A Call for Justice in Mā'ohi Nui [French Polynesia]: The Post-Climate Change Imaginary of Mourareau's *Méridien Zéro* and *Maeva nulle part*

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Abstract: This article considers the ways in which two contemporary novels by the Tahitian writer, Mourareau, shed light on the historical causes of changing climates in Oceania, especially the legacy of the Pacific Testing Center, the French colonial body that established a base for the testing of nuclear missiles in 1964 and dramatically altered the social and economic land- and seascapes of Mā'ohi Nui [French Polynesia]. In *Méridien zéro* (2020) and *Maeva nulle part* (2024), Mourareau depicts characters who struggle with the aftermath of what Isabel Hofmeyr has called "hydrocolonialism," or the legacy of colonial views of the Pacific Islands as utopias that would later be subjected to the global powers of tourism and militarism. The article argues that by recentering the history of Mā'ohi Nui in larger transoceanic currents Mourareau's fiction has much to contribute to current debates in the recent collaboration between the Blue Humanities and Oceania Studies.

Keywords: French Polynesia, Oceania, Mourareau, hydrocolonialism, tourism, militarism, climate change

Introduction

Maeva nulle part [*Welcome Nowhere*] (2024), the novel by Mourareau, recounts the life of Manutahi, a former soldier in Mā'ohi Nui [French Polynesia],[1] as he struggles under the legacy of the *Centre d'Expérimentation du Pacifique* (CEP, Pacific Testing Center), the French colonial body that established a base for the testing of nuclear missiles in 1964 and, in the decades that followed, dramatically altered the social and economic land- and seascapes of Mā'ohi Nui and surrounding Oceania.[2] Near the conclusion of the novel, Manutahi appears to be coming to his own end, as he crosses the parc Bougainville and approaches the port of Papeete. "His walk is like a grim funeral procession," the narrator observes, "the hearse limps along" (139).[3] With few opportunities, Manutahi had enlisted in the French army at the age of 18 but deserted some years later after a traumatic experience serving in Mali. He returned to Tahiti and, now 40, is adrift in a series of short-term jobs, with no future in sight.

At the beginning of the novel, Manutahi sets out to take stock of his life at the margins of the postcard image of Tahiti, a misleading picturesque history, as the narrator explains, "fomented from abroad, or at least by locals whose interests are foreign to it" (15).[4] The narrator extends the sense of rejection and fatigue that Manutahi feels to the entire archipelagic territory of Mā'ohi Nui. "This territory is so accustomed to importing goods, ideas, and manufactured products, that it has become lazy at the very idea of doing otherwise," the narrator laments (15). In Manutahi's view, the Mā'ohi have internalized and accepted "the destruction of its will" (15). He derides the corrupt system of political "semi-autonomy" that has benefited but a small circle of families and left the majority dependent on a neocolonial relationship with France.[5]

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The subservience that Manutahi decries as a legacy of French colonialism recalls the "belittlement" that Epeli Hau'fa, an anthropologist at the University of the South Pacific (USP), in Fiji, describes at the beginning of his celebrated essay, "Our Sea of Islands." "I was so bound to the notion of 'smallness,'" Hau'ofa confesses, recalling earlier interactions with students on the historical problem of dependence, "that even if we improved our approaches to production for example, the absolute size of our islands would still impose such severe limitations that we would be defeated in the end" (5). In the face of ashamed students, Hau'ofa experiences a kind of epiphany: he was "actively participating in our own belittlement" (5). The history of being made small, Hau'ofa explains, did not begin with European colonizers, as it can also be traced back further to hierarchical societies around Polynesia. However, it was "continental men," Hau'ofa clarifies, "Europeans and Americans, who drew imaginary lines across the sea, making the colonial boundaries that, for the first time, confined ocean peoples to tiny spaces" (7). It is this sense of smallness and isolation, "islands in a far sea" (7), that Hau'ofa rejects in his call to reclaim ancestral knowledge and practices of the ocean.

The "New Oceania" that Hau'ofa declared over thirty years ago was an auspicious moment, when the 25th anniversary of the USP became the occasion to reimagine the geographic and cultural spaces of the South Pacific and rethink models of socio-economic development and legal frameworks, regional and international. If Hau'ofa's essay resonated with many of his respondents in the volume in which it was published, especially its call to re-view older ways of living in and moving through the "large sea full of places to explore" (8), it also met with the skepticism of those who found it too idealistic and poetic as a response to the real problem of dependency on aid, energy, food, and technology.[6] Changing the collective mindset to a less bounded perspective of Oceania, many responded, must also extend to structural changes in economic and political collaborations.

