

Across the Tropical Pacific Ocean: Reflections on the Future of Kanaky-New Caledonia

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Abstract

This paper draws attention to the imagined future of the often-overlooked Franco-Melanesian archipelago of Kanaky-New Caledonia in the South Pacific. In particular, it considers the notion of tropical futurism at the intersection and coexistence of settler, Indigenous, and diasporic cultures. As the local population of Kanaky-New Caledonia faces growing uncertainties about their future, particularly since the riots of May 2024, it is timely to engage in such reflection. This study focuses on the reflexive narratives of the authors, three women from Kanaky-New Caledonia, who have migrated to Australia. Drawing inspiration from Glissant (1989) we acknowledge that our island home has always been shaped by displacement and migration, and like so many other people of the islands, we view it from across the ocean. Although never our ancestors' home, it remains the source of our identity and connection, and similar to Hau'ofa's *Our Sea of Islands* (1993), it calls us to recognise the Pacific as essential to the future. We use *métissage* as both a method of inquiry and to reflect on the challenges and possible futures of our island home, drawing from our experiences as women born across three different decades: the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s. By sharing our voices, this paper aims to contribute to the broader discussions about Kanaky-New Caledonia futurity.

Keywords: Kanaky-New Caledonia Futurity, Reflexive Narratives, Tropical Futurism, Pacific Futures Imagination, *métissage*

Introduction

...in Kanaky New Caledonia, the situation was predictable and you did not prevent it. Thirty years after the agreement between two men for peace between two political parties, the dialogue has broken down. The mediating State has become judge and party while the situation calls for wisdom, temperance and lucidity from the Government. Continuing to examine the constitutional bill to thaw the electorate is to choose conflagration. Appeasement will not return by sending additional gendarmerie squadrons, nor thanks to an escalation of words and polemics in this chamber. Appeasement can only come about through the withdrawal of the constitutional bill and the sending, on site, of a contact group to organise a return to dialogue. This is the only way to obtain a global agreement in the spirit of the Matignon and Nouméa agreements. It cannot be otherwise. (L'Assemblée Nationale 14 Mai, 2024)¹

These were the words of French politician Andre Chassaigne² to members of the French government during a National Assembly in Paris, occurring less than 48 hours after the May 2024 riots began in Kanaky-New Caledonia. The Franco-Melanesian Island, which is typically overlooked in international media, gained rapid attention when its capital city, Noumea, was destroyed by incendiary fires and out-of-control violence on the night of 13 May 2024. Residents' reactions on social platforms and other local media highlighted that some people in Kanaky-New Caledonia were aware of the inevitable disaster unfolding before them. Tensions rapidly escalated after the French government approved a constitutional amendment allowing recent arrivals to the Pacific French territory to participate in local elections. This change raised concerns that it would weaken the political influence of the Indigenous Kanak population, possibly reducing them to a minority in their own homeland and therefore affecting their future. This fear, however, was not new. Under

¹ Translated by the author. The original text was in French and presented in Paris on Tuesday 14 May 2024: « [...] en Kanaky Nouvelle-Calédonie, la situation était prévisible et vous ne l'avez pas empêchée. Trente ans après l'entente entre deux hommes pour une paix entre deux camps, le dialogue est rompu. L'État médiateur est devenu juge et partie alors que la situation appelle, de la part du Gouvernement, de la sagesse, de la tempérance, de la lucidité. Poursuivre l'examen du projet de loi constitutionnelle de dégel du corps électoral, c'est choisir l'embrasement. L'apaisement ne reviendra pas grâce à l'envoi d'escadrons de gendarmerie supplémentaires, ni grâce à une surenchère de paroles et de polémiques dans cet hémicycle. L'apaisement ne peut passer que par le retrait du projet de loi constitutionnelle et par l'envoi, sur place, d'un groupe de contact pour organiser le retour au dialogue. C'est la seule voie pour obtenir un accord global dans l'esprit des accords de Matignon et de Nouméa. Il ne peut en être autrement. » The full speech in French can be viewed here: https://videos.assemblee-nationale.fr/video.15162759_6643a9dd7d388.questions-au-gouvernement---mardi-14-mai-2024-14-mai-2024

² Andre Chassaigne is a French politician. He is a member of the National Assembly of France and the French Communist Party (PCF). President of the Democratic and Republican Left group since July 19, 2024. He is known for his advocacy of left-wing policies, particularly those focused on social justice, workers' rights, and the defence of public services. Throughout his political career, he has been active in promoting policies that support rural areas and agriculture.

the Noumea Accord, local election voting is restricted to those born in Kanaky-New Caledonia or those who have lived on the island before 1998. This law reflects the ongoing political unrest on the island and highlights the idea of postcolonising as a continuous process (Moreton-Robinson, 2015).

In a live interview on the afternoon of May 13, 2024, Steeven Gniptae, a journalist from Nouvelle-Calédonie la 1ère, asked High Commissioner Louis Le Franc, "What message do you want to say to the people of New Caledonia tonight...?" To which Le Franc responded, "They must trust us, it is our job to ensure security ... they must trust us, and we will restore order."³ Tragically, that same night, the security of residents in the capital and surrounding areas fell beyond the control of the French authorities, who had underestimated the ability of the *Cellule de Coordination des Actions de Terrain* (CCAT) to rally rioters in the name of decolonisation and independence. The president of the New Caledonia Chamber of Commerce estimated the damage at over one billion euros, and this number continues to grow. Beyond the financial toll, the social impact of the destruction has been deeply felt across the island. Additionally, the events created clear feelings of uncertainty and questions about the future of Kanaky-New Caledonia.

