Coral Souls: Think-Feeling with the Ocean in Denis Pourawa's *Ton âme corail*

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Abstract: This article examines the "coral theories" of Kanak poet Denis Pourawa, as he explores the ocean depths through poetic verse. I suggest that the coral reef can serve as an image of decolonial thought for peoples interconnected by waterways. More globally oriented than Pourawa's previous work, this collection references theories from the francophone Caribbean, the francophone Indian Ocean, and the francophone Pacific, as he evokes the idea of "Oceanitude," a concept proposed by author Paul Tavo from Vanuatu. The structure, theme, theories, and the imagery of the collection act in symbiosis, much like a coral reef environment – each element helps the other to thrive. I argue that *Ton âme corail* is an effort to reimagine terraqueous borders and boundaries. Rather than "think-feeling" with the Earth, as decolonial environmental thinker and anthropologist Arturo Escobar has proposed, here Pourawa encourages the reader to think-feel with the Ocean.

Keywords: Coral, ocean, reefs, think-feeling, decolonial thought, symbiosis

> "Our ties and our practices that continue to tie us to one another are beyond politics and come from deep time, one that has coral polyp memories."
>
> — Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner, Afterword, *Indigenous Pacific Islander Eco-Literatures*

The cover of Kanak author Denis Pourawa's latest poetry collection, *Ton âme corail* (2023), depicts a nebulous, impressionistic blue and turquoise coral shape against a white backdrop, illustrated by the author himself.[1]

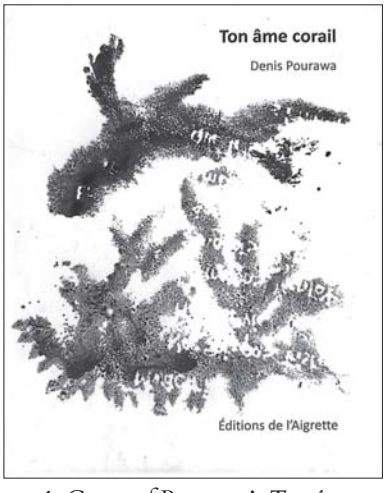

Figure 1: Cover of Pourawa's *Ton âme corail*

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Inside, after a brief introduction explaining his philosophical, practical, and emotional motivations for the poetry collection awaiting the reader, Pourawa includes an illustration by Tunisian artist Rachida Amara. This work, originally exhibited for the first time in 2021 at the galérie Kalysté in Tunis, Tunisia, is entitled "Odyssée," recalling the Homerian epic narrative. Against a dark blue sky with faint stars, two ships, perhaps cruise ships, appear on the calm water in the distance. Foregrounded are nude human bodies, ostensibly dancing elegantly in the ocean depths alongside coral, seaweed, a seahorse, and an anchor detached from its ship. The image uses the same colors as the cover image: shades of blue and white create a peaceful, dreamlike oceanscape.

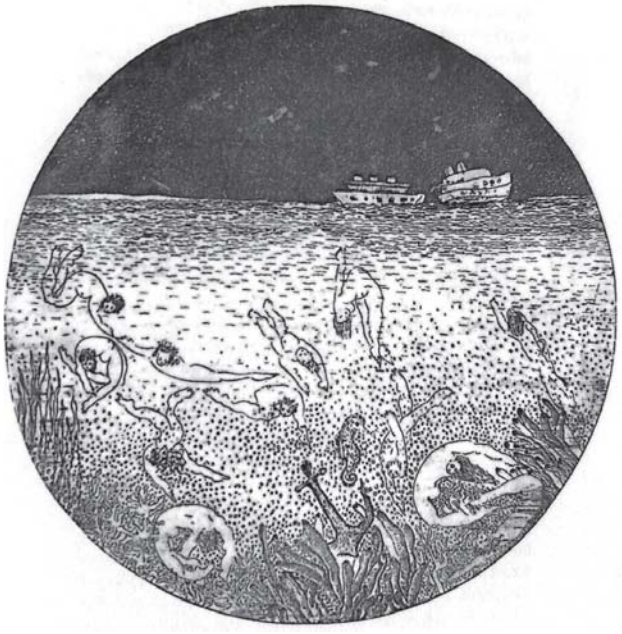

Figure 2: "Odyssée," etching by Rachida Amara

The title of the illustration, "Odyssée," seems particularly relevant for its unmistakable irony. The Homerian epic, notable for its depiction of an ocean voyage and regarded as one of the most significant and most enduring works of literature of the Western canon, is decentered in this work of art. The etching is depicted in a circle, the waterline evoking the percentage of water to land on Earth (approximately 71% water). The ships are proportionally outsized, yet they remain in the background, hinting that while large, these ships are not the protagonists of the story the image recounts. There does not appear to be an epic voyage underway in this etching: human bodies are submerged yet thriving, ostensibly living harmoniously with the underwater elements, at home, or anchored, in the deep waters.

While Pourawa does not explain in the text why he has chosen this etching as the sole image included inside the covers of his poetry collection, it immediately becomes clear when reading the first page of his introduction, where he states:

> Un récif corallien est connu de tous les insulaires bien nés, ce grand poumon sous-marin formés de polypes d'où tous les pêcheurs y posant le pied peuvent y entrevoir la lumière du jour d'un angle visionnaire. À lire la vie du fond des abysses, sans fioriture humaine, se sentir corail, enraciné et réceptacle des chants invisibles des Océans du monde, en tant que poète insulaire avoir une vision intérieure qui se distingue de ce qui est attitude de métamorphose ou de caméléon. Ici c'est de l'art du corail dont il est question.

