Lagoonscapes

Venice Journal
of Environmental Humanities

e-ISSN 2785-2709

Vol. 3 – Num. 2 December 2023

Edizioni
Ca'Foscari

e-ISSN 2785-2709

Lagoonscapes
The Venice Journal of Environmental Humanities

Editors-in-Chief
Stefano Beggiora
Serenella Iovino

Edizioni Ca' Foscari - Venice University Press
Fondazione Università Ca' Foscari
Dorsoduro 3246, 30123 Venezia
URL https://edizionicafoscari.unive.it/it/edizioni4/riviste/the-venice-journal-of-environmental-humanities/

Lagoonscapes
The Venice Journal of Environmental Humanities

Semestral journal

Editors-in-Chief Stefano Beggiora (Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italia) Serenella Iovino (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, USA)

Managing Editor Alessandra Viola

Advisory Board Joni Adamson (Arizona State University, USA) Marco Armiero (KTH Royal Institute of Technology, Stockholm; CNR-ISMed) Shaul Bassi (Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italia) Gaetano Capizzi (Cinemambiente) Anna Greenspan (NYU Shangai, China) Philip Hayward (University of Technology Sydney, Australia) Federico Luisetti (Universität St. Gallen, Schweiz) Timo Maran (University of Tartu, Estonia) Christof Mauch (Rachel Carson Center for Environment and Society, München, Deutschland) Bénédicte Meillon (Université de Perpignan "Via Domitia", France) Ruth Mostern (University of Pittsburgh, USA) Serpil Oppermann (Cappadocia University, Turkey) Dimitris Papadopoulos (University of Nottingham, UK) Elena Past (Wayne State University, Detroit, USA) John Pickles (University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, USA) Kate Rigby (Universität zu Köln, Deutschland) Scott Slovic (University of Idaho, USA) Jonathan Soffer (New York University Tandon School of Engineering, USA) Heather Sullivan (Trinity University, USA) Thom van Dooren (University of Sidney, Australia) Enrico Vicenti (UNESCO) Molly Westling (University of Oregon, USA) Hubert Zapf (Universität Augsburg, Deutschland)

Editorial Board Daniele Brombal (Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italia) Valentina Bonifacio (Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italia) Giovanni Bulian (Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italia) David Gentilcore (Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italia) Pietro Daniel Omodeo (Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italia) Fabio Pranovi (Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italia) Roberta Raffaetà (Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italia) Francesca Tarocco (Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italia) Federica Maria Giovanna Timeto (Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italia) Francesco Vacchiano (Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italia) Francesco Vallerani (Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italia) Massimo Warglien (Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italia)

Head office Università Ca' Foscari Venezia | THE NEW INSTITUTE Center for Environmental Humanities | Ca' Bottacin | Dorsoduro 3911, 30123 Venezia, Italia | hsc_journal@unive.it

Publisher Edizioni Ca' Foscari | Fondazione Università Ca' Foscari | Dorsoduro 3246, 30123 Venezia, Italia | ecf@unive.it

© 2023 Università Ca' Foscari Venezia
© 2023 Edizioni Ca' Foscari for the present edition

Quest'opera è distribuita con Licenza Creative Commons Attribuzione 4.0 Internazionale
This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License

THE NEW INSTITUTE Center for Environmental Humanities at Ca' Foscari University of Venice gratefully acknowledges the support of THE NEW INSTITUTE Foundation gGmbH.

THE NEW INSTITUTE Centre for Environmental Humanities (NICHE) at Ca' Foscari University of Venice

Certificazione scientifica delle Opere pubblicate da Edizioni Ca' Foscari: tutti i saggi pubblicati hanno ottenuto il parere favorevole da parte di valutatori esperti della materia, attraverso un processo di revisione anonima sotto la responsabilità del Comitato scientifico della rivista. La valutazione è stata condotta in aderenza ai criteri scientifici ed editoriali di Edizioni Ca' Foscari.
Scientific certification of the works published by Edizioni Ca' Foscari: all essays published in this issue have received a favourable opinion by subject-matter experts, through an anonymous peer review process under the responsibility of the Advisory Board of the journal. The evaluations were conducted in adherence to the scientific and editorial criteria established by Edizioni Ca' Foscari.

Lagoonscapes
Vol. 3 – Num. 2 – December 2023

e-ISSN 2785-2709

Table of Contents

SWIMMING AGAINST THE TIDE

Introduction
Swimming Against the Tide
Francesca Tarocco, Natalie King 177

Vā Fealoa'i **– Nurturing the Space Between People and Between People and Nature**
Yuki Kihara 183

Our Sea of Islands
Epeli Hau'ofa 197

A Fish Out of Water?
Barbara Casavecchia 209

Bodies of Water: Fluidity and Indigenous Curatorial Praxis
Reuben Friend 219

The *Vārchive* Revolution: The Imperative for Indigenous Truth-Telling and Redefining Heritage Preservation
Nathan Mudyi Sentance, Madeline Poll, Tammi Gissell 235

Nuclear Testing in French Polynesia: After Fifty Years of Lies and State Secrets
How to Calm Our Anger and Rebuild Ourselves
Chantal Spitz 247

The Monstrous Sea
Veronica Strang 257

URL https://edizionicafoscari.unive.it/it/edizioni/riviste/the-venice-journal-of-environmental-humanities/2023/2/
DOI http://doi.org/10.30687/LGSP/2785-2709/2023/02

The Oceanian Documentary Film: A New Form of Resistance
Miriama Bono 285

Overlapping Methods and Values in Critical Pacific Approaches to Making Contemporary Art
Joy Enomoto, Katerina Teaiwa 293

Peggy Guggenheim and the Pacific
Fanny Wonu Veys 305

An Archipelago of Ecological Care
Venice, Its Lagoon and Contemporary Art
Cristina Baldacci 321

Swimming Against the Tide

edited by Natalie King and Francesca Tarocco

e-ISSN 2785-2709

Lagoonscapes
Vol. 3 – Num. 2 – December 2023

Introduction
Swimming Against the Tide

Natalie King
The University of Melbourne, Australia

Francesca Tarocco
Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italia

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 Hauʻofa'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. (Hauʻofa 1994, 152)

"The world of Oceania is not small", Epeli Hauʻofa mused while gazing at the fiery majesty of Hawaiʻi'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 Hauʻofa 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.

e-ISSN 2785-2709

Figure 1 *Le Monde au Temps des Surrealistes* (The Surrealist Map of the World). *Variétés*, Brussels, 1929

human and non-human communities, notes Veronica Strang in this issue, are constantly threatened by 'infrastructural violence', "the building of sea walls, flood defences, harbours and other barriers aiming to keep the sea from invading and overwhelming *terra firma*" (Helmreich 2019).

Swimming Against the Tide originated as a Talanoa Forum initiated and conceived by interdisciplinary artist Yuki Kihara on the occasion of her critically acclaimed exhibition *Paradise Camp* for Aotearoa New Zealand at the 59th Venice Biennale 2022. Notably, Kihara was the first Pasifika, Asian, Indigenous and *fa'afafine* (third gender) artist to represent Aotearoa New Zealand with an exhibition and programming that audaciously returned the Western, colonial gaze in an hilarious act of defiance and reclamation across *siapo* wallpaper with sumptuous photographs that re-enact major paintings by post-Impressionist Paul Gauguin upcycled and recast with her own community.

Talanoa Forum augmented *Paradise Camp* with a gathering in October 2022 to bring critical dialogue to the themes of her exhibition such as "Turning the Tide: Indigenous water beings and multi-species democracy" by Veronica Strang and "Personhood and Water Bodies: Cosmological and Legal Frameworks" with Ocean Space, Earth Council and NICHE, Ca' Foscari as well as Alex Sua, President of the Sāmoan Fa'afafine Association and Ngahuia Te Awekotuku's keynote on Rotorua's thermal pools and Māori depictions in literature.

Held online and in person at Ca' Foscari University of Venice, Talanoa Forum orientated audiences towards issues related to the climate crisis. It also reflected on socially engaged art practices, community

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), Epeli Hauʻofa 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" (Hauʻofa 1994, 158-9).

Many Pacific Islanders have embraced Hauʻofa'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

e-ISSN 2785-2709

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 mudyi 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.

e-ISSN 2785-2709

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-relationality through a *talanoa* methodology of openness.

Acknowledgments

The Editors sincerely acknowledge Editors-in-Chief Stefano Beggiora and Serenella Iovino for granting us this special opportunity to co-edit *Lagoonscapes*. We thank Yuki Kihara, Artistic Director of Talanoa Forum for initiating pan-Pacific dialogues with the Global North during the 59th Venice Biennale and at Powerhouse Museum, Sydney; the essayists for their thoughtful, erudite and original contributions; Mariateresa Sala for her utmost professionalism in bringing the issue together; the peer reviewers; the translator Jean Anderson; VCA and CoVA at University of Melbourne as well as THE NEW INSTITUTE Centre for Environmental Humanities (NICHE) at Ca' Foscari University of Venice for their ongoing support of revisionist writings.

Bibliography

Hau'ofa, E. (1994). "Our Sea of Islands". *The Contemporary Pacific*, 6, 148-61. https://www.jstor.org/stable/23701593.

Helmreich, S. (2019). "Domesticating Waves in the Netherlands". *BOMB Magazine*, 146, 153-8. https://www.jstor.org/stable/26876282.

Hindley, P.; November, N.; Sturm, S. (2020). "Rolling Out the Mat: A *Talanoa* on *Talanoa* as a Higher Education Research Methodology". Huisman, J.; Tight, M. (eds), *Theory and Method in Higher Education Research*, 99-113. Leeds: Emerald Publishing Limited. https://doi.org/10.1108/s2056-375220200000006007.

Kirsch, S. (2020). "Why Pacific Islanders Stopped Worrying about the Apocalypse and Started Fighting Climate Change". *American Anthropologist*, 122(4), 827-39. https://doi.org/10.1111/aman.13471.

Mortimer, N. et al. (2023). "Reconnaissance Basement Geology and Tectonics of North Zealandia". *Tectonics*, 42, e2023TC007961. https://doi.org/10.1029/2023TC007961.

e-ISSN 2785-2709

Lagoonscapes
Vol. 3 – Num. 2 – December 2023

Vā Fealoa'i – Nurturing the Space Between People and Between People and Nature

Yuki Kihara
Artist; THE NEW INSTITUTE Centre for Environmental Humanities,
Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italia

Abstract This article explores the Sāmoan concept of *Vā fealoa'i* meaning 'nurturing the space between people; and between people and nature' and how it is embedded in my art practice, which reflects local, global and glocal considerations including a socially engaged, community outreach project involving Sāmoa's third gender community that aims to highlight the specificity of their local experience with climate change, which is often neglected by governments and NGO's. This article will also examine a textile exhibition entitled サーモアのうた (*Sāmoa no uta*) *A Song About Sāmoa* (2019-23) that explores the often hidden histories between Japan and the Pacific and specifically Sāmoa that goes beyond geopolitical boundaries as a man-made idea; and a video work, entitled *Smoke and Mirrors* (2023), which addresses environmental colonialism disguised as foreign diplomacy.

Keywords Contemporary art. Pacific. Exhibitions. Community outreach. Gender.

This text partly reproduces portions of other texts that appeared online. Cf. https://samblog.seattleartmuseum.org/tag/samoan-art/; https://samblog.seattleart-museum.org/2022/12/saturday-university-yuki-kihara/; https://yukikihara.ws/kimono-phase-3/artist-statement; https://yukikihara.ws/artist-statement.

Edizioni
Ca'Foscari

Submitted 2023-09-28
Published 2023-12-20

Open access

© 2023 Kihara | cc-by 4.0

Citation Kihara, Y. (2023). "*Vā fealoa'i* – Nurturing the Space Between People and Between People and Nature". *Lagoonscapes. The Venice Journal of Environmental Humanities*, 3(2), 183-196.

DOI 10.30687/LGSP/2785-2709/2023/01/001

At first glance, the vast oceanscape in my exhibition *Paradise Camp* appears idyllic, synonymous with unpolluted and vacant white sandy beaches that are constantly re-created by the tourism industry. First presented at the Aotearoa New Zealand Pavilion as part of the 59th Venice Biennale, this immersive panoramic wallpaper depicts an oceanscape from the Manusina Beach Fale in the village of Saleapaga part of the district of Aleipata in Upolu Island, the Independent State of Sāmoa **[fig. 1]**. Idealised beach scenes are also commonly featured on the screen savers of millions of people around the world, becoming ironic or clichéd in popular culture. However, those clichéd images of white sandy beaches are real places in Sāmoa with real people who have lived there for generations, faced with real life issues.

The village of Saleapaga was one of the worst hit villages during the 29th September 2009 tsunami that took the lives of 189 people. The slow recovery from the tsunami is compounded by rising sea-levels. Scientific data shows that the global average for sea level rise is 2.8-3.5 millimetres a year, compared to Sāmoa's sea level rise measuring up to 4 millimetres a year. Approximately 70% of Sāmoa's population and infrastructure are located in low-lying coastal areas which makes them extremely vulnerable to the impacts of climate change.

The impact of sea-level rising triggered by climate change can be seen along the coastlines in Upolu Island **[fig. 2]**, where saltwater encroaches on the land and overtakes the fresh water that deciduous trees rely upon for sustenance. The salinisation of the soil as a result of sea level rise poisons living trees, leaving a haunted ghost forest of dead and dying timber. The dead trees can be seen during low-tide before they are covered by high-tide. This causes stress and panic to communities living in coastal areas who have to consider moving further inland, where the strain is often directed at the members of the *fa'afafine* (assigned male at birth who express their gender in a feminine way) and the *fa'atama* (assigned female at birth who express their gender in a masculine way) – an Indigenous third and fourth gender communities in Sāmoa that falls outside of the Judeo-Christian gender binary are often used as scapegoat to blame Climate change, despite *fa'afafine* and *fa'atama*'s under recognised contribution to their clan, village and the nation. In addition, the absence of the legal recognition of *fa'afafine* and *fa'atama* in Sāmoa means that the experiences of the heteronormative community are prioritised in data collection that informs policies and legislations. Subsequently, Climate change resource distribution informed by policies that enforces Western gender binary classifications undermines the collective resilience between *fa'afafine*, *fa'atama*, *fafine* (Woman) and *Tane* (Man) which sustained Sāmoa for over the past 3,000 years. These compounding issues impact me personally as I also identify as a *fa'afafine* based in Sāmoa.

Sea level rising is depicted in my floor image *Moana Rising* (2023) at Powerhouse Museum, Gadigal land Sydney **[fig. 4]**. The image also

Figure 1 *Oceanscape* (2022) by Yuki Kihara.
Courtesy of Yuki Kihara and Milford Galleries, Aotearoa, New Zealand

references the actions taken to address the *fa'afafine* and the *fa'atama* community's lack of visibility within climate change spaces. On the 1st July 2021, I helped organise a Climate change workshop directed at the *fa'afafine* and *fa'atama* community as a way to building understanding and resilience against Climate change with the support of the Sāmoa Fa'afafine Association (SFA) and the Pacific Climate Change Centre (PCCC) [fig. 3]. The workshop came about as a result of my consultation between PCCC and SFA, which became a catalyst in bringing the organisations together to a talanoa in an open and transparent dialogue. For me, representation of *fa'afafine* and *Fa'afatama* communities in the *Paradise Camp* exhibition was not enough to address the practical and pragmatic approach that needed to address more immediate issues affecting the *fa'afafine* and *fa'afatama* communities.

The word *Moana* is a pan-Pacific word used to describe the Pacific Ocean. Sāmoan writer Albert Wendt describes the Pacific as having close to over 20 thousand Islands and over 2,500 Indigenous languages actively spoken every day (Wendt 1976). The Pacific Ocean is so vast it occupies one-third of earth's surface making it the biggest liquid continent on earth. In his 1993 essay "Our Sea of Islands", the late Tongan philosopher Epeli Hau'ofa wrote:

> Continental men, namely Europeans, on entering the Pacific after crossing huge expanses of ocean, introduced the view of 'islands in a far sea'. From this perspective the islands are tiny, isolated dots in a vast ocean. Later on [they] drew imaginary lines across the sea, making the colonial boundaries that confined ocean Peoples to tiny spaces for the first time. Today, these boundaries define the island states and territories of the Pacific. (1994, 153)

I extend Hau'ofa's idea of the 'colonial boundaries' to describe the geopolitical divisions between Asia and specifically Japan and the

Figure 2 Artist Yuki Kihara at Mulivai-Safata in Upolu Island, Sāmoa in 2022. Photo courtesy of Yuki Kihara

Figure 3 Group photo of the members from the Sāmoa Fa'afafine Association at the Climate Change workshop presented by the Pacific Climate Change Centre, 1st July 2021 in Upolu Island, Sāmoa. Photo courtesy of Yuki Kihara

Figure 4 Yuki Kihara, *Moana Rising* (2023). Floor work commissioned by the Powerhouse Museum for *Paradise Camp* (2020-23) exhibition curated by Natalie King. Courtesy of Yuki Kihara and Milford Galleries, Aotearoa New Zealand

Pacific, where the growing influence of Chinese aid projects together with the Fukushima nuclear disaster has seen Japan pivot to the Pacific as an opportunity to forge new diplomatic ties which was formally neglected. However, the aim of my *siapo* kimonos is to shed light on the human relationships developed between the meeting of cultures that goes beyond the rhetoric of diplomatic relations and geopolitical agendas that colours Sāmoa Japan relations today.

In 2015, I came across an old kimono owned by my late Japanese grandmother Masako Kihara where the colour of the kimono reminded her of *siapo* – a hand-made Sāmoan backcloth made from the *Lau u'a* (paper mulberry tree). This was the initial inspiration to bring together textile traditions from Sāmoa (*siapo*) and Japan (kimono) into a cross-cultural fusion to create a series of *siapo* kimono where kimono made from Sāmoan bark cloth is presented as sculpture.

The title of the series is adapted from a popular Japanese song entitled サモアのうた (*Samoatou no uta*) in Japanese meaning 'A Song from Sāmoa'. The work is adapted from a title of a popular Japanese song featured in music text books for elementary school students in Japan. The origin of the song was developed as a result of a visit by NHK film crew or the National Broadcasting Corporation who were filming in Sāmoa during the late 1950s. A young anthropologist, Sachiko Hatanaka, acted as a mediator between the film crew and the local Sāmoan people. Hatanaka arranged to film the children from Sapapali'i Elementary School singing and dancing. Later, NHK wanted to use the scene of the Sāmoan children and translate the Sāmoan lyrics into Japanese, but before Hatanaka could find a translator, NHK found a lyricist to create Japanese lyrics to match the scene and melody. The scene of the Sāmoan children with Japanese lyrics was later sung by the NHK's Tokyo Children's Choir in the NHK's "Minnanouta (Songs for All)" series. This resulted in a great hit and was published in the music textbook for elementary school, which continues to be sung today. Upon inspecting the Japanese lyrics to the song however, it describes Sāmoa as a paradise on earth settled by noble savages.

The cultural links between Japan and Sāmoa has been theorised by Sāmoan writer Albert Wendt, who compared the Sāmoan notion of *vā* to the Māori and Japanese notion of *wā* (和). He explains that

> Vā is the space between, the betweenness, not an empty space, not a space that separates but space that relates, that holds separate entities and things together in the Unity-that-is-All, the space that is context, giving meaning to things. The meanings change as the relationships and the contexts change. A well-known Sāmoan expression is 'Ia teu le vā'. Cherish/nurse/care for the vā, the relationships. This is crucial in communal cultures that value group, unity, more than individualism: who perceive the individual person/creature/thing in terms of group, in terms of vā, relationships. (Wendt 1996)

There are many facets of *Vā* in Sāmoan culture however in the context of this essay, the notion of *Vā fealoa'i* meaning "to nurture the space between people; and between people and nature" would be appropriate in describing my intent in creating awareness between the multi-layered relationship through art.

It is from within this context of the *Vā fealoa'i* that my work entitled サーモアのうた *Sāmoa no uta (A Song About Sāmoa)* (2019-23) – a five year project was developed. Here, the cultural function of the Japanese *kimono* and the Sāmoan *siapo* which both serve as a repository of ancestral stories are brought together as a metaphor to reframe the relationship between Japan and the Pacific and specifically Sāmoa, taking an Indigenous interpretation of trans-Pacific identity, gender, and history, while referencing my own interracial Sāmoan and Japanese heritage as a point of conceptual departure.

There are a total of 25 *siapo* kimonos presented between 2019 till 2023, ultimately forming one major mural. The *siapo* kimonos are also presented alongside my Japanese grandmother's silk kimono which first gave me the inspiration, and to also honor her passing.

Figure 5 Phase 1 "Vasa (Ocean)". 2019. Part of サーモアのうた (*Sāmoa no uta*) *A Song About Sāmoa* (2019-23) by Yuki Kihara. Courtesy of Yuki Kihara and Milford Galleries, Aotearoa New Zealand

Phase 1 entitled "Vasa (Ocean)" (2019) portrays the current state of the surrounding ocean in Sāmoa where sea creatures and corals are being threatened by global warming and frequent cyclones. A flock of *Tūlī* (Pacific Golden Plover) that migrates between Serbia, Alaska, Japan and across the South Pacific has stood witness to the changes in the Moana for centuries [fig. 5]. "The Great Wave off Kanagawa" woodblock print by Japanese ukiyo-e artist Hokusai, created in late 1831 has been adapted to represent the shape of the tsunami like waves in reference to the tsunami disaster in Sāmoa in 2009 and the Fukushima nuclear disaster of 2011 with both places sharing the same sea floor.

There are virtually no corals left in Sāmoa due to the impact of cyclones, natural disasters and rising ocean acidification since the seventeenth century, which coincides with the arrival of first Europeans in Sāmoa. The coconuts floating on waves allude to the Japanese poem *Yashi no mi* (A Coconut) by poet Shimazaki Toson please include poem. The poem was inspired by Shimazaki's friend, the folklorist Yanagita Kunio, who found a coconut on Iragomisaki Beach in Aichi-ken in central Honshu Island, which led him to believe that the origins of Japanese people were from the South, perhaps Okinawa or the Pacific Islands. The floating coconuts also share the ocean waves alongside a floating plastic bag and coke can alluding to the human impact on the ocean.

Figure 6 Phase 2 "Fanua (Land)". 2021. Part of サーモアのうた (*Sāmoa no uta*) *A Song About Sāmoa* (2019-23) by Yuki Kihara. Courtesy of Yuki Kihara and Milford Galleries, Aotearoa New Zealand

Phase 2 entitled "Fanua (Land)" (2020) serves as a forewarning against Sāmoa's speculative future that favours economic development and globalisation at the expense of traditional knowledge systems and the local environment **[fig. 6]**. The newly built Vaisigano bridge in Apia was officially completed and opened to the public on Tuesday 11th August 2020, constructed with the assistance of the Japanese government which commenced in April 2018. The new bridge is 75 metres long and 1.5 metres higher than the previous bridge which was in danger of extreme floods as climate change became intensified over the years. For me, the creation of the new bridge symbolised a stark warning about the future as pandemics and climate change reinforce each other as an existential threat, particularly for vulnerable people in Pacific countries.

Japanese aid together with aid from other industrialised countries in Sāmoa are part of what Development studies scholar Dr Masami Tsujita calls an "aidscape" where much of Sāmoa's infrustructure is heavily funded by foreign aid are slowing changing the aesthetic of the local culture in addition to influencing the way Sāmoa elect countries for the United Nations Secuiry Council. "Fanua (Land)" (2020) aims to raise questions about the impact foreign aid projects have on the sustainabilty of the local environment in Sāmoa, among others, including the introduction of invasive weeds by live stock from aborad overtaking traditional medicinal plants and clearing of lands to accomodate for the already struggling tourism sector at the expense of endangering the local habitat. The absence of people in the *siapo* kimono aims to highlight how earth's climate and ecosystems are beng impacted as a result of human activity.

e-ISSN 2785-2709

Figure 7 Phase 3 "Moana (Pacific Ocean)". 2023. Part of サーモアのうた (*Sāmoa no uta*) *A Song About Sāmoa* (2019-23) by Yuki Kihara. Courtesy of Yuki Kihara and Milford Galleries, Aotearoa New Zealand. © Gui Taccetti

Phase 3 entitled "Moana (Pacific)" (2023) serves as forewarning against the increasing levels of resource extraction including fisheries and seabed mining by foreign powers seeking to affirm their geopolitical dominance across the Pacific Ocean [fig. 7].[1] The surface design of the *siapo* kimonos portrays a chaotic oceanscape with nuclear testing occuring in the background while a series of hands pierce through the mushroom clouds uprooting marine species while deep-sea mining are simultaneously happening in the Pacific. The hands from the sky are loosely inspired by an ancient lore describing the genesis of the Sāmoan word '*Pālagi*' – where Sāmoans upon seeing the first Europeans across the horizon, believed they had pierced (*Pā*) through the sky (*lagi*). In and among the chaos, however, we see a Pacific double hull canoe using traditional navigation methods sailing across the ocean as a symbol of Indigenous resilience while foreign vessels arrive nearby to compete for domination.[2]

The missile launched from the Japanese submarine (from the *siapo* kimono on the second left) alludes to an incident which occured on 13th January 1942, where a Japanese submarine surfaced off Tutuila Island between Southworth Point and Fagasa Bay in American Sāmoa. The Japanese submarine fired 15 shells aimed at the U.S. Naval Station in Tutuila Island only for the first shell to fall at the rear of Frank Shimasaki's store which did not detonate. Ironically, the store was owned by one of Tutuila's few Japanese residents. The store was closed, as Mr. Shimasaki had been interned as an enemy alien.

1 `https://yukikihara.ws/kimono-phase-3/artist-statement`. This text partly reproduces portions of other texts that appeared online and quoting those sources.

2 `https://yukikihara.ws/kimono-phase-3/artist-statement`. This text partly reproduces portions of other texts that appeared online and quoting those sources.

e-ISSN 2785-2709

Figure 8 Phase 4 "Taiheiyō (Pacific)". 2023. Part of サーモアのうた (*Sāmoa no uta*) *A Song About Sāmoa* (2019-23) by Yuki Kihara Courtesy of Yuki Kihara and Milford Galleries, Aotearoa New Zealand. © Gui Taccetti.

Phase 4 entitled "Taiheiyō (Pacific)" (2023) is inspired by my visit to the Spa Resort Hawaiʻians in Iwaki city in the Fukushima prefecture in Japan in 2015; and how history of the resort resonated with the 1962 film entitled *King Kong VS Godzilla* **[fig. 8]**.

In 2015, I conducted site visits to Fukushima prefecture, among others, including the Spa Resort Hawaiʻians (SRH) – one of Japan's biggest hot spring park located in Iwaki city. SRH's marketing campaign which catered towards the local people relied heavily on the aesthetic of Polynesian tourism. SRH was also the venue for the PALM8 Summit (Eighth Pacific Islands Leaders Meeting) held in May 2018 chaired by Sāmoa Prime Minister Tuilae'pa Sailele Malieolegaoi, and hosted by Japan Prime Minister Shinto Abe. The PALM Summit is often seen as an extension of Japan's history of colonial and imperial expansion across the Pacific.

The ongoing diplomatic relationship between Japan and the Pacific is ironically played out in the popular Japanese sci-fi film entitled *King Kong VS Godzilla* (1962) directed by Ishiro Honda, which portrays the Pacific through a colonial lens. In the film, a Japanese corporation called the 'Pacific pharmaceuticals' kidnaps King Kong from Farou Island – a fictitious Island in the Pacific and transported to Japan, where King Kong escapes from captivity and battles recently released Godzilla, a prehistoric sea monster empowered by nuclear radiation from an American submarine. The film also features Japanese actors brown-faced as Pacific people worshipping King Kong as a god. During their fierce battle in Japan, King Kong and Godzilla destroy Atami Castle and both fall off a cliff together into the Pacific Ocean. After an underwater battle, only King Kong resurfaces, and swim towards his Island home. There is no sign of Godzilla, but the Japan self-defence forces speculates that it may have survived.

Symbolically, Godzilla represents a powerful alliance between Japan and US which saw US building nuclear powerplants across Japan as a show of technological advancement against King Kong representing the Pacific as 'the other' being less advanced. However, Phase 4 sub-theme

entitled "Taiheiyō (Pacific)" (2023) reframes the film's fictional plot by making reference to the reality of nuclear waste – created as a result of Japan/US alliance – leaking into the Pacific Ocean from the damaged Fukushima Daiichi power plant in 2011; thus impacting the ecology, marine life and fisheries that Japan and the Pacific countries both rely on for food security. This paradoxical relationship alludes to the late Teresia Teaiwa's definition of "militourism" as a "phenomenon by which a military or paramilitary force ensures the running of a tourist industry, and that same tourist industry masks the military force behind it".