My daughter did 3 years of Drehu (kanak language) at the Pervenches kindergarten, unfortunately this magnificent sharing and inclusive school, burned down ... my children learned in this school some basic customs, the cultivation of yams, songs and their first words in Drehu, this school represented living together. My incomprehension is as great as my sorrow.⁴

Though we (authors) were not in Noumea during the 2024 riots, we have closely followed the events, observing from afar, feeling a shared sorrow and incomprehension on the uncertain future of Kanaky-New Caledonia. Australia, and in particular Queensland, has long shared a past, a present, and potentially, more than ever, an interwoven future with the Franco-Melanesian island (Boulard, 2015, 2017, 2020; Davias, 2013). The future is of particular interest for the Tropics, where the potential for growth, innovation, and transformation holds vast promise for shaping the

³ Original text was in French: « Quel message vous adressez ce soir aux calédoniens [...] ? » To which Le Franc responded, « Il faut qu'ils nous fassent confiance, c'est notre métier de garantir la sécurité [...] qu'ils nous fassent confiance et que l'ordre on le rétablira ».

⁴ This was a comment from a local woman following a recorded interview of Dr Anne-Laure Dotte, linguist and academic at the University of New Caledonia who shared her reflection about the events of May 2024. The original comment was in French: « Ma fille a fait 3 années de Drehu à la maternelle les Pervenches malheureusement cette magnifique école de partage et pour le coup inclusive, a brûlé ... mes enfants ont appris dans cette école quelques bases de la coutume, la culture de l'igname, des chansons et les premiers mots de Drehu, cette école représentait le vivre ensemble. Mon incompréhension est aussi grande que mon chagrin ». Drehu is one of the 28 kanak languages. It is commonly associated as the language of kanak people from Lifou island. The video can be retrieved from <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mAZ1vMFnenU>

world of tomorrow (Lundberg et al., 2023; Harding, 2014; Naylor & Suhaimy, 2012). Tropical futurism is a creative and intellectual gesture that imagines alternative futures for these regions that have been so strongly impacted by colonialism. It encourages us to challenge colonial narratives and reinterpret the relationship between human and more-than-human worlds in the Tropics (Lundberg et al., 2021; Womack, 2010). In this paper, Tropical Futurism focuses on reimagining coexistence in Kanaky-New Caledonia, a Pacific land that, though not ours, has profoundly shaped us. A research article by Edward et al. (2025), which includes Fabrice Wacalie, a Kanak scholar at the University of New Caledonia, points out that the "connection to the land," which is crucial in shaping Kanak identity and holds deep symbolic meaning for the Kanak people, has not been properly acknowledged. Drawing from Édouard Glissant's work, here we consciously chose to acknowledge that the land of our island home has always been shaped by displacement and migration. It was never our ancestors' home, yet it remains the source of our identity and connection. Similar to Hau'ofa's 1993 work in *Our Sea of Islands*, the *2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent* (Pacific Islands Forum, 2022), calls on us to recognise the Pacific Islands as essential to the future. Imagination has the power to foster hope and resistance, challenging narratives of life in the Tropics (Chao & Enari, 2021). We believe that Kanaky-New Caledonia's future lies in its ongoing, multifaceted identity, shaped by its dynamic, multicultural, and multilingual nature. Our collective narratives offered in this paper, then, serve not only as personal reflections but also as political instruments to foster deeper connections among ourselves and with the broader Pacific region (Chao & Enari, 2021). As Lear (2006) suggests, our future depends on acting in solidarity and cultivating radical hope. This means creating conditions for meaningful coexistence with courage, humility, and sustained engagement, even when the future is uncertain or difficult to imagine.

In the next section, we start by briefly introducing Kanaky-New Caledonia. Then we discuss and analyse our collective reflections on the uncertain decolonial future of Kanaky-New Caledonia by focusing on three central themes: Media, Place, and Education. In particular, we consider the role of tropical futurism in the intersection and coexistence of settler, Indigenous, and diasporic cultures. Throughout this paper, we employ *métissage* as both a method of enquiry and a reflective writing practice. This research approach embraces the multiplicity of our individual experiences, fostering opportunities for deep understanding without imposing moralistic or prescriptive judgements (Hasebe-Ludt et al., 2009; Burke & Robinson, 2019). Here we write as three non-indigenous women who call Kanaky-New Caledonia home, and we discuss the uncertain decolonial future of Kanaky-New Caledonia. Born in the 1980s, 1990s, and 2000s, we each migrated to Australia for educational opportunities. As three women of mixed heritage, we proudly acknowledge Kanaky-New Caledonia as our homeland, even though we left to pursue tertiary education and build lives in Australia.

Like many Kanaky-New Caledonian migrants, we maintain strong connections to our island's people, languages, and cultures (Boulard & Osbaldiston, 2024).