The tensions that can be read in *A New Oceania* remain palpable in Moureau's writing. Born in Tahiti in 1991 and raised there and in the Gambier Islands, Moureau (the pen name of Ollivier Marrec) studied in France and returned to Tahiti with a desire to write about "the Polynesia that isn't known…and to propose another way of seeing it, a different portrait" than the one long told by the Metropole, as he stated in an interview (Gillet). In *Maeva nulle part*, Manutahi is a character deprived of a larger sense of self and community and seeks a way out of neocolonial existence, yet he must contend with structural limitations on education and employment. In the park, Manutahi encounters a man speaking to an audience of fellow disenfranchised. "Once super-Polynesians" (137), the speaker recalls, "and now look; pushing the shopping cart at the mercy of the tide, dragging it from one shelf to the other, the sign of a collective weakening, the vague hopes of renewal will remain in a sedated state," he says (137). Apparently crazy, the man nevertheless describes clearly the surrounding injustice. Listening to the speaker, Manutahi has an awakening of sorts:

> each passing year brings him a little closer to the end of the world. Inevitably. At the very moment when climate change sends an update on steroids [*MAJ musclée*], the injunction nevertheless stands: continue working, faster, longer, back hunched over, ligaments stretched, and act as if nothing had happened. (138)

The reference to "climate change" occurs but once, here in the final pages of the novel. For Manutahi, the threat it signifies as an "end of the world" is vague compared to the more immediate and tangible problem of endlessly demeaning labor in the crushing system of global tourism. The reality of dependency, with locals reduced to domestic labor, would seem to call into question the regional networks and "balanced development of our marine and ocean resources" that Hau'ofa had looked ahead to in *A New Oceania* (138).

The passing mention of "climate change" amidst the protagonist's frustrated search for a more just life raises questions about the place of Mā'ohi Nui and Oceania more broadly in prevailing

discourse on climate change. How does the generalizing language of this term obscure the local and regional problems that lead to Manutahi's downfall? How does it conceal or overlook the historical causes of changing oceans, especially the fallout (nuclear and socio-economic) of the CEP? As this article will show, like much Mā'ohi fiction that precedes it, Mourareau's writing sheds light on this history, and thus it provides important context for current debates in the Blue Humanities, especially as the field has undergone a recent turn, in what Steve Mentz, a leading contributor, calls its "offshore trajectory," away from the Atlantic and Caribbean and its largely Anglophone bias, "moving toward the Pacific as the default ocean basin" (46). How might one read Manutahi's struggles in terms of the deeper engagement of historical and cultural knowledge to be gained from the transoceanic collaboration between the Blue Humanities and Oceania Studies, as underscored by Craig Santos Perez, the Chamoru poet and scholar, and his study of histories of migration and militarization of the Pacific?[7]

This essay takes up the above questions in a comparative analysis of *Maeva nulle part* and *Méridien zéro*, Mourareau's first novel. Written the year before the Covid-19 pandemic and published in the fateful month of March 2020, *Méridien zéro* tells the story of a French couple, Bleu and Rose, who live in Paris sometime in the future, during a time of cascading and intertwining political and ecological catastrophes. They flee the French capital, in search of a new "point zero," a place to start over. Having heard about the isolated beauty of Mā'ohi Nui, they seek refuge in Tahiti, as France and Europe more broadly are on the verge of collapse. The transoceanic journey of Bleu and Rose takes them across the Atlantic, with a layover in Los Angeles, where they take in the Pacific Ocean for the first time. The couple are lured to Tahiti by the promise of utopia, only to discover the opposite of an idyllic place, a "utopia upside-down" [*utopie à l'envers*], as Titaua Porcher describes it in her analysis of the novel (81). Disenchanted, Bleu and Rose find Tahiti to be "a banal island" [*une île sans intérêt*] (161), where the legacy of a French colonial "training" [*dressage*] (160) has conditioned much of the population.

The Tahiti of a catastrophic future looks a lot like the neocolonial present and colonial past that Manutahi confronts in *Maeva nulle part*. By turning away from the future of impending collapse to focus on the travails of Manutahi in the present, Mourareau appears to have lost interest in the threat of climate change for the people of Oceania. And yet, the story of Manutahi, I argue, is a call to "reckon with historical changes," as Perez urges for any effort to "navigate our relationship to the ocean in a time of climate change" (75). As the article will demonstrate below, both novels reveal an author focused on the aftermath of what Isabel Hofmeyr has called "hydrocolonialism," or the discursive and material powers that have created a "world indelibly shaped by imperial uses of water" (13), and both recenter the history of Mā'ohi Nui in larger transoceanic currents to reimagine other ways of living with and navigating the ocean.

Méridien zéro, between Dystopia and Utopia?

Méridien zéro situates the colonial myth of the Pacific Islands as ahistorical, tropical idylls inside the genre of collapse, a kind of climate fiction. For Porcher, the attempt to hold together dystopian future and utopian past makes the novel an "OVNI littéraire," (81), an unidentifiable flying object in the universe of mainstream climate fiction. By now, "cli-fi" has become an umbrella term for a range of genres – dystopia, speculative fiction, post-apocalyptic stories, narratives of collapse, among others – that imagine futuristic worlds of the Anthropocene. Susanne Leikam and Julia Leyda observe that the growing number of neologisms corresponds to the "remarkable burgeoning of a heterogeneous body of cultural texts … and scientific works that take on the challenge of prompting global audiences to engage emotionally and intellectually with the implications of anthropogenic climate change" (109). For Porcher, dystopias have so taken hold of younger generations that they have become a cultural and commercial phenomenon. Porcher underscores a collective fascination and anxiety with dystopic futures and a parallel

(and growing) consumption of media, especially film and short videos, video games, and social media.[8] During a time of accelerating climate change, dystopias are an effective counterpoint, Porcher adds, "invaluable tools of reflection for envisioning the future of societies" (80). In this way, dystopias bring readers and viewers to imagine what life might look like beyond climate tipping points.