Figure 9 Phase 5 "Tūlī's Flight". 2023. Part of サーモアのうた (*Sāmoa no uta*) *A Song About Sāmoa* (2019-23) by Yuki Kihara Courtesy of Yuki Kihara and Milford Galleries, Aotearoa New Zealand. © Gui Taccetti

Phase 5 entitled "Tūlī's Flight" that is currently in production will be presented jointly as a solo exhibition held at Milford Galleries, Aotearoa New Zealand opening on the 1st of December 2023 **[fig. 9]**.

Environmental colonialism disguised as foreign diplomacy is explored in my single channel video work entitled *Smoke and Mirrors* (2023) which juxtaposes video footage of environments filmed between Sāmoa and the Netherlands. The right side of the screen features a handheld video footage capturing Tropical Cyclone Gita and its chaotic aftermath filmed in Upolu Island, Sāmoa in 2018; while the left side of the screen features a video footage of gentle smoke coming out of a factory chimney filmed during my fellowship hosted by the National Museum of World Cultures in the Netherlands in 2019. While Sāmoa in the Pacific and the Netherlands in Europe are geographically distant, they are both connected by a shared global ecosystem albeit with excessive levels of carbon emissions by the later that's triggering global warming and climate change.

The Cambridge dictionary defines *Smoke and Mirrors* as "intended to make you believe that something is being done or is true, when it is not". The video work serves as a metaphor where the title alludes to how foreign aid often serves as a smoke screen to conceal greater climate impacts experienced by low and middle income countries than richer counterparts, informed by a history of imperialism and colonialism that has devastated biodiversity therefore impacting people's livelihood and their close dependence on thriving ecosystems.

Figure 10a-e Stills from *Smoke and Mirrors* (2023) single channel video work by Yuki Kihara

Smoke and Mirrors (2023) serves as a clarion call to decolonise our perceptions about the natural environment and to partake of a richer and more equitable exchange between people and places.[3]

Conclusion

The works featured in my chapter allude to the Sāmoan Indigenous reference of *Vā fealoa'i* by shedding light on space that nurtures the relationship between people; and between people and nature including the vast *Moana* that connects us all. They also explore the nuances between gender, race, climate change and representation and their intersectionality that often compound each other to marginalise Indigenous peoples and call to action against government agencies for the inclusion of *fa'afafine* and *fa'atama* experiences and perspectives into climate change policies. サーモアのうた *Sāmoa no uta (A Song About Sāmoa)* (2019-23) series illustrates the stories hidden in the space-between the geo-political borders of Japan and the Pacific and specifically Sāmoa through a process of cultural fusion partly informed by my ancestral ties and interrogates Japan's occupation of the Pacific from an Indigenous perspective. *Smoke and Mirrors* (2023) serves as a metaphor to highlight environmental colonialism disguised as foreign diplomacy. It is my hope that Talanoa Forum can help shed light on lesser known stories about the *Moana*, while sparking dialogue about the origins of current challenges, and potential ways to overcome them.

3 https://yukikihara.ws/kimono-phase-3/artist-statement. This text partly reproduces portions of other texts that appeared online and quoting those sources.

e-ISSN 2785-2709

Bibliography

Epeli Hau'ofa, E. (1994). "Our Sea of Islands". *The Contemporary Pacific*, 6(1), 148-61. https://www.jstor.org/stable/23701593.
Wendt, A. (1976). "Towards a New Oceania". *Mana Review*, 1, 49-60.
Wendt, A. (1996). "Tatauing the Post-Colonial Body". *Span*, 42-3, 15-29. https://www.nzepc.auckland.ac.nz/authors/wendt/tatauing.asp.

e-ISSN 2785-2709

Lagoonscapes
Vol. 3 – Num. 2 – December 2023

Our Sea of Islands

Epeli Hauʻofa

This essay raises some issues of great importance to our region, and offers a view of Oceania that is new and optimistic. What I say here is likely to disturb a number of men and women who have dedicated their lives to Oceania and for whom I hold the greatest respect and affection, and always will.

In our region, two levels of operation are pertinent to the purposes of this paper. The first is that of national governments and regional and international diplomacy, in which the present and future of Pacific island states and territories are planned and decided on. Discussions here are the preserve of politicians, bureaucrats, statutory body officials, diplomats and the military, and representatives of the financial and business communities, often in conjunction with donor and international lending organizations, and advised by academic and consultancy experts. Much that passes at this level concerns aid, concessions, trade, investment, defense and security, matters that have taken the Pacific further and further into dependency on powerful nations.

The other level is that of ordinary people, peasants and proletarians, who, because of the poor flow of benefits from the top, skepticism about stated policies and the like, tend to plan and make decisions about their lives independently, sometimes with surprising and dramatic results that go unnoticed or ignored at the top. Moreover, academic and consultancy experts tend to overlook or misinterpret

The present article was previously published in *The Contemporary Pacific*, 6(1), Spring 1994, 148-61. https://www.jstor.org/stable/23701593.

Edizioni
Ca'Foscari

Published 2023-12-22

Open access

© 2023 Hauʻofa | CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

Citation Hauʻofa, E. [1994] (2023). "Our Sea of Islands". *Lagoonscapes. The Venice Journal of Environmental Humanities*, 3(2), 197-208.

DOI 10.30687/LGSP/2785-2709/2023/01/002

grassroots activities because they do not fit with prevailing views about the nature of society and its development.

Views of the Pacific from the level of macroeconomics and macropolitics often differ markedly from those from the level of ordinary people. The vision of Oceania presented in this essay is based on my observations of behavior at the grass roots.

Having clarified my vantage point, I make a statement of the obvious that views held by those in dominant positions about their subordinates could have significant consequences for people's self-image and for the ways they cope with their situations. Such views, which are often derogatory and belittling, are integral to most relationships of dominance and subordination, wherein superiors behave in ways or say things that are accepted by their inferiors, who in turn behave in ways that serve to perpetuate the relationships.

In Oceania, derogatory and belittling views of indigenous cultures are traceable to the early years of interactions with Europeans. The wholesale condemnation by Christian missionaries of Oceanic cultures as savage, lascivious, and barbaric has had a lasting and negative effect on people's views of their histories and traditions. In a number of Pacific societies people still divide their history into two parts: the era of darkness associated with savagery and barbarism; and the era of light and civilization ushered in by Christianity.

In Papua New Guinea, European males were addressed and referred to as 'masters' and workers as 'boys'. Even indigenous policemen were called 'police boys'. This use of language helped to reinforce the colonially established social stratification along ethnic divisions. A direct result of colonial practices and denigration of Melanesian peoples and cultures as even more primitive and barbaric than those of Polynesia can be seen in the attempts during the immediate postcolonial years by articulate Melanesians to rehabilitate their cultural identity by cleansing it of its colonial taint and denigration. Leaders like Walter Lini of Vanuatu and Bernard Narokobi of Papua New Guinea have spent much of their energy extolling the virtues of Melanesian values as egual to if not better than those of their erstwhile colonizers.

Europeans did not invent belittlement. In many societies it was part and parcel of indigenous cultures. In the aristocratic societies of Polynesia parallel relationships of dominance and subordination with their paraphernalia of appropriate attitudes and behavior were the order of the day. In Tonga, the term for commoners is *me'a vale* 'the ignorant ones', which is a survival from an era when the aristocracy controlled all important knowledge in the society. Keeping the ordinary folk in the dark and calling them ignorant made it easier to control and subordinate them.

I would like, however, to focus on a currently prevailing notion about Islanders and their physical surroundings that, if not countered

e-ISSN 2785-2709

with more constructive views, could inflict lasting damage on people's images of themselves, and on their ability to act with relative autonomy in their endeavors to survive reasonably well within the international system in which they have found themselves. It is a belittling view that has been unwittingly propagated, mostly by social scientists who have sincere concern for the welfare of Pacific peoples.

According to this view, the small island states and territories of the Pacific, that is, all of Polynesia and Micronesia, are much too small, too poorly endowed with resources, and too isolated from the centers of economic growth for their inhabitants ever to be able to rise above their present condition of dependence on the largesse of wealthy nations.

Initially, I agreed wholeheartedly with this perspective, and I participated actively in its propagation. It seemed to be based on irrefutable evidence, on the reality of our existence. Events of the 1970s and 1980s confirmed the correctness of this view. The hoped-for era of autonomy following political independence did not materialize. Our national leaders were in the vanguard of a rush to secure financial aid from every quarter; our economies were stagnating or declining; our environments were deteriorating or were threatened and we could do little about it; our own people were evacuating themselves to greener pastures elsewhere. Whatever remained of our resources, including our exclusive economic zones, was being hawked for the highest bid. Some of our islands had become, in the words of one social scientist, "MIRAB societies" – pitiful microstates condemned forever to depend on migration, remittances, aid, and bureaucracy, and not on any real economic productivity. Even the better resource endowed Melanesian countries were mired in dependency, indebtedness, and seemingly endless social fragmentation and political instability. What hope was there for us?

This bleak view of our existence was so relentlessly pushed that I began to be concerned about its implications. I tried to find a way out but could not. Then two years ago I began noticing the reactions of my students when I described and explained our situation of dependence. Their faces crumbled visibly, they asked for solutions, I could offer none. I was so bound to the notion of smallness that even if we improved our approaches to production, for example, the absolute size of our islands would still impose such severe limitations that we would be defeated in the end.

But the faces of my students continued to haunt me mercilessly. I began asking questions of myself. What kind of teaching is it to stand in front of young people from your own region, people you claim as your own, who have come to university with high hopes for the future, and you tell them that our countries are hopeless? Is this not what neocolonialism is all about? To make people believe that they have no choice but to depend?

Soon the realization dawned on me. In propagating a view of hopelessness, I was actively participating in our own belittlement. I decided to do something about it, but I thought that since any new perspective must confront some of the sharpest and most respected minds in the region, it must be well researched and thought out if it was to be taken seriously. It was a daunting task, and I hesitated.

Then came invitations for me to speak at Kona and Hilo on the Big Island of Hawai'i at the end of March 1993. The lecture at Kona, to a meeting of the Association of Social Anthropologists in Oceania, was written before I left Suva. The speech at the University of Hawai'i at Hilo was forming in my mind and was to be written when I got to Hawai'i. I had decided to try out my new perspective, although it had not been properly researched. I could hold back no longer. The drive from Kona to Hilo was my 'road to Damascus'. I saw such scenes of grandeur as I had not seen before: the eerie blackness of regions covered by recent volcanic eruptions; the remote majesty of Maunaloa, long and smooth, the world's largest volcano; the awesome craters of Kdauea threatening to erupt at any moment; and the lava flow on the coast not far away. Under the aegis of Pele, and before my very eyes, the Big Island was growing, rising from the depths of a mighty sea. The world of Oceania is not small; it is huge and growing bigger every day.

The idea that the countries of Polynesia[1] and Micronesia are too small, too poor, and too isolated to develop any meaningful degree of autonomy is an economistic and geographic deterministic view of a very narrow kind that overlooks culture history and the contemporary process of what may be called world enlargement that is carried out by tens of thousands of ordinary Pacific Islanders right across the ocean-from east to west and north to south, under the very noses of academic and consultancy experts, regional and international development agencies, bureaucratic planners and their advisers, and customs and immigration officials-making nonsense of all national and economic boundaries, borders that have been defined only recently, crisscrossing an ocean that had been boundless for ages before Captain Cook's apotheosis.

If this very narrow, deterministic perspective is not questioned and checked, it could contribute importantly to an eventual consignment of groups of human beings to a perpetual state of wardship wherein they and their surrounding lands and seas would be at the mercy of the manipulators of the global economy and 'world orders' of one kind or another. Belittlement in whatever guise, if internalized for long, and transmitted across generations, may lead to

1 For geographic and cultural reasons I include Fiji in Polynesia. Fiji however, is much bigger and better endowed with natural resources than all tropical Polynesian entities.

e-ISSN 2785-2709

moral paralysis, to apathy, and to the kind of fatalism that we can see among our fellow human beings who have been herded and confined to reservations or internment camps. People in some of our islands are in danger of being confined to mental reservations, if not already to physical ones. I am thinking here of people in the Marsball Islands, who have been victims of atomic and missile tests by the United States.

Do people in most of Oceania live in tiny confined spaces? Tbe answer is yes if one believes what certain social scientists are saying. But the idea of smallness is relative; it depends on what is included and excluded in any calculation of size. When those who bail from continents, or islands adjacent to continents – and the vast majority of human beings live in these regions – when they see a Polynesian or Micronesian island they naturally pronounce it small or tiny. Their calculation is based entirely on the extent of the land surfaces they see.

But if we look at the myths, legends, and oral traditions, and the cosmologies of the peoples of Oceania, it becomes evident that they did not conceive of their world in such microscopic proportions. Their universe comprised not only 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 ways across the seas. Their world was anything but tiny. They thought big and recounted their deeds in epic proportions. One legendary Oceanic athlete was so powerful that during a competition he threw his javelin with such farce that it pierced the horizon and disappeared until that night when it was seen streaking across the sky like a meteor. Every now and then it reappears to remind people of the mighty deed. And as far as I'm concerned it is still out there, near Jupiter or somewhere. That was the first rocket ever sent into space. Islanders today still relish exaggerating things out of all proportion. Smallness is a state of mind.

There is a world of difference between viewing the Pacific as 'islands in a far sea' and as 'a sea of islands'.[2] The first emphasizes dry surfaces in a vast ocean far from the centers of power. Focusing in this way stresses the smallness and remoteness of the islands. The second is a more holistic perspective in which things are seen in the totality of their relationships. I return to this point later. Continental men, namely Europeans, on entering the Pacific after crossing huge expanses of ocean, introduced the view of 'islands in a far sea'. From this perspective the islands are tiny, isolated dots in a vast ocean.

2 I owe much to Eric Waddell for these terms (personal communications).

Later on, continental men – Europeans and Americans – drew imaginary lines across the sea, making the colonial boundaries that confined ocean peoples to tiny spaces for the first time. These boundaries today define the island states and territories of the Pacific. I have just used the term *ocean peoples* because our ancestors, who had lived in the Pacific for over two thousand years, viewed their world as 'a sea of islands' rather than as 'islands in the sea'. This may be seen in a common categorization of people, as exemplified in Tonga by the inhabitants of the main, capital, island, who used to refer to their compatriots from the rest of the archipelago not so much as 'people from outer islands' as social scientists would say, but as *kakai mei tahi* or just *tahi* 'people from the sea'. This characterization reveals the underlying assumption that the sea is home to such people.

The difference between the two perspectives is reflected in the two terms used for our region: *Pacific Islands* and *Oceania*. The first term, *Pacific Islands*, is the prevailing one used everywhere; it denotes small areas of land sitting atop submerged reefs or seamounts. Hardly any anglophone economist, consultancy expert, government planner, or development banker in the region, uses the term *Oceania*, perhaps because it sounds grand and somewhat romantic, and may denote something so vast that it would compel them to a drastic review of their perspectives and policies. The French and other Europeans use the term *Oceania* to an extent that English speakers, apart from the much-maligned anthropologists and a few other seastruck scholars, have not. It may not be coincidental that Australia, New Zealand, and the United States, anglophone all, have far greater interests in the Pacific and how it is perceived than have the distant European nations.

Oceania denotes a sea of islands with their inhabitants. The world of our ancestors was a large sea full of places to explore, to make their homes in, to breed generations of seafarers like themselves. People raised in this environment were at home with the sea. They played in it as soon as they could walk steadily, they worked in it, they fought on it. They developed great skills for navigating their waters, and the spirit to traverse even the few large gaps that separated their island groups.

Theirs was a large world in which peoples and cultures moved and mingled, unhindered by boundaries of the kind erected much later by imperial powers. From one island to another they sailed to trade and to marry, thereby expanding social networks for greater flows of wealth. They traveled to visit relatives in a wide variety of natural and cultural surroundings, to quench their thirst for adventure, and even to fight and dominate.

Fiji, Samoa, Tonga, Niue, Rotuma, Tokelau, Tuvalu, Futuna, and Uvea formed a large exchange community in which wealth and people with their skills and arts circulated endlessly. From this community

e-ISSN 2785-2709

people ventured to the north and west, into Kiribati, the Solomon Islands, Vanuatu, and New Caledonia, which formed an outer are of less intensive exchange. Evidence of this voyaging is provided by existing settlements within Melanesia of descendants of these seafarers. (Only blind landlubbers would say that settlements like these, as well as those in New Zealand and Hawaiʻi, were made through accidental voyages by people who got blown off course-presumably while they were out fishing with their wives, children, pigs, dogs, and food-plant seedlings-during a hurricane). The Cook Islands and French Polynesia formed a community similar to that of their cousins to the west; hardy spirits from this community ventured southward and founded settlements in Aotearoa, while others went in the opposite direction to discover and inhabit the islands of Hawaiʻi. Also north of the equator is the community that was centered on Yap.

Melanesia is supposedly the most fragmented world of all: tiny communities isolates by terrain and at least one thousand languages. The truth is that large regions of Melanesia were integrated by trading and cultural exchange systems that were even more complex than those of Polynesia and Micronesia. Lingua francas and the fact that most Melanesians were and are multilingual (which is more than one can say about most Pacific rim countries), make utter nonsense of the notion that they were and still are babblers of Babel. lt was in the interest of imperialism and is in the interest of neocolonialism, to promote this blatant misconception of Melanesia.[3]

Evidence of the conglomerations of islands with their economies and cultures is readily available in the oral traditions of the islands, and in blood ties that are retained today. The highest chiefs of Fiji, Samoa, and Tonga, for example, still maintain kin connections that were forged centuries before Europeans entered the Pacific, to the days when boundaries were not imaginary lines in the ocean, but rather points of entry that were constantly negotiated and even contested. The sea was open to anyone who could navigate a way through.

This was the kind of world that bred men and women with skills and courage that took them into the unknown, to discover and populate all the habitable islands east of the 130th meridian. The great fame that they have earned posthumously may have been romanticized, but it is solidly based on real feats that could have been performed only by those born and raised with an open sea as their home.

Nineteenth-century imperialism erected boundaries that led to the con traction of Oceania, transforming a once boundless world

3 I use the terms 'Melanesia', 'Polynesia', and 'Micronesia' because they are already part of the cultural consciousness of the peoples of Oceania. Before the nineteenth century there was only a vast sea in which people mingled in ways that, despite the European-imposed threefold division, the boundaries today are still blurred. This important issue is, however, beyond the purview of this paper.

into the Pacific Island states and territories that we know today. People were confined to their tiny spaces, isolated from each other. No longer could they travel freely to do what they had clone for centuries. They were cut off from their relatives abroad, from their far-flung sources of wealth and cultural enrichment. This is the historical basis of the view that our countries are small, poor, and isolated. It is true only insofar as people are still fenced in and quarantined.

This assumption is no longer tenable as far as the countries of central and western Polynesia are concerned, and may be untenable also of Micronesia. The rapid expansion of the world economy in the years since World War II may have intensified third world dependency, as has been noted from certain vantage points at high-level academia, but it also had a liberating effect on the lives of ordinary people in Oceania, as it did in the Caribbean islands. The new economic reality made nonsense of artificial boundaries, enabling the people to shake off their confinement. They have since moved, by the tens of thousands, doing what their ancestors did in earlier times: enlarging their world as they go, on a scale not possible before. Everywhere they go, to Australia, New Zealand, Hawai'i, the mainland United States, Canada, Europe, and elsewhere, they strike roots in new resource areas, securing employment and overseas family property, expanding kinship networks through which they circulate themselves, their relatives, their material goods, and their stories all across their ocean, and the ocean is theirs because it has always been their home. Social scientists may write of Oceania as a Spanish Lake, a British Lake, an American Lake, and even a Japanese Lake. But we all know that only those who make the ocean their home and love it, can really claim it as their own. Conquerors come, conquerors go, the ocean remains, mother only to her children. This mother has a big heart though; she adopts any one who loves her.

The resources of Samoans, Cook Islanders, Niueans, Tokelauans, Tuvaluans, I-Kiribati, Fijians, Isndo-Fijians, and Tongans, are no longer confined to their national boundaries. They are located wherever these people are living, permanently or otherwise, as they were before the age of western imperialism. One can see this any day at seaports and airports throughout the central Pacific, where consignments of goods from homes abroad are unloaded as those of the homelands are loaded. Construction materials, agricultural machinery, motor vehicles, other heavy goods, and a myriad other things are sent from relatives abroad, while handcrafts, tropical fruits and root crops, dried marine creatures, kava, and other delectables are dispatched from the homelands. Although this flow of goods is generally not included in official statistics, much of the welfare of ordinary people of Oceania depends on an informal movement along ancient routes drawn in bloodlines invisible to the enforcers of the laws of confinement and regulated mobility.

The world of Oceania is neither tiny nor deficient in resources. It was so only as a condition of the colonial confinement that lasted less than a century in a history of millennia. Human nature demands space for free movement, and the larger the space the better it is for people. Islanders have broken out of their confinement, are moving around and away from their homelands, not so much because their countries are poor, but because they were unnaturally confined and severed from many of their traditional sources of wealth, and because it is in their blood to be mobile. They are once again enlarging their world, establishing new resource bases and expanded networks for circulation. Alliances are already being forged by an increasing number of Islanders with the *tangata whenua* of Aotearoa and will inevitably be forged with the native Hawaiians. It is not inconceivable that if Polynesians ever get together, their two largest home lands will be reclaimed in one form or another. They have already made their presence felt in these homelands, and have stamped indelible imprints on the cultural landscapes.

We cannot see the processes outlined here clearly if we confine our attention to things within national boundaries and to events at the upper levels of political economies and regional and international diplomacy. Only when we focus on what ordinary people are actually doing, rather than on what they should be doing, can we see the broader picture of reality.

The world of Oceania may no longer include the heavens and the underworld, but it certainly encompasses the great cities of Australia, New Zealand, the United States, and Canada. It is within this expanded world that the extent of the people's resources must be measured.

In general, the living standards of Oceania are higher than those of most third world societies. To attribute this merely to aid and remittances – misconstrued deliberately or otherwise as a form of dependence on rich countries' economies – is an unfortunate misreading of contemporary reality. Ordinary Pacific people depend for their daily existence much, much more on themselves and their kin, wherever they may be, than on anyone's largesse, which they believe is largely pocketed by the elite classes. The funds and goods that homes-abroad people send their home land relatives belong to no one but themselves. They earn every cent through hard physical toil in the new locations that need and pay for their labor. They also participate in the manufacture of many of the goods they send home; they keep the streets and buildings of Auckland clean, and its transportation system running smoothly; they keep the suburbs of the western United States (including Hawai'i) trimmed, neat, green, and beautiful; and they have contributed much, much more than has been acknowledged.

On the other hand Islanders in their homelands are not the parasites on their relatives abroad that misinterpreters of 'remittances'

would have us believe. Economists do not take account of the social centrality of the ancient practice of reciprocity, the core of all oceanic cultures. They over look the fact that for everything homeland relatives receive, they reciprocate with goods they themselves produce, by maintaining ancestral roots and lands for everyone, homes with warmed hearths for travelers to return to permanently or to strengthen their bonds, their souls, and their identities before they move on again. This is not dependence but interdependence, which is purportedly the essence of the global system. To say that it is something else and less is not only erroneous, but denies people their dignity.

What I have stated so far should already have provided sufficient response to the assertion that the islands are isolated. They are clearly not. Through developments in high technology, communications and transportation systems are a vast improvement on what they were twenty years ago. These may be very costly by any standard, but they are available and used. Telecommunications companies are making fortunes out of lengthy conversations between breathless relatives thousands of miles apart.

But the islands are not connected only with regions of the Pacific rim. Within Oceania itself people are once again circulating in increasing numbers and frequency. Regional organizations-intergovernmental, educational, religious, sporting, and cultural-are responsible for much of this mobility. The University of the South Pacific, with its highly mobile staff and student bodies comprising men, women, and youth from the twelve island countries that own it and from outside the Pacific, is an excellent example. Increasingly the older movers and shakers of the islands are being replaced by younger ones; and when they meet each other in Suva, Honiara, Apia, Vila, or any other capital city of the Pacific, they meet as friends, as people who have gone through the same place of learning, who have worked and played and prayed together.

The importance of our ocean for the stability of the global environment, for meeting a significant proportion of the world's protein requirements, for the production of certain marine resources in waters that are relatively clear of pollution, for the global reserves of mineral resources, among others, has been increasingly recognized, and puts paid to the notion that Oceania is the hole in the doughnut. Together with our exclusive economic zones, the areas of the earth's surface that most of our countries occupy can no longer be called small. In this regard, Kiribati, the Federated States of Micronesia, and French Polynesia, for example, are among the largest countries in the world. The emergence of organizations such as SPACHEE (South Pacific Action Committee for Human Environment and Ecology), SPREP (South Pacific Regional Environment Pro gramme), the Forum Fisheries Agency, and SOPAC (South Pacific Applied Geosciences Commission); of movements for a nuclear-free Pacific, the

prevention of toxic waste disposal, and the ban on the wall-of-death fishing methods, with linkages to similar organizations and movements else where; and the establishment at the University of the South Pacific of the Marine Science and Ocean Resources Management programs, with link ages to fisheries and ocean resources agencies throughout the Pacific and beyond; all indicate that we could play a pivotal role in the protection and sustainable development of our ocean. 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. Although this is a different issue from the ones I have focused on for most of this paper, it is relevant to the concern for a far better future for us than has been prescribed and predicted. Our role in the protection and development of our ocean is no mean task; it is no less than a major contribution to the well-being of humanity. Because it could give us a sense of doing something very worthwhile and noble, we should seize the moment with dispatch.

The perpetrators of the smallness view of Oceania have pointed out quite correctly the need for each island state or territory to enter into appropriate forms of specialized production for the world market, to improve their management and marketing techniques, and so forth. But they have so focused on bounded national economies at the macrolevel that they have overlooked or understated the significance of the other processes I have outlined here, and have thereby swept aside the whole universe of Oceanic mores and just about all our potentials for autonomy. The explanation seems clear: one way or another, they or nearly all of them are involved directly or indirectly in the fields of aided development and Pacific rim geopolitics, for whose purposes it is necessary to portray our huge world in tiny, needy bits. To acknowledge the larger reality would be to undermine the prevailing view and to frustrate certain agendas and goals of powerful interests. These perpetrators are therefore participants, as I was, in the belittlement of Oceania, and in the perpetuation of the neocolonial relationships of dependency that have been and are being played out in the rarefied circles of national politicians, bureaucrats, diplomats, and assorted experts and academics, while far beneath them exists that other order, of ordinary people, who are busily and independently redefining their world in accordance with their perceptions of their own interests and of where the future lies for their children and their children's children. Those who maintain that the people of Oceania live from day to day, not really caring for the long-term benefits, are unaware of the elementary truth known by most native Islanders: that they plan for generations, for the continuity and improvement of their families and kin groups.

As I watched the Big Island of Hawai‘i expanding into and rising from the depths, I saw in it the future for Oceania, our sea of islands. That future lies in the hands of our own people, not of those

e-ISSN 2785-2709

who would prescribe for us, get us forever dependent and indebted because they can see no way out.

At the Honolulu Airport, while waiting for my flight back to Fiji, I met an old friend, a Tongan who is twice my size and lives in Berkeley, California. He is not an educated man. He works on people's yards, trimming hedges and trees, and laying driveways and footpaths. But every three months or so he flies to Fiji, buys eight-to-ten-thousand dollars worth of kava, takes it on the plane flying him back to California, and sells it from his home. He has never heard of dependency, and if he were told of it, it would hold no real meaning for him. He told me in Honolulu that he was bringing a cooler full of T-shirts, some for the students at the university with whom he often stays when he comes to Suva, and the rest for his relatives in Tonga, where he goes for a week or so while his kava is gathered, pounded, and bagged in Fiji. He later fills the cooler with seafoods to take back home to California, where he has two sons he wants to put through college. On one of his trips he helped me renovate a house that I had just bought. We like him because he is a good storyteller and is generous with his money and time, but mostly because he is one of us.

There are thousands like him, who are flying back and forth across national boundaries, the international dateline, and the equator, far above and completely undaunted by the deadly serious discourses below on the nature of the Pacific Century, the Asia-Pacific coprosperity sphere, and the dispositions of the post-cold war Pacific rim, cultivating their ever growing universe in their own ways, which is as it should be, for therein lies their independence. No one else would give it to them – or to us.

Oceania is vast, Oceania is expanding, Oceania is hospitable and generous, Oceania is humanity rising from the depths of brine and regions of fire deeper still, Oceania is us. We are the sea, we are the ocean, we must wake up to this ancient truth and together use it to overturn all hegemonic views that aim ultimately to confine us again, physically and psychologically, in the tiny spaces that we have resisted accepting as our sole appointed places, and from which we have recently liberated ourselves. We must not allow anyone to belittle us again, and take away our freedom.