Kanaky-New Caledonia in Brief

Le retour à la tradition, c'est un mythe. (...) Notre identité, elle est devant nous.
—Jean-Marie Tjibaou

Kanaky-New Caledonia, a Franco-Melanesian island located in the Pacific Ocean east of Australia between the Tropic of Capricorn and the Equator, is renowned for its rich biodiversity, including hundreds of endemic species (Oedin et al., 2024). Unfortunately, this unique environment is under threat from the long-standing effects of colonial exploitation as well as the pressures of contemporary tourism. The French overseas territory has long attracted tourists drawn to its beautiful beaches and vibrant marine life. In particular, Australian tourists visit Kanaky-New Caledonia as cruise travellers. In 2023, over 30,000 Australians visited, marking an 18.5% increase from 2019 (Explore Travel, March 2024). More relevant to this paper, is the fact that the tourism industry capitalises on the island's image as a tropical paradise, often portraying it as the “*Paris of the Pacific*.” However, this imagery and symbolic representation overlooks the cultural marginalisation of the Indigenous Kanak people, framing the island primarily as an exotic destination.

In the tourism industry, tropicality is often associated with the idealised, romanticised, and commercialised representations of tropical places. For example, in Kanaky-New Caledonia, tourism has played a significant role in perpetuating the image of the island as a pristine getaway. Quanchi (2013) contends that this imagery of the Pacific continues to be construed as true by Australians despite their geographical closeness and linked histories. He suggests that despite continued exchanges initiated more than 120 years ago, Australia has not yet fostered a profound relationship with its Pacific Island neighbours:

Tourism continues to be the common personal relationship for Australians with Pacific Islands. This began with the offering of cruises through the islands in the 1890s and took on new forms each decade as cruising, resorts, package tours, jumbo jets, backpacking, surfing and eco-tourism become popular to each new generation of Australians. These Australians claim to know the Pacific on the basis of a honeymoon, package trip, cruise or short resort holiday (Quanchi, 2013, p. 29).

While tourism brings economic benefits, it also perpetuates colonial and neocolonial dynamics, continuing a cycle of exploitation and misrepresentation. Moreover, this focus on the island as a tropical getaway or a piece of French paradise often masks the socio-political struggles of the Indigenous Kanak people, whose lands and cultural practices have been historically undermined. The May 2024 riots, however, shifted global attention to the region's turbulent history, culminating in the repatriation of 108 Australians stranded in Noumea, as announced by Australian Foreign Minister Penny Wong on May 21. In a matter of hours, the stereotypical imagery of Kanaky-New Caledonia as a serene French paradise was suddenly replaced by scenes of violence and unrest, revealing a much darker place and portraying a different reality.

Before colonisation, Kanaky-New Caledonia was home to Melanesian people known as the Kanak, with rich cultural traditions and over 28 languages spoken across clans. France's annexation in 1853 deeply disrupted Kanak life (Chappell, 2003; Chappell, 1999; David, 2019). Many died from newly introduced diseases, while others were confined to reserves, severing ties to their culture and languages, with lasting effects on their collective identity (Winslow, 2010; Small, 2017; Chappell, 2003; Muckle, 2007). For over 40 years and throughout the lifetime of the three authors (1980s to 2000s), communities on the island have consciously and unconsciously grappled with imagining their future, a reflection shaped by generations of change and resilience.

To envision the future, one must first understand the past. The history of Kanaky-New Caledonia, particularly its colonisation, is well documented (Chappell, 1999; Leblic, 2007; Muckle, 2011; Carteron, Cugola & Graille, 2023). Rather than retracing its full history since 1853, key moments reveal the legacies that persist today. From 1887 to 1946, the Kanak were governed by the colonial 'indigénat' code, which imposed forced labour, curfews, and a head tax. While used across French colonies, Kanaky-New Caledonia saw its early implementation with minimal reforms until 1946, when Kanak men gained citizenship, followed by the women a decade later. Meanwhile, a few families built wealth through mining, trade, and livestock industries, maintaining oligopolies via political ties. The 1967 'nickel boom' spurred migration from France, but also Wallis and Futuna, French Polynesia, Indonesia, and Vietnam (Leblic, 1993). By 1976, the Kanak population had dropped to 45.9%, while Noumea's population grew by 47.2% with nearly 15,000 new settlers arriving (Institut Territorial des Statistiques et des Etudes Economiques, 1989). This rapid growth led to inflation, a housing crisis, and widened inequalities between Kanak and non-Kanak, as well as between urban and rural areas. The influx of nickel revenue stifled local industry development, favouring natural resource exploitation over diversification. Economic slowdowns began in 1971 and worsened in the 1975 recession driven by falling nickel prices, the oil crisis and a weaker U.S. dollar (Freyss, 1995).

As neighbouring Pacific islands gained independence (Foster, 1997), pro-independence movements emerged in Kanaky-New Caledonia, strengthening Kanak identity through cultural and political activism. Between 1976 and 1988, six political statuses were introduced (Leblic, 2003) to regulate the island's democratic processes, reflecting growing instability and clashes between loyalist and independence visions.

This tension culminated in the 1984-1988 “événements,” a violent period marked by the assassinations of Kanak leaders and significant loss of life. In response, French Prime Minister Michel Rocard launched a ‘mission of dialogue’ leading to the Matignon Accords signed by Jacques Lafleur and Jean-Marie Tjibaou in June 1988. The accords aimed to restore peace by dividing the main island into three provinces, redistributing power, and reallocating the national budget to underdeveloped areas. Additionally, in order to address the Kanak minority status, a referendum law limited the electorate by preventing new migrants from voting (Noumea Accord, 1998).