Critical reflection on dystopia also provides a counterpoint to the ways in which the naming of "cli-fi" risks some reduction, erasing generic differences and obscuring the historical causes of changing climates in different places. Much climate fiction produced in the last twenty years or so, especially Hollywood blockbusters, are so focused on the future that they offer but glimpses of the past. Moreover, the end of the world scenario that they often depict is not the uninhabitability of the planet for humans and non-humans alike but rather, as Claire Colebrook argues, "a life without urbanity, global media, and consumerism as the last of days… The end of capitalism is the end of the world" (265).[9] Ironically, as Anaïs Maurer points out, these "mainstream apocalypse narratives simply reiterate the myths that have enabled industrial capitalism in the first place: materialism, techno-utopianism, competition, individualism, and estrangement from other-than-human forms of life" (10). By contrast, "Pacific (post)apocalyptic narratives," Maurer writes, depict histories of world-ending events, from colonial conquest to nuclear testing of the CEP.[10] "To better understand Pacific activists' attitude in the face of climate collapse," Maurer adds, "it is important to remember that the issues perceived as imminent threats in mainstream climate discourse have already been experienced to their fullest deadliness by Oceanians" (8).[11] In this way, cultural production of Oceania reveals the belatedness of much climate fiction today and the discourse around the Anthropocene. Similarly, Perez observes the delayed turn of the Blue Humanities to the Pacific and calls for efforts to "re-map the complex strands of the intellectual and literary genealogy of the Blue Humanities" (67). The desire for such re-mapping recalls Hau'ofa's view of sea of islands, one that would re-chart the deeper contexts of Oceanian histories, including voyaging around the Pacific and the encounter with Euro-American ideas of civilization, progress, technology, and, crucially, oceans and islands.

In literary and philosophical history, utopia and dystopia have a long past, as Porcher points out with references to earlier periods of literature and film. The initial uses of "dystopia" and "dystopian" date to the 18th and 19th centuries, when the word signified a bad, dysfunctional place, or the opposite of Thomas More's invention of "utopia," in the early 16th century, as an imaginary, perfect place.[12] The creation of these neologisms spans roughly the same time that colonial expeditions embarked from European shores. In *Voyage autour du monde* (1771), Louis-Antoine de Bougainville – whose name, as we are reminded by the narrator of *Maeva nulle part*, still graces public space in Tahiti – filters his descriptions of the people and places he explores through the lens of utopia, a New Cythera at the outer ends of his Eurocentric view of the globe. In the prologue of her groundbreaking novel, *L'Île des rêves écrasés* (1991) [*The Island of Shattered Dreams*] (2007), Chantal Spitz reimagines the devastating effects of this early colonial contact: "They took our Land from us, they overturned the old order, our order, and ever since, white faces stand proud in our world in tatters" [*ils se sont approprié notre Terre, renversant l'ordre que nous avions établi et, depuis, un visage blanc se tient debout dans notre monde effiloché*] (19/24). *The Island of Shattered Dreams* was the first Mā'ohi novel in French to lament the long arc of apocalypse in Mā'ohi Nui – from colonialism to the CEP and neocolonial "semi-autonomy" –, a story burned onto the complicated genealogical tree of her fictionalized family. Since the early 1990s, Spitz has continued to shatter the postcard image of Mā'ohi Nui in subsequent novels and short stories, especially *Cartes postales* and *Et la mer pour demeure*. She has made it possible for writers like Titaua Peu and, later, Moureau to continue to unsettle expectations around tourism, socio-economic development, and the political relationship of Mā'ohi Nui with France.[13]

Méridien zéro moves between dystopia (the collapse of a dysfunctional, violent Europe) and utopia (in the Euro-American imaginary, the enduring perception of Tahiti as an Edenic elsewhere). The novel employs a choral narrative structure, with chapters alternating in the third person between Bleu, Rose, and Trézor, Rose's little Maltese. The narrative structure emphasizes the disconnections between Bleu and Rose, exposing their fragile bonds. The biggest obstacle to their relationship, an unremitting self-absorption, can be read in the novel's opening sentence, which introduces Bleu, having "returned from a day spent completing his work unit, seated in front of the screen offering him vegetative comfort" (7). Bleu's addiction to all manner of digital screens – streaming platforms, social media, and video games – and their narcotic effects after a unit of drone-like work would not be out of place in a novel set in the present day. However, in the future imagined by Mourareau, human subjectivity and inter-subjectivity are entirely filtered by screens and networks. The vegetal has become intertwined with the digital, as Bleu is often described as "*planted* in front of the television" (16, emphasis mine). What is more, governed by CEOs in "social Eurocracies" (11), Europeans of the (near) future have been transformed as consumerist subjects of a violent hyper-capitalism that controls all aspects of political and social life. As Porcher writes, it is a "union of solitudes that joins Bleu and Rose" (85). "Neither a victim nor guilty person," the narrator describes Bleu, "he had become a simple, silent collaborator of his era" (43-44).