I WOULD LIKE *to thank Marshall Sahlins far convincing me in the end that not all is lost, and that the world of Oceania is quite bright despite appearances. This paper is based on lectures delivered at the University of Hawai'i at Hilo, and the East-West Center, Honolulu, March-April, I993. Vijay Naidu and Eric Waddell read a draft of this paper and made very helpful comments. I am profoundly grateful to them for their support.*

e-ISSN 2785-2709

Lagoonscapes
Vol. 3 – Num. 2 – December 2023

A Fish Out of Water?

Barbara Casavecchia
Ocean Space, Venezia; Accademia di Brera, Italia

Abstract Learning to acknowledge water as the interconnecting element of a dense ecosystem such as Venice and its lagoon marked an epistemological turn for the Author. Which language is being used – or silenced – to describe the rapidly shifting climatic conditions of the Mediterranean basin? In this article, Casavecchia retraces her steps as curator of the 2021-23 fellowship programme *The Current III*, titled *Thus Waves Come in Pairs* (after Etel Adnan), promoted by TBA21-Academy. 'Thinking with waves' means questioning our apparatuses of knowledge, and activating transdisciplinary processes of exchange, choral mappings and pedagogies of relation.

Keywords Venice. Experimental pedagogies. Hydrocommons. Tidalectic curatorial practices. Exhibition-making. Queer ecologies. Etel Adnan. Petrit Halilaj. Alvaro Urbano.

Peer review

Submitted 2023-09-28
Accepted 2023-10-31
Published 2023-12-20

Open access

© 2023 Casavecchia | CC BY 4.0

Citation Casavecchia, B. (2023). "A Fish Out of Water?". *Lagoonscapes. The Venice Journal of Environmental Humanities*, 3(2), 209-218.

DOI 10.30687/LGSP/2785-2709/2023/01/003

> The atoms of our body, as well, flow in and away
> from us. We, like waves and like all objects,
> are a flux of events; we are processes,
> for a brief time monotonous.
> (Rovelli 2017, 136)

Across many scales, the following passage from Epeli Hau'ofa's "Our Sea of Islands" often resonated with my experiences, after moving to Venice and understanding how uncritically terrestrial my views had been: "The idea of smallness is relative; it depends on what is included and excluded in any calculation of size. […] There is a world of difference between viewing the Pacific as 'islands in a far sea' and as 'a sea of islands'. The first emphasises dry surfaces in a vast ocean far from the centers of power. Focusing in this way stresses the smallness and remoteness of the islands. The second is a more holistic perspective in which things are seen in the totality of their relationships" (Hau'ofa 2008, 22). Until my relocation, I used to see the brackish waters and the archipelago of tiny islands surrounding Venice as a nondescript, empty background to its picture-perfect skyline, as if they were a blind spot on the maps. I never spent time with them, nor ventured beyond the majestic built environment of the city centre. But over time, it was instead the primacy of the hydrocommons in connecting the dots of this dense ecosystem that started to emerge, and with it, different epistemologies.

To live on a daily basis surrounded by the vastest Mediterranean lagoon where waters come lapping at one's doorstep, rising and lowering every six hours, in accordance to tides, moons, winds, meteorological conditions, times of the year, Anthropocenic impacts and the global upsurging of oceans, liquifies many preconceived ideas and allows that 'totality of relationships' to reshape our ways of seeing. And ways of feeling. It situates them within a proximity where the speculative and the actual collide, so that complexity unfolds. Inhabiting this condition taught me how to finally see *This Sea Around Us*, as marine biologist, conservationist and writer Rachel Carson titled her first book, published in 1951, with the intention to highlight the threats that nuclear energy was posing to the vastly unknown oceans, their inhabitants and, at large, to life on a planet whose three quarters are covered in water. Five years before, with the infamous Operation Crossroads at the Bikini Atoll, the U.S. started to use the Marshall Islands as a nuclear testing site: until 1958, 67 detonations were carried out, with devastating long-lasting effects. Currently, the Runit Dome, a concrete shell enclosing a huge deposit of nuclear waste on an island of Enewetak Atoll, is at risk of releasing further

Lagoonscapes
3, 2, 2023, 209-218
e-ISSN 2785-2709

contamination because of rising sea levels.[1] Between 1960 and 1966, France detonated 17 bombs above and below the ground of the Sahara desert in Algeria, still under colonial rule (other 41 nuclear tests were then carried out between 1966 and 1974 in French Polynesia); sixty years later, the storms that seasonally hit the area with increasing intensity, due to global heating and expanding desertification, are now returning to France those contaminated sands, rich in caesium-137. The slow violence and atrocious consequences of the colonial framing of oceans and deserts as *terrae nullius*, hence both empty, are as evident (cf. Samia 2022) as the return of the repressed.

"That sea around us", for me, was – and is – the Mediterranean, a hotspot where the acceleration of climate change is happening at a rate twenty percent faster than any other areas of the planet.[2] The occasion for delving into its rapidly shifting condition was the invitation to work as curator for the third cycle (2021-23) of TBA21-Academy's fellowship program The Current, a pioneering initiative that cultivates transdisciplinary practices and the exchange of ideas around bodies of water.[3] From the very beginning, I proposed a working title inspired by a line of Etel Adnan's poem "Sea and Fog": *Thus Waves Come in Pairs*. Waves are propagations through space of disturbances, whose evolutions in time can not be described by simple trajectories, but rather mutual interactions. Movement is their constant, in response to the movement of others. Like water, matter never settles and reality is relational, quantum physics suggests.

Thinking with waves encouraged me to rethink ways of practising research, based on open processes of exchange and choral forms of mappings, across the many shores and layered histories of the Mediterranean basin. As part of The Current III's first commissions, I asked Etel Adnan and her partner Simone Fattal to share a conversation about their own Mediterraneans – "la lèvre multiple de la mer"(the plural lip of the sea), wrote Etel Adnan in her first poem, *Le Livre de la mer*, appeared in 1944 (cf. Adnan 2000, 133-43) –, that became a key inspiration for the whole triennial program. In it, Adnan says:

> We are in the process of leaving the Mediterranean behind, but there are forms which resist that, like food. [...] You see, these things become ideas and ideas can be carried from generation to generation, they are the most resistant things, they're invisible

1 https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-u-s-must-take-responsibility-for-nuclear-fallout-in-the-marshall-islands/.

2 Cf. UN Environment Programme, Information and Communication Regional Activity Center, 2020, The Mediterranean is a Climate Change Hotspot, http://www.info-rac.org/en/communication/newsletter/newsletter-archive/mednews-01-2020/the-mediterranean-region-is-a-climate-change-hotspot.

3 https://ocean-archive.org/collection/286.

e-ISSN 2785-2709

> like viruses, but they resist. We need them. What are these ideas? A need for togetherness, there is a Mediterranean humanism which is there. I remember when we used to say: small is beautiful. Not only a question of size. (Casavecchia 2023, 32-3)

The sea – for both Carson and Adnan, a feminine and gestational entity – can be a formidable vessel for dismantling outdated paradigms and for questioning the limits of our current apparatuses of knowledge. Curator and scholar Stefanie Hessler introduced the term *tidalectics*, a neologism borrowed from the Barbadian poet and historian Kamau Brathwaite, to define an approach that "formulates an oceanic worldview, a different way of engaging with the oceans and the world we inhabit" and "attempts to coalesce steady land with the rhythmic fluidity of water and the incessant swelling and receding of tides" (Hessler 2018, 31). She used it not only to outline water-centered ways of interpreting the connections between art and ecologies, but also to inform the practice of exhibition-making.

> Curating in an oceanic way is neither limited to nor defined by exhibitions addressing the oceans, but is composed of methodologies that are hybrid, transdisciplinary, generative, fluid, uncertain and transformative, working at different temporal and spatial scales and involving various forms of knowledge, both human and non-human. The ocean provides a model to accommodate change and unpredictability, to sway back and forth between, and ultimately to transcend, numerous disciplines and to invoke performativity, both in the exhibition making process and in the audience experience. (31)

So how to apply a framework questioning fixity to an extended (time-wise) inquiry stemming from Venice and expanding towards the Mediterraneans? How to implement pedagogies of relation and correlation, and to "make time for care", as feminist scholar Maria Puig de la Bellacasa (2017) calls for? Artists lead the way. A crucial reference was another initial commission, the action *lacuna* carried out by Venetian artist Giorgio Andreotta Calò, who in June 2021 – at the piping hot end of the first fully post-pandemic spring, at least in Italy – performed a solitary clockwise walk, around 270 km long, along the entire, fleeting perimeter of the Venetian lagoon, for ten days. Photographs and undisclosed notes marked his evolution. By measuring subjectively the ever-changing and ever-porous borders between land and water, wet and dry, their ontologies and intertwined dynamics at specific points in time and space, the artist kept moving and breathing at unison with the lagoon.

> I was interested in reconsidering this place from the outside, from a dimension of physical crossing, by following its boundary lines. I was interested in considering it as a void, a gap to be gradually filled, slowly circumscribed and observed. To walk… […] Within the circularity of the space covered, a unity is gradually established between outside and inside, between the slow mutation of the territory and that of those who are crossing it.[4]

The pace and introspection of that first exploration generated, a month after, a collective walk that we titled "Walking A Wavy Line", conceived together with Giorgio and guided by him. Over four days, always in a row, we slowly covered the strip of land separating the Venetian lagoon from the Adriatic Sea, by walking from the lighthouse at San Nicolò on the northern edge of the Lido island, to the beach of Ca' Roman's natural reserve, at the southern tip of Pellestrina island. The body learns from every step and salty drop of sweat. The attempt to develop "habits of noticing", as Anna Tsing calls them, by moving closer to water became a key principle of The Current III. The practice of periodically walking together around the city and the lagoon, started in 2020 (and co-curated, all along, with Pietro Consolandi), resulted in four cycles of free itinerant conversations, under the title: "Venice as a model for the future?" (2020-23). Each time, guided by a different voice, this iterative practice spawned a profusion of encounters and transdisciplinary exchanges around the Venetian ecosystem and its interconnected segments, ranging from science to activism, from anthropology to fishing, from cooking to conservation, from performative readings under the starry sky, to instructions on how to recognise the calls of nocturnal birds or to capture almost inaudible underwater sounds. Did we know that fish are now shouting, as a reaction and adaptive countermeasure to the high levels of acoustic pollution caused by humans? That on good years for prosecco on the neighbouring hills of Veneto, when vineyards benefit from the right amount of rain and sunshine, the abundance of nutrients brought to the lagoon make mussels grow at their best?

Transforming the verticality of a lecture into an itinerant, intimate and often messy talk, where bodies are positioned closely to the subject being discussed (dunes, currents, sediments, seagulls, erosion, clams, pollutants, invasive species), but also kept free to move and wander, helps to deconstruct the power system a lecture entails and blur the lines between speakers and audience. From an institutional standpoint, it suggest a possibility for moving outside fixed walls and partitions, which is both physical and metaphorical. The fact of

4 See Giorgio Andreotta Calò, *lacuna*, in https://ocean-archive.org/collection/277.

e-ISSN 2785-2709

repeating, somehow ritualising the same action, created an open space and a collective rhythm, operating also as reservoir of shared memories and possible visions of the future. A transfixing moment, for me, was the perception of deep time while standing on a fossil dune, over a thousand old, in Cavallino, inhabited by an assemblage of thousands different species, standing quietly next to the bareness of a neighbouring corn field, where contemporary herbicides annihilated everything that humans consider useless at the ground level. To keep on walking allowed us also also to record and witness the speed of changes. Since my arrival in Venice, only three years ago, the controversial MOSE barriers started to operate successfully and to stop *acqua alta* from submerging the city, although unprecedented high waters started to present themselves even over the summer, severe droughts moved the line of salty waters over 30 km inland within the Po river delta and its agricultural grounds, sudden violent storms brought with them giant haze and dramatic floods, the temperature in sea waters reached such peaks that mussels now find it hard to reproduce, while the surge in population of invasive blue crabs is disrupting the entire submarine and amphibious food chain, together with the fishing industry. Finding new lexicons to voice and interpret this speed, to align existing databased models with reality is the challenge ahead.

When Giorgio asked us to walk for hours without speaking, the sounds and the silence surrounding our movements became extremely present, together with many questions. By means of ripple effect, that experience suggested also a necessity to rethink how and which language is being used – or not being used – to describe shifting climatic conditions. For instance, if the Venetian lagoon is scientifically described as an arid space because of the paucity of sweet water and resources available to all living beings, how many *lacunae* could we learn to detect in the mainstream understandings and cultural constructions of aridity and desertification, above and below water?

The podcast Aridity Lines,[5] developed in collaboration with Reem Shadid and Radio Ma3azef, looked into the interconnectedness of geopolitics, extractive forces, climate migrations, environmental colonialism and local ecological knowledges relative to water protection, as did two cycles of the online Ocean/Uni, under the title “Imagine the Ocean Dry as Lavender”[6] (after a verse by Egyptian-Lebanese-French poet Andrée Chedid), probing into artistic practices, rights of nature, independent Global South scientific approaches, intersectional feminisms. In analysing ‘the Mediterranean question’, scholars Iain Chambers and Marta Cariello reflect upon the inadequacy of the current cartography. They write:

5 Cf. https://soundcloud.com/tba21-academy/sets/aridity-lines.

6 Cf. https://ocean-archive.org/collection/291.

e-ISSN 2785-2709

> The re-mapping and re-narrating of the Mediterranean clearly evokes the plastic geographies of de-territorialization and re-territorialization; an uprooting and re-orienting of given interpretations. Posing the question of by whom, how and why the Mediterranean is explained leads to a critical evaluation of the current political economy of knowledge (and power).
>
> Listening to the languages used to narrate the Mediterranean, and crossing the spaces in which such languages are transmitted and translated, means folding and crumpling the received structure of sense (without erasing it), thus creating a historical and critical depth that proposes a different Mediterranean, one still to come. (Chambers, Cariello 2020, 143)

It is urgent to generate spaces where to reflect collectively on how the information on climate change is articulated, circulated, illustrated, and how it could be radically reimagined.

> Postcolonial studies scholar Dipesh Chakrabarty has discussed the way scientific discourse on climate change and the Anthropocene have ushered humankind's return as the agent of history, which in effect re-elevates gendered man to the center of research and actions. […] Queering now is not only a move for deheterosexualization, but also a collective quest to redefine the status of the human in the extended ecosystem of the interdependencies through which humans exist. (143)

In the exhibition *Thus Waves Come in Pairs* at Ocean Space that marked the end of The Current III, artists Petrit Halilaj and Álvaro Urbano (also a couple in life) presented the installation *Lunar Ensemble for Uprising Seas* (2023), composed of several sculptures in aluminum, all functioning also as musical instruments and protest banners, swirling in a vortex below a suspended *Luna* (Moon), in the shape of a giant egg that encapsulate possible queer futures, the artists explained. These transformative, imaginary creatures could fly in mid air with their lucent fins and wings, but also swim out of water and move on the ground as our common ancestors did millions of years ago. By shape, they sometimes recall many fishes commonly found in the Mediterranean Sea as well as on the plates of classic Venetian restaurants. More often than otherwise, humans ignore that those subaqueous individuals can reproduce themselves first as males and then females, or vice versa, or even simultaneously, depending on their life stages and the systemic stress to which their community is subjected. To quote Yuki Kihara:

e-ISSN 2785-2709

> Darwin's theory of evolution priorities heterosexuality as solely responsible for the survival of the species, including humankind, despite a plethora of examples in the animal kingdom that challenge this notion. Fish change sex, including reproductive functions, practise role reversal and allow their kinship to become resilient. (Kihara 2022, 105)

Venice is a fish, they say. This story is told very often, again and again, along the canals. Look at the cartographic map of the city, they say, it is there, don't you see the tail, the round body, and the head, attached to a long fishing-line? Ironically, that structure, *i.e.* the bridge that anchors Venice to the mainland, as if caught and held hostage by its concrete bait, is called *Ponte della Libertà* (Freedom Bridge). I always find this story too short, too misleading. Which fish is Venice, for instance, and how resilient could it be, in the near future, if we could stop thinking of it as the sole, frozen occupant of an empty tank? Instead of focussing on it as alone, collective imagination could change its adaptive patterns by starting to include in the picture also all the islands and salt marshes that surround it and constitute this lagoon, so full of endangered life. Then the image recomposed would be that of a swarm of aquatic creatures. And then, I guess, it would be so clear: how can there be fishes without water? It is all there, already, for everybody to see.

e-ISSN 2785-2709

Bibliography

Adnan, E. (2000). “الكتابة بلغة أجنبية / To Write in a Foreign Language”. *Alif: Journal of Comparative Poetics*, 20, 133-43.

Adnan, E. (2012). *Sea and Fog*. New York: Nightboat Books.

Carson, R. (1951). *This Sea Around Us*. New York: Oxford University Press.

Casavecchia, B. (ed.) (2023). *Thus Waves Come in Pairs. Thinking with the Mediterraneans*. London; Venice: Sternberg Press; TBA21.

Chambers, I.; Cariello, M. (2020). “The Mediterranean Question: Thinking with the Diver”. *Journal of Mediterranean Knowledge-JMK*, 5(1), 141-9.

Hau‘ofa, E. (2008). *We Are the Ocean: Selected Works*. Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press.

Hessler, S. (ed.) (2018). *Tidalectics: Imagining an Oceanic Worldview Through Art and Science*. Cambridge (MA): MIT Press.

Hessler, S. (2020). “Tidalectic Curating”. *Journal of Curatorial Studies*, 9(2), 248-70. https://intellectdiscover.com/content/journals/10.1386/jcs_00023_1.

Jaque, A.; Otero Verzier, M.; Pietroiusti, L. (eds) (2020). *More-Than-Human*. Het Nieuwe Instituut; Serpentine Galleries; Office for Political Innovation; Manifesta Foundation.

Kihara, Y. (2022). “Fa‘afafine Aquarium”. King, N. (ed.), *Paradise Camp by Yuki Kihara*. Melbourne: Thames and Hudson, 105.

Puig de la Bellacasa, M. (2017). “Matters of Care: Speculative Ethics”. *More Than Human Worlds*. Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.

Rovelli, C. (2017). *Reality Is Not What It Seems: The Journey to Quantum Gravity*. New York: Riverhead Books.

Samia H. (ed.) (2022). *Deserts Are Not Empty*. New York: Columbia Books on Architecture and the City.

e-ISSN 2785-2709

Lagoonscapes
Vol. 3 – Num. 2 – December 2023

Bodies of Water: Fluidity and Indigenous Curatorial Praxis

Reuben Friend
Porirua City Council, New Zealand

Abstract This philosophical recentring of Indigenous identity and relationship to water and the sea has been the driving motivation behind a number of recent international contemporary art exhibitions that have featured Indigenous artists and curators in the years during and since the COVID-19 pandemic. This essay reflects on the curatorial frameworks of these exhibitions and unpacks some of the geopolitical pressures informing and, at times, compromising Indigenous participation in these events and discussions.

Keywords Naadohbii: To Draw Water. Bottled Ocean. Hawai'i Triennale The Pacific Century. E Ho'omanu no Moananuiākea. Pan-Austro-Nesian. The Great Journey. Paradise Camp. La Biennale di Venezia. Jim Vivieaere. Yuki Kihara. Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Art Taiwan. Winnipeg Art Gallery. Pātaka Art+Museum. Melbourne Museum.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 Naadohbii: To Draw Water. – 3 The 2022 Hawai'i Triennale: E Ho'omau no Moananuiākea. – 4 Pan-Austro-Nesia: Taiwan and the Global South. – 5 Decolonising the Pacific: Indigenising Moana Curatorial Praxis.

Edizioni Ca'Foscari

Peer review

Submitted 2023-09-28
Accepted 2023-11-30
Published 2023-12-20

Open access

© 2023 Friend | CC BY 4.0

Citation Friend, R. (2023). "Bodies of Water: Fluidity and Indigenous Curatorial Praxis". *Lagoonscapes. The Venice Journal of Environmental Humanities*, 3(2), 219-234.

DOI 10.30687/LGSP/2785-2709/2023/02/004

1 Introduction

Kō wai koe? Nō wai koe?
Kō wai koe. Nō wai koe.
(Who are you? Who do you come from?
You are water. You come from water).

Māori people commonly refer to our communities as Tāngata Whenua, People (of the) Land, but our bodies and words are water. The word *wai* literally means *who* and *water*, so when we ask who you are, we are also stating that you are water. This conceptualisation of life and identity is intrinsically connected to the cyclic system of water, evidenced in cosmological narratives of the precipitation from the sky father Ranginui flowing down to fertilise Papatūānuku mother earth and replenish Tangaroa in the seas. Each of these ancestral bodies are connected through water, and through water our bodies are formed and sustained.

This message was delivered by Sir Peter Sharples, then Minister of Māori Affairs, during the 2012 Indigenous Peoples' Water Forum at the University of Otago in Wellington, Aotearoa New Zealand. Sharples explains this relationship in relation to the birth of a child: *Tuatahi kō te wai, tuarua whānau mai te tamaiti, ka puta kō te whenua* (Water flows first, then the child, followed by the earth) (Sharples 2009). The word 'earth' (*whenua*) has a double meaning, referring also to the child's placenta that is planted in the soils of Papatūānuku after birth. Again, the cosmological narratives of our place within this complex system of *wai* and *whenua* are reinforced with ontological observations of a child birthed between falling waters and earth.

Identity informed by connections to water is a common theme shared by Indigenous peoples across the Moana (Pacific Ocean). Sāmoan poet and writer Albert Tuaopepe Wendt spoke to the idea of an "Ocean in Us" in 1976, being a person defined by the sea as a 'Pacific Islander', socio-politically and culturally rooted in a specific part of the ocean that feeds the imagination and nourishes the spirit (cf. Wendt 1976). Referencing Wendt's pivotal essay "Towards a New Oceania", Sāmoan art historian Dr Peter Brunt states "He [Wendt] was not referring to the Oceania of history books, museums and excavation sites, but rather to an Oceania in us, a subjective proposition addressed to the consciousness of modern Pacific Islanders" (Brunt 2010, 83). This idea was championed by Tongan-Fijian writer and anthropologist Epeli Hauʻofa who encouraged a broader relational understanding of the ocean as an extension of our body, connecting communities across the sea, rather than separating island nations (Hauʻofa 1994). Taking this idea a step further, Tongan Philosopher and Critical Anthropologist Hūfanga-He-Ako-Moe-Lotu Professor Dr ʻŌkusitino Māhina reminds us that we are not just connected

e-ISSN 2785-2709

Figure 1 Rebecca Belmore, *Body of Water*. 2019.
In *Naadohbii: To Draw Water* at Winnipeg Art Gallery-Qaumajuq

or defined *by* the ocean, we *are* Tāngata Moana, People (*of* the) Sea (Māhina 2010). This idea was most eloquently expressed by I-Kiribati and African American scholar, poet and activist Teresia Teaiwa when she wrote of our genealogical connections to the sea, observed through the salt that seeps from our pores (Teaiwa 2017).

This philosophical recentring of our identity and relationship to water and the sea has been the driving motivation behind a number of recent international contemporary art exhibitions that have featured Indigenous artists and curators in the years during and since the COVID pandemic. This essay reflects on the curatorial frameworks of these exhibitions and unpacks some of the geopolitical pressures informing and, at times, compromising Indigenous participation in these events and discussions.

e-ISSN 2785-2709

2 Naadohbii: To Draw Water

A river is a body of water.
It has a foot,
an elbow,
a mouth.
It runs.
It lies in a bed.
It can make you good.
It has a head.
It remembers everything.[1]

On the 13 September 2007 the United Nations Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples was adopted by the General Assembly with a majority of 144 states in favour, and only 4 votes against. The Declaration is the most potent and comprehensive international agreement recognising the rights of Indigenous peoples, establishing a framework of minimum standards for the survival, dignity and well-being of Indigenous peoples around the world. The nations that voted against the Declaration were Aotearoa New Zealand, Australia, Canada and the United States (cf. United Nations Declaration On The Rights Of Indigenous Peoples 2007).

The countries that voted against the Declaration have since reversed their position, and a 2021 exhibition has brought together a group of artists from each of these four nations to create an international dialogue on Indigenous water rights. The exhibition, *Naadohbii: To Draw Water*, was gifted its name from Elder Dr Mary Courchene from Sagkeeng First Nation Treaty 1 Territory in Canada, and refers to the process of drawing, seeking or gathering water in the Anishinaabemowin language. I was fortunate to be part of the all-Indigenous curatorial team with Anishinaabe artist and curator Jaimie Isaac, Yorta Yorta Aboriginal Australian Curator Kimberley Moulton, and Sāmoan New Zealand curator Ioana Gordon-Smith. Beginning at Winnipeg Art Gallery-Qaumajuq (WAGQ) in Canada during the first Winnipeg Indigenous Triennial in 2021, the exhibition went on to tour to Victoria Museum in 2022 Melbourne, Australia and Pātaka Art+Museum in Porirua, Aotearoa New Zealand in 2023.

From the outset, the curatorial team set out to develop the exhibition on the philosophy of a global Indigenous axis of solidarity, to collectively champion each of the four curators and twenty-eight Indigenous artists represented in the exhibition, utilising a place-based Indigenous-led framework to create a forum for multicultural

1 The poem "The First Water" by Natalie Diaz was displayed on a billboard banner at the entrance of Pātaka Art+Museum in Aotearoa, New Zealand, in 2023.

Figure 2
Nova Paul, *Ko te ripo, Two-Channel Moving Image Installation*, 2018

empowerment. Learning from the principles of Indigenous cultural, political and environmental resurgence described by Mississauga Nishnaabeg writer, musician and scholar Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, the fluid curatorial process that was followed in the development of *Naadohbii* allowed for a respectful trans-Indigenous approach to understand the different socio-spatial conditions and practices that inform Indigenous ways of being across our various territories (Betasamosake Simpson 2017).

Artworks by artists such as Nova Paul (Māori, Ngāpuhi) demonstrate the ability of artists to do more than raise awareness of historical injustices, but to take the next step and hold governments and corporations to account. In Paul's *Ko te ripo* (2018) two-channel moving image installation viewers are provided with an opportunity to hear an unedited transcript of court proceedings held by Paul's Māori *whānau* (family) and community in Aotearoa New Zealand for claims to Indigenous rights over freshwater springs and streams on their lands. On one screen we see footage of the artist walking through the disputed Waipao springs at the centre of the court case, and in the second screen we see Paul's cousin, oral historian Dinah Paul, sitting at the foot of their ancestral *maunga* (mountain) Whatitiri reading evidence presented during their court claim to the Waitangi Tribunal.

The political messaging of *Naadohbii* is not confined to the gallery but is also embodied on a series of giant billboard-sized banners by Anishiinaabe performance artist Maria Hupfield. A banner artwork entitled *The First Water* was placed on the exterior of the WAGQ and at both venues in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand. Asking the question 'what separates a body from water' the artwork shows a documentary image of the artist ringing water from her hair during a

Figure 3 Maria Hupfield (with poem by Natalie Diaz), *The First Water*. Billboard banner at the entrance to Pātaka Art+Museum in Aotearoa, New Zealand, 2023. © Author

performance on a canoe on land. In bright yellow text overlaid on top of this image is a portion of a poem by Mojave and Akimel O'odham poet Natalie Diaz that conceptualizes a river as a body with a head and a mouth, a foot and a bed. In the same way that a the river sustains and carries our bodies in a canoe, the river itself is carried and sustained within our bodies. As a later portion of Diaz's poems beautifully articulates, "No matter what language you speak, no matter the color of your skin. We carry the river, its body of water, in our body".

3 The 2022 Hawai'i Triennale: E Ho'omau no Moananuiākea

Water is not only a body that connects communities and island nations, it is a body that also connects continents and superpowers on either side of the Pacific Rim. Indigenous peoples across the Moana find themselves today increasingly caught in a geopolitical power struggle between the superpowers of North America, Asia and Europe. International art programmes, foreign aid and investment that inject economic stimulus into the Pacific have necessarily become a political tool of 'cheque-book diplomacy' asserting economic ties and occupation of locations in the Pacific.

The theme of cultural and economic investment in the Pacific as a tool of neo-colonial expansion and occupation was explored in the 2022 Hawai'i Triennial *The Pacific Century – E Ho'omau no Moananuiākea*. Here the island archipelago, and 50th State of the

e-ISSN 2785-2709

Figure 4 Yuki Kihara, サ－モアのうた (*Sāmoa no uta*), *A Song About Sāmoa* (2019). Installation view piece installation; siapo, textiles, beads, shells, plastic; kimonos 1750 × 1330 × 150 mm each. Courtesy of Yuki Kihara and Milford Galleries Dunedin, Aotearoa New Zealand

USA, becomes the epicentre for discussions about international relations between Asia and North America. Reflecting on the positionality of the exhibition framework and its location in Hawai'i, Indigenous Hawai'ian co-curator Drew Kahu'āina Broderick reflects in conversation with the Triennial curatorial team of Dr Melissa Chiu and Dr Miwako Tezuka that various artists and art audiences may understand the idea of the "Pacific Century" differently depending on the time and place of their engagement with this space. The bilingual title of the exhibition, he suggests, asks audiences to question 'whose Pacific' and 'which century' are we referring to? For reference, in ōlelo Hawai'ian the title *E Ho'omau no Moananuiākea* refers to the Great Ocean of Kea, the eponymous ancestor attributed to the discovery and settlement of a great number of islands throughout the Pacific (Hawai'i Triennial 2022). Whereas the English language title of the exhibition is related by co-curator Melissa Chiu to a 2011 essay and speech made by then US Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, in which Clinton "weaponizes" the phrase "America's Pacific Century" (Katzeman 2022). This conceptual duality and subversive word play brings to mind the words of the late Hawai'ian author, educator, poet and activist Haunani-Kay Trask who called Moana communities to action to fight for Indigenous sovereignty, challenging colonial perceptions of the Pacific with the often-quoted question of 'What do you mean *We*, White Man?' (Trask 1999, 180).