> [All well-born islanders know the coral reef, this big submarine lung formed by polyps where all fishermen setting their feet there can catch a glimpse of the daylight from a visionary angle. Reading life from the bottom of the abyss, unadorned, to feel oneself coral, rooted and receptacle of the invisible songs of the Oceans of the world, as an islander poet to have an interior vision distinguishable from the attitude of metamorphosis or of chameleon. Here it's the art of the coral that is of concern.] (Pourawa 11)[2]

In my interpretation of the etching, "Odyssée" represents Pourawa's reading of life "from the bottom of the abyss": the beings portrayed in the image *feel* themselves coral. At the forefront of the image, two human bodies are very clearly intertwined with the coral reef, demonstrating a refusal of boundaries, or a consubstantiality, between human and marine life.

This article examines what I call Pourawa's "coral theory," as he explores the ocean depths through poetic verse. As the poet suggests, the imagery of the coral reef is one with which every islander can readily identify—and not uniquely Pacific islanders. Afterall, as the author states, islanders can hear the "songs of the Oceans of the world." I suggest that in this collection, the coral reef serves as a visualization of decolonial philosophy for peoples interconnected by waterways. More globally oriented than his previous work, this collection references theories from the francophone Caribbean, the francophone Indian Ocean, and the francophone Pacific, as Pourawa evokes the idea of "Oceanitude," a concept proposed by author Paul Tavo from Vanuatu. The structure, theme, theories, and the imagery of the collection act in symbiosis, much like the coral reef environment depicted in "Odyssée"—each individual element helps the other to thrive. I argue that *Ton âme corail* is an effort to reimagine terraqueous borders and boundaries. Rather than "think-feeling" with the Earth, as decolonial environmental thinker and anthropologist Arturo Escobar has proposed, here Pourawa orients the reader toward think-feeling with the Ocean.

Think-Feeling with the Ocean

In an article examining Pourawa's 2010 poetry collection *La Tarodière*, I argue that Pourawa's writing is a "decolonial ecological" writing, borrowing the phrasing from Malcolm Ferdinand's theory of "decolonial ecological thinking" from the Caribbean. For Ferdinand, ecological thought emanating from a formerly colonized region could serve to decolonize the field of ecocriticism, a literary field that until recently has been dominated by the West. A decolonial ecocriticism considers every living being: plants, animals, and humans, as well as non-living beings present on the Earth. Decolonial ecocriticism examines capitalist, racist, and sexist dominations that exist in the world, and considers environmental questions alongside social and economic justice questions as well as past and present inequalities. The Argentinian theorist Walter Mignolo is well known for his work on "decoloniality." As he explains it, "thinking decolonially is concerned with global equality and economic justice, but also asserts that democracy and socialism are not the only two models to orient our thinking and our doing. Decolonial arguments promote the communal as another option next to democracy and socialism" (Mignolo 274). Mignolo suggests that one must separate the idea of decoloniality from the ideas of capitalism and communism, or from liberalism and republicanism. If we separate from these ways of thinking, if we refuse these political options or forms of government that these ways of thinking leave us, we can find liberty in "decoloniality." This separation is what Mignolo calls "border thinking," a metaphorical term that implies that one is on a philosophical or a figurative border, and not necessarily a territorial or physical one. For Mignolo, border thinking is linked with corporeality: it is a sensorial way of living in the world. To live on the borders with a decolonial conscience, to separate oneself from the world in which colonial thought continues to dominate, one must be "epistemically disobedient."

Similarly, in an article entitled "Thinking-Feeling with the Earth: Territorial Struggles and the Ontological Dimension of the Epistemologies of the South," Colombian American anthropologist Arturo Escobar explains a similar theory, a rejection of Western paradigms in favor of other ways of

thinking and understanding the world, which he calls "Think-feeling with the Earth." He suggests that the "epistemologies of the South" or the ways of think-feeling with the Earth prevalent in the Global South, are more appropriate and more sophisticated for thinking through social transformation than are most of the forms of knowledge produced in the Academy as of late (Escobar 14). "Think-feeling with the Earth" provides a form of "epistemic disobedience" that may help us to think through (decolonial) social transformation in a way that is not only more connected to the Earth, but also more grounded in the lived experiences of Indigenous peoples from across the globe. Escobar explores a community of Afrodescendant people inhabiting Columbia's southern Pacific rainforest region of the Yurumanguí river, where he suggests that the dense network of interrelations that occurs between human beings, minerals, mollusks, algae, birds, plants, etc. may be called a "relational ontology" that "reveals an altogether different way of being and becoming in territory and place" (Escobar 18). Recalling Martinican theorist Édouard Glissant's theories on the mangrove swamp, the rhizome, and Relation, Escobar envisions a way of being in the world in which "things and beings are their relations, they do not exist prior to them" (18). He further explains that the people in this community get to know their world "by being alive to their world. These worlds do not require the divide between nature and culture in order to exist – in fact, they exist as such only because they are enacted by practices that do not rely on such a divide" (18). The cause of the divide, he argues, is the conversion of "nature" into "resources" by the "One-World world," or global capitalism.

Much like Escobar's encouragement of academics to turn to the ways of thinking with the Earth found in the Global South, Françoise Vergès encourages her readers to turn to non-Western philosophies in order to envision "liquid worlds" to form a decolonial *oceanic* theory: "C'est en puisant dans les philosophies non-occidentales, qui cherchent l'absolue maîtrise du temps et de l'espace, qu'une théorie décoloniale océanique peut se developer" [It is in drawing from non-Western philosophies, which attempt absolute mastery of time and space, that a decolonial oceanic theory can develop] (Vergès 211-12). While Escobar's version of epistemic disobedience *includes* the ocean, Vergès suggests a *centering* of the ocean in decolonial thought. She writes :

> la décolonisation des océans ne pose pas exactement les mêmes questions que celles d'une écologie décoloniale, car cette dernière part d'une cohabitation permanente entre espèces humaine et non humaines, entre animaux, êtres humains, plantes, insectes, arbres, rivières, etc. La majorité de l'espèce humaine n'a pas l'expérience de l'océan comme *habitat* permanent, il faudra donc partir des formes de vie que les peuples des mers ont inventées dans leur rapport permanent avec un espace liquide, constamment mouvant et qui ne se laisse pas cultiver comme la terre ferme. (219, emphasis in original)
>
> [the decolonization of oceans doesn't ask exactly the same questions as that of a decolonial ecology, because the latter assumes a permanent cohabitation between human and non-human species, between animals, human beings, plants, insects, trees, rivers, etc. The majority of the human race does not have the experience of the ocean as permanent *habitat*, so one must begin with the ways of life that sea peoples have invented in their permanent relationship with a constantly moving liquid space, which does not allow itself to be cultivated like solid land.]