As a projection into a near future, the novel walks a fine line between fantasy and reality. However, a huge storm, with deadly lightning strikes and hail that pulverizes buildings around the city, like a bombardment, presages a cataclysm to come. The storm marks a turning point, as Bleu begins to question the meaning of his labor, enters a "phase of radicalization" (42) and quits his job. Seeking an "emergency plan outside of the salary world" [*monde salarial*] (46), Bleu encounters a Tahitian bartender and recalls a documentary he had seen about Tahiti. At the time of the viewing, Bleu had been mindlessly watching the television, flipping from channel to channel, and had landed on the documentary. In this vegetative state, Bleu is mesmerized: "Ta-hi-ti…these three syllables were synonymous of exoticism, perfumed flowers, bare women…the documentary was not lacking in praise for these faraway lands of the South Pacific, away from conflict, modern-day issues, the tumult of global civilization" (24). Having already consumed the postcard image, Bleu is primed, in the crisis unleashed by the storm, to seek shelter in the centuries-old colonial myth of the South Pacific as a *mare nullius*, an isolated, largely uninhabited space.[14]

The documentary interrupts the narrative of dystopic collapse, yet only temporarily. Pulled back into another screen, this time a tablet, Bleu is sucked into the vortex of social media and begins to scroll from update to update, story to story, like to like, a series of absentminded gestures that reveal to him that the distance between real and virtual travel has collapsed. The tangible experience of the former, the narrator laments, has been reduced to an "ostentatious consumption… Traveling had become a vulgar fashion" (70). Such acerbic critique of the tourist armed with Instagram both reaffirms the problematic sea change in digital culture and practices of travel and betrays the corrosive effects of utopia. Like Spitz and others, Mourareau shows how tourism has long been dystopic and deadly for the people of Oceania.

If the absence, or non-place, inherent to utopia begins to disrupt the expectations of Bleu and Rose before and during their transoceanic flight (Bleu has an ominous vision of the desert threatening to overtake the utopic image of Los Angeles), their arrival in Tahiti, in the novel's second act, completes their disillusionment. Initially disoriented after the long flight, Bleu and Rose spend their second day on a tour of the island and discover familiar signs of global capitalism and the inequality it creates; for the French couple, the trappings of such commodification and cultural sameness appear to have done great damage to "the pride of a people who had been taught to unlearn what they had been" (160). Moreover, the utopic promise of sandy beaches

and turquoise waters has also suffered. During the construction of the CEP, the narrator explains: "money and cement flowed like the drugs of the French Connection…In the space of a half century, the island was so built up with cement that all that was missing was an Eiffel Tower on a coral reef transformed for the occasion into a polder with underground parking" (162). In the space of one afternoon, Bleu and Rose are astonished to witness how the "flows of cement" have paved over the postcard image. In this passage, Moureau presents readers with what one might call a post-hydrocolonial artifice. As Hofmeyr argues, "Hydrocolonialism makes visible relations of power that have been shaped around water and its colonial appropriations" (13). In the novel, French projections of utopia reveal a barely concealed desire to extract resources and transform the islands into its own concrete image. That Bleu can envision an Eiffel Tower floating on coral serves to underscore the power of what Hoymeyr calls, "post-hydro-imperialism" and how it "has produced and will continue to produce a chaotic plurality of ecological disorders" (14).

Upon witnessing the degraded utopia on Tahiti, Bleu and Rose travel with a local acquaintance to Raroia, an outer lying *motu*, or small island, where they are taken in by an eclectic community, "a bunch of good-for-nothings" [*un ramassis de bras cassés*] (177), foreigners and a couple of locals, including one named "Manutahi," introduced as "an intermediary" (179). The community is led by Monsieur G., who explains the strict rules for living in their encampment, which "forbid the taking of photos and videos. Publicity is punishable by banishment for life" (179). At first, Rose feels like she has joined a kind of asylum, but she slowly begins to appreciate the simplicity and calm of this analog corner of the world. Moreover, when Manutahi takes Bleu and Rose on a dive, they experience the great depths of the ocean and the amazing flora and fauna of this sub-marine world, previously unknown to them. As the narrator reveals, "They stayed for several hours, weightless, evolving in three dimensions in this liquid milieu. Bleu held Rose's hand to accompany her in this mineral and minimalist experience" (200). In the sense of wonder described by the narrator, the passage risks framing the weightless joy of the French couple as an experience of what Mentz calls, "the oceanic sublime" (79). Long linked to Western ideas about the limits of the human capacity for imagination, the sublime, Mentz adds, is an ecological problem, because "there can be no heroes and no sublimity in an ecological system" (82). Yet Mentz also suggests that a "posthuman Blue Humanities" (82), turning to Oceania Studies, leave open the possibility of ecological interconnectedness. Thus, the above passage on the submarine experience of Bleu and Rose could be read to suggest an immersion into an oceanic perspective, leading to the re-mapping, as Perez calls for, of other ways of living and thinking the ocean.