The forked tongue nature of the Triennial's title and thematic premise address the enduring and worrying persistence of imperialism which continues to loom over the Moana like an ominous nuclear-powered

rain cloud. Pointing to the economic and military force of external superpowers, and by extension highlighting the tenuous hold that Indigenous Hawaiʻian and other Moana peoples exert over their ancestral homelands, it is a timely reminder that subversive neo-colonial structures of power continue to evolve and manoeuvre course to build and maintain cultural, economic and military supremacy.

Moana artists and curators engaging in these types of transnational programmes and discussions are necessarily faced with the responsibility of identifying the various actors and agendas at play, from institutional agendas and corporate sponsorship to more subversive political undercurrents influencing the broader outcomes of the events and programmes. The question of participation, whether it be to raise awareness or to provide critical analysis of the structures of power, is one that can divide opinions among Indigenous arts communities, especially given the increasing global awareness and reluctance to be seen to be complicit-by-participation of supporting an unethical or neo-colonialist agendas.

As Māori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith advocates in her research on decolonial methodologies, non-Indigenous writers and curators must be taken to task for the way that they promote and inscribe their dominant world views onto Indigenous art, culture and communities (Tuhiwai Smith 2022). Choices made for how Indigenous art and culture should be conceptualized, critiqued and discussed are best articulated by voices from within the communities that most holistically understand the histories and contemporary dynamics informing and influencing the culture. As Broderick's curatorial reflections demonstrate, rather than positioning ideas of the Pacific in relation to Asia and Euro-American international perspectives on history and contemporary art discourse, Moana artists, curators and scholars are increasingly recentring our understanding of the Moana and Moana art practices in relation to our values, perspectives and positionalities here in the Pacific.

4 Pan-Austro-Nesia: Taiwan and the Global South

A similarly complex set of geopolitical conditions informed the 2021 exhibition 泛•南•島 *Pan-Austro-Nesian* (*PAN*) at the Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Arts in Taiwan (KMFA). I was fortunate to be one of the co-curators invited to work on this project, observing the thought processes of Kaohsiung Director Yulin Lee, with curatorial input from co-curator Dr Zara Stanhope (Director of Govett-Brewster Art Gallery & Len Lye Centre in Aotearoa New Zealand) and the curatorial team at the KMFA.

Director Lee cites the location of the KMFA in the South of Taiwan and the institution's established history of developing exhibitions

analysing Indigenous Taiwanese connections to the South Pacific as the rationale for the KMFA's recurrent focus on Oceanic art practices.[2]

With *PAN* the KMFA expanded this focus from the South Pacific to reposition the museum in alignment with the broader Global South. In an interview with KMFA curator Lily Hsu, Director Lee states:

> We all know how widely the Austronesian peoples spread out, from Taiwan the northernmost, New Zealand the southernmost, Africa the westernmost to Easter Island of [and] South America the easternmost. If viewed from this angle, the 'Austronesian' concept might not include the Indigenous peoples of Southeast Asia or Australia. However, if we take the perspectives of colonialism or contemporary globalization, different Indigenous communities from around the world, and even including the southern island political entities in comparison to the northern continental political powers, all share similar dilemmas concerning their own economic, political, or cultural sovereignties. (Lee 2022)

The dilemma of sovereignty mentioned in this context plays out against a backdrop of immense political tension between China and Taiwan. Taiwan has been occupied by various nations over the centuries, including waves of Indigenous settlement and migration before the arrival of the Portuguese and successive waves of colonisation from Spain, the Dutch, China, Japan, and then China again in 1949, when the Republic of China (ROC) government retreated to the island at the end of the Chinese Civil War. As the global influence of China has grown, Taiwan has become increasingly politically isolated, losing many of their former allies, as nations around the world have formally acknowledged diplomatic relations with China. These conditions make it difficult to separate the stated aims of the *PAN* project to engage with the Global South from the broader diplomatic interests of Taiwan, which are strengthened through the development of cultural relationships with countries in the South Pacific.

These long and complicated colonial histories present multifaceted challenges to decolonial practices within Taiwanese arts and cultural institutions. Collections of Indigenous art in public galleries and museums have long been associated with displays of imperialism, legitimising the occupation of the new regime through carefully curated collections of treasures acquired through the process of colonisation. Indigenous art in this context becomes a tool for diplomatic relations and assertions of the unique cultural identity of the nation.

2 *The Great Journey* exhibition included a number of Tāngata Moana artists from Aotearoa New Zealand and the Pacific, including Lisa Reihana, Shane Cotton, Virginia King, Greg Semu and Michel Tuffery.

Indigenous artists and curators who chose to participate in such contemporary Indigenous art exhibitions are forced to contend with these histories, lending their cultural capital to the institutions delivering the projects, legitimising the agenda and in the process becoming accomplices in the outcomes delivered, whether positive or otherwise.

The curatorial framework for *PAN* sought to deal with these complex dynamics through a thematic approach to the issues, dividing the exhibition into three discrete groupings of *Known to Unknown*, *Dark Island* and *Circle of Life* – groupings that spoke to creative practices as well as chronological periods of time, from Indigenous navigation and exploration, imperialism and colonisation, and the contemporary conditions of today. Artworks within the exhibition were subsequently placed within a conceptual mosaic, dealing with a myriad of themes across time and space in the Asia-Pacific region.

Japanese Sāmoan *fa'afafine* artist Yuki Kihara's contribution to *PAN* is emblematic of the types of artworks and nuanced discussions that took place, presenting a richly complex contemplation on Asia-Pacific trans-nationalism, gender identity politics and emerging environmental crises of the Anthropocene. Kihara grew up with her family in Japan before moving to Sāmoa as a child and eventually Aotearoa New Zealand where she undertook formal studies in art and fashion. Initially focusing on the colonial gaze and gender identity politics in the Pacific, her return to Sāmoa in recent years has broadened her research interests to include marine ecology and the impact of climate change on ocean habitats around the islands of Sāmoa.

Kihara's installation in *PAN*, entitled サーモアのうた *(Sāmoa no uta) A Song About Sāmoa*, combines textiles with customary printmaking and painterly practices from Japan and Sāmoa.

> The installation takes the form of five Japanese furisode kimono, a style of kimono that is customarily worn by young unmarried woman. Made of siapo (Sāmoan bark cloth), these works are an evocation of the artist's trans-national heritage and *fa'afafine* gender identity. [...] Adorned across this suite of kimono are printed images of tropical beach scenes, painting an idyllic picture of Sāmoa as a thriving paradise, subverted by the inclusion of litter and other forms of detritus introduced by people. The beauty of the works belie a tale of devastation that has just started to unravel, as unprecedented levels of pollution and carbon emissions from the industrial superpowers of the world increasingly impinge on the viable existence of ocean life, and by extension the livelihood of Oceanic peoples. (Friend 2023, 141-2)

A Song About Sāmoa reminds us that the world is seeing the first climate refugees emigrating from low lying nations such as Sāmoa, Fiji, Kiribati, Marshall Islands, Solomon Islands, Tonga, Tuvalu and

Vanuatu. While this devastation is having immediate impacts on Kihara's island homelands in Sāmoa, references to her Japanese heritage and damage to the ocean environment remind us of the devastation caused by the Fukushima Daiichi Nuclear Power Plant which has leaked radioactive materials into the ocean following the 2011 tsunami in Japan (Friend 2021, 52).

Kihara went on to represent Aotearoa New Zealand at the 59th Venice Biennale of Art in 2022, presenting an immersive installation of photography of Sāmoan landscapes and patterned imagery. The wall-to-wall aesthetic of touristic island imagery and patterned fabric enveloped visitors in the colours and visual culture of Sāmoa. Rethinking the paintings of nineteenth century French Impressionist painter Paul Gauguin, Kihara reconstructs Gauguin's paintings with staged photographs of *fa'afafine*, positing a hypothesis that Gauguin's subjects were often not necessarily young women but likely *fa'afafine* posed in the manner of women. Here the artist's thoughts on transcultural and transgender Moana identity politics are paired with decolonial strategies for the resurgence of Indigenous knowledge systems and ways of being.

5 Decolonising the Pacific: Indigenising Moana Curatorial Praxis

> This is not an ocean, this is a rented houseThis is not a hand, this is a library
> This is not the sky, this is a grandfather clock
> This is not a child, this is a mirror.[3]

In 2009 the Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Art invited Aotearoa New Zealand Rarotonga artist and curator Jim Vivieaere to co-curate an exhibition entitled *The Great Journey: In Pursuit of the Ancestral Realm*. Seeking to locate Taiwan culturally and geographically within the Island realms of Oceania, Vivieaere's contribution to *The Great Journey* and the legacy of his curatorial practice became an important touchstone in my thinking around the *PAN* project and the artists proposed for this exhibition.[4]

The idea of 'Islandness' within contemporary art had been a problematic subject that Vivieaere had sought to resolve for many years

[3] This poem by Jim Viviaere was written on a wall panel of his "Multimedia moving image artwork" in the exhibition *Le Folauga* at the Auckland War Memorial Museum in 2007.

[4] Section 5 of the article was written by reusing portions of text from a publication by the same Author (Friend 2021, 52-71).

prior to *The Great Journey*. Vivieaere's groundbreaking 1994 exhibition *Bottled Ocean* at City Gallery Wellington left an indelible mark on the art history of Aotearoa New Zealand, marking an important moment of change in the outdated anthropological consideration of Oceanic art and artists at that time. As Dr Peter Brunt writes in the 2012 publication Art in Oceania, '*Bottled Ocean* made the "arrival" of contemporary Pacific art in the elite galleries of the New Zealand art world a problem to be reflected upon, rather than simply a triumph to celebrate. Having been invited to survey the work of Pacific migrants, Vivieaere turned the exhibition into something of an installation, a work of art in its own right…" (Brunt, Thomas 2012; Brunt 2010).

As an artist-curator, Vivieare had a unique perspective and ability to reframe curatorial practice as an extension of his own art practice. Vivieaere's master stroke in *Bottled Ocean* was the placement of artworks behind a clear acrylic screen, bottling the exhibition within a giant museum vitrine. Freeing Pacific cultures from the vitrines of archaeology and anthropology become a lifelong endeavour, and a legacy that would free new generations of South Pacific Moana artists and curators to explore new currents in contemporary practice.

The Great Journey provided an opportunity for Vivieaere, and the community of artists that travelled alongside him, to traverse beyond the parochial Western-centric horizons of Aotearoa New Zealand contemporary art discourse, to reconsider and reconnect 'Pacific art' in relation to broader Austronesia histories of Oceanic art and culture. The six artists that travelled with Vivieaere were Shane Cotton, Virginia King, Lisa Reihana, Greg Semu, Michel Tuffery and Daniel Waswas. They were joined by eleven Taiwanese artists from four Indigenous nations of Taiwan, including the Atayal, Amis, Paiwan and Sediq nations.

KMFA Curator and Head of Research Mei-Chen Tseng shared in her 2009 preliminary catalogue for The Great Journey, "The art and culture of Taiwan and the South Pacific bear witness to the migration and development of Austronesian peoples throughout the Pacific. The linkages between Taiwan and the South Pacific extends to the ecological environment, language, myths and legends, houses, tools and lifestyles. In the context of contemporary art, the Austronesian peoples can draw on their extensive pedigrees. And even in the midst of modern civilization, they can still rely on clearly defined cultural roots" (Zeplin 2010, 35).

These histories of migration and exchange between the Indigenous nations of Taiwan and the many island nations of the Pacific reach back in time many thousands of years prior to the arrival and settlement of European colonies in the Asia-Pacific region. *The Great Journey* exhibition provided an opportunity for these communities and cultural narratives to be centred in contemporary art discourse of the Asia-Pacific region. This geographical recentring aligned with

Figure 5 *Bottled Ocean*, installation shot. City Gallery Wellington Te Whare Toi, 1994

Vivieaere's ongoing project for cultural recentring which had been so potently communicated with *Bottled Ocean*. *Bottled Ocean* visually demonstrated the othering of Pacific art and people in Aotearoa New Zealand, encased within the vitrine of Western museology. As Albert Wendy had articulated previously, the cultural label and perception of what a 'Pacific Islander' was in the 1970s was something other to the cultural label and idea of what a New Zealander was at that time, and this prevalent attitude continued to persist into the 1990s and 2000s during *Bottled Ocean* and *The Great Journey*.

I was 13 years old when *Bottled Ocean* opened, unaware of the art historical negotiations taking place. When *The Great Journey* opened in Taiwan in 2009, I had just been appointed Curator Māori-Pacific at City Gallery Wellington in Aotearoa New Zealand. Vivieaere's legacy at the institution was palpable. I felt swept up in the torrent of information and critical discourse that Jim and his peers had navigated many years before. For me, Jim was Kupe. The great Oceanic navigator who sailed to Aotearoa New Zealand from Rarotonga and Aitutaki a thousand years ago, carving pathways in the sea and sky, traversing turbulent waters, confronting titans, claiming new terrain (Friend 2021, 52).

Though Vivieaere, Hauʻofa and Teaiwa are no longer with us, having sailed beyond daylight in return to the ancestral realm, I see new generations of Moana artists and scholars on the horizon, with their paddles in the water, rising on the wake of elders gone before. Many of my peers, and younger generations of Pacific Island artists

and curators, have expressed a strong desire to completely reject the term ‘Pacific’ and ‘Oceania’ in favour of self-determined Indigenous language terms. Most audibly, Canada-based artist and scholar Dr Léuli Eshrāghi advocates for the term ‘Moana’ or ‘Moananui’ as more culturally and linguistically appropriate words to describe Oceania and the island nations of the Pacific. In his 2015 essay “We Are Born of the Fanua: Moananui Arts Practice in Australia” Eshrāghi explains, “Moananui ā kea in ʻŌlelo Hawaiʻi denotes the great ocean linked to [the] ancestor Kea. Te Moananui a Kiwa in reo Māori denotes the great ocean linked to [the] ancestor Kiwa” (Eshrāghi 2015, 65). As a term, he explains “Moananui a Kiwa or Moananui ā kea encompasses vast worlds of atoll and volcanic archipelagos, all connected through millennial vā of customary exchange, from Timor, Kaho’olawe and Pora Pora to Viti Levu, Te Ika a Māui and Rekohu. Thousands of peoples maintain Moananui geocultural, sociopolitical and spiritual practices in every part of this expansive ocean, and far beyond it through international diaspora” (65).

As a contribution to decolonising research methodologies championed by scholars such as Linda Tuhiwai Smith and Leanne Betasamosake Simpson, Tongan scholar and philosopher Tēvita O. Ka’ili builds on the *tā-vā* theory of reality and relations developed by ‘Okusitino Māhina. Defining *tā* as ‘the beating of space’ and *vā* as the ‘relational space between two marks in time’, Ka’ili offers the Tauhi Vā theory as a methodology for creating and maintaining trans-Indigenous socio-spatial relations across the Moana, enacted through the performance of servant leadership. Ka’ili offers four guiding principles for the performance of social duties: *hohoko* (genealogy), *vāʻifaiva* (sociospatial responsibility), *talatalanoa* (conversation), and *fokifokihi* (taking time to see all sides of a concept) (Ka’ili 2017). By understanding time and space as vectors that determine our positionality, we can mark our time in space by the steps, actions and interactions we create.

A poetic interpretation of this methodology can be seen in a poem by Jim Vivieaere. Two years before *The Great Journey*, Vivieaere presented a multimedia moving image artwork in an exhibition titled *Le Folauga* at the Auckland War Memorial Museum. In the title of the artwork Vivieaere wrote the words, “This is not the sky, this is a grandfather clock”. I think about this line at times, when I look up at the sky, or when I am peering down on the ocean from a window seat on a plane, and I try to slow time in my mind.

In conclusion, the poetic inference in this line evokes genealogical connections to the sky father, but also makes reference to philosophies of time and space as temporal and relational markers of our positionality between the realms of earth, sea, sky and time. These are philosophies rooted in the Moana. The time we live in is marked by our actions and measured by the beating of our hearts. Though our ancestors would not recognise the world we live in today, the

ocean remembers them, and so too does the earth and sky. And it will remember our actions between the earth and sky too, for better or worse.

Bibliography

Brunt, P. (ed.) (2010). “Roundtable: Thinking through Oceania Now”. *Reading Room: A Journal of Art and Culture*, 4, 82-104.

Brunt, P.; Thomas, N. (eds) (2012). *Art in Oceania: A New History*. London: Thames & Hudson.

Eshrāghi, L. (2015). “We Are Born of the Fanua: Moananui Arts Practice in Australia”. *Artlink*, 35(2), June, 52-71.

Friend, R. (2021). “The Journey Continues: New Currents in Oceanic Art”. *Pan Austro Nesian Navigation Guide*. Taiwan: Kaohsiung Museum of Fine Art, 52-71.

Friend, R. (2023). “In the Way of a Woman”. `https://www.natalieking.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2023/10/Yuki-Kihara.pdf`.

Hau‘ofa, E. [1993] (1994). “Our Sea of Islands”. *The Contemporary Pacific*, 6(1), Spring, 147-61.

Hawai‘i Triennial (2022). *Pacific Century – E Ho‘omau no Moananuiākea. Exhibition Catalogue*. Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press.

Katzeman, A. (2022). Review of Hawai‘i Triennial 2022. `http://www.caareviews.org/reviews/3989`.

Lee, Y. (2022). “Ocean Currents, Islands and the South: The Conception of the Pan-Austro-Nesian Arts Festival”. Interview by L. Hsu, 19 June. `https://athillyer.org/ocean-currents-islands-and-the-south-the-conception-of-the-pan-austro-nesian-arts-festival/`.

Māhina, ‘O. (2010).“‘Tā, Vā and Moana: Temporality, Spatiality, and Indigeneity”. *Pacific studies*, 33(2-3), August-December, 168-202.

Scharples, T.P. (2009). “Indigenous Peoples’ Water Forum” [Speech Transcript]. 27 July. `https://www.scoop.co.nz/stories/PA0907/S00311/speech-sharples-indigenous-peoples-water-forum.htm`.

Simpson, L.B. (2017). “Nishnaabeg Internationalism”. *As We Have Always Done: Indigenous Freedom through Radical Resistance*. Minneapolis (MN): University of Minnesota Press, n.p.

Smith, L.T. (2012). *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. 2nd edition. London: Zed Books, 2012.

Teaiwa, T. (2917). “We Sweat and Cry Salt Water, so We Know That the Ocean Is Really in Our Blood”. *International Feminist Journal of Politics*, 19(2), 133-6.

Tēvita, O.K. (2017). “Researching as a Communal Concept and Practice”. Tēvita, O.K, *Marking Indigeneity: The Tongan Art of Sociospatial Relations*. Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 48-65. `https://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctt1t89kr9.10`.

Trask, H.-K. (1999). “What Do You Mean ‘We’ White Man?”. Trask, H.K. (ed.), *From a Native Daughter: Colonialism and Sovereignty in Hawai‘i*. 2nd edition. Honolulu: University of Hawai‘i Press, 123-35.

United Nations Declaration On The Rights Of Indigenous Peoples (2007). `https://social.desa.un.org/issues/indigenous-peoples/united-nations-declaration-on-the-rights-of-indigenous-peoples`.

Wendt, A. (1976). "Towards a New Oceania". *Mana Review: A South Pacific Journal of Language and Literature*, 1(1), 49-60.
Zeplin, P. (2010). "Expanding Oceania. A Review of Art in the Contemporary Pacific, 2009: The Great Journey: In Pursuit of the Ancestral Realm". *Pacific Arts*, 9(1), 35-9. www.jstor.org/stable/23412114.

e-ISSN 2785-2709

Lagoonscapes
Vol. 3 – Num. 2 – December 2023

The *Vārchive* Revolution: The Imperative for Indigenous Truth-Telling and Redefining Heritage Preservation

Nathan Mudyi Sentance
Powerhouse Museum, Head of Collections, First Nations

Madeline Poll
Powerhouse Museum, Assistant Curator, First Nations

Tammi Gissell
Powerhouse Museum, Collections Coordinator, First Nations

Abstract The following article discusses *Paradise Camp* by Sāmoan-Japanese artist Yuki Kihara, curated by Professor Natalie King which is on exhibition at The Powerhouse, Sydney, Australia throughout 2023. Authors delve into the significance of *Paradise Camp* as a vital and timely act of truth-telling. They highlight Kihara's concept and realisation of what she has coined as the *Vārchive*, a means to approaching First Nations archival materials. They explore the *Vārchive* as both artwork and archival practice that could catalyse a transformative shift within the heritage sector highlighting the imperative for Indigenous interventions within colonial collections. Reflecting on the *Vārchive* emphasises the need to redefine heritage, to encompass and consider Indigenous communities and landscapes as animate archives and memory holders that are increasingly threatened by climate change.

Keywords Archives. Climate Change. Climate action. Fa'afafine. Gender Studies. Sāmoa. First Nations. Indigenous. Paul Gaugin. Museums. Decolonisation.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 *Vārchive* Background. – 3 *Vārchive* Is a Right of Reply to the Colonial Archive. – 4 The Body as an Archive. – 5 Conclusion.

Edizioni Ca'Foscari

Peer review

Submitted 2023-09-28
Accepted 2023-10-25
Published 2023-12-20

Open access

© 2023 Sentance, Poll, Gissell | CC BY 4.0

Citation Sentance, N.M.; Poll, M.; Gissell, T. (2023). "The *Vārchive* Revolution: The Imperative for Indigenous Truth-Telling and Redefining Heritage Preservation". *Lagoonscapes. The Venice Journal of Environmental Humanities*, 3(2), 235-246.

DOI 10.30687/LGSP/2785-2709/2023/01/005

invisible hands
reach for your eyes to cover,
truth eludes you now
unaware of what's concealed
insidious ghosts
you never will hear their laugh,
that joke is on us
(Sentance [unpublished] 2023)

1 Introduction

We are what we remember, the self is a trick of memory… history is the remembered tightrope that stretches across the abyss of all that we have forgotten
(Wendt 2017)

On Gadigal Country, at Powerhouse Ultimo, interdisciplinary artist Yuki Kihara and Nathan Mudyi Sentance sat in Kihara's exhibition *Paradise Camp*, curated by Professor Natalie King, in front of Kihara's *Vārchive* featured in the exhibition and yarned. During this yarn, Kihara stated "I always consider who does this empower?".[1] It is a question, a focus, we wish more of those who work in memory institutions reflected on.

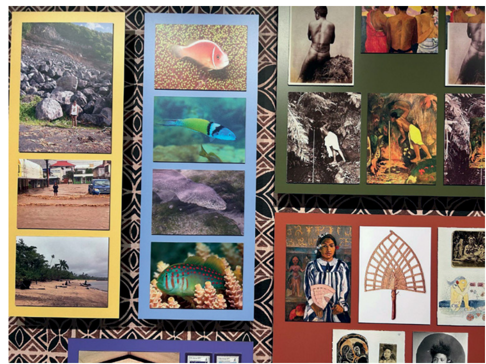
To do so, however, would mean to acknowledge the power that memory institutions such as government archives and museums possess. The power to shape what is remembered and how it is remembered, what voices construct the memory they hold, preserve and tell, and what voices do not (Finigan 2020). Some may say archives empower the public as it is them they serve, but this ignores that the power of archives has been often wielded against Indigenous peoples to serve goals of colonialism (Thorpe 2022; Sentance 2019).

Additionally, in thinking about who we in memory institutions empower, some may say everyone because we collect, preserve, and make accessible knowledge and memory for future generations (Sentance 2018). However, if we reflect on the *Vārchive* and its discussion of how climate change is affecting *fa'afafine* peoples, can we honestly say we are preserving knowledge and memory if we are not actively working to prevent environmental destruction and harm to Indigenous peoples caused by rising temperatures, rising sea levels and increased ocean acidification such as is happening in Sāmoa?

The *Vārchive* **[figs 1-4]** explores many themes and asks many questions. As we work with collections in a memory institution, we want to focus on a couple.[2] Namely, how Kihara's *Vārchive* is a Right of Reply that can create dialogues that empower people to be more critical

1 Personal communication (14 June 2023).

2 Cf. Positionality Statement in this paper.



Figures 1-4 Yuki Kihara's *Vārchive* at the *Paradise Camp* Exhibition, Powerhouse Museum. © Madeline Poll, 2023

of the constructed memory of collections, making them more aware that there is much memory and knowledge that exists outside of them.

We will also discuss the question posed by the *Vārchive* of what or more importantly, who is an archive? Through this we may expand our thinking of what an archive is to people and places. As such, we can understand the biggest threat to archives is climate change. Therefore, it is integral for us working in memory institutions to advocate for the rights of the people and lands most threatened by climate change. In fact, it should be a key tenet of our work, because if we do not, important memory keepers could be lost forever.

2 *Vārchive* Background

> The closer I looked at the background, and then
> the closer I looked at the models, it reminded me of
> people and places in Sāmoa
> (Kihara 2022)

Kihara and King's *Paradise Camp* is elaborate and unapologetic in its presentation of lies which have been passed as truths; and of truths which have been hidden amongst lies. The work pops with hot fuchsia and tigerprint, alluding to the exoticised projection of an 'untamed' Sāmoan homeland and people; and it unfolds through an extraordinary palette of textures and tones as Kihara responds, rejects and reimagines archival representations of her community and country.

Coming from a Japanese and Sāmoan background, interdisciplinary artist Yuki Kihara seeks to challenge historical narratives, most notably around Pasifika and Queer stories. Yuki often uses media and performance to convey her work, often opposing the historical narratives driven through colonial archives.

This is notable through the *Vārchive*, which is an archive and artwork currently displayed centrally in Kihara and King's *Paradise Camp* at Powerhouse Ultimo.

The exhibition is a vibrant *tableau vivant* of identity and landscape which shifts contemporary understanding of cultural autonomy in the Pacific, featuring a collection of constructed images captured by Kihara herself and other images that hold deeper significance in connection to Kihara's identity. These images are juxtaposed against traditional Sāmoan cloth backdrop, while the floor beneath them symbolises the Pacific Ocean as a tropical paradise. However, a deeper interpretation reveals that this waterline stands at the waistline, and is a commentary on the effects of rising sea levels due to climate change. Placing Kihara's *Vārchive* amidst a backdrop of rainbow headboards serves as a powerful reminder that this is no ordinary black and white Western archive. Kihara actively challenges conventional record-keeping practices through her use of a brilliant array of colours, shedding light on the exoticised portrayal of her Sāmoan homeland and its people.

The *Vārchive* is an example of storing Kihara's personal cultural knowledge and experiences, combining the Sāmoan concept of *Và*, which in Kihara's words is "the space that unites separate entities". *Và* is the bridge between the physical and the metaphysical that is always present and constant even when we are not aware. It is not empty space that needs to be filled, rather a space that connects a person to ceremony, spiritualism, cherished lands and each other. The concept of *Và* and its interrelatedness, and its rejection of binaries clashes with the colonial archive and its rigidness and how archival practices attempt to sort all information, including people, into categories and taxonomies.

e-ISSN 2785-2709

A major part of the *Vārchive* is Kihara's case study on Paul Gauguin, a Parisian Post-Impressionism artist (b. 1848) who inserted himself into the Tahitian lifestyle in 1891 with the hope of having a 'simpler' but successful career as an artist, painting the lives of Tahitian men and women, especially sexualising the women and their lifestyles. As told through the *Vārchive*, Kihara while in New York for her exhibition *Fa'afafine: In a Manner of a Woman* at the Metropolitan Museum of Art, examined the two portraits by Gauguin that the Museum held from his Tahitian trip. Kihara noticed landscapes that reminded her of her home in Sāmoa. The supposed candidness of the subjects posed against the picturesque landscapes was also questioned by Yuki, leading her to dig deeper into the truth about the portraits supposedly from Gauguin's memories.

Kihara's thorough investigation into colonial photography revealed a notable connection to the photographic works of Thomas Andrew, a New Zealand photographer, who resided in Sāmoa for a significant portion of his life, spanning from 1891 to 1939. In her research, Kihara stumbled upon compositions remarkably like those depicted in Gauguin's artwork. Additionally, she uncovered evidence suggesting that Gauguin visited the Auckland Art Gallery in 1895, where some of Andrew's photographs were stored.