Vergès observes that for Westerners, the Ocean is something to fear: it represents danger (224), whereas for sea peoples it does not *represent* anything, it *is* a part of their existence, their home. A decolonization of the ocean would then mean a reappropriation of the ocean—to question the notions of belonging with regard to the ocean (does it belong to governments, to tourists, to surfers, to hotels?), to fight against the militarization of oceans (in the Chagos archipelago of the Indian Ocean, for example, the US military has had control of Diego Garcia, from where it launched B52s to bomb Afghanistan, since the 1970s). Finally, she argues for a working of the imagination with regard to the ocean, citing the famous phrase by Tongan anthropologist Epeli Hau'ofa: "the Ocean is in Us." The decolonization and the reimagination of the world's oceans means, in effect, centering Ocean peoples' stories and histories, their ontological and epistemological relationships with the Ocean.

Pourawa's Reimagined Ocean World

Denis Pourawa's *Ton âme corail* performs this very reimagining, centering the Ocean and Ocean peoples' stories and ways of knowing the world. The collection is shaped around water, taking the image of the coral reef as its unifying element, as almost every poem title includes at least one of three words: "coral," "soul," and "ocean." Published six months prior to the summer 2024 uprising in Kanaky-New Caledonia,[3] it reveals the aquatic theoretical lens the poet has adopted, and while it does subtly address the tense political situation in the archipelago, it does not do so as explicitly as does his previous poetry collection, *La Tarodière*. On the first page of the Introduction, he declares: "En écrivant, mon écriture s'est inventé un recif corallien" [In writing, my writing has invented for itself a coral reef] (11). Pourawa attempts to make a shape out of his poetic musings, to provide imagery for his readers and to center the coral reef as his philosophical foundation. Notably, he mentions two other archipelagic thinkers as he muses:

> Ce corail visionnaire pousse dans les profondeurs des émotions Océaniques de notre humanité et des profondeurs de son néant, il capte la lumière du temps pour s'émanciper. Limon insulaire universel, matière brute et esprit réel des grands sentiments et des grands espoirs qui nous habitent, d'où que l'on soit […] Le poète Édouard Glissant disait qu'il nous faut « "habiter l'errance." Jean-Marie Tjibaou disait : "le retour vers le passé est un mythe…notre identité, elle est devant nous."
> *Ton âme corail* propose une "émotion insulaire" pour se réconcilier, se reconstruire d'un amour je dirai Topique. (14)

> [This visionary coral grows in the depths of the Oceanic emotions of our humanity and from the depths of oblivion, it captures the light of the times to free itself. Universal island silt, brute material and real spirit of grand feelings and great hopes that inhabit us, wherever we are […] The poet Édouard Glissant would say that we need to "inhabit errantry." Jean-Marie Tjibaou would say: "The return to the past is a myth…our identity is before us."
> *Our coral souls* proposes an "insular emotion" to reconcile, to rebuild from a love I will call Topical.]

Glissant's theoretical proposal of "errantry" is relevant to Pourawa's approach, as he views "errantry" as part of the process of the symbiotic existence of a coral reef. In the chapter entitled "Errantry, Exile" in *Poetics of Relation*, the Martinican theorist suggests that the great founding narratives of communities "the Old Testament, the *Iliad*, the *Odyssey*, the *Chansons de Geste*, the Islandic *Sagas*, the *Aeneid*, or the African epics, were all books about exile and often about errantry" (Glissant 15).[4] Errantry, Glissant remarks, has an "imaginary vision" (20), and plays a role in the poetics of Relation, in which every identity is related to another through rhizomatic thought and a rejection of static, fixed, "monolingual" roots. Glissant's translator remarks in her notes on the term "errantry": "*Errance* for Glissant, while not aimed like an arrow's trajectory, nor circular and repetitive like the nomad's, is not idle roaming, but includes a sense of sacred motivation" (Glissant 211). Pourawa too seems to have a "sense of sacred motivation," the coral reef providing a similar imagery of errantry in that it is constantly in motion, growing and expanding across the world's oceans.

Immediately following his citation of Glissant, Pourawa cites the well-known Kanak political figure Jean-Marie Tjibaou. Tjibaou was an ordained Catholic priest, the son of a Kanak tribal chief, and a politician in Kanaky-New Caledonia. He was an integral figure of the Kanak independence movement in the 1970s and 80s, serving as the first president of the pro-independence *Front de libération nationale Kanak socialiste* [Kanak and Socialist National Liberation Front]. A hero of the Kanak people and often cited in Kanak literature, Tjibaou was the inspiration for the *Centre Culturel Tjibaou*, a cultural center focused on Kanak history and culture, whose construction began following the leader's assassination in 1989 after the turbulent period in the 1980s known as *les Événements* [the Troubles].[5] Tjibaou's political thought has been examined in the context of his influence on the Kanak independence movement, but it is important to note that his notions of Kanak independence were grounded in the idea of "expanding interinsular relationships" (Bensa and Wittersheim 370)

among other Pacific Island nations. Tjibaou, a proponent of the Pacific Way,[6] remarked: "You know, among ourselves, we work more through consensus than by elections. This means that we try to work out questions together, and try to find shared common ground before deciding. This is how we live" (qtd. in Bensa and Wittersheim 378). Like Glissant, Tjibaou's political stance was that every person exists in *relation* to the other, especially within the Kanak community. Pourawa's citing of Tjibaou's famous line "the return to the past is a myth…our identity is before us" encapsulates the forward-moving trajectory Tjibaou envisioned for the Kanak people: a path toward modernity, a modernity unique to the Kanak people but always in relation to others.