After escaping the collapse of Western Europe, Bleu and Rose appear to have found refuge in Raroia. For Porcher, this retreat marks the novel's turn to counter-utopia, a cousin to dystopia, with the slight difference of describing a world post-catastrophe.[15] On this small island, among the imperfect members of their new tribe, Bleu and Rose do not find the ideal space to live out their days, Porcher argues, because Mourareau has already rejected the postcard image of utopia. It is inside this bubble, Porcher finds, where the novel offers a powerfully quiet critique of (Western) civilization and its core belief in progress. And yet, the counter-utopia is short-lived. Just when Bleu and Rose appear to find their place at a "community table, where they might remake the world" [*tablée où refaire le monde*] (182), the novel shifts rapidly, in its third and final act, to a post-apocalyptic mode. The collapse of Europe was but the initial phase of global catastrophe. Bleu dies from eating a poisonous fish during a picnic with Rose, and, soon thereafter, a cyclone ravages neighboring islands and giant waves threaten to destroy Raroia. The community flees on a migrant boat, "Sauve-qui-peut," and make land on Mehetia, where they encounter another group of (less powerful) survivors. Instead of staying with the more democratic community of laborers on Raroia, *Méridien zéro* concludes with the idea that "everything must be rebuilt," and Monsieur G "campaigned openly for a grand return to origins" (241). This

return goes all the way back to a Mā'ohi theocracy, ruled by Manutahi and Rose: "Rose already saw herself in close up on a giant screen, reigning over this place at Manutahi's side, who had become king by the sole argument of his strength" (241). Just as the younger generations have been mesmerized by dystopia, although likely on smaller screens, so Moureau, too, appears unable to resist the otherworldly lure of cli-fi.

Maeva nulle part, the Defeated Soldier

What should readers make of the seemingly abrupt shift from the edifying scenes of counter-utopia to the annihilation of collapse and the strange return to pre-colonial origins? One could focus on the lessons to be gained for the present-day from the counter-utopia of Raroia. In this view, the novel compels thought about what life might look like post-climate catastrophe. The reverse temporality of *Méridien zéro*, set inside a playful satire, is not a call to start over, but rather a questioning of the ways in which colonial and imperial pasts and their extractive projects are the historical causes of changing climates. In this section, the chapter continues to develop this argument by making a connection between the two novels, in which Moureau turns away from the near future of Mehetia and its newfound king, Manutahi, to reimagine the backstory of this character, someone we might read as an alternate Manutahi in the present. In this reading, Manutahi is both a local intermediary in the future and a cautionary tale about the life of a defeated soldier in the stalled present of neocolonialism.[16] In the slow time of nuclear fallout in Mā'ohi Nui, Manutahi is caught in the cycle of endless, short-term labor and the media-saturated economy of global tourism. In what follows, I examine a few scenes of the novel that provide a historical context for the disillusionment of Bleu and Rose in post-hydrocolonial Tahiti.

At first glance, the depressing coming of age story of *Maeva nulle part* contrasts with the ludic satire of *Méridien zéro*. The novel reads like an anti-bildungsroman, with Manutahi as the anti-hero who reaches the age of 40 – "this age between two ages… a turning point…" (7) – and feels obliged to recount his life. The opening pages make clear that this is not a story about growth and development. In the words of the narrator, "He went from birth to multi-level due dates: educational, financial, existential; they have given him the impression that life gets put into simple containers. It's frightening and rather depressing" (8). The novel's title suggests that not only does Manutahi have nowhere to go, having failed to meet the above deadlines for the path to maturity, but also does not feel welcome anywhere (*maeva nulle part*).[17] Some of the first memories that Manutahi retrieves, sitting in a parking lot of a McDonald's, are about the limits of his education. At 12, he is sent from Mangareva, in the Gambier archipelago, southeast of Tahiti, to a boarding school on the smaller island of Hao, about two hours by plane. As the narrator describes it:

> Hao and its boarding school are the unavoidable layover for the average schoolkid of Tuamotu Centre-Sud-Gambier. The school drains the youth from these atolls on which the structures of secondary education are nonexistent. Those who finish elementary school have no other choice but to pursue their schooling on another island. A form of exile; so, after elementary school on one's own island, next, it's middle school on the atoll of penitence. (37)

In this passage, Moureau, following the example set by Spitz and Peu in their writings, offers a thinly veiled critique of the structural inequality of the system of education in Mā'ohi Nui, where poor children in the outer islands are deprived of the superior schooling available in the larger islands of the archipelago. The colonial legacy of the uneven relationship between periphery and center endures in Manutahi's memory of exile and punishment. The isolated environment recalls the remote, smallness of Pacific islands in the historical imaginary, and this feeling is reinforced, the narrator adds, by the students' lack of access to the sea: "The sea that we hear from a distance, bit by bit, it's the song of the siren tied up at the windows. No swimming

was permitted throughout the year. Tragic" (39). Hao and the school within evoke memories of carceral spaces, as Manutahi and his schoolmates struggle to imagine a less bounded view of archipelagos and the wider ocean. As soon as he is old enough to work, a year away from being able to go to high school, Manutahi leaves Hao to work on his uncle's pearl farm.