Signed on May 5, 1998, the Nouméa Accord introduced shared sovereignty, New Caledonian citizenship, and a focus on recognising and promoting Kanak culture. It also promised a referendum on self-determination after a 15-to-20-year transition, with independence as a possible outcome (MacLellan, 1999). Between 2018 and 2021, three referendums (Fisher, 2019) asked eligible voters, “Do you want New Caledonia to accede to full sovereignty and become independent?”. The first vote saw 56% oppose independence and 44% support it, while the second resulted in 53% against and 47% in favour (Connell, 2021). The third referendum overwhelmingly favoured remaining with France (96.5%), but it was marred by a 43.9% turnout after pro-independence groups boycotted the vote. The French government had unilaterally scheduled it for December 12, 2021, aligning it with national elections, while the local community was also dealing with COVID-19. Independence supporters had requested a delay to respect Kanak mourning practices, but their appeal was ignored. This decision deepened political and ethnic divides, solidifying loyalist victory and concluding the Nouméa Accord process. In the history of the independence movement in Kanaky-New Caledonia residents have continuously struggled to overcome persistent political, cultural, and social challenges.⁵

The end of the Nouméa Accord highlights the issue of New Caledonian citizenship. Voting is currently limited to residents before 1998 and their children, a measure aimed at boosting Kanak representation. Recent negotiations propose reducing the residency requirement to 10 years, expanding the electorate by about 15%. Separatists fear that this would dilute Kanak votes and favour French interests. Protests against this constitutional reform erupted in early 2024, and riots followed the

⁵ Here we are reminded of Henry et al.'s (2023) recent work on weedy life in the tropics which discusses the notion of contestation between “colonial weeds and the decolonial endemic” (p. 263).

French Assembly's approval of the reform on May 13, 2024. The Common Destiny framework, "*Le Destin Commun*," from the Nouméa Accord, was a milestone in envisioning the future. Many debates centre on whether independence from France will be achieved or when it will no longer dominate discourse. For the three of us, however, the focus has shifted from why we struggle to live together to how we might achieve unity. The May 2024 riots deepened our reflections on Kanaky-New Caledonia's future. Policymakers have long tried to balance culture preservation with progress, and we hope this paper offers a small contribution towards shaping a shared future.

The Voices of Three Caledonian Women: From Millennial to Gen Z

Kanaky-New Caledonia continues to hold significant geographical and political importance for France, serving as a strategic point in the Pacific region. Geographically, its location provides France with a vital presence in the southern hemisphere, acting as a gateway to Pacific and Asian economies. The territory's vast exclusive economic zone grants France access to abundant natural resources such as nickel and fisheries. Politically, Kanaky-New Caledonia is crucial as a symbol of France's historical global influence and its continued assertion of sovereignty over overseas territories. It also provides a crucial military and defence presence in the Pacific, contributing to France's geopolitical interests in the region. Despite the island's political status and ongoing debates over independence, Dingwall (30 November 2024) highlights in his Australian Broadcasting Corporation⁶ (ABC) documentary that while many of New Caledonia's Pacific neighbours gained independence from colonial powers in the 1970s and 1980s, France continues to maintain control over its Pacific islands.

As Kanaky-New Caledonian women living in Australia but deeply connected to our homeland, we share our perspectives on the imagined future of a place rooted in our hearts and minds. To do so, we use *métissage*, a reflective writing practice that braids personal narratives together with traditionally recognised methodologies that challenge the dominance of Western knowledge systems (Glissant, 1989; Campbell-Chudoba, 2024). Chambers, Donald, and Hasebe-Ludt (2002, p.1) describe *métissage* as a merging of genres, texts, and identities, both a literary stance and a pedagogical practice. After the events of May 2024, we documented our reflections individually and then wove them into a cohesive story, blending facts and emotions to make sense of the situation. This approach reflects Bishop et al.'s (2019, p. 3) idea that multiple narratives are more impactful than a single story, honouring both unity

⁶ *Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC)*: The Australian Broadcasting Corporation is Australia's national public broadcaster, providing television, radio, and online news services. Launched in 1932, it is a trusted source for news, documentaries, and other media content, widely recognised for its coverage of both domestic and international stories.

and diversity within individuals and the collective. They argue *métissage* creates “a generative and liberating learning space,” enabling us to navigate the complexities of Kanaky-New Caledonia’s realities and share a holistic understanding of its socio-political landscape.

From millennials to Gen Z, here we bring our unique perspectives on the past, present, and future of Kanaky-New Caledonia, understanding that this reflexive practice is also an important research praxis:

When researchers come to view themselves as storytellers, they become conscious of the ways in which their autobiography influences how they make sense of their lives and experiences. They realize that their personal stories cannot be easily differentiated from the larger research stories they wish to tell. (Dwayne, 2012, p. 548)

The island's complex socio-political history, marked by events such as the riots of May 2024, compels a deep reflection on its future. For those invested in the island’s destiny, this uncertainty leads to the need for critical self-examination. As we each began exploring Tropical Futurism in Kanaky-New Caledonia, we identified three common key themes within our reflection: media, place and migration, and education. These form distinct, but overlapping, areas of further exploration below.

We acknowledge that our understanding of the situation in Kanaky-New Caledonia is deeply influenced by our positionality, shaped by our lived experiences, ethnic backgrounds, and journeys across continents (Holmes, 2020; Merriam, 2001; Smith, 1999). As three Pacific women, two born in Kanaky-New Caledonia and one who moved there from Tahiti at age one, we draw from our positionality as Pacific French scholars and island residents to imagine a tropical future for our island home. Our insights are shaped by both our personal experiences and academic work, which allows us to weave together perspectives grounded in the stories and interests of Pacific French communities.

