as a necessary but provisional stage of writing, which will eventually be subsumed under a commitment to hybridity.⁴⁹ Ramsay thus writes that '[p]olitical commitment to [a] recovered shared community [...] makes any interest in créolité or hybridity *prematuré*'.⁵⁰ In the poems and interviews that Ramsey analyses, Gorodé does indeed intimate that it is necessary to establish one's roots before opening up to other cultural contexts. Gorodé's novels, however, complicate even this dialectical narrative.

Her first novel, *L'Épave*, opens with a gathering in the deculturated capital Nouméa, 'où alternent airs polynésiens, mélanésiens et caribéens, où la mousse amère de la bière le dispute au fouet revigorant du rhum, ou au goût amer du pastis'.⁵¹ What may initially appear as a festive hybrid setting is revealed, upon closer scrutiny, to contain dystopian undertones. The harmonious entanglement of musical styles from various regions of the globe is undermined in the following clause, where world music is replaced with the bitter tastes of world alcohol, betraying the alienation and the malaise of the protagonists in this determinedly colonial context. Indeed, France actively encouraged the migration of Polynesian and Caribbean workers from France's other *départements et collectivités d'outre-mer*, in order to ensure the 'democratic' marginalization of Kanak voices after they had obtained the right to vote in the mid-twentieth century.⁵²

Gorodé is thus critical of hybridity since she sees it as being entangled in a complex colonial agenda. However, she does not advocate a return to 'pure' and 'authentic' Kanak identity as an antidote to hybridity, since she is acutely aware of the potential capitalist co-optation of anti-colonial root-identities. In the same passage at the opening of *L'Épave*, the novel's narrator alludes to the fact that Kanak identity is made visible only through its commodification. Gorodé depicts Kanak identity as a

débauche de couleurs et de produits manufacturés. *Made in Japan, China et autres Taiwan* mythiques des usines clés en mains de la délocalisation, fabricant et imprimant sur tissus drapeaux Kanaky en série et autres symboles et signes identitaires sur commande.⁵³

In the vein of the Frankfurt School, Gorodé suggests that capitalism allows for the emergence of root-identities only inasmuch as they can be integrated into market dynamics. Kanak identity is made visible only through commodification and consumerism, thereby deepening Kanak people's dependency on French

⁴⁹ Raylene Ramsay, *The Literatures of the French Pacific: Reconfiguring Hybridity* (Liverpool: Liverpool University Press, 2014), p. 175.

⁵⁰ Raylene Ramsay, 'Speaking from Her I-land: The Singular Parti-Pris of Insularity and Ethnicity in the Writing of Déwé Gorodé', in *Ecrire à la croisée des îles, des langues; Otherness in Island Writing: Meeting the Other, Understanding the Other*, ed. by Dominique Jouve and others (Paris: L'Harmattan, 1999), pp. 161–85 (p. 175); my emphasis.

⁵¹ Déwé Gorodé, *L'Épave* (Nouméa: Madrépores, 2007), p. 20.

⁵² The multiculturalism depicted here does not feature white colonizers. In her interviews, Gorodé expands on her decision only to represent white people symbolically and obliquely in her writing, arguing that since there are no white people in Kanak neighbourhoods, her texts only convey 'traces' of colonialism, such as the alcoholism destroying Kanak communities; quoted in Hamid Mokaddem, *Œuvres et trajectoires d'écrivains de Nouvelle-Calédonie* (Nouméa: Expressions, 2007), p. 43.

⁵³ Gorodé, *L'Épave*, p. 17.

subsidies and entanglement with capitalist wage labour. In the twentieth century, imperial powers coerced colonized markets to buy manufactured products made from their own raw materials. This scene implies that the same dynamics are taking place today, except that the raw materials have been replaced with raw local cultures. Far from depicting identities as frozen, essentialist, and belonging to a colonial past century, Gorodé's novels present 'Kanak-ness' as being in permanent redefinition and therefore under constant threat of co-option by the global market.

Gorodé does not advocate for easy solutions. *L'Épave's* incipit remains suspicious of hybridity and its effects, but the novel's protagonists, Tom and Lena, do not follow a *Bildungsroman* path towards discovering their 'true' identity. Throughout the novel, they keep going back and forth between political rallies promoting a root-oriented Kanak identity and nightclubs presented as a melting pot. **Gorodé opens up a discussion about the nature of Kanak identity in a globalized world, without providing any doctrinaire answer to its ongoing hybridization.**

Identities cannot exist independently of politics. Evidently, both Spitz and Gorodé refuse to use the concepts of creolization and *métissage*, not because of a lack of interracial encounters, which are a historically undeniable fact, **but rather because they are reacting to a specific creolizing ideology. In her essays, Spitz suggests that these theories have served the colonizers' nuclear agenda,** justifying the unprecedented wave of French immigrants to the islands in the 1960s by evoking the allegedly ontological openness of Pacific cultures:

Et si cette nouvelle identité qui nous est aujourd'hui imposée célébrée multiculturelle pluriethnique harmonieuse — excusez du peu — n'était finalement qu'un vilain saut par-dessus la violence de la colonisation qu'un sournois artifice pour rendre impossible l'indispensable travail de mémoire qu'il nous appartient de cheminer [. . .] pour abolir l'amnésie la distance la rancœur mutuelles.⁵⁴

By establishing a parallel between 'multiculturelle' and 'rancœur mutuelle', Spitz intimates that the **alleged hybridity of Pacific cultures functions as a red herring, occulting the structural racial inequality plaguing the islands as well as the unacknowledged consequences of nuclear testing.**

It is not a coincidence that the neologisms conceptualizing indigenous identities in France's Pacific colonies appeared in the 1970s, in the aftermath of the militarization of the islands. The demographic impact of nuclear colonialism on the francophone Pacific cannot be overstated. In the 1960s, the population of Tahiti's capital nearly doubled when thousands of soldiers immigrated there. Kanaky was subjected to a similar migratory wave of civilians, partially motivated by the nickel boom, and strongly encouraged by the French government who believed that the demographic marginalization of the Kanak population would secure France's position in the region. France's then Prime Minister, Pierre Messmer, referred to these migrations as an improvement in the numerical balance between

⁵⁴ Chantal Spitz, 'Multiculturalité', *Pensées insolentes et inutiles* (Papeete: Éditions Te Itē, 2006), pp. 208–15 (p. 211).

communities,⁵⁵ while Roger Laroque, the mayor of Kanaky's capital, put it in more straightforward terms: 'Il faut faire du blanc.'⁵⁶

It is in response to this particular type of 'creolizing colonialism' that anti-colonial thinkers began to redefine Pacific identities. In the 1970s, political and social actors initiated an unprecedented politics of naming throughout the Pacific, inventing the neologisms Kanak and Mā'ohi in order to oppose the creolizing agenda of the colonizers. These new identities met the political need for asserting the autochthonous right to self-determination, and within a decade they had eclipsed the former colonial labels of 'Melanesian' and 'Polynesian', which referred to loosely defined regional identities rather than national ones. Today, these new labels have been adopted nationwide by people of autochthonous descent regardless of their genealogical racial mixing. These labels are not essentialist per se, but rather articulate a dynamic strategic essentialism that conveys an ever-changing and politicized conception of postcolonial identities.

I use the term 'strategic essentialism' here in order to emphasize the tactical yoking together of nationalism and environmentalism in the construction of a regional sense of identity. Invented by Gayatri Spivak to describe an expedient way to oppose sexism, strategic essentialism recognizes the political dimension of all identities.⁵⁷ In the Pacific context, the concept of strategic essentialism underscores the fact that regional identities were developed in parallel to a growing sense of awareness regarding the protection of oceanic resources. As Epeli Hau'ofa highlights, 'our region has achieved its greatest degree of unity on issues involving threats to our common environment: the ocean.'⁵⁸ Indeed, both independent and colonized Pacific nations have presented a regional united front when protesting nuclear tests, wall-of-death drift-netting, dumping of radioactive waste, and rising sea levels. Both Spitz's and Gorodé's novels corroborate Hau'ofa's claim that it is on 'issues of this kind [that] the sense of a regional identity, of being Pacific Islanders, is felt most acutely' (ibid.). I am not suggesting that Pacific cultures' closeness to the ocean is an 'invented tradition', but rather I am highlighting the ongoing co-constitution of environmental awareness and Pacific identities.

Postcolonial articulations of identity around notions of indigeneity or creolization cannot be resolved easily and have been the object of debate for decades. Ultimately, these debates about identity are more political than philosophical. Opposing concept to concept, 'identité racine' to 'identité rhizome', can only lead to aporia since each concept is equally valid as a philosophical category. Yet it is possible to assign various political meanings to identity labels in their specific political contexts. In fact, divorcing these concepts from their political framework through philosophical abstraction is itself a political move. Pacific anti-colonial

⁵⁵ Alban Bensa, *Nouvelle Calédonie: vers l'émancipation* (Paris: Gallimard, 1998), p. 11.

⁵⁶ Roger Laroque, quoted in Chappell, *The Kanak Awakening*, p. 115.

⁵⁷ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography', in *Deconstruction: Critical Concepts in Literary and Cultural Studies*, ed. by Jonathan Culler (London: Routledge, 2003), pp. 220–44.

⁵⁸ Hau'ofa, *We Are the Ocean*, p. 49.

literature contributes to this discussion by reminding us that, in an age in which *métissage* and multiculturalism have become ideologies so often instrumentalized by imperial powers, root-based strategic essentialism cannot be so easily dismissed.