Looking back on his schooling and the series of jobs that followed, service work and manual labor that profited multi-national corporations and the elites of Mā'ohi Nui, Manutahi feels like a failure. Time hasn't moved forward, as his current entrapment recalls the time of adolescence on Hao, when he could not imagine an escape to a "sea of islands." As opposed to the mobility of Bleu, powered by an agency that allows him to escape an impending cataclysm and travel, like a tourist, to Tahiti, Manutahi has nowhere to go. And yet, like Bleu, he attempts to find an outlet from depression and loss of self in the virtual spaces of video games and social media. The depictions of Manutahi's obsessive use of Instagram and dating apps – in the novel, he doesn't have a partner in the flesh, like Rose – show him to be much more like Bleu. In fact, Moura-reau's sustained critique of a media-saturated, consumerist world and the paradoxical ways in which social media engenders anti-social behavior tightens the connection between the two novels. However, readers may be more inclined to pity the tragic plight of Manutahi than the hapless Bleu. The portrait of an outcast, whose only outlet is a seething anger, is indeed far from the tragic-comic optimist in search of utopia.

Of course, there is one outlet for Manutahi and other Mā'ohi of his milieu: service in the French military, or, more precisely, the *Régiment du Service Militaire Adapté* (RSMA). Like the colonial history of the school system in Mā'ohi Nui, the RSMA is another (neo)colonial appara-tus, an institution under the aegis of the *Ministère de l'Intérieur et des Outre-mer*, through which young Mā'ohi can enlist, aspiring to continued education and social mobility. Created in 1960 in the French Caribbean, as Claudia Ledderucci explains, the RSMA was intended to "replace obligatory military service and incorporate in a symbolic way the citizens of the former colonies of Martinique, Guadeloupe, and French Guyana" (167). Instituted in French Polynesia in 1989, the RSMA is part and parcel of evolving agreements on political autonomy from France, result-ing in the "differential governance," Ledderucci adds, "that gives way to numerous exceptions and adaptations" (167). More specific to the depiction of Manutahi's enlistment, the RSMA is also known "as a school of second chance, where youth at risk of failing school may achieve satisfactory results and feel a sense of personal and professional fulfillment," as Ledderucci points out (166). The army has long been, as the narrator of *Maeva nulle part* remarks, "a lifeline for all those who, without seeking some meaning to their life, find an occupation rather than a calling. For lack of anything better, it's a way out through which one finds camaraderie and kindness" (73). Here, the novel acknowledges the place of the RSMA in French Polynesia and the endur-ing colonial thought around education, individual agency and belonging, and what Ledderucci calls "pieces of political sovereignty" (176).

However, individual engagement in the larger political configuration of French Polynesia and the ability to articulate some notion of sovereignty proves to be a daunting mission for Manutahi. Indeed, the idea of the RSMA as a lifeline is quickly undermined by Manutahi's con-fession, made with his hands in the hot oil of the fryer at McDonald's, that he has never been the same since enlisting in the army. Not surprisingly, the post-traumatic stress that he suffers from rises to the surface in the daily physical pain endured on the job. As the narrator explains, "The Army, the Army, the Army. The word alone resonates in a loop in his head. It's a cacophony. An interior explosion" (72). Manutahi's reflections on his military service, from boot camp on the Marquesas Islands, to his advanced training in the metropole, all the way to his desertion and return to Tahiti, and the obvious mental and physical toll it has taken, occupy several chapters of this slim novel, and thus they constitute a core part of his life story. In fact, the events of his time in the army speak volumes to the central themes of *Maeva nulle part*: education and train-

ing; migration and mobility; family expectations and sense of pride; and the role of the French army in the ongoing ties between France and Mā'ohi Nui. Moreover, the novel's sustained attention to the outsized role of the military in Manutahi's life and many of his peers provides an important opening for more robust discussion of the historical and ongoing militarization of seas and oceans around the globe. As Elizabeth Deloughrey has recently pointed out, "The Pacific Ocean as defined by geographers covers one-third of the world's surface area (63 million square miles), but to the US military it extends all the way to the western coast of India" (24). More recently, Deloughrey adds, the "US Indo-Pacific Command…in recognition of its new maritime regime…has expanded to 100 million square miles…" (24). For Deloughrey, "this recent change in transoceanic hydro-politics has produced all kinds of material for cultural analysis, suggesting an interesting relationship between militarism and literary production (and consumption)" (24).