Our paper draws from our lived experiences and the privileges we hold as individuals from Kanaky-New Caledonia, navigating colonial and postcolonial dynamics. While French is our first language and we do not speak a Kanak language, we stand in solidarity with the Kanak people’s struggle for self-determination. Our diverse cultural and academic backgrounds, including those we have been exposed to in Australia and France, deepen our understanding of the challenges faced by both Indigenous and non-Indigenous communities.

By beginning with our positionality, we acknowledge the limitations of our viewpoints while reaffirming our commitment to decolonising research practices. Our goal is to

advocate for ethical knowledge creation that amplifies the voices of those directly impacted by Kanaky-New Caledonia's socio-political realities and challenges conventional narratives about the island's history, identity, and future.

Media's Role in Shaping Island Narratives

These snippets of information made me anxious. I was unsure of what was happening. I waited for Australian news to report on the events and I remember first finding information through New Zealand media before Australian coverage picked it up and eventually the situation attracted international attention. A few weeks later, I woke up to see, for the first time in my 20 years in Australia, someone from Kanaky-New Caledonia being interviewed on Australian TV. (Reflection, Author 1)

The May 2024 riots in Kanaky-New Caledonia highlighted the growing challenge of distinguishing truth from false information in an environment saturated with fake news, alternative facts, and misleading narratives (Brinkman, 2017; Bonazzi, 2016). This struggle mirrors Plato's Allegory of the Cave, where prisoners see only shadows of reality, unable to perceive the truth outside their confined world. In much the same way, the events unfolding in Kanaky-New Caledonia were filtered through various media sources, offering conflicting interpretations that created a maze of shadows rather than a clear view of reality.

On the island there are two separate media landscapes: one representing the Indigenous Kanak pro-independence perspective and the other reflecting the metropolitan loyalist anti-independence viewpoint (M'Balla-Ndi, 2017). In 2023, Kanaky-New Caledonia's media landscape underwent a significant shift with the closure of *Les Nouvelles Calédoniennes*, the island's primary daily newspaper. As traditional journalism no longer served as the main source of news, social media took centre stage, becoming the dominant platform for information.⁷ In the absence of

⁷ We wish to note that during the riots, the dissemination of information on social media was significantly influenced by external interference, particularly from Azerbaijan, which supported the rioters. This interference included the widespread circulation of disinformation both internationally and, at times, locally. For instance, certain Kanak communities were led to believe that the police intended to shoot them without provocation, thereby fostering unnecessary fear and hostility. Such misinformation severely distorted the portrayal of the situation, complicating its coverage even within national media outlets. The issue with Azerbaijan is not fake news; it is something that is confirmed to have started a new political movement in Kanaky-New Caledonia with some now witnessing the presence of the Azerbaijan flag in the territory. More information can be retrieved here: https://www.20minutes.fr/societe/4127043-20241204-cherche-faire-azerbaïdjan-nouvelle-caledonie-corse?fbclid=IwY2xjawlHlr9leHRuA2FibQlxMAABHY1xbIVarEu1SMqda4qSAeDSscqVHVnpGSO0bEdS6En7WU mPk92LDqE_w_aem_vjFiO0p0tDspVwzUh9WY5A

reliable sources, anyone could post anything online, making it increasingly difficult for those of us outside the region to distinguish fact from fiction. In the 2024 riots, we turned to friends and trusted contacts for updates, relying on personal networks instead of traditional media. This created a sense of connection, yet also isolation, as we navigated an overwhelming flow of often misleading information.

Decolonisation through digital media and citizens' use of mainstream media to share information has proven to be both effective and impactful (Makananise & Madima, 2024; Radsch, 2016). Social media and citizen journalism allowed the people of Kanaky-New Caledonia to bypass traditional media institutions and tell their own stories, democratising the flow of information. However, this also amplified contradictory narratives, deepening the challenge of discerning truth. Plato's allegory seemed increasingly relevant as we tried to make sense of the events. Like the prisoners in the cave, we were exposed to fragments of reality but struggled to piece them together into a coherent truth. This struggle for truth resonates with the language of the 1998 Noumea Accord, which acknowledged the "shadows" of the colonial period: "The time has come to acknowledge the shadows of the colonial period, even if it was not devoid of light."⁸ This reflection on the shadows of history mirrors the ongoing search for truth and justice in Kanaky-New Caledonia.

For those of us far from the island, the riots were a deeply emotional experience. Author 1 first learned of the unrest through a friend's social media posts about explosions and violence near her home. As the situation escalated, the initial slow response from Australian media meant relying on social media for updates. However, between May and September 2024, the Australian Broadcasting Corporation (ABC) published over 60 articles on Kanaky-New Caledonia, a significant increase from previous years. The coverage for 2024 mostly focused on violence and destruction, further deepening the sense of disillusionment among those watching from afar. In comparison, in 2023, there had been only 12 ABC articles published, with most focusing on sharks, and these numbers were less than 10 articles in 2022 and 2021.

Author 2, initially unaware of the riots' severity, was deeply affected by the images of destruction shared on social media. "*Watching my country in flames from afar was heartbreaking,*" she noted, emphasising the emotional toll of witnessing the violence without being able to intervene. Author 3 echoed similar feelings of helplessness and guilt, particularly as childhood landmarks were destroyed. "*I certainly blew up my monthly screen time in May, watching my island break apart,*" she reflected, highlighting the pain of watching familiar places consumed by flames. These personal

⁸ Translated from French by the authors, original text in the Nouméa Accord : "Le moment est venu de reconnaître les ombres de la période coloniale, même si elle ne fut pas dépourvue de lumière".

accounts underscore the emotional impact of the riots, highlighting the feelings of alienation and helplessness that many experienced.