Yuki also noted the androgyny of some of the subjects he depicted, such as those described in *Migrating Genders Westernisation, Migration, and Samoan Fa'afafine* by scholar Schmidt (2016) who discusses how the Sāmoan word *fa'afafine* translates as 'in the manner of' or 'like' (*fa'a*) a woman or women (*fafine*). She goes on to define *fa'afafine* as biological Sāmoan 'males' whose gendered behaviours are feminine. Through the *Vārchive* and the accompanying catalogue, Yuki explores the animosity that is still present about *fa'afafine* in Sāmoan culture today is a post colonised ideology – connected to the religious beliefs that were imposed by white settlers.

Yuki's archive seeks to disprove the notion of 'Paradise', citing that the concept is 'heteronomative' and dismissive of the implications of tourism, Climate Change and the erasure of Pacifica cultures due to the influence of colonialism.

Calling a place 'paradise' also glosses over the complexities of the seemingly idyllic regions where tourists travel to escape, she added,[3] including the land's own history of colonial violence and the looming threat of climate disaster, a battle in which Sāmoa is on the front lines.

3 Personal communication (14 June 2023).

e-ISSN 2785-2709

3 *Vārchive* is a Right of Reply to the Colonial Archive

> What the archive conceals and obliterates are the people behind the paper filed away in cardboard boxes, stored in cold vaults in the basements of buildings. These places are the prisons of Aboriginal history that attempted to incarcerate our memories of blood and Country – just as the official state-operated prison system incarcerates our physical bodies – the dual imprisonment. (Leane 2017, 244)

As Worimi archivist Thorpe (2022) discusses in the Australian context, archives have been used as instruments in service to the Australian colonial project by supporting the construction of narratives about Indigenous peoples by outsiders, mainly colonial agents, and suppressing Indigenous perspectives or how Booker (2022) describes "othering and silencing". These constructed narratives have often contained misrepresentations of Indigenous peoples, depicting us, Indigenous peoples, as less than human, as savages, thus in need of civilising by the colonial state and less deserving of our lands (Nakata et al. 2005; Finigan 2020). This othering and silencing can be seen in the *Vārchive* through the art of Gauguin.

Barrowcliffe (2023) states, Indigenous peoples can combat this underrepresenting, misrepresenting and vilifying of them by memory institutions or as Caswell (2014) names it, symbolic annihilation, by exercising their Right of Reply. The Right of Reply is, according to the *Position Statement on the Right of Reply to Indigenous Knowledges and Information Held in Archives* released in 2021 by The Indigenous Archives Collective, a group of Indigenous and non-Indigenous researchers and practitioners who think about and/or work in Indigenous archives, a right and a participatory framework where Indigenous peoples can update, correct, critique, or enhance archival material held in memory institutions related to or depicting them, their culture and their histories.

Kihara's *Vārchive* and *Paradise Camp* as a whole is an assertion by Kihara of her *Right of Reply*. As Fusco (2022) notes, *Paradise Camp* is re-examining and challenging the tropes and myths about Indigenous peoples reinforced by colonial archives and classic art. By doing so Kihara and King are adding dimensions and perspectives often missing in archives, setting the record straight.

By deconstructing tropes and myths *Paradise Camp* is also showing that they have been constructed in the first place, naming the power of archives, making it visible. Sentance (2019) has argued previously that the power of archives is partly maintained and hard to challenge or change because it is concealed behind archival professional standards and government bureaucracy, which gives an illusion that archives are neutral sites of memory (Christen, Anderson

2019). Yet, neutrality bias and power dynamics can be hidden making conversations of who archives empower or disempower difficult. The *Vārchive* makes this power visible and inverts it. It shows the archives' structures, it bares its bones.

One thing this *Right of Reply* makes clear is there is much Indigenous knowledge and truth that exists outside the archive which is being brought to the forefront by Indigenous artists like Kihara. Our hope for those who visit *Paradise Camp*, including us who work in memory institutions, is an increased awareness of the power dynamics that shape colonial archives thus shaping colonial memory.

We hope this could shift discussions around the preservation of memory and history to not just the material within institutional collections, but to extend it to sources of Indigenous knowledges that exist outside of them. Who are we empowering if our preservation does not include people and places historically excluded from the colonial archive?

4 The Body as an Archive

> The body speaks.
> It does not lie.
> The more you try and lie with your body
> The more it will tell the truth on you.
> (Dr. Elizabeth Cameron-Dalman)[4]

Using a multitude of contemporary archival mediums, Kihara collides cold hard facts with memories – both actual and imagined – with a beauty and humour necessary to confront the wounds that colonialism, climate change and exclusion incur and perpetuate upon Kihara's community. Yet, at the core of *Paradise Camp*, it is the body itself which remains firm as the epicentre of knowledge keeping and of truth telling.

Gissell (2022) has previously described Indigenous bodies as *animate archives of their people* and Kihara's revelations regarding Gauguin's mis-appropriation (trying to tell lies) with the bodies of his subjects are a significant example of the bodies' power to prevail as a source of truth.

The bodies of Kihara's subjects, in stark opposition to Gaugin, are empowered, standing firm in truth, and the artist – Kihara – does not attempt to deceive her audience about who or where these subjects are. They are not 'othered and silenced' as Booker describes. Instead, they are recognised and given their voice. Kihara is allowing the bodies of her subjects to speak and they are telling the truth.

---

4 Personal communication in rehearsal with Gissell, The University of Western Sydney 2005.

Throughout *Paradise Camp*, one is swept up in tides of extravagant colour and sound and then dumped on shores of realisation that as it is the marginalised who are most affected by climate change and as Kanemusu and Liki (2021) point out, it is the *fa'afafine* who are the most marginalised community in Sāmoa. *fa'afafine* bodies as archives do not lie. They remain, as Bardiot describes "a receptacle of memory on the surface of the skin".

The gestures, postures and even the eyelines of Gauguin's models spoke out beyond his paintings. They spoke truths Kihara recognised because the collective embodied knowledge – the animated archive of her people – is the source of her knowing. Kihara has access to this archive because she is a living inheritor and contributor to it. Rosey Simas Dewadošyö (2022) explains:

> I realised how the movements of my childhood, of play, dance, ritual and ceremony – movements deeply connected to the earth – informed the very architecture of my body. As my bones were shaped by gestures, my senses became developed to receive and perceive information in culturally specific ways.

It is clear that so much of Indigenous knowing exists outside of colonial archives. This knowledge is lived and passed through Indigenous bodies in relationship to landscape as a body unto itself – the body of Mother Earth[5] if you will. The survival of our species is predicated on an embodiment of knowledge in relationship with Mother Earth.

As Jacinta Koolmatrie (2019) states "by destroying land you are destroying the 'books' and 'libraries' of Indigenous people". Indeed, by denying the *fa'afafine* their real bodies and by denying Sāmoa her real body, what perpetuates is further decline for a community already deep in post-colonial traumatic amnesia.

In light of the climate change crisis it is imperative we return to original sources of knowing – to the animate archives of Indigenous peoples and places to guide us back to living in harmony with each other and our lands in Sāmoa and beyond.

Without a body, one cannot sense their land nor live in harmony with it. Without land, our bodies have nowhere to go. A renewed relationship between people and place is paramount if we are ever to return to collective responsibility and genuine caring toward addressing today's climate crisis.

This renewed relationship can only be achieved through a willingness to hear and speak the truth. The good, the bad and the very, very ugly truth. Mother Earth is in crisis and she is calling out for

5 It is common with Kooris (New South Wales Indigenous peoples) to refer to the Earth as our Mother.

our help. Kihara is sounding the call for her Sāmoan homelands and her people. It would do us all good to harken her call.

5 Conclusion

In conclusion, as Indigenous collections professionals, we are thankful to Yuki and the *Vārchive* for providing us with a profound lens through which to examine the intersection of art and archival practice. Through their thoughtful exploration, we have gained invaluable insights into the *Vārchive*'s potential role as a transformative force within the heritage sector. Yuki and the *Vārchive* have illuminated the pressing need for Indigenous interventions in colonial collections, offering a compelling impetus for truth-telling.

The reflections offered by the *Vārchive* compel us to redefine our conception of heritage, extending its scope to embrace Indigenous communities and sites as living archives and memory bearers. In an era where climate change threatens to erode these vital cultural resources, this redefinition takes on even greater urgency. Yuki and the *Vārchive* challenge the status quo and point towards a future where heritage preservation and cultural understanding are more inclusive and sustainable. By acknowledging and safeguarding the diverse narratives of Indigenous peoples, we can forge a path toward a more equitable world where memory embedded in us, and in our Mother Earth is celebrated and cherished by all.

Positionality Statement

As collection workers who reject notions of neutrality and believe our experiences and relationships to knowledge inform our work, we believe for transparency, it is important to share our positionality. Positionality, according to Queens University following the work of Alcoff, refers to an individual's location in relation to their different social identities, such as gender, race, class and geographical location (Queen's University ND; Alcoff 1988). The convergence of these identities and their interactions influence our perception and engagement with the world, as well as our knowledge and perspectives. Both as individuals and as people who work with collections in memory institutions we embody multiple identities that are flexible and interactive, shaped by context, and subject to constant revision and reproduction. We see our identities, embodied knowledge and relationships to knowledge as a strength we harness and not a limitation. Because of this, we will write citing literature as well as citing our experiences and interpretations.

We are writing this essay on the multiple unceded Aboriginal lands on which we work and live, namely Gadigal, Bediagal, Gaimaragal. We acknowledge we are visitors to these lands as Indigenous peoples from elsewhere and hope our work honours and respects the continuous sovereignty and connections of the Traditional Owners of these lands, waterways and skies we surround ourselves with. We also want to honour the Ancestors and Elders who are captured in collections and recognise the significant strength and guidance of our fellow First Nations collections professionals who have and still do lead the commitment of working with collections for truth telling, cultural revitalisation, repatriating love to our Ancestors in collections.

Bibliography

Alcoff, L. (1988). “Cultural Feminism Versus Post-structuralism: The Identity Crisis in Feminist Theory”. *Signs: Journal of Women in Culture and Society*, 13(3), 405-36. https://doi.org/10.1086/494426.

Bardiot, C. (2021). *Performing Arts and Digital Humanities*, vol. 5. London: Wiley-ISTE. https://doi.org/10.1002/9781119855569.

Barrowcliffe, R. (2023). *Reading Between the Lines: Uncovering Butchulla History in the K’gari Research Archive* [PhD dissertation]. Sydney: Macquarie University.

Booker (Garigal), L. (2022). “Resist and Assert. Indigenous Work in Glam”. *Indigenous Women’s Voices*. London: Zed Books, 153-68. https://doi.org/10.5040/9781350237506.ch-009.

Caswell, M. (2014). “Seeing Yourself in History”. *The Public Historian*, 36(4), 26-37. https://doi.org/10.1525/tph.2014.36.4.26.

Christen, K.; Anderson, J. (2019). “Toward Slow Archives”. *Archival Science*, 19(2), 87-116. https://doi.org/10.1007/s10502-019-09307-x.

Finigan, N. (2020). *Are Museums and Archives Irredeemable Colonial Projects?*. Museum-ID. https://museum-id.com/are-museums-and-archives-irredeemable-colonial-projects/.

Fusco, C. (2022). “Reinventing the Archive: Yuki Kihara’s Paradise Camp”. King, N. (ed.), *Paradise Camp by Yuki Kihara*. Melbourne: Thames & Hudson.

Gissell, T. [unpublished] (2022). “Indigenous Dramaturgy in Dance”. *Critical Path*, 7. https://criticalpath.org.au/resource-category/sharings/.

Indigenous Archives Collective (2021). “The Indigenous Archives Collective Position Statement on the Right of Reply to Indigenous Knowledges and Information Held in Archives”. *Archives and Manuscripts*, 49(3), 244-52. https://doi.org/10.1080/01576895.2021.1997609.

Kihara, Y.; King, N. (2022). *Paradise Camp*. Sydney: Powerhouse.

Kanemasu, Y.; Liki, A. (2021). “‘Let Fa’afafine Shine Like Diamonds’: Balancing Accommodation, Negotiation and Resistance in Gender-Nonconforming Samoans’ Counter-Hegemony”. *Journal of Sociology*, 57(4), 806-24. https://doi.org/10.1177/1440783320964538.

Koolmatrie, J. [unpublished] (2019). *Indigenous Knowledge and Libraries = Conference presentation* (Adelaide, 5-7 July). Adelaide. New Librarians Symposium 9.

Leane, J. (2017). “Gathering: The Politics of Memory and Contemporary Aboriginal Women’s Writing”. *Antipodes*, 31(2), 242-51. https://doi.org/10.13110/antipodes.31.2.0242.

Nakata, M. et al. (2005). “Indigenous Knowledge, the Library and Information Service Sector, and Protocols”. *Australian Academic & Research Libraries*, 36(2), 7-21. https://doi.org/10.1080/00048623.2005.10721244.

Queen’s University (n.d.). *Positionality statement*. Kingston: Centre for Teaching and Learning. https://www.queensu.ca/ctl/resources/equity-diversity-inclusivity/positionality-statement.

Schmidt, J. (2016). *Migrating Genders Westernisation, Migration, and Samoan Fa’afafine*. London: Taylor & Francis. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315595276.

Sentance, N. (2018). *What Is Our Purpose?*. Archival Decolonist, 29 December. https://archivaldecolonist.org/2018/12/29/what-is-our-purpose/.
Sentance, N. (2019). “Disrupting the Colonial Archive: Nathan Sentance on Natalie Harkin”. *Sydney Review of Books*, 18 September. https://sydneyreviewofbooks.com/review/natalie-harkin-archival-poetics/.
Simas Dewadošyö, R. (2022). “The Body Is an Archive: Collective Memory, Ancestral Knowledge, Culture and History”. *Music, Dance and the Archive*. Sydney: Sydney University Press, 79-92. https://doi.org/10.30722/sup.9781743328675.05.
Smith, L.T. (2021). *Decolonizing Methodologies: Research and Indigenous Peoples*. 3rd ed. London: Zed Books.
Thorpe, K. (2022). *Unclasping the White Hand: Reclaiming and Refiguring the Archives to Support Indigenous Wellbeing and Sovereignty* [PhD dissertation]. Victoria: Monash University.
Wendt, A.; Marsh, S.T. (2018). *Tightrope*. Auckland: Auckland University Press.

e-ISSN 2785-2709

Lagoonscapes
Vol. 3 – Num. 2 – December 2023

Nuclear Testing in French Polynesia: After Fifty Years of Lies and State Secrets
How to Calm Our Anger and Rebuild Ourselves

Chantal Spitz
Tahitian author

Abstract The essay discusses, from an Indigenous perspective, the French nuclear weapon tests in the southern Pacific islands. It presents a vivid scenario of the detrimental effects and social inequalities produced by the dynamic of 'industrialization without industry' brought about by militarisation and extraction.

Keywords Nuclear testing. Militarisation. French Polynesia. Pacific islands.

Translated from the original French by Jean Anderson.

Edizioni
Ca'Foscari

Peer review
Submitted 2023-09-28
Accepted 2023-11-22
Published 2023-12-20

Open access
© 2023 Spitz | cc-by 4.0

Citation Spitz, C. (2023). "Nuclear Testing in French Polynesia: After Fifty Years of Lies and State Secrets. How to Calm Our Anger and Rebuild Ourselves". *Lagoonscapes. The Venice Journal of Environmental Humanities*, 3(2), 247-256.

DOI 10.30687/LGSP/2785-2709/2023/02/006

On July 6th 1966, Aldebaran ripped open the skies above Moruroa.[1] Aldebaran was the first nuclear test carried out by the French State in its Pacific colony of French Polynesia, where 193 nuclear bombs would explode between July 1966 and January 1996.[2]

On that morning of July 6th 1966, the wind was blowing in the wrong direction and the radioactive cloud reached Mangareva[3] instead of blowing far out to sea as had been predicted by the military command that believed that "with such a network of weather stations, under the control of technicians from the National Meteorological Service, […] any inaccuracy in judging the conditions favorable to the firing is highly unlikely" (Meltz 2022).[4] No preventive evacuation of Mangareva's inhabitants was planned. "Secrecy is the order of the day and the danger is to be covered up for political and psychological reasons" (Meltz 2022).[5] For the same reasons, no atomic shelters existed on the island. The inhabitants of Mangareva were unknowingly contaminated by the radioactive cloud and by the rain that was their main source of water at that time. A few days after the explosion scientists carried out analyses that showed food and water were contaminated. The report concluded "the degree of contamination and the actual numbers must be minimized so as not to lose the confidence of civilians" (Statius, n.d.).[6]

On 17 July 1974, Centaure was tested. Military command believed that the explosion would reach the ideal altitude and that the wind would not be blowing toward Tahiti. The cloud did not rise above 5,200 meters and the wind pushed the radioactive cloud directly over Tahiti. Here again the silence was absolute and no information was passed on for the protection of the inhabitants, in particular about foods that absorb radioactivity and should be avoided. Cow's milk and dairy products were 'confiscated' and withdrawn from sale without Tahitians having any idea of the reasons for this.

---

1 Atoll in the Tuamotu archipelago 1,250 km south-east of Tahiti.

2 From 1966 to 1974, 46 atmospheric tests (explosions in the open air) and from 1974 to 1996, 147 underground tests in the subsoil and beneath the lagoons of Moruroa and Fangataufa.

3 Island in the Gambier archipelago, 1,590 km south-east of Tahiti, with a population at the time of 500.

4 "[A]vec un tel réseau de stations météo, exploitées par des techniciens du Service de la Météorologie Nationale, […] une estimation erronée des conditions favorables de tir est très improbable".

5 "On est dans la politique du secret et on veut cacher la dangerosité".

6 "[I]l faut minimiser la contamination et la réalité des chiffres pour ne pas perdre la confiance des populations civiles". Interview with Tomas Statius, co-author of *Toxique enquête sur les essais nucléaires français en Polynésie* (Toxic Inquiry Into French Nuclear Tests in Polynesia).

e-ISSN 2785-2709

The only preventive evacuation took place in 1968 under great secrecy. The sixty or so inhabitants of Tureia atoll, the closest atoll to Moruroa, were moved to Tahiti at the time of the first megatonic test (Canopus, 2.6 megatons), without knowing why they had been moved.

Over the thirty years of its nuclear campaigns, and for twenty years afterward, in keeping with its techno-scientific arrogance, the military command[7] maintained its practice of secrecy and multiple lies in order to prove the harmlessness of its nuclear experiments and to minimize their consequences.

The setting up of the Centre d'Expérimentation du Pacifique (CEP)[8] is a part of the history of the irreversible upheaval that shook the population of French Polynesia on multiple levels, environmental, economic cultural, psychological, undermining their health and their identity.

The cracks caused by the vibrations of the underground nuclear tests were not mentioned for a long time. Three zones in the north of Moruroa are damaged and under surveillance by seismic monitoring equipment. If these zones should collapse there would be a tidal wave that would swallow Tureia, the closest atoll to Moruroa.

In just a few years, the society of the 1960s that was largely unsalaried became a society of mostly salaried workers with "a post-industrial economy […] without having passed through the normal intermediate phase of industrialization" (Poirine 2022).[9] The building of the infrastructures associated with the nuclear industry in Tahiti and the Tuamotus required a considerable number of labourers and resulted in the exodus of thousands of people from the archipelagoes to take up the local jobs created by this need. People left the primary sector and exports crashed. The economy developed around military spending and goods imported from outside; "the territory's budget became more and more dependent on this military spending that allowed for the lifestyle of an industrialized country but with no industry".[10] In this context, social inequalities grew between the winners in the system (expatriate and local government employees, importers, distributors, business owners, promoters) and the losers

7 Military authorities, along with scientists, doctors and politicians were responsible for the nuclear testing program and all participated in the secrecy and official lies. There is a growing body of literature on the post-WWII military industrial complex and militarization. See, for example, McGranahan, Collins 2018. In particular, Ann Stoler's conversation included in the book's Afterword, "Disassemblage: Rethinking U.S. Imperial Formation", is helpful in thinking through the inconsistence of post-WWII militarization.

8 Responsible for the development of the French State's nuclear programme.

9 "[U]ne économie post-industrielle […] sans passer par la phase normale d'industrialisation intermédiaire". In 1962, 46% of the population was active in the primary sector (food production, vanilla, coffee, fishing, mother-of-pearl, coprah…).

10 "[L]e budget du territoire devient de plus en plus dépendant de ces dépenses militaires qui lui permettent un niveau de vie de pays industriel sans industrie".

(under-qualified workers in the private sector and in low-security employment).

> According to the 1962 census, 80% of those aged 15 and over stated they could read and write Tahitian. Only an urban elite were fluent in French; in the rest of the country French was not spoken. (Vernaudon 2022)[11]

In 1964, aware of the difficulties for the setting up of the CEP that could result from this situation, General de Gaulle decided to launch television in Tahiti,[12] so that "Polynesians might live in French with news from Polynesia from France from the world, in French, they must be bathed in France" (Vernaudon 2022).[13] Television, fluency in French, repeated contact with expatriates and climbing the economic and social hierarchy brought about major socio-economic changes and a disdain for Tahitian developed in people's minds and in society at large. Doing well in French school and mastering French are from now on key to accessing the world of salaried employment, and this new society and families value school and give priority to French when they can.

Indigenous culture is also subject to this same disdain, and customary activities (fishing, growing crops, food, housing, ways of life…) are left to families that do not wish to Frenchify themselves or that live in areas far from town or from Tahiti. Over time, these families become the source of under-qualified labourers in the private sector or workers who are often undeclared or have little job security.

The thousands employed by the CEP are largely delighted to be part of the monumental adventure of building the nuclear test sites. These men are paid prodigious sums and are happy to spend them generously with their families each time they come home from work.[14] As buildings are completed, many of the workers are hired by businesses profiting from the CEP manna while others stay on at the nuclear sites. These employees, like the French and Polynesian conscripts, are present without protection at the atmospheric tests, confident in the army's lies. Many of them develop one or more radiation-induced diseases, some give birth to disabled children, and their pride in having been able to give their families an unhoped-for

11 "Lors du recensement de la population en 1962, 80% des 15 ans et plus déclare savoir lire et écrire en tahitien. Seule une élite urbaine maîtrise le français; dans le reste du pays on ne parle pas français".

12 This would happen in 1965.

13 "[Que] les Polynésiens vivent en français avec des nouvelles de Polynésie de France et du monde en français il faut qu'ils baignent dans la France".

14 Depending on the status of these workers, their on-site time varied from 15 days to six months.

e-ISSN 2785-2709

standard of living sours into a deep feeling of culpability and shame. Of anger. At falling for reassuring speeches. At having created the disaster that is eating away at our country. At having contaminated their offspring. In addition, the men's long absences have broken apart many couples, just as they have produced a generation without paternal role models. This feeling of culpability is widespread among the broad sector of society that was in favour of the nuclear tests, particularly since the exposure of the French State's lies and since they too are physically affected by radiation-induced sickness.

The French government wipes out possible opposition in French Polynesia by hatching a plot against Indigenous parliamentary representative Pouvāna'a a 'O'opa, and by threatening to put its colony under a military regime.[15] From the beginning of the nuclear campaign, there is evident resistance, but the speech given in 1966 by John Teariki in response to General de Gaulle's is quickly drowned out by the reassurances of local politicians in favour of the tests.[16]

> But Mister President, I cannot help but tell you, in the name of the inhabitants of this territory, how bitter and how sad we are to see France […] dishonoured by such an undertaking. […] We wish, Mister President, that you would apply here in French Polynesia the excellent principles that you recommended from Phnom Penh to our American friends, and that you would round up and ship out your troops, your bombs and your planes. Then our leukaemia and cancer sufferers would not be able to accuse you later on of having caused their illness. And our future generations would not be able to blame you for the birth of monsters and retarded children. (Teariki 1966)[17]

This opposition would never cease, and would be carried on until the tests were completely stopped, in particular by John Teariki, Francis

15 Pouvāna'a a 'O'opa (1895-1977), Tahitian politician, elected to the French parliament from 1947 to 1958, supported a considerable degree of autonomy. He was unjustly accused of involvement in the arson attack in Pape'ete, and was sentenced to 8 years in prison and 15 years' exile; pardoned in 1971, he was elected to the Senate from 1971 until his death in 1977.

16 John Teariki (1914-1983) a Tahitian politician, elected to the French parliament, proponent of a considerable degree of autonomy for French Polynesia, opposed to nuclear testing.

17 "Mais je ne puis, Monsieur le Président, m'empêcher de vous exprimer, au nom des habitants de ce territoire, toute l'amertume, toute la tristesse que nous éprouvons de voir la France […] déshonorée par une telle entreprise. […] Puissiez-vous, Monsieur le Président, appliquer, en Polynésie française, les excellents principes que vous recommandiez, de Phnom Penh, à nos amis américains et rembarquer vos troupes, vos bombes et vos avions. Alors, plus tard, nos leucémiques et nos cancéreux ne pourraient pas vous accuser d'être l'auteur de leur mal. Alors, nos futures générations ne pourraient pas vous reprocher la naissance de monstres et d'enfants tarés".

Sanford,[18] Daniel Millaud[19] and Oscar Temaru,[20] accompanied by a percentage of French Polynesians who would take part in marches every year to demand that nuclear tests in their country be ended.

On 5 January 2010, the French government voted in a law[21] creating a right to total reparation for harm caused to persons suffering from a radiation-induced illness potentially caused by the nuclear tests. This law recognised 23 such illnesses. It did not satisfy the associations for the defence of former nuclear workers who criticised the limited number of cases accepted by Comité d'Indemnisation des Victimes des Essais Nucléaires (CIVEN)[22] where the French Ministry of Defence lists 353 instances of nuclear fallout over the whole of French Polynesia between 1966 and 1974 (Ministère de la Défense 2006) **[fig. 1]**.

To this official total must be added Doctor Sueur's (2018)[23] "conclusion to a progress report of a research project carried out in Tahiti […] between 2012 and 2016" that followed up on two observations. These included "the considerable number of clinical cases combining a pervasive developmental disorder[24] with morphological anomalies and/or mental retardation"; "among our patients, the majority of these clinical cases are found, in 'grandchildren', among the descendants of civilian or military veterans of the CEP, at the same rate as among the inhabitants of the southern atolls of the Tuamotus and the Gambiers" (Sueur 2018, 2-3). It is possible that the cases encountered are "third generation cases […] probably related to the radiation exposure of their grandparents who worked for the CEP at the time of the atmospheric nuclear tests of the 1960s and 70s" (Sueur 2018, 6-7).

18 Francis Sanford (1912-1996), Tahitian politician, elected to the French parliament then first vice-president of the Council of Government in 1977, proponent of a considerable degree of autonomy for French Polynesia, opposed to nuclear testing.

19 Daniel Millaud (1928-2016), Tahitian politician, elected to the French Senate, proponent of a considerable degree of autonomy for French Polynesia.

20 Oscar Temaru (b. 1944) Tahitian politician, leader of the Independence movement and opposed to nuclear testing, President of the government of French Polynesia five times between 2004 and 2013, and leader of the party elected to power in April 2023.

21 So-called Morin Law relating to compensation for victims of French nuclear testing.

22 Cf. Comité d'Indemnisation des Victimes des Essais Nucléaires 2022, 6: 143 applications, 46 awarded, 84 refused, 13 out of scope.

23 Christian Sueur is a practising hospital psychiatrist in French Polynesia, head of the pediatric psychiatry unit at the Centre Hospitalier in Pirae.