Maeva nulle part belongs to a rich history of Mā'ohi and Oceanian cultural production that has long lamented the militarization of its ocean- and island-scapes. Moureau's novel strikes a delicate balance between the personal and familial confines of Manutahi's choice to enlist in the army and a larger historical and political critique. The extended family's reproach of Manutahi for his desertion is at once an accusation of laziness, when "everyone is making sacrifices" (122) and an expression of regret at the loss of retirement income. The family pressure is based on the continued relationship of dependency that the narrator had observed and was further criticized for by the orator in the park. Years after the last nuclear test was carried out by the French military, Manutahi's aim to pass basic training and integrate into the army in France is further evidence, the narrator reminds us, of how "the French State continues to nourish its systems of defense from Polynesia, which, after offering itself as a kind of laboratory, entrusts its lifeblood to the battles of the Republic that one loves despite the adversity and in spite of common sense" (99). The centrality of Manutahi's military service to the story also recalls the beginning of Spitz's *The Island of Shattered Dreams*, when Tematua's enlistment in the French Navy, during the Second World War, sets up the generational conflict between his family and "Greater France." One of the dramatic turning points in Spitz's novel is the arrival of Laura, the engineer of the French state who oversees the construction of the CEP and who also falls in love with Terii, Tematua's son and activist against nuclear testing. Two generations later, the question of the CEP and nuclear power remains critical to any discussion of the ties between France and Mā'ohi Nui and Oceania. However, Moureau also highlights in *Maeva nulle part* the expansion of two transoceanic forces, tourism and militarism, and a closer look at a pivotal scene in the novel will allow me to come back to their implications for the changing oceans and climates of Oceania and bring this transdisciplinary reflection to a conclusion.

On a transoceanic flight to Paris, via LAX, his first time abroad, Manutahi sits next to a French tourist, and their encounter sets the stage for the conflicting and overlapping interests of tourism and militarism. Manutahi's seatmate is returning to Paris after a tour of the world, including "six months in paradise" (103). Manutahi notices his tattoo, a fresh souvenir, and the tourist launches into a monologue of his trip, supported by the photo and video album on his phone. "The islands encapsulated, digitized, filtered, and optimized for search engines…Our digital nomade," the narrator continues, "is a lifestyle pornstar. He returns to France with a wardrobe accentuated with a flower motif… and a hard drive filled with images from the latest generation of his GoPro camera, latest model" (103-104). As he had done in *Méridien zéro*, Moureau returns here to the critique of contemporary travel and consumption, made routine by social media and the requisite trappings of *dépaysement* provided by the postcard image. On the plane, Manutahi understands quickly that the tourist's audience is really Instagram, a recognition that also recalls the narrator's earlier critique of "Bora l'instagrammable légendaire" (12). Lamenting the extractive industries of finance and social media that created Bora Bora as it is

advertised and known around the globe, the narrator announces sarcastically, long live tourism, "while the fish swallow all the stuff thrown down the drains; just as, at the same time, locals are transformed into maids" (12). In *Maeva nulle part*, however, the tourist's voyage to paradise contrasts sharply with the military tour, which takes the French Polynesian soldier from the airport, RER, and train station to the base at Draguignon, in southeast France. Moureau's depiction of the pathways of this journey is notable for its close attention to the multiple spaces in which the soldier moves alongside and even mingles with tourists. At Draguignon, Manutahi meets a fellow recruit, Mokhtar, and, after several months of additional training, the two soldiers are deployed in Mali, another part of the former French empire, where Mokhtar is killed by an IED, and Manutahi shoots and kills an adolescent.

In the novel, the itineraries of tourist and soldier converge and diverge; the two may seem miles and worlds apart, yet their journeys are propelled by global geographies of imagination (of space, race, gender, and nation) and fueled by carbon capitalism. Tourism and militarism have each created material routes (air routes, sea lanes) and points of transit and infrastructure (airports, train stations, aircraft carriers, hangars, bases, hotels); and they run on technologies engineered by military and commercial powers.[18] For Deloughrey, the material forces of transoceanic militarism have been overlooked in the oceanic turn of the Blue Humanities to Oceania. "The concepts of fluidity, flow, routes, and mobility have been emphasized over other, less poetic terms," Deloughrey writes, "such as blue water navies, mobile offshore bases, high-seas exclusion zones, sea lanes of communication (SLOCs), and maritime 'choke points'" (22). Deloughrey's attention to this critical vocabulary of militarization resonates with Hofmeyr's study of hydrocolonialism. Mourareau's portrayal of the chance meeting between the defeated soldier and the Instagram-obsessed tourist compels readers to engage with the hydro-powers controlling seas and oceans, and the massive quantities of oil and energy that are transforming them.

Conclusion

Manutahi's decision to enlist in the RSMA leads to the fateful events in Mali and the ensuing symptoms of post-traumatic stress. Later, the death of Mokhtar weighs heavily on him, and he has nightmares in which he is visited by a "strange thing…without a face" (115). His service in an overseas regiment is the latest defeat in a life in decline. Back in the *parc Bougainville*, Manutahi feels the disorienting temporality of hauntings and the swirl of immaterial and material presences, people and specters, places, vehicles, and environments, ideologies, systems, and mythologies. Together, they leave Manutahi with an eerie sensation:

> the past is thrown into the future and, inversely, in the opposition direction, the future in which we will unavoidably collide, accelerates and rushes to a prophetic crash. A struggle between projections of a damaged world and counter-projections of a condemned future (115).
>
> [le passé se jette dans le futur, et inversement, à contre-sens, le futur avec lequel nous allons inéluctiblement entrer en collision, accélère et se précipite en direction d'un crash prophétique. Une lutte entre projections d'un monde avarié et contre projections d'un avenir condamné]

If *Méridien zéro* is the story of a condemned future, *Maeva nulle part* compels readers to stay in a present damaged by historical forces near and far. Both novels reflect on the entanglement of dystopia, counter-utopia, and utopia, and both offer views of the changing oceans and the climates they regulate in Mā'ohi Nui and greater Oceania.