The May 2024 riots also highlighted the growing importance of local reporting in shaping national and international perceptions of Kanaky-New Caledonia. These testimonies, often shared through Facebook, provided alternative narratives that were not shaped by external media organisations historically influenced by colonial and metropolitan interests. A discussion paper by Peni Tawake et al. (2021) confirmed that Facebook is a powerful tool to share information across communities in the Pacific. In fact, it can be argued that this shift in the media landscape represents a break from the colonial era when the media was often a tool of political control and dominance on the island (Chanter, 1996). Social media enabled the people of Kanaky-New Caledonia to reclaim their narrative: asserting their identity and challenging the long-standing colonial influence in the media.

Looking ahead, the role of media in shaping the future of Kanaky-New Caledonia will continue to evolve, with local voices playing an increasingly central role in telling their own stories. As digital platforms develop, individuals will gain greater control over the local narratives, enabling a more diverse representation of the island's identity. However, this shift also brings challenges related to misinformation and the need for greater media accountability (Mirzoeff & Halberstam, 2018; Willems, 2014). We note that in October 2024, the launch of the Australia-New Caledonia Media Partnership, a collaboration between the ABC and local stations such as NC La 1ère and Caledonia TV, aimed to foster better content sharing and media collaboration between Australia and Kanaky-New Caledonia. This partnership seeks to bridge the historical gap between local and international media, facilitating a more balanced exchange of news and cultural programmes, which is said to support the representation of Kanaky-New Caledonia on the global stage.

A Sense of Place Now and into the Future

On May 13th, I was preparing to return to New-Caledonia for the first time in five years, excited to attend my friend's wedding as a bridesmaid and show my country to two couples visiting with me. My mum called that day, urging me to reconsider my trip due to escalating unrest. I postponed my departure from the 15th to the 22nd. My mum and stepdad, who had travelled to Brisbane to surprise me at the airport, ended up staying with us for three weeks as they could not return home. (Reflection, Author 2)

During the May 2024 riots, many residents were "stuck" in their locations, facing disruptions and an uncertain future. Main roads were being barricaded, and the international *La Tontouta* airport was shut down for over six weeks, preventing travel to and from the island. Only military aircraft were permitted at the local airports. This sense of being trapped forced people to reflect on their present and imagined possible futures. The Chamber of Commerce and Industry (CCI) estimated over 10,000 departures (out of 271,000 people) due to the events in 2024 and this number is expected to continue to grow. A year prior to the events, local news reported that most families leaving New Caledonia moved to France, but those with at least one adult born in New Caledonia were more likely to choose Australia, New Zealand or Canada (Wakahugneme & Dutertre, 2023). Migration is not solely motivated by fear; however, feelings of instability can serve as a significant catalyst for relocation. Destinations that are geographically closer provide not only physical closeness but also emotional reassurance (Muller-Funk, 2023; Hammad, 2011; Vanclay, Higgins & Blackshaw, 2008). In the context of Kanaky-New Caledonia, we argue that migration aspirations are not solely driven by geographic proximity but by a deeper, more complex sense of place. In addition, our sense of place in times of instability can be extended to encompass a broader region (the Pacific) or even a distant land (France).

Author 3's family, living in one of the hardest-hit areas, Mont-Dore, made the difficult decision to migrate to French Polynesia for a new beginning. Reflecting on this choice, Author 3 explained, "*Now, as the dust begins to settle, the uncertainty remains. Traumatized and constrained, my family has decided to move back to French Polynesia, feeling the environment is too unstable ... I understand and respect my parents' decision.*" In general, even after migrating, the emotional ties to one's homeland remain strong, and it is the same for migrants from Kanaky-New Caledonia. Author 2's connection to Kanaky-New Caledonia is evident in her desire to maintain relationships with close friends and family, despite being abroad. She expressed hope of returning in 2025 to attend a wedding and visit family, reinforcing how migration does not stop these deep-rooted ties. The desire to migrate within the Pacific region reflects more than just geographic proximity. It is about cultural and emotional connections that extend across islands. Author 1 noted, "*Growing up, I travelled often, and Vanuatu, especially Port Vila, felt like a cousin to New Caledonia.*" These cultural affinities shape migration aspirations, creating a sense of belonging that transcends geographic boundaries. For many, the shared Pacific identity fosters emotional ties that make places like Australia, French Polynesia, and Vanuatu feel not just accessible but familiar and comforting. Vanclay (2008) describes 'Place-making' as the process of transforming space into a meaningful place. This concept is essential in understanding future migration from Kanaky-New Caledonia. Migration is not just a physical movement but a deeper, emotional connection to places that feel like home. As Vanclay (2008) suggests, 'Place' exists when an individual can tell a story about it;

when it becomes something more than just a space, that's when it has the potential to become home.

Looking ahead, migration patterns from Kanaky-New Caledonia will continue to evolve, shaped by socio-political changes and strong cultural connections to the Pacific. The political landscape in 2024 in Kanaky-New Caledonia remains fluid, and migration within the Pacific region is expected to increase. This trend reflects not only a search for stability but also an evolving sense of identity, one that connects the people of Kanaky-New Caledonia to the wider Pacific. Following Hammad's (2011) generational approach to geographies, we anticipate that future generations of Kanaky-New Caledonians will experience a transformation in their sense of place, challenging intergenerational geographies and broadening their understandings of home.