In answer to a question I asked Pourawa regarding the choice of title *Ton âme corail* (namely, why the informal "ton" and to whom does this "ton" refer?) the author elucidated not only the title of the collection for me but also his choice of intertextual references throughout the work. His answer demonstrates why the quotes from Glissant and Tjibaou resonate with the poet:

> Le recueil de poésie avec le titre "Ton âme corail" est une forme de théorie poétique et politique sur la nature de l'âme humaine. Comme les polypes qui se forment pour devenir des coraux, puis se constituer en récif corallien, l'âme humaine venue du fond des âges prend la métaphore Océanienne mélanésienne kanak d'être née au fond de l'Océan […] Âme née du fond des abysses, âme devenue algue, puis corail qui s'est élevé, poussant comme une plante par ses propres ressources, force et énergie de vie attirée vers la surface des eaux par la lumière du soleil. C'est cette référence de l'élévation naturelle de la vie, du fond des abysses vers la lumière, de tout ce qui fait l'âme de la nature humaine et de l'humanité. Le "tu" ou le "ton" c'est celui de l'Humanité. Ici le "ton" est utilisé dans le sens vernaculaire kanak du duo, guè mè gû (toi et moi) ce qui est "toi" est aussi "moi." (Pourawa Re : Quelques questions)
>
> [The collection of poetry with the title "Ton âme corail" is a form of poetic and political theory on the nature of the human soul. Like polyps that form to become coral, then make themselves into a coral reef, the human soul coming from the end of the ages takes the Oceanian Melanesian Kanak metaphor of being born at the bottom of the ocean […] Soul born at the bottom of the abyss, soul become algae, then coral that lifts itself up, pushing like a plant using its own resources, strength and life energy attracted toward the surface of the waters by the light of the sun. It's this reference to the natural elevation of life, from the bottom of the abyss toward the light, to everything that makes the soul of human nature and of humanity. The informal "you" or the "your" is that of Humanity. Here the "you" is used in the vernacular Kanak meaning of the duo, guè mè gû (you and me) what is "you" is also "me."][7]

As Pourawa states, the work is the poet's reimagining of the soul of Humanity in the nebulous shape of a coral reef: a community that can survive and thrive through both an independent strength as well as through interdependence, or symbiosis. In other words, Pourawa's coral theory borrows and intertwines elements from Tjibaou's consensus-driven, forward-moving trajectory, and Glissant's errantry, with a sense of sacred motivation.

Pourawa's influences for his coral theory are multiple, and are not restricted to well-known literary, philosophical, or political figures. In the second part of the introduction to the poetry collection, the poet recounts a story from his childhood that has profoundly affected the way he understands coral in relation to the human soul. In his story, he recalls a traditional family get-together from when he was around eight years old. He and his cousins were playing with dead coral washed up along the shoreline, throwing it in the air to hear it crash and shatter when it hit the ground. His mother and aunt approached, scolding the children. His aunt then told him a story about the meaning of coral in the Drubea[8] language of their people:

> *[…] les coraux sur le rivage étaient les restes des esprits qui ont trépassé passant par le pays sous-terrain, "le pays des morts", qu'il fallait respecter cela. Quand ils passent dans la rocher percée pour renaître, ils laissent leurs peaux spirituelles sur le rivage, leurs mues, et lesquelles par le ressac de la mer deviendront par la suite grain de sable, puis poussière et tout que cela retournera ainsi à la terre. Que, le cycle du processus devait être respecté et que, nous ne devions pas nuire à cet équilibre entre le monde visible et celui de l'invisible.* (18, emphasis in original)

> [[…] *coral on the shoreline were the remains of the spirits that had passed away, through the underground, "the land of the dead," and that we must respect that. When they pass in the opening of a rock to be reborn, they leave their spiritual skin on the shoreline, their molt, and with the backflow of the sea they become grains of sand, then dust and all of it would then return to the earth. That, the cycle of the process should be respected and that, we shouldn't harm that balance between the visible world and the invisible one.*][9]

This memory from his childhood profoundly marked Pourawa and has shaped the way he views coral in relation to human beings: "Un bout de corail sur le rivage est la mue naturelle d'une âme qui s'est réincarnée pour renaître ailleurs" [A piece of coral on the shore is the natural metamorphosis of a soul that has been reincarnated to be reborn elsewhere] (18). The image of the coral is thus not simply a metaphor for the symbiotic relationships humans must form, in Pourawa's reimagined ocean world, human souls are both literally and figuratively coralline.

Corporeal Coral Souls

The initial poem of the collection, entitled "Corail," depicts a volcanic scenario, recalling the volcanic nature of the formation of many of the high islands of Melanesia, which seems appropriate given the placement of the poem at the incipit of the collection.[10] The poem begins with a description of the melon color of coral, which develops from a "rouge bruni vers le rose bonbon" [burnished red toward candy pink] (23). The line "quelque chose de mêlant Coolie" [something muddling Coolie] (23) appears embedded in this description of the "diffused body" (23) of the coral, recalling the notion of Coolitude theorized by Mauritian poet, filmmaker, and cultural theorist Khal Torabully, notably in his collection *Chair corail, fragments coolies* [Coral Flesh, Coolie Fragments, 1999]. The term "Coolie" in the literal sense refers to indentured Indian laborers, brought to the Indian, Caribbean, and (less so) the Pacific Ocean islands following the abolition of slavery, yet Torabully reconstructs the figure of the Coolie as an epic hero. For Torabully, Coolitude "is the song of my love for the ocean and for travel, the Odyssey still unwritten by my seafaring people…and my deckhands will speak for those who erased the borders to expand the land of mankind" (qtd. in Ette 113). The Coolie is a voyager, and as Ette observes, "woven into a worldwide network of movement" (114), at once a Homerian epic figure and a coralline figure. Torabully describes what he means by "chair corail" [coral flesh] : "Le corail est hybride dans son être même, car il est né de la symbiose d'un phytoplancton et d'un zooplancton. On ne fait pas mieux en termes de métaphore de la diversité. Il est racine, polype et plature, protéiforme, souple et dur, et de différentes couleurs" [Coral is hybrid in its very being, because it is born out of the symbiosis of phytoplankton and zooplankton. One cannot do better in terms of a metaphor for diversity. It is root, polyp and flattening, protean, flexible and hard, and colorful] (*Chair corail* 70-71). For Torabully, the Coolie is a being with this "coral flesh," adaptable, migratory, growing, far-reaching.

