

Introduction

Swimming Against the Tide

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The Surrealist Map of the World first appeared in 1929 in a special issue of *Varietes*, a Belgian periodical dedicated to the movement. Oceania and the *Pacifique*, rather than the Atlantic Ocean, are depicted at the centre of the drawing. Counter to imperialist and colonialist projections, this expansive mapping provides an alternative vision of the world whereby Oceania is vast and centralised. Perhaps this reorientation foregrounds Epeli Hau'ofa's 1994 essay and manifesto "Our Sea of Islands", reprinted in this special issue of *Lagoonscapes*. A Tongan and Fijian writer and anthropologist, his influential essay offers a grassroots view of Oceania, the island states and territories of the Pacific, all of Polynesia and Micronesia, as a place of optimism and largesse. His positionality contrasts with the narrow, deterministic view of Oceania replacing it with:

a universe comprised not only of land surfaces, but the surrounding ocean as far as they could traverse and exploit it, the underworld with its fire-controlling and earth-shaking denizens, and the heavens above with their hierarchies of powerful gods and named stars and constellations that people could count on to guide their way across the seas. (Hau'ofa 1994, 152)

"The world of Oceania is not small", Epeli Hau'ofa mused while gazing at the fiery majesty of Hawai'i's volcanoes. Researchers have now mapped Zealandia. Basalts, sandstones, and pebbles from the

sandstones, fine-grain sandstone, mudstone, bioclastic limestone, and basaltic lava have been analysed and dated. By dating the rocks and interpreting magnetic anomalies, they are able to map the major geological units across North Zealandia (Mortimer et al. 2023). Its sandstone is roughly 95 million years old and a mix of granite and volcanic pebbles dates back from up to 130 million years to the Early Cretaceous period. Finally, we know more about Oceania. It is indeed remarkable how little was known for so long about the origins and nature of the Pacific Ocean, a fact that fuelled speculation and misinformation.

Just as Epeli Hau'ofa heralded “a large world in which people and cultures moved and mingled, unhindered by boundaries” (1994, 153), *Talanoa Forum: Swimming Against the Tide* and this issue of *Lagoonscapes* binds thinkers, scholars, artists, activists, policymakers and curators from Venice and the Pacific in a more holistic way, in dialogue and with converging views and vantage points. Bringing voices, ideas and perspectives across waterways and time zones, Talanoa Forum comprised a three-day symposium at Ca' Foscari University of Venice with the NICHE Centre for Environmental Humanities as a place and space to think, rethink and reflect with an expanded perspective on Oceania. Gathering in the mirrored room at Ca' Dolfin and by Joseph Kosuth's window drawings with glimpses of the gleaming grandeur of Venice's Grand Canal, speakers and audiences listened to art historians, curators, artists, anthropologists, philosophers and community advocates discussing human/non-human relationships, cross-disciplinary dialogues and ancestral epistemologies. First-hand knowledge and experiences shifted the perspective from rigid academic and institutional structures to personal ruminations on the injuries of colonisation.

The essays and writers of *Lagoonscapes: Swimming Against the Tide* alert us to numerous connections and entanglements. Yuki Kihara perceptively notes that, in the Pacific, “environmental colonialism” is often disguised as “diplomacy”. Her single channel video work *Smoke and Mirrors* (2023) juxtaposes video footage of environments filmed between Sāmoa and the Netherlands. The right side of the screen features video footage of cyclone Gita and its chaotic aftermath in Upolu Island, Sāmoa in 2018 while the left side of the screen features video footage of the smoke coming out of a factory chimney in the Netherlands. While Sāmoa in the Pacific and the Netherlands in Europe are geographically distant, notes Kihara, they are both connected by a shared global ecosystem, where excessive levels of carbon emissions in the Global North trigger extreme weather events in the Global South.¹ Similarly, the sea, its ecosystems and

1 <https://yukikihara.ws/artist-statement>.

voices and Indigeneity from a distinctly Pasifika perspective. By binding the fragile, small island ecologies of Venice and the Pacific, Talanoa Forum built bridges between fields and across waterways with lightning talks, personal reflections, song, imagery and keynotes.

Talanoa is a pan-Pacific word that describes a process of inclusive, participatory and transparent dialogue, sharing views without a predetermined expectation for agreement. A term used by Tongans, Sāmoans and Fijians, it involves the cross-pollination of ideas, skills and experiences to build and maintain relationships. The etymology of the word *talanoa* is derived from two components: ‘tala’ meaning to inform, tell and relate and ‘noa’ meaning ‘any kind’ or ‘nothing in particular’. A Polynesian tradition, it constitutes an Indigenous Pasifika worldview as a preferred mode of communication. Indigenous researchers and their allies deploy *talanoa* as a methodology to ignite cross-regional dialogue about our collective futures. When employed with care and in recognition of their emergence out of decolonial struggles for Indigenous sovereignty and self-determination (*talanoa*) can foster a fruitful intercultural research conversation (Hindley, November, Sturm 2020).