24 PDD, now known in English as ASD, autism spectrum disorder.

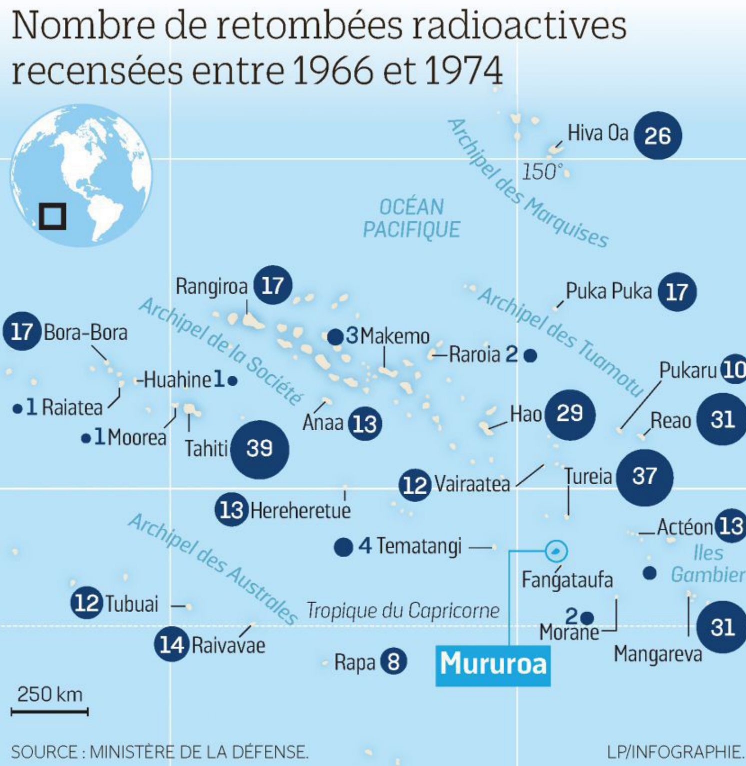


Figure 1 Instances of radioactive fallout in French Polynesia between 1966 and 1974

Fifty years of experimental tests of secrecy of lies and arrogance have deeply marked the collective intelligence of French Polynesians. Against official speeches that exhort them to 'turn the page' and look to the future, there stands a shared demand that the French State recognize its colonialism along with its multitude of consequences and write it into the constitution; that it pay out the compensations due to French Polynesians, that the Remembrance Centre[25] enable people to understand and to shine a light on that sinister era, take into account Indigenous memories and feelings, and that it make use of digital platforms to interest the young generations who often know nothing about this page in their history. A page that fear shame complicity lies propaganda intimidation censorship blacklisting have

25 Pū Mahara, the Remembrance Centre for the nuclear tests, was requested by the government of French Polynesia in 2009 and agreed to by the French State in 2017; it is currently in the scientific, cultural and educational planning stages.

stifled hidden silenced. A page that has burdened multiplied intensified the agitations injuries traumas of a history of violence of oppression of outrage, handed down from generation to generation from soul to soul from the first confrontation with the first European arrivals, written into the collective unconscious of a people full of self-doubt.

In French Polynesia as in every colony or occupied territory, official history is written with the conqueror's ink and does not tell of the furious encounters between Indigenes and European navigators, of the upheavals of an evangelization that took apart the foundations of a society and installed a disorder of beliefs and governorship, of colonization that struck the final blow in destroying awareness and intellects. The legacy of fifty years of nuclear abomination is concentrated in a society that is alienated altered twisted, into a daily life interrupted by radiation-induced illnesses, by epigenetic, transgenerational pathologies (Sueur 2018, 3), and a future that has been paid for in advance by a long trail of self-abasement and deadly self-abuse.

It is up to us, peoples of French Polynesia, to build together a positive perception of ourselves, anchored in what we possess in our intelligence, our collective memories, philosophies of life, interpretations of events, perspectives on the future, representations of ourselves and of others, and in what is tucked away deep in our entrails, emotions, injuries, aspirations, temperaments, processes of identification or unbelonging. So that we may all reinterpret ourselves in our humanness and in the way we are represented and live.

e-ISSN 2785-2709

Bibliography

Colloque Histoire et Mémoire du CEP: un 2° contact? (2022) (Université de la Polynésie française, 11-13 mai 2022). https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Cm7Jlzu0dPU&list=PLIkb3z3tR8DQ__5lLn7FniGIGF3KrY8dq&index=8.

Comité d'Indemnisation des Victimes des Essais Nucléaires (2022). *Rapport d'activité du CIVEN 2022*. https://www.gouvernement.fr/rapport-d-activite-2022.

Mc Granahan, C.; Collins, J.F. (eds) (2018). *Ethnographies of U.S. Empire*. Durham: Duke University Press,

Meltz, R. (2022). "Le Gouvernement du risque pendant les campagnes atmosphériques: secret, dissimulations et adaptations". *Colloque Histoire et Mémoire du CEP: un 2° contact?*.

Ministère de la Défense (2006). *La Dimension radiologique des essais nucléaires en Polynésie française*. https://www.francetnp.gouv.fr/IMG/pdf/La_dimension_radiologique_des_essais_nucleaires_francais_en_Polynesie.pdf.

Poirine, B. (2022). "L'Impact économique du CEP". *Colloque Histoire et Mémoire du CEP: un 2° contact?*.

Statius, T. (n.d.). "Interview". https://www.facebook.com/moearo.vanaa/videos/1448843995924790.

Sueur, C. (2018). *Les Conséquences génétiques des essais nucléaires français dans le Pacifique, chez les petits-enfants des Vétérans du CEP, et des habitants des Tuamotu Gambier*. https://www.obsarm.info/IMG/pdf/rapport_conse_quences_nucle_aires_sueur_2018.pdf.

Teariki, J. (1966). *Discours d'accueil au général de Gaulle*. http://moruroa.assemblee.pf/medias/pdf/Discours%20John%20Teariki%20%C3%A0%20Tahiti%207%20septembre%201966.pdf. Consulted 20 July 2023.

Vernaudon, J. (2022). "Les Dynamiques sociolinguistiques à l'époque du CEP". *Colloque Histoire et Mémoire du CEP: un 2° contact?*.

e-ISSN 2785-2709

Lagoonscapes
Vol. 3 – Num. 2 – December 2023

The Monstrous Sea

Veronica Strang
University of Oxford, UK

Abstract Through an anthropological lens, this essay examines the sea's dual capacities to bring order and chaos. Drawing on a major comparative study, it examines hydro-theological water beings who personify the sea's agentive powers, compose the world, and move spirit and matter through time and space. It explores the oceans' capacities to consume human lives and threaten material stability, and considers how people respond to fears of being overwhelmed. It proposes that, rather than trying to control the sea with coastal fortifications, societies should seek more ecologically convivial solutions to stop climate change and support marine ecosystems.

Keywords Sea. Tsunamis. Water beings. Cosmology. Hydro-theology. Materiality. Infrastructure. Sustainability.

Summary 1 Introduction. – 2 The Cosmic Sea. – 3 The Generative Sea. – 4 The Swallowing Sea. – 5 The Monstrous Sea. – 6 The Agent Sea. – 7 Conclusion.

Edizioni
Ca'Foscari

Peer review
Submitted 2023-09-28
Accepted 2023-10-25
Published 2023-12-20

Open access
© 2023 Strang | CC BY 4.0

Citation Strang, V. (2023). "The Monstrous Sea". *Lagoonscapes. The Venice Journal of Environmental Humanities*, 3(2), 257-284.

DOI 10.30687/LGSP/2785-2709/2023/01/007

1 Introduction

Some years ago I went to visit one of my doctoral students who was doing ethnographic fieldwork in Sāmoa. It was shortly after a major tsunami had swallowed several coastal villages. There were some skeletal traces of the pretty thatched *fales* that the sea had engulfed **[fig. 1]**, but their inhabitants – those who had survived the catastrophe – were living up in the hills, afraid to return to the shore. I stayed in a small beachside *fale* that had escaped the giant wave, but despite the beauty of the tropical bay with its rustling palms and soft sand, it was impossible to push away the image of the vast consuming maw that the sea had briefly but traumatically become.

> Cars teetered where they had been thrown, on top of rubble from collapsed dwellings. Fridges and air-conditioners floated in the sea. A bus sat in a pool of water and mud [...] The *fales* where my husband and I stayed had entirely disappeared. A woman called to me, 'Were you staying here? We found a woman's body over there in the bushes, but no one has claimed her'[...] Many people are missing, mainly Samoan villagers. A warning siren did sound, but either people did not hear or heed it, or could not move to safety fast enough [...] Children were out and about on their way to school at that time, and there are many unaccounted for.[1]

Drawing on long-term anthropological and interdisciplinary research examining human relationships with water, this essay is about the dark side of the sea: its capacities to be monstrous, and to inflict fluid chaos even on putatively secure *terra firma*. As this implies, like water in all of its forms, the sea has a dual nature. Archaeologist Matt Edgeworth describes freshwater bodies as the "dark matter" of the landscape (2011, 25), and the sea appears in many cultural and historical imaginaries as the dark matter of the Earth. As anthropologist Stefan Helmreich says, it traverses dualistic categories of culture and nature: "Seawater as culture manifests as a medium of pleasure, sustenance, travel, disaster' but it sits largely in the latter category, as 'potentiality of form and uncontainable flux" (2011, 132).

The sea's 'uncontainability' is elemental. The oldest tsunami recorded was in Greece, in 497 BCE and there are about ten major tsunamis every century. The waves, sometimes over 100 feet in height, can rush across the sea at more than 500 miles an hour. The 1908 Messina tsunami in the Mediterranean, which inundated parts of

1 Stephenson-Connolly, P. (2009). "Samoa Tsunami: Eyewitness Account". *The Guardian*, 30th September. https://www.theguardian.com/world/2009/sep/30/pamela-stephenson-connolly-witness-samoa.

Figure 1 Fale (traditional house), Upolu, Sāmoa. © Author

Sicily and Calabria, killed approximately 123,000 people. In 2004 the tsunami in the Indian Ocean drowned 230,000.

The sea is a vast source of positive material agency, in supporting hydrological cycles, in its provision of abundant resources, in connecting and separating land, and in inspiring the human imagination. Rachel Carson (though better known for her *Silent Spring* in 1962), was previously known as a 'poet of the sea' whose work highlighted the oceans as the source of global climate and life itself (1941; 1951; 1955). But the sea is, schizophrenically, both a creative, generative force and an agent of death and destruction.

People who have directly survived tsunamis are often marked for life, experiencing post-traumatic stress and depression. Long-term effects are particularly evident in children (Thienkrua et al. 2006). Such trauma also has national impacts. "Such a hugely complex disaster inevitably has negative psychological effects on general populations as well as on the direct victims" (Kyutoku et al. 2012, n.p.).

The oceans' capacities to be monstrous are increasing as sea levels rise in response to the anthropogenic effects of climate change, casting doubt over the safety of all low-lying coastal zones. This doubt is particularly sharp for islanders isolated in the world's largest oceans. In the Pacific, Marshallese islanders have inhabited their 29 coral atolls for 3,000 years, sustaining traditional lifeways through careful use of marine resources. But, lying a mere six feet above current sea

e-ISSN 2785-2709

levels, their island homes now constitute what filmmaker David Buckland calls "the most existentially threatened place on the planet".[2] As one of the artists involved in his project has observed, in an exhibition entitled *Come Hell and High Water* (Pinsky 2006), the swallowing of such tiny islets of land by the ocean are the precursors of a much larger problem.

2 The Cosmic Sea

The duality of the sea is eloquently expressed in stories of cosmogenesis. In many of the narratives that societies have composed about 'how the world came into being', the primal sea appears as formless chaos and, quite literally, as the matter of life and death. This duality is similarly embodied in the serpentine water beings who, in these cosmic origin stories, personify the agency of water and its power to act upon all living kinds and the material environment **[fig. 2]**.

Such water beings have occurred ubiquitously in human history, reflecting a reality that – just as people think with all aspects of the material world and their physical properties (Levi-Strauss 1964) – they "think with water", its movements and hydrological cycles, to imagine concepts of time and flow, and material and spiritual transformation (Tuan 1968). These concepts are given form through water deities: a polysemic family of supernatural beings who reflect the material properties and behaviours of water. They share its fluidity, its serpentine movements and colours, its generative and destructive powers, and its capacities for transformation. They incorporate the features of local species that water generates, in particular the snakes and eels that mirror its sinuous movements. Those representing the celestial half of the hydrological cycle have wings and feathers, and spit the lightning and fire that signals the coming of the rain (Schaafsma 2001). And, as all early human societies worshipped 'nature', the water beings representing the element most essential to their lives were central to their ideas about how the world was created (Strang 2023).

In Egyptian origin stories, for example, a great serpent emerges from the ocean to form material being out of light and water, and to bring enlightenment to humankind (Cooper 2005) **[fig. 3]**. In the Mesopotamian story of Tiâmat the great serpent is known as "Mother Hubur who forms everything" and, in an act of parthenogenesis aided by the sun deity Marduk, heaven and earth are made from the two halves of her body (*Enuma Elish*; cf. Lambert 2013, 459).

In Mayan cosmogenesis a water deity, Itzam Na, surfaces from primal seas to generate living kinds and carry them upon its back (Deimel,

2 https://ourlifeishere.org/.

Figure 2 Temple mural of water beings, Saigon, Vietnam. © Author

Ruhnau 2000). In the Chinese Taoist cosmos, under the heavenly river Tian He, land is surrounded by a "roaring sea" and the Azure Dragon plays a key role in maintaining orderly material flows (*feng shui*) (Chen, Yang 1995). In Aboriginal Australia the Rainbow Serpent has cosmic role in the Dreaming as the primary ancestor who spews or spits into the world all the living kinds who form the landscape and became the totemic ancestors of Aboriginal clans (Strang 2002; 2022a).

e-ISSN 2785-2709

Figure 3
Egyptian serpent beings on stele, New Kingdom 1295-1069 BCE Thebes. Louvre. Wikimedia Commons

In the Māori cosmos life begins with *Te Kore*, the fluid chaos out of which the world is created (Barlow 1991). Water beings emerge from the creative process as key ancestral figures, and there are major sea *taniwha* (*marikihau*), such as Parata, whose breathing creates the inflowing and outflowing tides (Bacon 2004). Other *taniwha* create rivers and lakes and carve out harbours (Government of New Zealand 2018). They remain in water bodies as a powerful ancestral presence.

When, over time, the serpentine water beings of 'nature religions' are subsumed by humanised deities, a supreme God still replicates their original role, separating the primal seas to bring forth the light that enables the material world and its inhabitants to be created:

> The earth was without form, and void; and darkness was upon the face of the deep. And the Spirit of God moved upon the face of the waters. And God said, "Let there be light", and there was light. And God divided the light from the darkness. And God said, "Let there be a firmament in the midst of the waters, and let it divide the waters from the waters". And God made the firmament, and divided the waters which were under the firmament from the waters which were above the firmament. And God called the firmament Heaven. And God said, "Let the waters under the heaven be gathered together unto one place, and let the dry land appear", and it was so. And God called the dry land Earth; and the gathering together of the waters He called Seas. (*Gen*. 1,2-26)

e-ISSN 2785-2709

At a cosmic scale the sea therefore offers creative but also apocalyptic visions, in which worlds are created but may also dissolve back into chaos. The Egyptian Book of the Dead warns that, at the end of time, "the world will revert to the primary state of undifferentiated chaos and Atum will become a serpent once more" (Joines 1974, 97), or as the Scriptures anticipate: "The dragon who is then named as Satan, causes a huge flood, whereupon the beast of the Apocalypse arises from the sea" (*Rev.* 12,3).

But until that time, cosmic creativity centres upon a notion of the material world 'becoming' (Deleuze, Guatarri 2004) or 'taking form' out of the ocean. The appearance of dry land provides some degree of material stability upon which human and other lives can be founded. The notion of *terra firma*, from the Latin *terra* (earth, land) and *firma* (strong, steadfast) is the polar opposite of fluid chaos, reifying the material and social order that prevails against the potential disorder represented by the chaotic fluidity of water bodies.

This polarity is often revealed by liminal areas of ambiguity, in particular wetlands that are neither land nor water, but an uncertain, untrustworthy mix. Rod Giblett writes imaginatively about "quaking zones" and the psychological terrors evoked by mud and slime, which appear with vivid horror in accounts of war zones and their oozing, slippery, life-consuming trenches (2009). In contrast, *terra firma* speaks of safety and of material and social governance. This is nicely expressed in the term's historical origins. In the fifteenth century, the Venetian *domini di terraferma* comprised the 'mainland domains' of the Republic of Venice, which might be more readily defended than its maritime areas, the *stato da màr.*

3 The Generative Sea

Helmreich's observation that seawater provides a 'theory machine' for generating insights about human cultural organisation is well illustrated by its role in producing people and resources (2011, 132). As well as providing a source of cosmic creativity, the sea is also integral to many societies' visions of both hydrological and hydro-theological life-cycles (Tuan 1968). Although ideas about hydro-theology are often located in the natural theological treatises of the early eighteenth century, the use of the hydrological cycle as a metaphor for spiritual cycles of life, death and renewal has a much deeper history. Russell points to the interest in water as a theological substance in ancient Egyptian and Babylonian cosmologies (2007, 163), but clear models of cyclical hydro-theological thinking can be observed in the longstanding cosmologies of traditional hunter-gatherers, whose primary water beings are often seen to have a key role in moving spirit and matter through cycles of life and death.

e-ISSN 2785-2709

For example, the Australian Rainbow Serpent embodies the generative powers of water, bringing rain and resources, and ensuring annual cycles of ecological reproduction. It has a similarly central role in the cyclical production of human spiritual being, generating the human spirit from the invisible dimension of the Dreaming into the material visible world, to be incarnated in physical and conscious form (Strang 2015). At the end of life, which entails a loss of conscious being or 'forgetting' and the dissolution of form, it absorbs the spirit back into an invisible, immaterial pool of ancestral power (Morphy, Morphy 2014).

Figure 4 Clarence Strait, Tiwi Islands, Northern Australia. Wikimedia Commons

These ideas were powerfully illustrated in a recent legal battle in which the Indigenous community on the Tiwi Islands (situated to the north of Darwin) sought to protect their marine areas or 'sea country' from the social, spiritual and ecological damage potentially caused by undersea mining **[fig. 4]**. In a landmark case that effectively called a halt to the drilling into the nearby reefs, the traditional owners highlighted the role of the *Ampiji*, serpentine beings who 'travel' through fresh and saltwater bodies. The *Ampiji* generate human spirits (*putapawi*), which must be returned to them via mortuary rituals when a person dies, so that, as they put it, their "Spirit go passed out to sea" (Davis 1983, 55, quoted in Strang 2022b).

The spiritual movements enabled by hydro-theological cycles in many Indigenous belief systems have some resonance with popular ideas in larger societies which connect water and spiritual movements through the metaphor of a 'river of life'. The mountain spring appears as a source of the youthful spirit, growing and maturing as it flows downhill. It eventually becomes 'old man river', and is at last reunited, in death, with the all-absorbing 'great sink' of the sea, from which it might then be regenerated.

The hydrological cycle therefore provides "metaphors we live by" (Lakoff, Johnson 1980), providing a model for cycles of life and for the movements of spirit and matter between visible material worlds and invisible hidden 'other' dimensions. At both a cosmic and everyday spiritual and social level, the sea is both a generator of life and form, and a mortal realm of 'unbecoming' into which life is swallowed and consumed.

4 The Swallowing Sea

Ideas about the beings who personify water swallowing and regurgitating people recur in diverse ethnographic and historical contexts. In Australia, as well as supporting cycles of life between material and non-material domains, the Rainbow Serpent also enables movement between these worlds during important rituals for 'clever doctors', who have a shamanistic role in ceremonies. A rite of passage described as 'passing through the rainbow' (which entails immersion in water), gives these individuals access to secret and sacred knowledge, and therefore endows them with social power and authority (Taylor 1984).

Similar rituals, in which priests or shamans enter serpentine water beings to visit other domains, occur in various parts of the world. Amazonian Desana rituals, aided by the ingestion of hallucinogens, involve travel to alternate dimensions of time and place in a giant anaconda-canoe (Reichel-Dolmatoff 1989; see also Eliade 1964). In Central America, Mayan leaders enter the watery underworld of Xibalba to gain sacred knowledge via sacred cenotes, or 'the serpent's mouth'. Mayan architecture represents this access to the otherworld as a zoomorphic cleft or fontanel, associating it with consciousness and enlightenment. Temple entrances also serve as serpentine portals to Xibalba, and this is clearly expressed by the famous site of Chichen Itza (which translates as 'mouth' and 'well') and the Temple of the Serpent's Mouth at Chicanná (Lucero, Kinkella 2015) **[fig. 5]**.

e-ISSN 2785-2709

Figure 5 Chicanná, House of the Serpent's Mouth. Ca. 600-830 CE. Campeche, Mexico. Wikimedia Commons

Many objects and images depicting water beings show them either swallowing or generating/regurgitating humans or gods. Indian makaras, which appear, usually as dual or twin serpentine figures, in temples across Asia, often have figures in their mouths (Gyun, Atkinson 2005), as does the famous *biscione* Visconti serpent in Milan, used since the eleventh century as a heraldic image, and more recently popularised in the logo for Alfa Romeo cars (Strang 2023).

In a well-known Hindu story the serpent being Agashura swallows Krishna as well as some *gopas* (pastoralists) and their cattle. The Egyptian 'green god' Osiris, though originally described as a 'shining serpent', also appears in humanised form to be swallowed by his evil serpent twin Seth/Typhon. He must pass through the underworld and return so that annual floodwaters can be generated: thus he enters the tail of the serpent and emerges from its mouth, and his reappearance brings the spring solstice. In the ancient Greek story about his search for the Golden Fleece, Jason is swallowed and regurgitated by the serpent guarding the sacred tree. Stories of Jonah or Yunus being swallowed by a whale or giant fish, and then 'vomited' onto dry land occur in Judaeo-Christian and Islamic narratives. And in recurrent images of the ouroboros, in Egyptian, Norse and other ancient cosmologies, a symbol of infinite time and regeneration is provided by the world-encircling serpent swallowing its own tail.

So to be swallowed by water, to be consumed by it, is to leave this world and enter another, sometimes on a cyclical return journey, and

Figure 6
Visconti serpent. Milan.
© Author

sometimes on a one-way flow to mortality with only a faint prospect of return on a far-distant judgement day. While such journeys represent orderly spiritual cycles in many cultural worldviews, water beings can also swallow people in less benign ways. In Australia, when people transgress customary Law, the Rainbow Serpent may simply consume them. This underlines the power and agency of water beings, and their capacities to be punitive when their authority is not respected.

There are many similar examples of 'swallowing' serpent beings, as I have noted elsewhere [fig. 7]:

> Anthropophagic serpents include the Aztec Hapai-Can; the Māori *taniwha*; the Algonquin *windigo*; Australian Rainbow Serpents; the Cheroki *utkena*; and the Kiau in the seas of northern China. The existential threat of mortality that underlies such imagery is equally recognizable in the maw of the great serpent that comprises the 'mouth of Hell' in Christian iconography, surely one of the most terrifying representations of death imaginable. (Strang 2023, 65-6)

There are more prosaic explanations for assigning symbolic weight to images of anthrophagy. Joseph Andriano argues that the vulnerability of prehistoric societies to being eaten by sharp-toothed predators instilled a primal fear of being swallowed by monstrous beings (1999, 91). There is no reason to exclude such evolutionary perspectives, but the multiple recurring narratives describing person-consuming

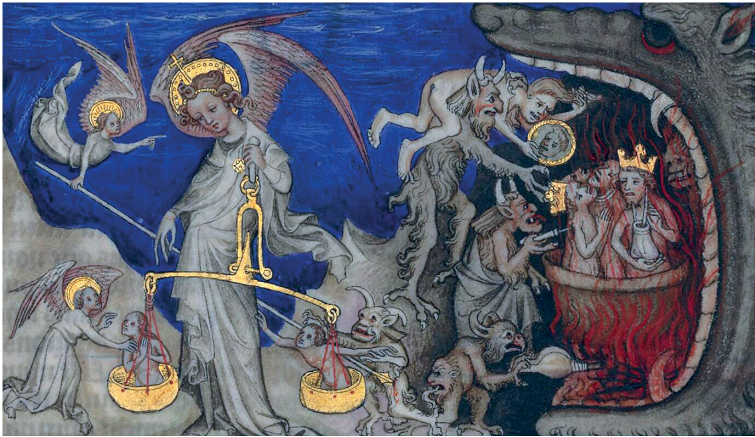


Figure 7 *From Judgement to Hellmouth*. Fourteenth century. Bibliothèque Nationale de France, Wikimedia Commons

water serpent beings suggest that they have a far more complex role. In essence, they meet human needs for cosmological explanations that enable them to deal with flows of time and life, the arrival and disappearance of persons, and the potential for stability and order to be overwhelmed by chaos.

5 The Monstrous Sea

David Gilmore draws attention to Jung's view that the sea represents both an individual and collective unconscious, an Id which, despite all efforts to repress its impulses, might at any moment give rise to tumultuous waves of emotion, laying waste to the orderly structures of the Ego (2003). At an individual and societal level this chaotic inner sea endangers the self, the body, and the mind. This view intersects usefully with contemporary thinking about the extended mind, and anthropological understandings of identity through which individuals and groups project themselves outwards and locate identity and memory externally (Anderson 1991; Clark, Chalmers 1998; Myers 1986). The individual is extended into visual imagery and material culture; the house becomes an extension of familial identity; a cultural landscape represents a local community; and a nation provides a collective persona for the society it contains. At each level of scale there is an intrinsic tension between order and disorder, as individual, collective, social and material elements that are not readily controlled threaten disruption (Douglas 2002). Thus, at all levels, internally and externally, there is a fear of the consuming flood.

The sea provides an imaginative home for these anxieties. Despite the putative nets of governance cast over it, in the form of maritime zones and regulation, and the fortified sea walls erected to keep it at bay, it is ultimately beyond control. It epitomises the limitations of human capacities to maintain order and assure social and material stability, and a fear that all such efforts will be overwhelmed. A visceral terror of the deep and its hidden powers, which Keller decribes as "*tehomophobia*" (2003), is reflected in ideas about the sea and its potential to be monstrous. The Judaeo-Christian story of Genesis, in which God quells the chaotic primal sea, contains both a vision of patriarchal mastery and a fear that this control will not withstand the sea's potential chaos.

The term 'chaos' itself, from the Greek *kháos* (χάος), means 'emptiness, vast void, chasm, or abyss', and a struggle to impose order on a sea of chaos, or *chaoskampf*, is a recurrent theme in many cosmologies. As noted above, the creativity of chaos is personified in great serpent beings, and so too is their potential for destruction.

The dark side of water beings (and other non-human deities) comes more strongly to the fore as societies make transitions from venerating 'nature' beings and their generative powers, to belief systems in which such deities are humanised, or replaced by deities in human form. When the Canaanite god Baal, originally a storm god/water being, acquires a more human form he defeats the Ugaritic serpent Lôtān (Day 1985). The Greek god of the waters, Poseidon, seen in a pre-Hellenic era as a chthonic fertility figure, is later depicted in human form but retains the earthquake and flood-making capacities of earlier great serpent beings.

When monotheisms hand the role of world-making to God the Father and seek human dominion over an alienated domain of 'nature', the *chaoskampf* becomes particularly adversarial. Water is recast either as 'good water', compliant to human direction and control, or as unruly and evil, and potentially inhabited by demons (Smith 2017). Pre-Christian water deities representing untamed non-human powers are duly demonised and made monstrous, and with the emergence of militant monotheistic evangelism in the medieval period there is an orgy of dragon slaying (Riches 2004; Strang 2023).

For example, although Leviathan shares the serpentine and sea-dwelling characteristics of the creative serpent beings of Egypt and Mesopotamia, and is seen by the Ophites as a world-containing ouroborus (Rasimus 2009), the dragon is transformed in Old Testament into a seven-headed fire-breathing embodiment of evil who must be defeated so that Judaeo-Christian order can be imposed **[fig. 8]**. While he may "frolic" in the sea (Psalm 104, 26), he appears in Isaiah as a "coiling", "writhing" or "twisting" serpent: a "dragon of the sea" who must be slain by the Lord's "great and strong sword" (Isaiah 27, 1).

e-ISSN 2785-2709

> Though didst divide the sea by thy strength: though brakest the heads of the dragons in the waters. Thou brakest the heads of leviathan in pieces, and gavest him to be meat to the people inhabiting the wilderness. (*Ps*. 73,13-14)

Figure 8
Giacomo Rossignolo, *Last Judgement.* Ca. 1555. Fresco. Wikimedia Commons

As previously observed, it is also in Judaeo-Christian iconography that the serpent's consuming maw becomes a portal not to spiritual reincarnation, but to damnation in the fires of Hell. This establishes a fearful vision of mortality inextricably linked to serpentine beings and anthrophagic life-swallowing, and this vision is echoed in the 'monstrous' water beings that manifest the capacities of the sea to swallow and consume.

Monsters inhabit every cultural and historical context, and they have a purpose. Recent anthropological literature (Gilmore 2003; Musharbash, Presterudstuen 2019) has drawn attention to their vital social function in enabling people to articulate their fears:

> The mind needs monsters. Monsters embody all that is dangerous and horrible in the human imagination. Since earliest times people have invented fantasy creations on which their fears could safely settle. (Gilmore 2003, IX)

Whether located in external (possibly invisible) worlds, or inhabiting the psyche, monsters invariably express specific cultural and historical meanings (Williams 2011). Morphologically they share some

common characteristics. They are typically hybrid in form, reflecting categorical uncertainties. They are sharp in tooth and claw, and they prey mercilessly on humans and/or their domesticated livestock. Terrestrial monsters tend to lie hidden, in marginal hinterlands and unknown territories, in dense forests and caves and – frequently – underground. Many are water beings, lurking in rivers and deep lakes, and in the sea, embodying people's fears of fluid realms **[fig. 9]**.