Pourawa's evocation of the "Coolie" in a poem entitled "Corail" is a clear reference to Torabully's Coolitude, as in *Chair corail, fragments coolies* the Mauritian poet writes "Dans ma mémoire sont des langues aussi / Ma coolitude n'est pas une pierre non plus, elle est corail" [In my memories there are also tongues / my coolitude is not a stone either, it is coral] (82). Pourawa's line, "quelque chose de mêlant Coolie" [something muddling Coolie] seems apt here, as Torabully's Coolitude is not static or fixed like a rock, it is a complex living organism, ever evolving, embodying adaptability and an unwavering capacity for survival.[11] The placement of the line, furthermore, is intentional, as the "Coolie" appears in a corporeal description of the colorful coral stretching itself out along the reef awaiting a storm:

> son corps désamorcé
> piégé dans l'azur des heures ourlées
> l'aubaine insoutenable légèreté de l'être
> ce soleil thermal
> brûlant de sueur dégoulinante
> allongeant en courbe le sourire d'un orage […] (*Ton âme* 23)

[its diffused body
stuck in the azure blue of restricted hours
the blessing of the unbearable lightness of being
this thermal sun
burning with oozing sweat
stretching out along the bend the smile of a storm]

While for Torabully, "coral flesh" provides a pertinent metaphor for the hybridity or the diversity of the Coolie, for Pourawa coral represents much more than a metaphor. As his aunt's explanation for why he and his cousins must respect coral recounted in the introduction indicates, for the Kanak people, coral are *literally* the bodies of their ancestors in a process of reincarnation. Many Oceanian communities view the land, the ocean, and themselves as genealogically linked. Ni-Vanuatu thinker Paul Tavo has called this way of thinking "Oceanitude," a term Pourawa himself uses as a title of one of the poems in the collection ("Océanide âme océanitude corail là" [Oceanid soul oceanitude coral there], 32). This term, first coined by Tavo in his 2015 novel *Quand le cannibal ricane* [When the Cannibal Sneers], has not yet made the impact in Oceanian studies it deserves. In *The Ocean on Fire: Pacific Stories from Nuclear Survivors and Climate Activists* (2024), Anaïs Maurer remarks that Tavo's choice of "Oceanitude" as a name for this movement for its "obvious homophony with the Negritude movement" (Maurer 54) is an explicit one, suggesting that Oceanitude can place itself in a long history of transnational decolonial struggle of which Negritude was a part. Maurer, acknowledging that Oceanitude has not been formally theorized (it is a neologism used only twice by Tavo himself in his first novel), suggests that Oceanitude can serve as a seminal concept for Oceanian writers, thinkers, scholars, artists, and activists, as well as scholars of Oceanian creative output. In her chapter entitled "Oceanitude: A Philosophy for the Anthropocene," she explores the genesis, development, and genealogy of the idea. In Maurer's analysis of the term, Oceanitude is at once a decolonial ideology, an identity, and a political, economic, and environmental movement "centered on the lineage and the relationship uniting people and the places that sustain them" (Maurer 56) through the concept of "living together." She explains that "the ocean and its people are not metaphorically but rather consubstantially, genealogically, and historically related" (63). Oceanian people have long understood themselves as corporeally and spiritually linked to the ocean and the land: celebrated Tongan anthropologist Epeli Hau'ofa famously wrote a collection of essays entitled *We Are the Ocean*, and i-Kiribati writer Teresia Teaiwa similarly stated "We sweat and cry salt water, so we know that the ocean is really in our blood" (qtd. in Hau'ofa 41). For some Oceanians, the ocean is a living, breathing, being. In a poem entitled "Atlas," Samoan poet Terisa Siagatonu writes:

As if the Pacific Ocean isn't the largest body living today
beating the loudest heart
the reason why land has a pulse in the first place. (*Indigenous* 96)

"Living-together" thus implies that human beings live *with* the ocean, *with* sea and plant life, *with* non-human animals: Oceanitude.[12] The last line of Paul Tavo's novel suggests that the movement is both an identity as well as a *literary* movement: "Let us heed, let us read *oceanitude*: Henri Hiro, Chantal Spitz, Déwé Gorodé, Grace Molisa and all the others showing us the way to value the living-together" (qtd. in Maurer 53).[13]

Indeed, throughout Pourawa's poetry collection the lines between plant life, marine life, the human, and the word are blurred, or, rather, fused. In "Toute ton âme océanique" [All our ocean soul], poetry is "archipelagic," and the beach bleeds:

Les psaumes qui débouchent sur les bouches analogues
La reliure acoustique d'une fente insulaire en rive du diversifié
La traverse à feu rouge du sacré
Au sang de la plage tranchée l'ouverte mémorable lune (27)

[The psalms that pour out of kindred mouths
The acoustic binding of a crack in the island on the banks of the diversified
The red-light crossing from the sacred
To the blood of the unmistakable beach the unobstructed unforgettable moon]

The poem "Ton âme pacifique" [Our Pacific souls] begins with the line "Le sabre d'une parole foule le silence du soir à son soleil couchant" [The blade of a word tramples the silence of the evening at its setting sun] (35). The poem "Âme île continent" [Soul island continent] embodies the sense of Tavo's Oceanitude, melding poetry, voices, land and ocean:

Toutes anamnèse les intensives palpitations
Les voix le roulement des grains mémorables Vapeurs des sables vocalises des chauds diptyques Du temps des doigtés sonores qui distillent la beauté des sens Les écumes vibrantes des régions et des lignes aux équinoxes De la joie du chant ourlé au vent vêtu de nos réjouissances Dans tes cheveux aquatiques la mer scintille Dans mes battements poétiques un corail s'éveille Le tourbillon qui cheville l'âme des horizons De toutes profondeurs ouvertes et les étuves de toutes longitudes Des tropiques où s'entremêlent les parallèles du tumulte En de variables équations et des bulles somnolentes des plaisirs simples (34)

[All anamnesis intense palpitations
The voices the memorable rolling of seeds Vapors from sands vocalized from warm diptychs From the time of sonorous fingerings that distill the beauty of the senses The stirring foams of regions and lines to equinoxes From the joy of song fringed on the wind clothed in our celebrations In your aquatic tresses it shines In my poetic rhythms a coral awakens The whirlwind that pins the horizons' soul From all open depths and the head of all longitudes From tropics where tumultuous parallels blur together In variable equations and torpid bubbles simple pleasures]

Notably, a coral "awakens" in the poet's rhythms and the joy of song shines in "aquatic tresses." For Pourawa, the boundaries between land and ocean, body and coral, the human and the non-human are unobstructed, and as suggested by the term "anamnesis" referring to the Platonic philosophy, Oceanic knowledge is innate for the Oceanian. As Elizabeth DeLoughrey notes, "allegories of the relationship between humans and the ocean provide the potential for thinking about evolutionary and ontological origins and as a shared commons and resource" (DeLoughrey 139). For Pourawa, however, thinking oneself coral is not an allegory. Mirroring Tavo's Oceanitude, Pourawa's coral theory depicts a shared aquatic commons, delinking from a capitalistic way of imagining the Ocean in that it views the Ocean as both resource and *habitat*.

Créolinésie or One World Ocean

The image of a shared aquatic commons facilitates Pourawa's sometimes pointed critiques of liberal capitalism. In "Chante ton âme corail-chtone" [Sing our coral-tonous souls], he implies that poets and poetesses are alive:

À décrire le contemporain Liberal capitaliste
mondial communiste rebelle *insulaire singulier*
particulier résistant authentique soumis à la loi
sociale en parallèle de la langue de bois nue à y
mettre le feu aux l'êtres du monde (39, emphasis in original) [14]

[To describe the contemporary Liberal capitalist
global communist rebel *singular islander*
particular resistant authentic subject to social law
in parallel to the language of naked wood to there
set flame to creations of the world]

Positioning the poet in opposition to or as an outside observer of the "global liberal capitalist" and the "communist rebel,"[15] Pourawa suggests that the poet thinks in a more liberated way, or that the poet

has the vision to point out the constraints in these unimaginative systems. In other words, the poet performs Mignolo's "epistemic disobedience," thinking decolonially by de-linking from Western forms of perceiving the world. Indeed, two pages later in a poem entitled "Toi âme libérée" [Our liberated souls] he suggests that the poet finds liberty through the creative act of writing.

Located between "Chante ton âme corail-chtone" and "Toi âme libérée," the poem "Clandestine de toutes créolités" [Clandestine of all creoleness] indicates that Pourawa's coral theory takes inspiration from yet another group of francophone island theorists, the Créolistes Jean Bernabé, Patrick Chamoiseau, and Raphaël Confiant. In the *Éloge de la Créolité* [*In Praise of Creoleness*], the three Martinican thinkers propose "Creoleness" as a more inclusive and diverse notion of identity and language in the Caribbean. A rejection of a single cultural identity, Creoleness expresses a "kaleidoscopic totality" (Bernabé et al. 892), it is "an annihilation of false universality, of monolingualism, and purity […] our primitive soup and our continuation, our primeval chaos and our mangrove swamp of virtualities" (Bernabé et al. 892). Pourawa's poem implies that the underwater world of coral reefs is the most secret of all Creole worlds: "Ce monde-là / on ne l'entend pas/comment il grouille / du dedans / comment il pétille / de ses formes les plus diverses / Comment ça déclenche / les rythmes qui n'ont pas de musique" [This world / you don't hear it / how it teems / from within / how it sparkles / in its most diverse shapes / How that sets off / the rhythms that don't have music] (40). This secret world teeming and sparkling "in its most diverse shapes" recalls the Creolistes' discussion of "Diversality," in which they state, "Our submersion into Creoleness will not be incommunicable, but neither will it be completely communicable" (903). Likewise, in Pourawa's poem, we cannot hear this world, the possibilities it contains remain elusive. The Créolistes describe the Creole world as one that is "diffracted but recomposed, the conscious harmonization of preserved diversities: DIVERSALITY" (903). Pourawa's poem imagines this "diffracted but recomposed" world as a moonbeam shining on the rippling water, diffracting but not separating it. The poet depicts the moon throwing arms of a wandering fire "sous les jupes dentelées des rivières insouciantes et tout roule / sur des ombres légères palpitantes où le sacré lui-même / par solitude / vient y tromper sa chevelure gracieuse" [under the rippling skirts of carefree rivers and everything rolls / on light fluttering shadows where the sacred itself / arrives in solitude / slipping by its graceful tresses] (40). Pourawa's deliberately more aquatic coral theory adopts the Créolistes' "diversality," yet allows for more expansive possibilities by including other-than-human beings, suggesting a future not yet fully envisaged.