Education Futures

Education in Kanaky-New Caledonia is a critical arena where the intersection of culture, politics, and social dynamics plays out (Boulard, 2022; Minvielle, 2018; Small, 2017; Hardouin, 2008; Colombel & Fillol, 2009; Mandaoué, 2003). Historically, French has been the official language in Kanaky-New Caledonia, and this linguistic dominance has been a defining feature of its education system (Dotte, Geneix-Rabault & Vandeputte, 2017; Fillol & Vernaoudon, 2004). In the early 2000s, following the Noumea Accord, local schools began incorporating Kanak languages into the curriculum. These efforts, while important, highlight the enduring gap between educational outcomes and work opportunities, particularly for Melanesian communities. Moreover, in practice, Kanak languages are often seen as ethnic or cultural markers and are predominantly studied by Kanak students.⁹ In contrast, English has gained prominence, with bilingual programs being introduced, partly due to Kanaky-New Caledonia's geographical location in an Anglophone-dominated region. Some argue, as Small (2000) notes, that English education is necessary to prepare students for an increasingly globalised world, especially as the island's economic future is tied to international trade and cooperation. This dual focus on Kanak languages and English raises profound questions about the future of indigenous languages and the inclusivity of the educational system in shaping the island's cultural and linguistic identity. Achille Mbembe (2015) reminds us that

⁹ On January 25, 2025, during a seminar on plurilingualism in schools at James Cook University, Dr Fabrice Wacalie presented on the integration of Kanak languages in education, emphasising the positive initiatives currently being explored. For example, in the context of fostering a more inclusive education system, the teaching of Kanak languages is offered in schools, with an optional curriculum in middle and high school, typically followed by Kanak students. However, since 2012, there has been a significant development with the introduction of mandatory instruction in Kanak languages and culture for all students up to the baccalaureate level. This policy change was implemented in response to a recommendation from the United Nations and represents a significant advancement in educational inclusivity.

monolingualism rhymes with colonialism, while Edouard Glissant (1997) critiqued the preconceived idea that a single dominant or universal language can help simplify communication. In the future, will Kanak languages ever thrive in the curriculum, or will they continue to be sidelined in favour of global (colonial) languages like French and English?

Eddie Wauyone Wadrawane (2024) also advocates for a reconfiguration of the education system to prioritise Kanak knowledge and cultural practices. He calls for schools and universities to integrate more resources from Kanak and broader Oceanic cultures, fostering a deeper connection to Indigenous heritage. This would involve not only restoring the memory of indigenous Kanak cultures but also actively decolonising the education system, which has long been shaped by colonial politics and hegemonic cultural influences. The educational system's failure to fully embrace Kanak knowledge can be seen in the social stratification that persists in schools. Students from wealthier backgrounds mostly attend schools in Noumea, which offer better educational opportunities, while students from lower-income, primarily Kanak families, often attend public schools outside the capital city. Author 2 reflects on attending a public school known for its diversity but also its class divide. Though there was no overt racism, the socio-economic disparities were evident, particularly in high school. This separation was most apparent in the science track, which was dominated by non-Kanak students. These divides underscore how the education system mirrors broader social inequalities, where Kanak students are often relegated to a less prestigious education, leading to fewer opportunities in the labour market.

Though I did not come from wealth, I attended public schools known as the 'white' or 'rich' schools. Despite this, classrooms were diverse, and I do not recall witnessing any racism. I had friends from various social and cultural backgrounds, though this changed somewhat in high school. I went to the 'whitest' school, and although I had Kanak friends, the classrooms, especially in the science track, were dominated by non-Kanaks. I did not think much about this imbalance until years later. (Reflection Author 2)

The riots of May 2024 serve as a reminder of the ongoing frustrations faced by marginalised communities in Kanaky-New Caledonia. The destruction of several schools during these riots underscores the need for urgent reforms. Many young Kanaks, particularly those who feel excluded from political and economic power, are rebelling against the systemic inequalities that persist in the educational system and beyond. There is a growing sense that education is not just about knowledge acquisition but also about power and representation. Young people are increasingly vocal about their desire for an education system that reflects their cultural heritage and

offers equal opportunities for success. We must listen to them. According to Benjamin Davis (2023), listening can enhance understanding of one's responsibilities and foster a deeper sense of duty toward oneself, others and life. Tertiary education is another area where disparities are evident. While a significant number of Kanak students attend the University of New Caledonia, many of the island's wealthier students continue to study in France, potentially reinforcing the cultural divide and a divided sense of identity. Nevertheless, on some occasions, being away from the island also had the opposite effect and helped strengthen their Pacific sense of place:

After finishing high school, I moved to France for my studies, spending five years in Montpellier where many students from New-Caledonia and French Polynesia were drawn by the mild climate. Among my French friends, I identified strongly as an islander. Despite speaking the same language, our experiences and backgrounds felt worlds apart, and I never felt truly at home in France. (Reflection Author 2)

The future of Kanaky-New Caledonia is not just about educational reforms but also about the broader political and social changes that must accompany them. As Ghosal and Modak (2023) argue, decolonisation involves reclaiming Indigenous knowledge and traditions that have been silenced or erased. It is about "learning to unlearn" the dominant narratives that have marginalised Indigenous voices and perspectives (Tlostanova & Mignolo, 2012). Many young Kanaks envision a future where the island is independent from France and can rebuild its cultural and political power. This future would be grounded in the values of Indigenous governance, where traditional knowledge and cultural practices play a central role in shaping the nation's identity. This vision challenges the continued dominance of colonial systems and advocates for a more inclusive, Indigenous-led society. At the same time, the vision of a multicultural Kanaky-New Caledonia, one that blends Indigenous and settler cultures, is also present. This vision embraces the diverse ethnic groups on the island and seeks to foster unity and mutual respect. However, tensions between these groups, particularly in terms of land ownership, representation, and economic opportunity, continue to hinder the realisation of this vision. The recent riots, driven by frustrations with the slow pace of decolonisation and the systemic marginalisation of Indigenous voices, highlight the urgency of addressing these issues.