Figure 9 Olaus Magnus, *Carta Marina*. 1539. Wikimedia Commons

To be literally at sea, to venture out across the ocean's vast hidden depths, is to leave the relative safety of *terra firma* and risk being swallowed. Sea-faring societies therefore require sea monsters to "settle their fears upon" (Gilmore 2003, IX). Like all water beings these reflect both the material properties of water and the features of local life forms. Thus the Norse ship-swallowing *kraken* (something twisted) has the features of a giant octopus. The Icelandic *hafgufa*, a giant water being whose name, composed of *haf* (sea) and *gufa* (steam), gives form to the consuming sea mists that swallow ships. In the Caribbean, folk tales describe Lusca, a giant sea monster with the head of a white shark and multiple tentacles, who is said to be a nemesis for unwary sailors (Stephens 2022).

e-ISSN 2785-2709

Figure 10 Scylla with kētos (sea monster) tail and dog heads, ca. 450-425 BC. Red-figure vase. Louvre. Wikimedia Commons

In Homer's *Odyssey*, the goddess Circe warns Odysseus about two monstrous sea beings that guard a narrow strait: Scylla a multi-headed serpent with jaws that snatch and consume passing sailors, and Charybdis, a whirlpool that swallows ships whole **[fig. 10]**.

> Therein dwells Scylla… an evil monster, nor would anyone be glad at sight of her, no, not though it were a god that met her. Verily she has twelve feet, all misshapen, and six necks, exceeding long, and on each one an awful head, and therein three rows of teeth, thick and close, and full of black death… By her no sailors yet may boast that they have fled unscathed in their ship, for with each head she carries off a man, snatching him from the dark-prowed ship. But the other cliff, thou wilt note, Odysseus, is lower… beneath this divine Charybdis sucks down the black water. Thrice a day she belches it forth, and thrice she sucks it down terribly. Mayest thou not be there when she sucks it down, for no one could save thee from ruin… Nay, draw very close to Scylla's cliff, and drive thy ship past

e-ISSN 2785-2709

> quickly; for it is better far to mourn six comrades in thy ship than all together. (Homer, quoted from Murray 1919)

Sea serpent beings simultaneously give form to anxieties about the ocean's propensities to swallow those attempting to enter its waters, and to larger fears about mortality and the inevitability of being consumed by death itself. These fears are beautifully encapsulated in Melville's *Moby Dick*, in which the monstrous white whale provides a multivalent image representing God, nature, the ocean, and fate. Pursued by the obsessive Captain Ahab, Moby Dick sinks the whaling vessel, *The Pequod*, with "infernal aforethought of ferocity", and drowns all of its crew except for the narrator. Ishmael is filled with "nameless horror' at the sight of the white whale, caused in part by the "intelligent malignity" of the monster:

> Nor was it his unwonted magnitude, nor his remarkable hue, nor yet his deformed lower jaw, that so much invested the whale with natural terror, as that unexampled, intelligent malignity which, according to specific accounts, he had over and over again evinced in his assaults. More than all, his treacherous retreats struck more of dismay than perhaps aught else. (Melville 1851, n.p.)

The monstrous sea recurs in multiple literary contexts. In a very different style, John Wyndham's tale *The Kraken Wakes* (1961) links the seas with alien beings in outer space. Having invaded the Earth, the aliens colonise the oceans, sending out vast tentacles to drag people into the water. Then, in response to being attacked with nuclear bombs, they change the climate, raise the sea levels, and literally drown humankind.

The visual arts similarly communicate the terrors of being swallowed by the deep. Describing the fate of the *Méduse*, shipwrecked on its way to Senegal in 1816, Théodore Géricault's painting, *Le Radeau de la Méduse* (Raft of the Medusa) shows the desperate terror of the survivors abandoned on a hastily constructed raft **[fig. 11]**. In 1819 the French painter Eugène Delacroix, was so shocked by this image that he fled from the gallery where it was being exhibited. Similar horror was induced by Turner's painting *The Shipwreck*, which recalled the sinking of the *Earl of Abergavenny* near Weymouth on 4 February 1805.

Figure 11 Théodore Géricault, *Le Radeau de la Méduse*. 1818-19. Oil on canvas. Paris, Musée du Louvre. Wikimedia Commons

6 The Agent Sea

If we circumnavigate back to the port of departure for this essay, we can see that fears about the monstrous sea are carried across time and space by the reality that, materially and metaphorically, the sea can always swallow human lives. In 2023 the loss of the submersible *Titan* brought the reality of this oceanic agency home with dramatic force. The submersible, a tiny bubble of resistance to the powers of the sea, disintegrated while carrying wealthy tourists into the depths to survey the wreck of the *Titanic*. The journey aimed, ironically, to satisfy their abiding fascination with that earlier expression of hubris. Yet the intense curiosity still engendered by a ship swallowed by the sea over a century ago persists precisely because of its builders' certainty that the *Titanic*, seen as an apotheosis of human technology, was 'unsinkable': a certainty shared by the builders of the *Titan*. Hardy's poem about the 'vaingloriousness' of this belief remains apt:

> In a solitude of the sea
> Deep from human vanity,
> And the Pride of Life that planned her, stilly couches she…
> Over the mirrors meant
> To glass the opulent
> The sea-worm crawls – grotesque, slimed, dumb, indifferent…
> Dim moon-eyed fishes near

> Gaze at the gilded gear
> And query: "What does this vaingloriousness down here?"
> (1923)

The fate of the *Titanic* and its miniature emulator highlights the eternal tension between the sea's capacities to become a life-swallowing 'chaos monster' and human attempts to defy death and maintain stability and order. It reminds us that water is not a passive subject of human will, but always a co-creative – or destructive – actor in our multiple relationships with the non-human domain. Joseph Conrad's writing illuminates this agency. He personified the sea winds and their different characters, and the overwhelming power of the ocean itself.

> For what is the array of the strongest ropes, the tallest spars and the stoutest canvas against the mighty breath of the infinite, but thistle stalks, cobwebs and gossamer? Indeed, it is less than nothing, and I have seen, when the great soul of the world turned over with a heavy sigh, a perfectly new, extra-stout foresail vanish like a bit of some airy stuff much lighter than gossamer […] Gales have their personalities, and, after all, perhaps it is not strange; for, when all is said and done, they are adversaries whose wiles you must defeat, whose violence you must resist, and yet with whom you must live in the intimacies of nights and days […] [Following a storm] I looked with other eyes upon the sea. I knew it capable of betraying the generous ardour of youth as implacably as, indifferent to evil and good, it would have betrayed the basest greed or the noblest heroism. My conception of its magnanimous greatness was gone. And I looked upon the true sea – the sea that plays with men till their hearts are broken, and wears stout ships to death. Nothing can touch the brooding bitterness of its heart. Open to all and faithful to none, it exercises its fascination for the undoing of the best. (Conrad 2013)

For Conrad, the sea does not merely "undo the best" who venture into its embrace, it also assaults the land:

> [The West Wind] is the war-lord who sends his battalions of Atlantic rollers to the assault of our seaboard. The compelling voice of the West Wind musters up to his service all the might of the ocean. At the bidding of the West Wind there arises a great commotion in the sky above these Islands, and a great rush of waters falls upon our shores. (Conrad 2013)

In a recent essay on Conrad's writing Maya Jasanoff considers how the agency of the sea appears in a contemporary world:

> The 21st-century economy depends more than ever on ships, which carry 90 percent of global trade. Sending data 'into the ether' often means sending it through cables laid across the sea floor, just like the telegraph. The ocean also shows the failures of progress. It is where thousands of refugees drown trying to reach prosperity. It is where slavery and piracy flourish in the face of modern law. It is where industrial chemicals and plastics pollute and destroy ecosystems. And it is where, with rising sea levels, the planet pays us back even beyond Conrad's imagination for our embracing fossil fuels over the enduring benefits of sail. (Jasanoff 2013, n.p.)

Human fear of the monstrous sea is most clearly revealed in societies' material efforts to defend *terra firma*. The term 'bulwark' (from Middle English *bulwerke* and early Dutch *bolwerc*) is most often associated with ships, and describes the sides of the vessel above the deck. But it is also used to refer to sea walls and port fortifications and, metaphorically, to describe any social or material barrier protecting against invasion. This "scheme transference" (Bourdieu 1990) highlights the precarity of the shore and communicates a sense of how, on a global scale, the land provides humankind with a (putatively) 'safe' material haven between oceans of potential chaos.

Figure 12 Lighthouse, Phare du Jumont, Brittany. Wikimedia Commons

A similar message is communicated by lighthouses **[fig. 12]**. Until rendered obsolete by radar and other emergent technologies, these held a key role in societies' relationships with the sea: guiding ships safely to harbour; standing with phallic pride as bulwarks against invasion; and maintaining sentinel surveillance over the ocean with a searching 'eye' of light. Lighthouses are boundary markers between land

and sea and the guardians of *terra firma*. As my colleagues and I observed, in an interdisciplinary conversation about light:

> The potential for lighthouses to encapsulate ideas about light and dark as a matter of life and death is compounded by another major dualism: their position at the edge of safe and solid land where it meets the dark formless deep… The lighthouse is a sentry that defies the chaos of death, a concrete material bastion against fluidity, against dissolution into non-material being. This highlights the role of lighthouses as part of the essential infrastructure that maintains both material and social order. (Strang et al. 2018, 23; see also Bachelard 1983)

In this sense, lighthouses are part of the material activities through which societies seek to concretise their particular visions of order. In Penny Harvey and Hannah Knox's work on infrastructure, roads cast a net of social, political and material control over landscapes (Knox 2015; cf. also Larkin 2013). So too do communications technologies, fences and the dams and concrete river banks constraining freshwater flows. Precisely the same intentionality attends the building of sea walls, flood defences, harbours and other barriers aiming to keep the sea from invading and overwhelming *terra firma* (Helmreich 2019). Like other material culture imposing human will on the environment, aspirations to gain control over the sea raise similar issues about "infrastructural violence" (Rodgers, O'Neill 2012) and the concomitant costs to ecosystems and their human and non-human communities (Strang 2017).

Many physical defences against the sea are built in response to traumatic incursions **[fig. 13]**. The Japanese government began building sea walls following a major tsunami in 1933. These were breached when a (magnitude 9) earthquake in March 2011 caused a tsunami that engulfed many coastal towns and villages with waves rising to nearly 70 feet in height.

> March 11th, 2011… Mother Nature ripped her fingers through the northeast region of the country and caused a whole nation to shake… The closest thing at hand for any kind of news source was a mobile phone… the first thing we saw was a map of Japan flashing incessantly – the whole of the east coast from Hokkaido right the way down to the Kansai area was lit up all red. Alarms wailed. One announcement later and we learnt that the Tohoku region had been completely ravaged in an instant. (Lucas 2011)

At a cost of over 1.4 trillion yen ($ 13 billion USD), approximately 145 miles of sea walls, some of them three stories high, have been built or are under construction along the coast of Japan **[fig. 14]**. But these

Figure 13 Print illustrating Meiji Sanriku earthquake and tsunami in 1896. UBC Library. Wikimedia Commons

walls are controversial: they have been imposed by the central government despite protests from coastal communities who argue that such vast infrastructure destroys their lifeways, have multiple negative impacts on coastal ecosystems, separate them from the sea both physically and visually, and make them feel imprisoned. It has also been suggested that sea defences provide a false sense of security, delaying decisions to evacuate coastal areas in response to tsunami warnings, when "waves of a scale similar to the surge in 2011 are expected to overwhelm the structure anyway" (Kawaguchi, Suganuma 2021, n.p.).

What ambivalence this problem reveals. On one hand are passionate desires to connect with the sea: to swim in the amniotic embrace of this vast salty womb; to fish in it, sail across its surface, and delight in its shimmering presence. On the other is terror: the fear of the monstrous sea and the consuming waves that might, at any time, emerge from its bottomless depths to invade the shore, smash houses into matchsticks, swallow human sacrifices, and render futile all attempts to maintain material stability.

Figure 14 Japanese sea wall. Asahi Shimbun file photo

7 Conclusion

There is no resolution to this conundrum: life sits precariously on *terra firma*. In some cases, where rising seas threaten to swallow coastal and island communities, there are few choices beyond fleeing to higher ground or wholly abandoning traditional homelands. What is really needed, globally, is an urgent change in direction to halt the fossil fuel burning and land clearance that is driving climate change and causing sea levels to rise. However, even with a superhuman collective effort (which seems painfully elusive), this cannot be achieved within a timescale that will prevent harm, or remove the likelihood that some communities will be – are being – forced to leave their homes.

There are more subtle choices to be made about how much coercive material control societies should try to impose on the material world. Nations must consider the wider social and ecological costs of merely continuing, doggedly, to build coastal bulwarks against chaos. In Japan, a few communities defied the central government and rejected sea walls in order to maintain their traditional lifeways. But such choices entail accepting a considerable degree of risk.

Such difficult decisions point to the importance of alternative 'green' solutions that aim for mutually beneficial human-non-human

relations. Many coastal areas used to have quite effective non-human defences, such as extensive mangroves and wetlands that helped to dissipate the force of incoming waves. All too often these marine mitigators have been removed and replaced by concrete developments bringing urban structures right down to the shore. But mangroves are vital in providing safe nursery areas for marine life, and coastal wetlands comprise some of the Earth's richest ecosystems. There is much to be said for reinstating them and creating soft buffer zones, and, rather than building sea walls, focusing on 'green engineering' such as artificial reefs that, as well as absorbing the force of incoming waves, can create biodiverse undersea habitats.

Of course the same argument can be made for reviving wetlands and forests comprehensively throughout river catchments, to steady the freshwater flows that with increasing frequency overwhelm concrete river banks and flood low-lying urban areas, many of which are located in deltas also vulnerable to sea incursions. Here too there is much evidence that it is very costly to exert coercive control over water bodies rather than nurturing healthy ecosystems and making room for water's normal behaviours. A useful model of alternative thinking is provided by the Dutch *Ruimte voor de Rivier* (Room for the River) project which is currently removing tightly constraining dykes and providing space and renewed habitats into which water flows can expand (Dutch Water Sector 2021).

In human relationships with both fresh and salt water bodies there is much potential to achieve better partnerships with the non-human domain, and with water's creative and destructive forms of agency. Rather than frantically building barriers against the monstrous sea, societies might do better, in the long term, to accommodate and mitigate its capacities for chaos by restoring the coastal and marine ecosystems that mediate between the oceans and *terra firma*.

e-ISSN 2785-2709

Bibliography

Andriano, J. (1983). *Water and Dreams: An Essay on the Imagination of Matter*. Transl. by E. Farrell. Dallas: Pegasus Foundation.
Bacon, R. (2004). *Parata, the Taniwha: Another Legend of the Sea*. Auckland: Waiatarua Publishing.
Barlow, C. (1991). *Tikanga Whakaaro: Key Concepts in Māori Culture*. Oxford; London; Melbourne: Oxford University Press.
Bourdieu, P. (1990). *The Logic of Practice*. Transl. by R. Nice. Cambridge: Polity Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781503621749-007.
Carson, R. (1941). *Under the Sea Wind: A Naturalist's Picture of Ocean Life*. London: Simon and Schuster. https://doi.org/10.2307/1439143.
Carson, R. (1951). *The Sea Around Us*. London: Staples Press. https://doi.org/10.1063/1.3067318.
Carson, R. (1955). *The Edge of the Sea*. London: Staples Press.
Carson, R. (1962). *Silent Spring*. Boston: Houghton-Mifflin. https://doi.org/10.12987/9780300188479-019.
Chen, J.; Yang, Y. (1995). *The World of Chinese Myths*. Beijing: Beijing Language and Culture University Press.
Clark, A.; Chalmers, D. (1998). "The Extended Mind". *Analysis*, 58(1), 7-19. https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/9780262014038.003.0002.
Conrad, J. [1906] (2013). *The Mirror of the Sea, The Project Gutenburg*. London: Methuen and Co. www.gutenberg.org.
Cooper, W. (2005). *The Serpent Myths of Ancient Egypt*. Berwick MW: Ibis Press.
Davis, S. (1983). *A Report on the Bathurst and Melville Islands Sea Closure Application. Report for the Tiwi Land Council*. Darwin: Landsearch.
Day, J. (1985). *God's Conflict With the Dragon and the Sea: Echoes of a Canaanite Myth in the Old Testament*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/S0041977X00039598.
Deimel, C.; Ruhnau, E. (2000). *Jaguar and Serpent: The Cosmos of Indians in Mexico, Central and South America*. Transl. by A. Davis. Hannover: Niedersächsisches Landesmuseum.
Deleuze, G.; Guattari, F. (2004). *A Thousand Plateaus: Capitalism and Schizophrenia*. Transl. by B. Massumi. London: Continuum.
Douglas, M. [1966] (2002). *Purity and Danger: An Analysis of Concepts of Pollution and Taboo*. London: Routledge.
Dutch Water Sector (2021). *Room for the River Explained*. The Hague: Government of the Netherlands.
Edgeworth, M. (2011). *Fluid Pasts: Archaeology of Flow*. Bristol: Bristol Classical.
Eliade, M. (1964). *Shamanism: Archaic Examples of Ecstasy*. New York: Arkana.
Giblett, R. (1996). *Postmodern Wetlands: Culture, History, Ecology*. Edinburgh: Edinburgh University Press. https://doi.org/10.1515/9781474468442.
Giblett, R. (2009). *Landscapes of Culture and Nature*. Basingstoke (NY): Palgrave Macmillan. https://doi.org/10.1057/9780230250963.
Gilmore, D. (2003). *Monsters: Evil Beings, Mythical Beasts, and All Manner of Imaginary Terrors*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press. https://doi.org/10.7202/007134ar.
Government of New Zealand (2018). "Taniwha. Taniwha of the Sea". *Te Ara: the encyclopedia of New Zealand*. www.teara.govt.nz.
Gyun, H.; Atkinson, T. (2005). *Korean Temple Motifs: Beautiful Symbols of the Buddhist Faith*. Transl. by T. Atkinson. Seoul: Dolbegae Publisher.

Hardy, T. (1923). "The Convergence of the Twain". Armstrong, T. (ed.) *Thomas Hardy: Selected Poems*. London: Routledge, 288-9.
Harvey, P.; Knox, H. (2015). *Roads: An Anthropology of Infrastructure and Expertise*. Ithaca: Cornell University Press.
Helmreich, S. (2011). "Nature/Culture/Seawater". *American Anthropologist*, 113(1), 132-44. https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1548-1433.2010.01311.x.
Helmreich, S. (2019). "Domesticating Waves in the Netherlands". *BOMB Magazine*, 146, 153-8. https://bombmagazine.org.
Hiatt, L. (1984). "Swallowing and Regurgitation in Australian Myth and Ritual". Charlesworth, M.; Morphy, H.; Bell, D.; Maddock K. (eds), *Religion in Aboriginal Australia*. Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 31-56.
Jasanoff, M. (2013). "At Sea With Joseph Conrad". *New York Times*, 7th August.
Joines, K. (1974). *Serpent Symbolism in the Old Testament: A Linguistic, Archaeological and Literary Study*. New Jersey: Haddonfield House.
Kawaguchi, M.; Suganuma, E. (2021). "Residents Lose Coastal Vistas to Fortress-like Tsunami Walls". *The Asahi Shimbun*, 15th March.
Keller, C. (2003). *The Face of the Deep: A Theology of Becoming*. Oxford; New York: Routledge.
Kyutoku, Y. et al. (2012). "Cognitive and Psychological Reactions of the General Population Three Months After the 2011 Tohoku Earthquake and Tsunami". *PLOS One*, 7(2), p.e31014-e31014. https://doi.org/10.1371/journal.pone.0031014.
Lakoff, G.; Johnson, M. (1980). *Metaphors We Live By*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press. https://doi.org/10.7208/chicago/9780226470993.001.0001.
Lambert, W. (Transl.) (2013). "Enuma Elish, Tablet 1:133". *Babylonian Creation Myths*. Winona Lake (IN): Eisenbrauns, 439-69.
Larkin, B. (2013). "The Politics and Poetics of Infrastructure". *Annual Review of Anthropology*, 42(1), 327-43. https://doi.org/10.1146/annurev-anthro-092412-155522.
Lévi-Strauss, C. (1964). *Totemism*. Transl. by R. Needham, London: Merlin Press.
Lucas, M. (2011). "Japan: First-hand Account of the March 11 Tsunami". *Japan, Buddhism in Daily Life*, 5th July.
Lucero, L.; Kinkella, A. (2015). "Pilgrimage to the Edge of the Watery Underworld: An Ancient Maya Water Temple at Cara Blanca, Belize". *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*, 25(1), 163-85. https://doi.org/10.1017/s0959774314000730.
Melville, H. [1851] (2020). *Moby Dick, or The Whale*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.
Morphy, F.; Morphy, H. (2014). "We Think through our Marwat (Paintbrush): Reflections on the Yolngu Location of Thought and Knowledge". *The Robert Layton Lecture* (Durham University, 8th October).
Murray, A. (rransl.) (1919). *Homer. The Odyssey With An English Translation*. Cambridge (MA): Harvard University Press.
Musharbash, Y.; Presterudstuen, G. (eds) (2019). *Monster Anthropology: Explorations of Transforming Social Worlds Through Monsters*. London: Bloomsbury. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781003086130.
Myers, F. (1986). *Pintupi Country, Pintupi Self: Sentiment, Place and Politics Among Western Desert Aborigines*. Canberra: Smithsonian Institute and Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies. https://doi.org/10.1525/9780520394131.

Pinsky, M. (2006). *Come Hell and High Water*. Gateshead (Newcastle): World Summit of Arts and Culture. https://www.michaelpinsky.com/portfolio/come-hell-of-high-water/.

Rasimus, T. (2009). *Paradise Reconsidered in Gnostic Mythmaking: Rethinking Sethianism in Light of the Ophite Evidence*. Leiden: Brill. https://doi.org/10.1163/ej.9789004173231.i-380.

Reichel-Dolmatoff, G. (1989). “Desana Texts and Contexts”. Wien: Föhrenau. Series Americana 12.

Riches, S. (2000). *St George: Hero, Martyr and Myth*. Stroud: Sutton Publishing.

Rodgers D.; O’Neill, B. (2012). “Infrastructural Violence: Introduction to the Special Issue”. *Ethnography*, 13(4), 401-12. https://doi.org/10.1177/1466138111435738.

Russell, C. (2007). “Hydrotheology: Towards a Natural Theology for Water”. *Science and Christian Belief*, 19(2), 162-84.

Smith, J. (2017). *Water in Medieval Intellectual Culture: Case Studies From Twelfth-century Monasticism*. Turnhout: Brepols. https://doi.org/10.1484/m.cursor-eb.5.112274.

Stephens, R. (2022). “The Tale of Lusca”. *Interdisciplinary Studies in Literature and Environment*, 29(3), 936-9. https://doi.org/10.1093/isle/isaa123.

Strang, V.; Edensor, T.; Puckering, J. (2018). *From the Lighthouse: Interdisciplinary Reflections on Light*. London: Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9781315583570.

Strang, V. (2002). “Life Down Under: Water and Identity in an Aboriginal Cultural Landscape”. *Goldsmiths College Anthropology Research Papers*, vol. 7. London: Goldsmiths College.

Strang, V. (2015). “On the Matter of Time”. *Interdisciplinary Science Reviews*, 40(2), 101-23.

Strang, V. (2017). “Re-Imagined Communities: The Transformational Potential of Interspecies Ethnography in Water Policy Development”. Conca, K.; Weinthal, E. (eds), *The Oxford Handbook on Water Politics and Policy*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 142-64. https://doi.org/10.1093/oxfordhb/9780199335084.001.0001.

Strang, V. (2022a). “Seeing Through the Rainbow: Aboriginal Australian Concepts of an Ordered Universe”. Oschema, K.; Mauntel, C. (eds), *Order Into Action: Large-Scale Categories of Order in the Pre-Modern World*. Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols Publishers. Cursor mundi series, 263-89. https://doi.org/10.1484/m.cursor-eb.5.123851.

Strang, V. (2022b). *Independent Expert Anthropologist’s Report* in the case of Dennis Murphy Tipakalippa (*Applicant*) v National Offshore Petroleum Safety and Environmental Management Authority (*NOPSEMA*) and Santos NA Barossa Pty Ltd (*Santos*) [Legal Report]. Federal Court of Australia.

Strang, V. (2023). *Water Beings: From Nature Worship to the Environmental Crisis*. London: Reaktion Books.

Taube, K. (2010). “Where the Earth and Sky Meet: The Sea in Ancient and Contemporary Maya Cosmology”. Finamore, D.; Houston, S. (eds), *Fiery Pool: The Maya and the Mythic Sea*. London: Yale University Press, 202-22.

Thienkrua, W. et al. (2006). “Symptoms of Post-traumatic Stress Disorder and Depression Among Children in Tsunami-Affected Areas in Southern Thailand”. *JAMA*, 296(5), 549-59. https://doi.org/10.1001/jama.296.5.549.

Taylor, J. (1984). *Of Acts and Axes: An Ethnography of Socio-Cultural Change in an Aboriginal Community, Cape York Peninsula* [PhD dissertation]. Queensland: James Cook University.
Tuan, Y. (1968). *The Hydrologic Cycle and the Wisdom of God: A Theme in Geoteleology*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press. https://doi.org/10.3138/9781487584535.
Williams, W. (2011). *Monsters and Their Meanings in Early Modern Culture: Mighty Magic*. Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press. https://doi.org/10.1093/acprof:oso/9780199577026.001.0001.
Wyndham, J. (1961). *The Kraken Wakes*. London: Longman.

e-ISSN 2785-2709

Lagoonscapes
Vol. 3 – Num. 2 – December 2023

The Oceanian Documentary Film: A New Form of Resistance

Miriama Bono
President of the FIFO, Tahiti

Abstract The Oceania Documentary Film Festival has been held annually in Tahiti since 2004. Known as FIFO, it celebrated its 20th anniversary in 2023 and now has an established reputation. The festival's success is based on the development of Oceania documentary filmmaking, which has enabled filmmakers from Pacific communities to be proactive in building a shared identity. Environmental issues, the struggle for language preservation and gender issues are among the topics covered since the festival's inception. In two decades of evolution, these identity-related productions have become militant, using the globalisation of images to bring the voices of Pacific peoples.

Keywords Documentary. Oceania. Film Indigeounus. Resistance.

Translated from the original French by Jean Anderson.

Edizioni Ca'Foscari

Peer review
Submitted 2023-09-28
Accepted 2023-11-30
Published 2023-12-20

Open access

© 2023 Bono | cc-by 4.0

Citation Bono, M. (2023). "The Oceanian Documentary Film: A New Form of Resistance". *Lagoonscapes. The Venice Journal of Environmental Humanities*, 3(2), 285-292.

DOI 10.30687/LGSP/2785-2709/2023/02/008

The Oceanian Documentary Film festival has been held annually in Tahiti since 2004. Known as FIFO, it celebrated its twentieth anniversary in 2023, and now has a well-established reputation. The festival's success is based on the developing production of Oceanian documentary films, which has enabled directors from Pacific communities to be proactive in the construction of a shared identity. Environmental concerns, the fight to preserve languages, gender issues, are among the themes featured from the Festival's beginnings. Over twenty years of evolution, these identity-related productions have become militant, using the globalisation of images to carry the voices of Pacific peoples…

The International Festival of Oceanian Documentary Film (Festival International du Film Océanien, or FIFO) originated in Pape'ete, Tahiti, in 2004. It grew from a desire to hear the voices of Pacific peoples, by allowing them to tell their stories from their own perspectives. "To enable the audiences to hear and to see Oceania" (quoted by Chaumeau 2011),[1] according to Wallès Kotra, one of the festival's co-founders. To the great surprise of the organisers, the festival met with instant success, creating strong interest among the local population. This enthusiasm has become an indicator of a particular phenomenon: Polynesians are curious, greedy for images of the region and especially keen to discover how Pacific communities live.

The prime objective of the festival was to allow Oceanians to create their own audiovisual content and to show themselves, and especially to make themselves heard. "FIFO is a little voice rising up in the distant ocean to be listened to", explains Heremoana Maamaatuiaiautapu, a co-founder of the festival (Chaumeau 2011).[2] But as the years have passed, the festival has revealed another reality: the emergence of an Oceanian consciousness, of a growing sense of identity, a second phase of cultural renewal, that is no longer of interest only to intellectuals and artists, but to entire populations in their daily lives. In a very concrete way, this festival has allowed the creation of an Indigenous branch of audiovisual production, even if – as Tahitian writer Chantal Spitz has stressed (Spitz 2019) – there is still a great deal to be achieved. It has also enabled the showing in Tahiti, and throughout the region, of Pacific documentaries made by Pacific Islanders.

Often quoted at each year's festival, Epeli Hau'ofa's dictum transcends the event and feeds into a growing awareness: "We must not allow anyone to belittle us again, and take away our freedom" (Hau'ofa 1994, 160). By circulating stories and tales of the whole

1 "Donner à entendre et à voir l'Océanie".