The final two pages of the collection contain two aphorisms. Each aphorism is placed in the middle of the page, with blank space surrounding it. The first aphorism reads: "Nous coraux sans âges et sans frontières pluriverselles" [Us corals ageless and borderless pluriversal] (44). The second aphorism, on the final page of the poetry portion of the collection, reads: "Affirmons notre océane âme humaine: Créolinésie" [Let us affirm our ocean human soul: Creolinesia] (45). The poet proclaims people coral, again equating humans with "ageless" and "borderless" coral. Oceanians, according to Pourawa, have an "ocean human soul," located in the "borderless" Creolinesia. The invented archipelago of Creolinesia, which seems to me to be at once a political, philosophical, and literary project, unifies the world's oceans, as both the Caribbean and the Indian oceans are creolized, hybridized, and have been theorized as such by those who inhabit these oceanic spaces. In the 18th century, the Pacific Ocean was split into three regions: Polynesia, Melanesia, and Micronesia, when Charles de Brosses coined the term "Polynesia" from the Greek "poly" (many) and "nésos" (islands). Ironically, the neologism Creolinesia, which serves to unite the oceans of the world, borrows from a phrasing that arbitrarily placed borders around the islands of the Pacific in the 18th century. The explicit refusal of borders through the term Creolinesia recalls not only Mignolo's "border thinking," but also the scientific reality of a "One World Ocean." The National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration suggests that "while there is only one global ocean, the vast body of water that covers 71 percent of the Earth is geographically divided into distinct named regions" (NOAA).[16] Pourawa's

"Creolinesia" unites the oceans geographically with scientific accuracy while it simultaneously unites Ocean peoples philosophically through the idea of Creole "coral souls." Pourawa's "Creolinesia" synthesizes the theories of the prior thinkers he mentions, and rather than simply echoing their thoughts, he reveals the resemblances in their philosophies and the ways in which these philosophies can work in harmony. Essentially, he treats the theoretical lenses he cites as polyps, a coral reef forming across them in the creation of "Creolinesia."

Conclusion

In the "Words of Thanks" section of text following Pourawa's fifteen-poem collection, the author not only thanks the many people who have inspired or supported his work, he also takes the opportunity to further explain the context out of which this poetry collection was born. Pourawa cites Édouard Glissant yet again, explaining that Glissant's *Traité du Tout-Monde* [*Treatise on the Whole World*] was published in 1997, the year prior to the Nouméa Accords which would establish a period of 20 years throughout which the French government would grant increased political power to New Caledonia and to the Kanak people. At the end of that 20-year period, New Caledonia would hold three more referendum votes on whether to remain a special collectivity of France or to become independent.[17] Pourawa explains: "Ceci pour choisir le chemin du destin entre deux peuples, le peuple kanak et les victimes de l'histoire (les descendants de colons européens, les déportés politiques et les travailleurs des colonies…)" [This to choose the path of destiny between two people, the Kanak people and the victims of history (the descendants of European colonists, political deportees, and the workers of the colonies…)] (46). He evokes the language of the Nouméa Accord, the idea of a "common destiny" discussed many times with his friends: "Sur notre petit caillou nous espérions que tous les peoples du monde puissent un jour ou l'autre se joindre à cette volonté de construire ensemble un même destin, en partage entre toutes les communautés humaines sur Terre" [On our little pebble we hoped that all the people of the world could one day or another join together in this desire to build together a same destiny, one of sharing between all the human communities on Earth] (47). Pourawa suggests that in 2023, the desire to live together in peace, a desire Glissant also expressed in the *Traité du Tout-Monde*, has been weakened by late-stage capitalism and by governments through the creation of dehumanizing laws and rules, institutionalizing peoples' free actions as offenses. He writes that his political education has allowed him to put forth a critical and creative vision: "l'enjeu societal d'une symbiocratie spirituelle et matérielle pour le bien-être d'une Humanité plurielle" [the social issue of a spiritual and material symbiocracy for the well-being of a plural Humanity] (47). After listing the numerous people he has met from all over the world, who have all learned of his origins with interest and pleasure, he writes "À tous je dédie ce doux rêve né de nos âmes libérées et que je nomme Créolinésie" [To all I dedicate this sweet dream born from our liberated souls and that I call Creolinesia] (48). Pourawa ostensibly proposes, uniting the theories of Glissant, the Créolistes, Torabully, and Tavo, that the world, similar to a coral reef, is dynamic, interconnected, complicated, and diverse, yet if humans are to survive, it will have to be through living together. The people of Kanaky-New Caledonia know this all too well, but as history has shown, a "symbiocracy" is difficult to attain.

I would like to conclude by reflecting on yet another of Pourawa's neologisms, the term "symbiocracy." The word symbiosis, the scientific term used to describe a mutually beneficial relationship between two or more organisms, comes from the Greek sumbiôsis, "a living together." The suffix, "-cratie," comes from the Greek "kratia," meaning power or rule. As coral reefs live in symbiotic relationships with fish and other marine life, this would be the ideal for humanity in Pourawa's reimagined, "symbiocratic" ocean world, his "Creolinesia." While this reimagined world in which humanity can live together in symbiotic power with the ocean may seem naïve and utopic given that in 2025 we are facing broad-scale wars in Ukraine and in the Middle East, increasing capitalistic globalization, and climate threats such as sea level rise and coral bleaching that imperil the health

of coral reefs around the globe, it strikes me as a profoundly radical example of decolonial thought, one that suggests a shifting of the notion of power or rule from the forms of government to which we are accustomed. Denis Pourawa's think-feeling with the Ocean provides the poet, along with his readers, a provocative way to reimagine Humanity's relationship with the Ocean precisely in terms of power. Rather than depicting the Ocean as a dangerous and fearsome force, as in Homer's *Odyssey*, for Pourawa the Ocean is home to peoples of the sea, resembling Amara's etching discussed at the beginning of this article. Looking to coral reefs, the poet suggests that marine life has figured out a way to survive and thrive through an interdependence that does not threaten the independence of individual beings, reframing the power dynamics between Ocean and living beings from the ways that many of the writers of Western literary tradition have depicted them. Pourawa's *Ton âme corail* resituates the human in relation to the Ocean in a way that can only be envisioned by peoples of the Ocean. Through intertextual references to theories developed by Oceanic thinkers, he explores the potential of the poetic and political relationships between peoples interconnected by waterways, suggesting that perhaps "think-feeling with the Ocean" can prove a productive move toward a reimagined Ocean world.