Following the riots of 2024, the economic future of Kanaky-New Caledonia is also uncertain, with concerns about the potential for a downturn and the continued departure of essential workers. Political figures like Gil Brial have pointed to budget cuts in sectors like education, culture, and the environment, further complicating the situation. In this context, the role of education becomes even more crucial in shaping the future of the island. Education must serve as a tool for empowerment, helping

young people in Kanaky-New Caledonia to overcome historical disadvantages and contribute to the island's long-term social and economic progress.

Conclusion

Le passé a été le temps de la colonisation. Le présent est le temps du partage, par le rééquilibrage. L'avenir doit être le temps de l'identité, dans un destin commun.
—Accord de Nouméa, May 1998

The riots that broke out in May 2024, in Nouméa, the capital of Kanaky-New Caledonia, were more than just an event in time. They were a reflection of the island's long and complex socio-political history, forcing those of us who care deeply about this land and its people to think about what the future holds. Yet, amidst this turmoil, something unexpected happened: it brought the three of us, three women from Kanaky-New Caledonia, closer. As we wove our tropical Pacific stories together, we discovered a common thread, we are neither fully French nor Kanak. Our mixed identities shape our sense of belonging, making it hard to take a clear stance on one side or the other. We know there are many others like us, navigating this same complexity. Our upbringing and backgrounds demand of us that we choose between independence or remaining French, but how can we, when our imaginations are deeply connected to both? Our use of the term Kanaky-New Caledonia in this paper is not just about politics; it is a personal reflection of who we are. In our imaginations, we belong to both worlds, French and Pacific Islanders. Our lives, histories, and experiences are interwoven in each. Living in Kanaky-New Caledonia is a world apart from life in mainland France. The landscapes, smells, symbols, and sounds of the Tropics inevitably create a unique Pacific French identity. Whether we acknowledge it or not, Kanaky-New Caledonia, as a place, is full of complexity, unpredictability, and interdependence. We are woven together. It is time to move beyond the rigid dichotomies of "France or Kanaky" and the utopic motto of "common destiny." Instead, we must embrace the heterotopic nature of this island, acknowledging the messy and intertwined reality of our existence in the Tropics. Inspired by Chao and Enari's (2021) work on the Pacific, we envision a future for Kanaky-New Caledonia that mirrors the harmony and interdependence found in the natural world. The rich local ecosystems show us how non-human beings (for example, animals, rivers, plants, mountains, and seas) can coexist, relying on one another for survival, and flourishing. Like this more-than-human world, we too, need to shift from merely coexisting to truly living together, paying attention to what surrounds us, listening more deeply, and walking through the world with greater awareness of each other.

As Pacific French citizens, we stand out when travelling in metropolitan France, yet we are not indigenous to our own Pacific islands. We often feel more at home in

Australia, despite the language differences. Although we may be a small group, we are far from unique, and it feels unfair to be forced into a single identity or future. We invite others to share their stories and memories as we continue our journey, listening, observing, and also recognising that what we perceive from afar might not always be the full truth. Yet, as witnesses, we play a crucial role in fostering dialogue and peaceful conversations that remind everyone that unity doesn't mean taking sides. Our collective experience in Australia, spanning over 30 years, has shown us that while far from perfect, Australians have integrated tributes and recognition of Indigenous rights into their daily lives. Although there is still much to be done, we believe we must move forward with humility, rebuilding trust one step at a time. Trust is not solely built by leaders; it can be fostered by anyone and it must begin with the people.

One thing is undeniable: the path to a shared future in Kanaky-New Caledonia is fractured, requiring more than physical infrastructure. It demands a deep restoration of trust among its diverse communities. But who will the people place their trust in: France, Australia, Pacific Islanders, or someone else that we have not yet imagined? At the same time as we conclude this paper, on 28 October 2024, Pacific leaders are arriving in Kanaky-New Caledonia on a fact-finding mission, with Tongan Prime Minister Siaosi Sovaleni stating, "I bring greetings from your family in Oceania. We are here as family." We hope these Pacific voices will help our island home move ahead. Our vision for Kanaky-New Caledonia is a future where cultural hybridity flourishes and people live together in the true Pacific Way. It is our *métissage*, our mixity, that holds the key to bridging cultures, traditions, and languages. This shift from individual identity to a collective communal consciousness will allow the people of Kanaky-New Caledonia to stop seeing themselves as divided. Looking ahead, we hope the people of Kanaky-New Caledonia are given the opportunity to imagine a future full of possibility and potential, one where the richness of mixity is embraced and celebrated. The next 40 years could forge a shared memory where identities are not confined to rigid choices of "oui" or "non," but instead reflect a collective journey of unity and diversity. In this imagined future, Kanaky-New Caledonia will be celebrated not only for its vibrant biodiversity but also for the harmonious coexistence of all species, including humans, living together in mutual respect and interdependence.

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