In *Méridien zéro*, Bleu succumbs to the narrative of post-apocalypse, and the reader is left to wonder about the fate of Rose and Manutahi. What will happen to the other Manutahi, at the conclusion of *Maeva nulle part*? In the industrial zone of the port of Papeete, he sees a container ship unloading its cargo, a hulking material reminder of dependency, consumerism, and ecological damage. Like his counterpart in *Méridien zéro*, he, too, sees a storm on the horizon,

"roaring on a raging sea" (139). In the novel's last lines, Manutahi's gaze pierces the cloudy front, which, he believes, is but the prologue for the main act to follow, "a scene of atonement and reparation…a moment that he awaits with pleasure" (140). Moureau concludes here on a note of anticipation: the story of Manutahi is a call for justice in the present.

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Notes

[1] The term *Mā'ohi Nui* is the indigenous name for French Polynesia, which comprises the Society, Tuamotu, Gambier, Marquesas, and Austral Islands. In this chapter, with some exceptions, I use the term *Mā'ohi Nui*.

[2] For a history of the social, cultural, and commercial impact of the CEP, see Meltz and Vrignon, "Polynesian Agency and the Establishment of the French Centre for Pacific Tests." For a literary history of representations of the CEP, see Maurer, "Plaidoyer pour la colère antinucléaire."

[3] Unless otherwise noted, all translations are my own.

[4] See Kahn, *Tahiti Beyond the Postcard*.

[5] For a history of statutes on autonomy between France and Mā'ohi Nui, see Ledderucci, "L'école de la deuxième chance."

[6] See, in particular, the responses by Griffen and Thaman in the volume.

[7] Another key literary and philosophical contribution to add here is "*océanitude*," the neologism coined by Paul Tavo in *Quand le cannibal ricane* [*When the Cannibal Sneers*] (2015). Maurer devotes an entire chapter to Tavo's conception of the term and its connection to Negritude and earlier anticolonial movements. Maurer explains, "Tavo coined a way to refer to a literary, political, and philosophical movement uniting decolonial writers, orators, and activists across oceania" (*Ocean on Fire* 53). See also Champion, "*Océanitude* and the Francophone Blue Humanities."

[8] Porcher leans on the work of Laurent Bazin, "La Dystopie," Entretiens d'Issy les Moulineaux, April 14, 2022 (qtd. in Porcher 80). See the talk at Issy les Moulineaux. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oRqo-q60uAUk. Accessed 25 June 2025.

[9] As examples of blockbuster cli-fi, Colebrook cites Cormac McCarthy's novel, *The Road* (2006) and Roland Emmerich's film, *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), among others.

[10] Colebrook and Maurer use "postapocalyptic" in different ways. For the former, it refers to Hollywood cultural production whose depictions of "ends of worlds" diverge from earlier understandings (religious, scientific, and philosophical) of apocalypse; for the latter, it refers to Pacific narratives that imagine life after the catastrophe of colonialism incursions and, later, the CEP.

[11] Colebrook writes, "It is no wonder then that the West's preliminary mourning for its own end has been met with the charge that the 'end of the world' has already been imposed on those peoples the West harnessed, conquered, and erased for its own benefit" (264).

[12] For the origins of utopia and dystopia, see Claeys, ed. *The Cambridge Companion to Utopian Literature*.

[13] See Peu, *Mutismes* (Au vent des îles, 2003) and *Pina* (Au vent des îles, 2016).

[14] Bleu is captivated by what Maurer calls "Isletism," a late-stage Orientalism that envisions "the tropical island as marooned at an even earlier stage of historical development" (*Ocean on Fire* 35).

[15] Porcher refers to Eric EssonoTsimi, *Vous autres, civilisations, savez maintenant que vous êtes mortelles: de la contre-utopie* (Classiques Garnier, 2020). For Tsimi, counter-utopias are not simply fiction, as they blur the line between reality and fantasy.

[16] By "stalled present" I am borrowing from David Scott, in *Omens of Adversity: Tragedy, Time, Memory, Justice* (Duke University Press, 2014). Scott argues for a rupture in the Hegelian-Marxist sense of the dialectic, one in which the "the existential rhythms of that enduring relation between past, present, and

future have been broken…And what we are left with are aftermaths in which the present seems stricken with immobility and pain and ruin" (6).

[17] According to the online dictionary of the *Académie Tahitienne*, "maeva" means "welcome." See https://www.farevanaa.pf/fra/dictionnaire, accessed 15 March 2025.

[18] In his essay, Perez summarizes the history of U.S. colonization and militarization of Guam after the Second World Ward. "The island is one of the most militarized places in the world," Perez adds, "and one of the most strategic US military bases in the Pacific" (69).

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