Moreover, *talanoa* is a group encounter where space is created for people to tell their stories, concerns and aspirations. As a Pasifika methodology to relate experiences, this volume amplifies the themes of both Talanoa Forum and Kihara’s exhibition while reflecting on intersectionality, oceanhood, colonisation and collections. This special issue of the Journal extends the symposium, expanding the exchange with a suite of full-length essays, shorter reflections, artist annotated visual essay, dialogue/*talanoa* and a position paper. The geographical and temporal scope is expansive and deeply humanising, providing a uniquely Pasifika and Venetian perspective.

Artists, writers and activists from the Pacific Islands have made “significant contributions to the shaping and development of global climate change policies and discourses. Writing before climate change was on people’s minds in the region” (Kirsch 2020, 836), Epeleli Hau’ofa emphasised the importance of water bodies, and the Pacific Ocean in particular, for the global environment. He noted that “there are no people on earth more suited to be guardians of the world’s largest ocean than those for whom it has been home for generations” (Hau’ofa 1994, 158-9).

Many Pacific Islanders have embraced Hau’ofa’s prescient call to protect the oceans and islands by helping to set the agenda for global climate change policy regimes and facilitate international dialogue. Barbara Casavecchia responds to his words from a Venetian perspective with a clarion call to focus on the endangered life of the lagoon as a “swarm of aquatic creatures” or a complex habitat whereas Cristina Baldacci considers modes of archipelagic sustainability for Venice as a form of cultural and curatorial activism. Writing from

the vantage point of Venice, both Baldacci and Casavecchia examine the emerging practices and collaborations that give rise to ever greater effective (and affective) forms of responsibility towards all forms of environmental injustice.

Swimming Against the Tide is a timely collection of essays by an assembly of artists, curators, scholars, activists, community leaders and anthropologists inspired by the words of the late Māori New Zealand filmmaker Merata Mita (1942-2010), who declared in an interview with writer Helen Martin in 1989, that “swimming against the tide becomes an exhilarating experience. It makes you strong. I am completely without fear now”.² Mita explored the political tensions in Aotearoa during the 1970s and the 80s by championing issues such as Indigenous sovereignty and gender equality. Mita’s words orient this special issue of *Lagoonscapes* towards how localised strategies including art, activism and policy are being shaped to address the global concerns of our times. In the context of the blurring boundaries between nature and culture, and humans and non-humans in the Anthropocene, the essays in this special issue provide an explicitly eco-activist endeavour of interventions into contemporary critical thinking around individuation and personhood. They ask how do we imagine and expand a more flexible and capacious understanding of the human, one that is capable of addressing all terrestrial life? In fact, the still pervasive concept of ‘the human’ in the humanities, derives from a very particular modern European universalising definition of ‘Man’. European discourses monopolised the definition of the human under circumstances of coloniality and placed all other cosmologies at a distance from it.

One of the aims of this special issue of *Lagoonscapes* is to decentralise and provincialise such ‘Man-as-human’ as the subject/object of inquiry, and thus counter and reframe established geographies, histories and temporalities. The *talanoa* dialogues advance new readings of the archives, for instance with Yuki Kihara’s *Paradise Camp* and Chantal Spitz’s critique of French colonisation of Tahiti, in order to find alternative repositories and practices of knowledge and collection to radically redistribute our ways of understanding the meaning of the human. An Oceanic consciousness is discussed by Miriama Bono through the lens of The Oceanian Documentary Film Festival held annually in Tahiti since 2004, as a vital and enduring act of resistance, storytelling and networking.

Wonu Fanny Veys, Reuben Friend and Nathan muddy Sentence examine the curatorial, museological and archival modes of practice from Māori, Indigenous and Oceanic perspectives that are intrinsically linked to seas, waterways, ancestors, memories and language.

² <https://www.nzonscreen.com/profile/merata-mita>.

Friend notes that the Māori word *wai* literally means both ‘who’ and ‘water’ thereby intertwining life and water in an ontological bind. Building bonds of reciprocity and respect for all sentient beings and creatures, *Swimming Against the Tide* ultimately aims to foster understanding, care and inter-relatedness through a *talanoa* methodology of openness.

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