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Notes

[1] The term Kanak is the name of the Indigenous people of New Caledonia. The Kanak people refer to the archipelago as Kanaky. I have adopted the framing that Pourawa himself has adopted, calling the island group Kanaky-New Caledonia to respect the Indigenous peoples' name as well as the officially recognized name of the archipelago.

[2] All translations are my own, unless otherwise indicated.

[3] The summer 2024 uprising in New Caledonia was triggered by a proposal by the French government to extend voting rights in provincial elections to French residents who have lived on the island for at least ten years. Currently, one must be a New Caledonian citizen born in the territory (or be an immediate descendant of someone born in the territory) before 1998. The proposed reform would have expanded the electorate and further diluted Kanak political power, because it would have opened provincial voting rights for new French arrivals and Asian workers who have come with the more recent nickel boom in the archipelago. Tragically, the uprising lead to 13 deaths, the economy was crippled, with damages estimated to be at least 1.2 billion euros (US $1.3billion), and with 35,000 people out of jobs. On October 1, 2024, French Prime Minister Michel Barnier announced that Paris would be dropping the divisive electoral reform, and that he would not be sending the proposal to the joint meeting of the French parliament for ratification.

[4] It is not coincidental that Glissant also mentions the *Odyssey*; we will see this intertextual reference yet again, as Torabully mentions it as a part of his theory of Coolitude.

[5] *Les Événements* refers to the years between 1984-1988 during which Kanaky-New Caledonia saw one of its most violent periods and has been dubbed a quasi-civil war. Tjibaou lead the Kanak independence fight, the independentists vying for complete independence from France, while the population of European descent, which by then outnumbered the Kanak population, maintained the desire to remain an overseas territory. The period reached its height in 1988 with a violent hostage takeover in a grotto on the island of Ouvéa, which attracted international attention. The Matignon Accord of 1988, signed by Tjibaou, Caledonian politician Jacques Lafleur, and the French government, established peace following this dramatic climax.

[6] The term "Pacific Way" was first used by former prime minister of Fiji Ratu Mara in a 1970 speech to the United Nations. It implies a sense of community, consensus, cooperation, and authenticity. The "Pacific Way" today is often used in reference to conservation efforts in the Pacific, with at its heart a respect for the values, traditions, and Indigenous knowledge found on the various islands of the vast ocean.

[7] Thus, I have translated the title of the collection along with the appropriate poems from the collection as "Our coral souls" or "Our Pacific souls," for example, to maintain the Kanak sense of "you and me."

[8] Drubea is one of the rarer of the 28 Kanak languages. It is spoken in the Southern Province of Kanaky/New Caledonia by less than 1,000 people.

[9] In his response to a list of questions translator Katherine Hammitt and I emailed him, Pourawa explained that the "pays des morts" [country of the dead] is located in the depths of the ocean. In the Kanak belief system of his family, the dead pass through the abysses of the ocean to resurface toward the light of the sun, a sort of spiritual reincarnation of the soul.

[10] It is interesting to note that "Low islands" are also called "Coral islands." These islands are low-lying and made of the skeletons and living bodies of corals. Low islands are generally found in Polynesia, but can also be found in the New Caledonian archipelago, particularly the Loyalty Islands (Ouvéa, Lifou, and Maré).

[11] The line is also intriguing for its oronymy with the phrase "quelque chose de mélancolique."

[12] The idea of "living together" also recalls Donna Haraway's *sympoiesis*, or "making with," that she elucidates in *Staying with the Trouble*. She explains: "Nothing makes itself; nothing is really autopoietic or self-organizing. In the words of the Inupiat computer "world game," earthlings are *never alone*. That is the radical implication of sympoiesis […] It is a word for worlding-with, in company" (58). Haraway also explores the coral reef in this work, suggesting that "worlding with" or "making with" is a positive way to reformulate Anthropocene and Capitalocene discourse. In Haraway's suggested reframing of the current age as the Chthulucene, human beings are not the only important actors, we are always *with* other beings.

[13] Maurer's translation. The writers Tavo mentions are foundational Oceanian writers, primarily of French expression: Henri Hiro and Chantal Spitz from Mā'ohi Nui/French Polynesia, Déwé Gorodé from Kanaky/New Caledonia, and Grace Molisa from Vanuatu.

[14] In response to a question about the word "l'êtres," Pourawa confirmed that this is a play on words, "êtres" as in beings, of course, and "lettres" as in letters. We have chosen to translate this wordplay as "creations."

[15] We might recall here Mignolo's suggestion that thinking decolonially entails thinking outside of the political possibilities to which we are accustomed, democracy, socialism, communism, etc.

[16] The website of the NOAA provides a helpful infographic to demonstrate that all the world's oceans are connected. The image can be found on their website: https://oceanservice.noaa.gov/facts/howmanyoceans.html.

[17] The three referenda were held in 2018, 2020, and 2021. The final referendum was held under questionable circumstances, as the Kanak population had requested a deferral due to their being in mourning for a large loss of life due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Emmanuel Macron did not agree to postponing the referendum; the Kanak population therefore decided to boycott the election. 95% of voters voted to remain a part of France, but only 43% of the archipelago's population voted due to the Kanak boycott. In the 2020 referendum, nearly 86% of the population had voted, with nearly 47% voting *for* independence from France. During the writing of this article, on July 12, 2025, France and the New Caledonian government announced an agreement that would create the "State of New Caledonia" within the French Republic, granting the archipelago more freedoms, but still stopping short of independence. The agreement would create a New Caledonian nationality and allow for residents to hold dual French and New Caledonian nationality. Notably, French citizens who have lived in the archipelago for 10 years would acquire New Caledonian nationality, ostensibly addressing the grievances that led to the 2024 uprisings.

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