2 "Le Festival international du film océanien, c'est la petite voix qui s'élève loin là-bas dans l'Océan pour se faire entendre".

Pacific, FIFO is in fact extending to Polynesians the idea that we are not small isolated communities, but one people of the Pacific, with customs, ways of life, and above all ways of thinking that unite us. As Bruno Saura has pointed out, the name "Te moananui a Hiva" used in Tahiti, even if relatively recent, reflects a desire to cease using a Western term and to replace it with a conception of the world and of this space that connects with Polynesian tradition. Among other things, this allows the use of a name with shared origins: "Te moana nui a Kiwa" for Aotearoa-New Zealand, and "Te moana o Kiva" for Rarotonga (Saura 2022). This identifies Polynesian space as a whole, as the "sea of islands" dear to Epeli Hauʻofa, rather than as separate islands, cut off or even lost in the region named "the Pacific" by Westerners. This point is also featured and much more developed in Chantal Spitz's consideration of representation in her "Essay. For the emergence of an Indigenous cinema in the Pacific". The creation of an Indigenous network aims to liberate an Indigenous voice, and especially to set it free from the exotic set ideas and other tired clichés that still mark audiovisual productions concerning the region. Even though there is still a long way to go to create an audiovisual network, particularly in Tahiti, this gathering of local images gives an Oceanian perspective to the productions, and in particular to the problems featured and the solutions that are envisaged.

In fact, some of the recurrent themes of FIFO, such as rising sea levels, the proliferation of plastics in the ocean we rely on for sustenance, or the over-exploitation of natural resources, bring about heightened awareness that is sometimes a trigger for solutions that inspire local people and authorities. This is typically the case with environmental problems, which have global but also regional impacts: take, for example, the sad sight of the plastic-littered beaches of Hawaiʻi, but also Bora-Bora or Kiribati, shown in Craig Leeson's *A Plastic Ocean* (2016), or Karina Holden's *Blue* (2017). These are shocking images that lead to raised awareness: plastic bags have been outlawed in Tahiti since 2022, with local solutions promoted, such as bags made of recycled tarpaulins or, even better, locally-crafted pandanus bags.

Another striking example, Briar March and Lyn Collie's film *There Once was an Island: Te Henua e Nnoho* (2008), had a strong impact on viewers: these Kiribati islands sinking under the sea could be any of the Pacific's communities. In 2023, this documentary was part of the retrospective selection marking the festival's 20th anniversary, and was presented as one of the strongest in its history. Faced with the climate emergency, images of Oceania in a state of environmental distress are rolled out every year in Tahiti, highlighting concerns, but also sometimes inspiring local solutions.

While environmental themes are very much to the fore in Oceanian documentaries, they also deal frequently with social and cultural

issues, notably questions of gender, that are more specific to the region. In 2004, the jury's Grand Prize went to the film *Mahu, the Effeminate* (Corillion 2001) which invites the audience to listen to "those people who are called Mahu, following them in their everyday lives, something which has allowed the producers to create nuanced and sincere portraits of a few individuals who are normally seen through their quirkiness and their mannerisms, forgetting that behind the surface image there are genuine personalities living singular lives".[3]

In 2015, Joey Wilson and Dean Hamer's Hawaiʻian film *Kumu Hina* took out the audience prize and the jury Grand Prize, an exceptional double… "The film tells the story of Colin Wong's transformation, from shy schoolboy to married woman and cultural adviser for a school living in Honolulu".[4] Beyond the gender issues and the difficulties Hina encounters, this documentary also deals with her recognition as a cultural leader and her fight in defence of Hawaiʻian specificities.

In 2018, another film by Wilson and Hamer, *Joey and the Leitis*, was awarded a special prize by the jury. This film deals with the more complex situation of transgender people in the kingdom of Sāmoa and tells the story of Joey Joleen Siosaia Winston Churchill Mataele, who is confronted by the prejudices and strong convictions of religious believers.

In 2019, two films on gender issues featured. The first, from New Zealand director Mitchell Hawkes, *Born This Way: Awa's Story*, tells the story of young Awa, who wants to "inspire people, to push them to be themselves, and I want to change the way transgender people are seen".[5] The second film, *Les Étoiles me suffisent* (The Stars Will Do), gives transgender Tahitians the opportunity to talk about their daily lives "from the inside". Director Éliane Koller gave her three Tahitian protagonists cameras to film themselves over a two-year period, something that gives us a sensitive view of their daily lives.

Year after year, this subject is presented from different angles, and in particular from within different communities, which allows us to understand the specificities of each country. The situation in Sāmoa seems far more complex than it is in Tahiti, for example, where the

3 "[C]eux que l'on désigne Mahu, en les suivant dans leur vie quotidienne, que l'équipe de réalisation a pu dégager un portrait tout en nuances et conforme de quelques personnages dont on a l'habitude de repérer les frasques ou les 'manières', en oubliant que derrière l'image offerte, il y a une véritable personnalité au vécu singulier". Cf. http://www.film-documentaire.fr/4DACTION/w_fiche_film/45432_1.

4 "Le film raconte la transformation de Colin Wong, lycéen timide, devenu Hina, femme mariée et 'Kumu' à Honolulu".

5 "[I]nspirer les gens, les pousser à être eux-mêmes, et je veux changer la vision des gens sur les personnes transgenres". Cf. https://www.maisondelaculture.pf/fifo-2019-born-this-way-awas-story/.

e-ISSN 2785-2709

churches are far more tolerant. This does not of course mean that the situation of *mahu* does not have its own challenges in Tahiti. But it is clear that the showing of these films, generally accompanied by debates and meetings with the protagonists, facilitates a call for greater tolerance. One interesting fact to note, in 2023, for the first time, a ministerial portfolio for gender issues was established, and for Pride Month, special events took place in French Polynesia, proof of a progressive evolution in attitudes toward these questions.

And so over the festival's twenty years, certain tendencies can be seen emerging from the main recurring themes of Oceanian documentaries, notably societal and environmental concerns, but equally in young directors' increasing commitment year by year to audiovisual productions. It is essential that these young people take up the role of speaking on behalf of their communities, like the young Marquesan Heretu Tetahiotupa whose audiovisual projects work to promote recognition of the culture of *Henua Enata*, and especially of its language. There is here another massive task, happily, at the heart of Oceanian directors' documentaries: the use of Indigenous languages. *Patutiki*, by Heretu Tetahiotupa and Christophe Cordier is entirely in Marquesan… a deeply symbolic and inspiring choice for this film about tattooing. This is one of the distinctive traits of Oceanian productions over the last ten years: an increasing impulsion to use local languages, a growing demand, a crying out against the generalised acceptance of globalisation. This is in fact how Wallès Kotra defines the festival: "FIFO is a crying out" (Triay 2012). It is also "an atoll of remission in the face of intractable globalisation, a new kind of navigational pathway over our sea of islands" for Heremoana Maamaatuaiahutapu (Rabréaud 2021).[6]

For these Oceanians, the documentary film becomes an act of revendication, of militantism, of resistance. Images create awareness, words sensitise. Much more than 'telling our stories', Oceanian directors are using the genre to carry a message, a sense of urgency, of combat. Oceanian documentaries have been waging an impact campaign over a number of years… since 2018 various initiatives have been featured there, such as the "Good Pitch". Conferences and workshops linked to the multi-platform impact campaigns are also organised. One such conference was held in 2020, on the theme of *The Impact Documentary: A Tool for Change*. Directors from Australia, New Zealand, Hawai'i, Rapa Nui and Tahiti attended. The objective of this new generation was clearly evident: to highlight a change and to be the tool for that change. The documentary film provides a means to create awareness, and to then bring pressure to bear and

6 "[U]n atoll de rémission dans la mondialisation intraitable, une route de navigation d'un nouveau genre sur notre océan d'îles".

e-ISSN 2785-2709

to educate people… and audiences are called upon to work toward concrete change. In 2004, FIFO was the answer to a need, the need to allow Oceanians to occupy the audiovisual space and to direct and produce their own films. Twenty years later, the network is opening up a new dimension, clearly using images as a means of militating for the recognition or preservation of Indigenous cultures. But it must be recognised that these ambitions are often held back by the economic reality of documentary production, which is still strongly dependent on television and by the norms that medium imposes. While images travel freely, producing them is very costly, even more so in this 'sea of islands' where time is essential to free expression.

What is required in the audiovisual field goes beyond the simple economic framework needed to develop a network, beyond artistic considerations. The Oceanian documentary film is increasingly anchored in a societal and committed, even philosophical dynamic. Whereas in 2004 globalisation and the fear of becoming invisible were the principal basis for developing FIFO, in 2023 that same globalisation is, on the contrary, becoming a positive factor for Oceanian documentaries. Images are nowadays distributed worldwide, and much more readily thanks to the development of various platforms. Images from Tahiti travel from Paris to Auckland, creating a network of international connections transmitting Oceanian works. Rather than merely making the multitudes of islands visible, this transmission of images is allowing the emergence of an Oceanian consciousness, and reconnecting communities that through their history and colonisation have lost the links that united them prior to the arrival of Europeans and their languages. As Michel Perez points out,

> it is the major colonial languages that have been the most completely imposed: French (New Caledonia, Wallis and Futuna, French Polynesia and, partly, Vanuatu), English everywhere else. These are the languages of school, of administration, and of the media. Even if few Oceanians speak them fluently, they know they are an indispensable tool for social advancement. They are thus a serious threat to Oceanian languages: young people are turning away from them and those that are lesser spoken are in danger of total extinction. (Perez 2013, 96)[7]

7 "[C]e sont les grandes langues coloniales qui se sont le plus complètement imposées: français (Nouvelle-Calédonie, Wallis-et-Futuna, Polynésie française et partiellement Vanuatu), anglais partout ailleurs. Ces langues sont celles de l'école et de l'administration, on les retrouve dans les médias, et même si peu d'Océaniens les parlent couramment, ils savent qu'elles sont l'outil indispensable à toute promotion sociale. Elles constituent de ce fait une grave menace pour les langues océaniennes: la jeunesse les délaisse et les moins parlées sont en danger d'extinction totale". Transl. by the Author.

While the daily use of English and French has brought about a real division between Oceanian peoples, renewed appreciation of Indigenous languages, particularly Polynesian languages, is allowing Pacific communities to reconnect, notably through documentary films.

In addition to the fact that Tahitians, Hawaiʻians and Māori can understand one another and recognise shared words when they speak together in their Indigenous languages, this exchange allows them to discover their strong cultural and ideological connections. Their world view, their relationship to Nature, are the same. And it is highly likely that this is what has made for the immense success of FIFO. Polynesian audiences love FIFO because they are curious to see how their Pacific cousins live. The festival gives them the opportunity to become aware of their belonging within a vast community, even more vast than they imagined. "Oceania is us, it exists when Oceanians come together", as co-founder Wallès Kotra repeats each year.[8]

The full meaning of the legacy of Māori film-maker Merata Mita is revealing itself. It is undeniable that in having to swim against the current, Oceanians have grown in strength. They are now entering a phase of resistance, using images to speak out and defend their identity. Even if there is still much to do to move beyond the legacy of colonial history, the emergence of a shared consciousness is the beginning of a renaissance that will be accompanied by documentary as well as artistic and literary films.

Bibliography

Chaumeau, C. (2011). "FIFO. Une voix dans l'océan". *Courrier international*, 25 January. https://www.courrierinternational.com/chronique/2011/01/25/une-voix-dans-l-ocean.

Corillion, J.-M. (2011). "Mahu, l'effeminé". *Le Sabre*. France 3 RFO.

Hauʻofa, E. (1994). "Our Sea of Islands". *The Contemporary Pacific*, 6(1), Spring, 148-61.

Perez, M. (2013). "Langues océaniennes: une grande diversité". *Hermès. La Revue*, 65(1), 95-6. https://doi.org/10.4267/2042/51503.

Rabréaud, L. (2021). "Heremoana Maamaatuiahutapu: 'Le FIFO est un atoll de rémission dans la mondialisation intraitable'". https://www.fifotahiti.com/heremoana-maamaatuaiahutapu-le-fifo-est-un-atoll-de-remission-dans-la-mondialisation-intraitable/.

Saura, B. (2022). "Une appellation transnationale pour l'Océan Pacifique: Te Moana nui a Kiwa (Nouvelle-Zélande)–Te moana nui a Kiva (Tahiti)".

8 "L'Océanie n'existe pas. Elle existe lorsque les Océaniens se rencontrent», cf. https://www.fifotahiti.com/fifo-2020-un-festival-engage-a-porter-la-voix-des-oceaniens/.

Archivio antropologico mediterraneo, XXV, 24(2). https//doi.org/10.4000/aam.5884.

Spitz, C. (2019). "Pour émerger un cinéma autochtone dans le Pacifique". *Journal de la Société des Océanistes*, 127-32. https://doi.org/10.4000/jso.10145.

Triay, P. (2012). "Trois questions à Wallès Kotra". *Polynésie 1*. https://la1ere.francetvinfo.fr/polynesie/2012/02/07/trois-questions-walles-kotra-3472.html.

e-ISSN 2785-2709

e-ISSN 2785-2709

Lagoonscapes
Vol. 3 – Num. 2 – December 2023

Overlapping Methods and Values in Critical Pacific Approaches to Making Contemporary Art

Joy Enomoto
Hawai‘i Peace and Justice, USA

Katerina Teaiwa
Australian National University, Australia

Abstract This is the transcript of a *talanoa*, a non-structured, free-flowing conversation between Katerina Teaiwa and Joy Enomoto with prompts from artist and curator Yuki Kihara and curator Natalie King, June 2023. Yuki Kihara and Joy Enomoto are co-curators with Healoha Johnston for Katerina's multimedia exhibition, *Project Banaba*, originally commissioned by Carriageworks cultural precinct in Sydney and opening in 2023 at the Bishop Museum in Honolulu.

Keywords Talanoa. Multimedia exhibition. Contemporary art. Project Banaba. Pacific studies.

Edizioni
Ca'Foscari

Submitted 2023-09-28
Published 2023-10-20

Open access

© 2023 Enomoto, Teaiwa | 🅭🅯 4.0

Citation Enomoto, J.; Teaiwa, K. (2023). "Overlapping Methods and Values in Critical Pacific Approaches to Making Contemporary Art". *Lagoonscapes. The Venice Journal of Environmental Humanities*, 3(2), 293-304.

DOI 10.30687/LGSP/2785-2709/2023/01/009

Katerina Teaiwa

Perhaps we should discuss relevant methodologies that have influenced *Project Banaba* and Yuki's *Paradise Camp*, which is the ways in which my work, Joy's and Yuki's, are similar in that we do extensive research for each project. We delve into histories, stories and archives, and we track things before we try to figure out what to do, what project to work on and what stories to tell. We had some intersecting and overlapping similarities in that a shared method is to go back into the past. Then, once you see some gaps, some issues, some challenges, some problems of injustice from the past and in the present, then you start crafting your arts practice as creative and critical responses to findings.

We have intersecting and overlapping methods, cares and concerns.

I am a Pacific Studies academic who does not care so much about western disciplinary boundaries and genealogies. I have an interdisciplinary approach and in fact, I talk a lot more about it being transdisciplinary rather than just interdisciplinary.

I studied in California and in the breaks, worked in the nascent Fiji fashion industry as a model and dancer, and in hotels and bars, doing all kinds of hustle, low-paid kind of work. In another part of the Pacific Yuki Kihara's career, also started in the fashion industry, her career as an artist starts blooming, thriving and expanding, and mine grows as an academic. We start overlapping in that space of critical and creative contemporary arts, but still very much driven by what is happening in the islands, even further than that, what is happened in the past, what has happened in history.

Yuki's practice resonated with the things I cared about and the way that I worked, especially drawing on archives and historical colonial issues and decolonising contemporary arts practice from a transdisciplinary Pacific perspective. By transdisciplinary, we are driven by transformation in the present, bringing people beyond boundaries of academy, genres, institutions and communities, into conversations where there may not have not been such dialogue before.

Talanoa is a critical dialogue, but not a debate or an argument where someone comes out on top. It is a conversational flow and a different way of being, knowing, and producing that guides our work. It is clear from Yuki's work that you utilise whatever different technologies, forms, materials and crews to make it effective and impactful without borders and boundaries.

I carved my way through anthropology, Pacific Island studies and the natural sciences so I could explore issues my own way. That meant incorporating the visual and performing arts into dominant, textual, forms of knowledge production.

In the academy, you've got to find the right terms, frameworks, metaphors and poetics to describe what you do. For me, one of them

is 'remix'. In the Pacific, it is particularly useful, above and beyond concepts like hybridity, which have dominated spaces like post-colonial studies and cultural studies, etc. Remix is active. It highlights the agency of those involved in the remix process. It is creative and draws on the old and the new, and gives agency to creators.

I am Banaban, from a community that essentially exists between Fiji and Kiribati, with extracted lands that have flowed across farms and fields of other, larger, colonial nations such as Australia and New Zealand. Banabans utilise remix as a form of cultural survival. You come from such a small island and you are in the diaspora as a displaced, Indigenous minority, and you are dominated by 50 other groups – you need to be able to remix as a form of critical, creative, cultural survival.

Our ancestors come from many parts of the world now. When you have this massive ancestral remix, your practice in the present becomes one of vibing with your ancestors.

Diffraction is the other metaphor that I like, which is all about the ripples and the waves, I think Donna Haraway's ideas are timeless and still very relevant in this age of COVID, pandemics and calamities.

It is this idea that an event or a thing happens, history/ people/ decisions encounter or intersect with it and then diffract the 'thing' into an array of material, social and political waves that change history's direction. It is a useful Pacific metaphor with a range of possibilities for practice or for storytelling, kind of being all things simultaneously.

It is not a coincidence that my exhibition, Project Banaba, starts in Sydney because phosphate is randomly discovered in Sydney. Commercial and colonial activities in Sydney are the catalyst for the colony. It is a catalyst for diaspora and migration and for government and so many things.

I feel like whenever you try to tell or retell a story in Sydney, you have all those historical waves, all those vibrations, all those energies coming out of the land and coming out of time and space but there is a lot of profound things and energies in that space, in that layered, concrete, super urbanised space, but it is still on the ocean. It is still on the Pacific Ocean.

There are all historical pathways and trajectories, like well-travelled roads, oceanic or otherwise, that meet in Sydney and then move out and influence everywhere else. So, Sydney is another diffractive place. If you think about that as the pathway of Paradise Camp or Project Banaba, there are significant flows and pathways that make certain kinds of profound articulations possible.

A common origin story for the island of Banaba is that it formed from things of the ocean and things of the sky such as birds and bird droppings that create the land. Dead marine life made out of

e-ISSN 2785-2709

phosphate fuses together into the calcium carbonate structure, the limestone atoll base to create what then becomes Banaba.

Banabans have many old stories about land in the sky and land in the sea, but that the first land comes from the sky and falls out of the sky into the sea and then the ancestors are born. The ancestors before them are pre-human ancestors that are made out of different kinds of elements, like rock. These multi-elementals fall out of the sky, and they land in the sea.

People really do not understand how Indigenous origin stories are actually just way more condensed and fundamental narratives that actually tell the story of the histories of material substances of atoms and molecules. When you take away all these barriers and boundaries around what is human and what is not human, then other ways of thinking about who we are, where we come from and where we are going as beings becomes possible.

It is no coincidence that Banaba is the rock, seemingly very static, and it is very unchanging, but, these are dynamic rocks that fall from the sky and land in the ocean, and then become 'Ocean Island'. So, how is a rock also an ocean island simultaneously? Land is a vibrating substance. Humans are vibrating substances. Oceans are very much vibrating, big fluid masses. Once you take away all those boundaries, then the stories about land falling from the sky are not strange at all.

And then, they combined together with turtles, stingrays, sharks, clouds, thunder, lightning and porpoises to become even more of an island. Humans are the last thing to come along.

Phosphate is one of these things that is involved in what scientists have theorised as big planetary boundaries. There are a few planetary boundaries and planetary thresholds that we cannot cross. And when we cross them, humans are in trouble. One of them involves resources of phosphorus and nitrogen.

Phosphorus cannot be found in nature on its own. It has to be part of a compound. Phosphorus is very volatile. That is why you make explosives out of it, so it has to be locked away in nature. There is research that talks about these phosphate or bone beds around the world, where dinosaurs were driven into corners of the earth because of big catastrophic events, and they all perish in one place, because they could not go further, like the edge of a continent. There would have been calamitous fires and big weather events, and they would all have been trapped on a peninsula or something like that and then, they all end up perishing in that corner.

There is one in Florida, and it is called a bone bed, and it is one of the biggest sources of phosphate on the planet. The idea is that because so many animals perished in that place, their bodies were then turned into phosphate. Our bodies, our DNA have phosphate in them, or the phosphate compound is part of the DNA structure of living things. That is why it is such an important element.

Those cataclysmic moments create the possibility of this phosphate that we now mine and consume in global agriculture and circulate back through the system. But just like fossil fuels, we are doing it too fast. We are taking all the resources. Phosphate and fossil fuels, carbon, these things are meant to move slowly through the planet, like water. That is why we are facing all of these ridiculous thresholds that we are now passing at a planetary scale along with climate change: it is all connected.

One specific geological study that has been done about Banaba that I found in the Museum of Natural History in New York, I found that phosphate islands, especially Banaba, was under the sea before it emerged in its present form. It is been above the ocean and below the ocean and then back up above the ocean. The pressure created the sedimented phosphate rock.

You know how Papua New Guinea and Australia were one continent? It was called Sahul by scientists, and it was just one landmass: Papua New Guinea, Australia and Tasmania. 10,000 years ago, people were all connected through Papua New Guinea, Australia and Tasmania. Then the ocean rose and cut off that passage between Australia and Papua New Guinea.

Banaba has crossed through different major time periods, ice ages, rising tides and changing sea levels to be the 80 metres above sea level that it is today.

Such a tiny, little spot somehow keeps insisting on protruding above the ocean near the equator. Many different origin stories and legends are told about Banaba that intersect with this idea that things fall from the sky and go under, and then they come back up again, and also that there might have been an earthquake or major event where land disappeared, broke off and fell into the ocean. Banaba looks like an oyster, as if a bit of it has been cut out, like something crumpled and disappeared under the ocean.

Storytelling connects to things in deep time and way forward, into the future from where we are now, in all directions. That is when you know you are telling a story that matters and that will stand the test of time. Go find those stories. They are everywhere.

Colonialism is definitely connected to climate change. All forms of mining are definitely connected to climate change.

Banaba is a microcosm of everything that has happened even though there are only 7,000 Banabans on the planet. It only took 80 years to destroy and it had been there for thousands of years and people had thrived with very limited flora and fauna. They flourished and they were amazing expert fisherman as they had to learn to fish in the deep ocean because there is no reef on Banaba.

You have to understand what happened to the small places to think about how you fix what is happening to the big places: the micro is profoundly connected to the macro. By understanding it, you understand the big global forces.

My work is about the land, and it is about the material details of what happened. Phosphate, concrete, steel, and these different kinds of material structures that come from the earth, but are causing a lot of problems, because they are not in harmony with the kinds of environments that we are living in. Banaba teaches us that it does not take long to destroy an entire ecosystem and make it unliveable with no drinking water and food. Imagine entire continents going through the same thing.

How did Banabans flourish and survive, laugh and play in 2023? What is the social structure going to look like and who is in charge and where do you find happiness? These are actually really, really important things that we all need to be thinking about right now but the end goal is justice for Banaba peoples and Banaban lands.

When Australia, New Zealand and Great Britain created the British Phosphate Commissioners it was the same year that Morocco solidified its hold over the Western Sahara. 1919 to 1920 was this critical moment where all the big powerful phosphate companies were formed. The Moroccan company was mining Western Sahara and displacing Indigenous Sahawari people who have been protesting ever since. Banaba and Nauru and, to a limited extent, French Polynesia where there was phosphate mining as well, and Palau.

The quality of the phosphate in the Pacific, but particularly Banaba and Nauru, were superior. Phosphoric acid is the ingredient put into industrial strength, agricultural fertiliser and has many other applications. We had high quality phosphate that was economically important from an industrial perspective. It was worth it for all the ships to come from across the planet to go and source phosphate from that very far away place in the Pacific.

That's why Morocco and Banaba are triangulated, but both displaced Indigenous people in order to access phosphate that's in the ground. There are resonances between the two spaces over phosphate displacement, they call it 'blood phosphate' in Western Sahara. That's what the Indigenous activists call their phosphate 'blood phosphate'.

e-ISSN 2785-2709

Joy Enomoto

There is so many interesting ways in which Hawaiʻi intersects with Banaba as a site, and the way in which extraction works. It has its roots in the 1856 *Guano Act*, which is America's entryway into empire in the truest sense, meaning the US as a nation is beginning to claim islands in the Pacific through guano extraction and declare "If there is guano on this island that we can mine, we can claim that island for the United States".

This is the gateway to what leads to this relationship to Banaba and phosphate along with slave trade sugar. The relationship between bird shit and slavery, extraction and displacement are things that island people in the Pacific know in a very specific way. And one thing that's not really being included in the Project Banaba exhibition is when the Guano Act gets put into place, Hawaiʻian men are sent out into the Pacific to harvest that guano, because there is this desperate need to find guano that is not coming from Peru.

Peru had the highest quality guano at the time. Peru was a key player in black birding. They began kidnapping people from Rapa Nui for Peruvian guano mining, which leads to a very fast population collapse along with disease for Rapa Nui. And so, because there is this competition for phosphate, and it is not really so much guano and phosphate for fertiliser, for food, as much as it is for weapons in the US context, because they were in the middle of the Civil War. There is this need to build up ammunitions that also ties it to America's need for Hawaiʻi, America's need for these military sites everywhere.

That is the intersection of American planters wanting a very distinct source of its own guano or its own phosphate to build up industries to improve their capitalism, to improve their wealth, with no consideration for island peoples, and even more so less concern for the lives of the birds that produce guano.

They are more than willing to devastate entire ecosystems for this source of material, for this thing that has taken millennia to create, as Kati always points out, and one of the most horrifying things that Kati always shares is it took 80 years to basically destroy Banaba and 80 years is the time from King Kamehameha to the overthrow in Hawaiʻi. This is our relationship to time. Taking processes that take millennia to create, for ecosystems to evolve and develop and exist in a very particular way so that other lives can survive. And within less than a century, that can all be undone based on greed.

Banaba was also militarised: it was important for the Japanese and the Americans to militarise all of the phosphate mines of Banaba to feed and protect their empires. All of these connections to this one substance, among the 100s of extractions that have occurred in the Pacific. Imperialists have the audacity to talk about security while they literally devastate the things that make us secure. There is a

e-ISSN 2785-2709

constant threat or destruction of waterways, water pathways, rivers, bays, and estuaries. The US, Britain, Australia, and other large nations have the nerve to talk about security when freshwater is our ultimate security, and they do not care about displacing people.

When the Marshallese were bombed, the US displaced 90,000 people – during this last Red Hill spill in 2021, 93,000 people were poisoned. They do not care. That is just collateral damage to them. It is inconvenient. People do not want to think that they would do that to Hawaiʻi, but I do not know why they think they would not. What an inconvenience Hawaiʻians have been to them for centuries.

We definitely acknowledge that this is not America, consistently. We are a constant thorn in their side. What easier way to get rid of that thorn in your side than to contaminate our water permanently? The same issue is occurring in Okinawa. The same issue is happening in Guam. All of which have strong resistance movements. There is a tremendous threat to their only aquifer on Guam, the largest aquifer in their northern lands. They would remove the entire Chamorro population, and that would mean nothing to them just to have that base.

This is the kind of mindset that we are dealing with when we talk about phosphate extraction – and all of this is tied to a mineral. All of this is tied to resources that we need to live. We actually need water to live.

With Project Banaba, I always think about that connection that the United States Military and Government has no consciousness – and Australia as well – because they are partners in this – they are partners in crime and they can use natural resources to remove us as that source of nuisance.

Katerina Teaiwa

It is even more than an economic incentive. I do think it is quite ideological and cultural. We are ruled by cultures who are driven by a patriarchal and hyper masculinist way of thinking about everything. It is this fascinating, dangerous, crazy, really illogical and very unpragmatic human drive, colonial – colonising drive, extractive drive. There is an Isaac Asimov sci-fi novel about how in the future, we have run out of everything, so they are putting the bodies in the chimneys to get phosphate because one common, historical source of phosphate is human bones. I include this in one of the chapters of my book *Consuming Ocean Island* (2015). It is a chapter on remix.

Joy Enomoto

Solomon Enos is a master of remix. His Polyfantastica series is very much along a Hawaiʻian futurist lens and even Kamaoli Kuwada is interested in Hawaiʻian futurism literature. Hawaiʻians are shapeshifters and people who had to figure something out very quickly.

Kamehameha in 1810, he is like "I need to control the harbours. It is not just that I need to control that. It is not that I just need to bring all of the islands into one thing". He took sandalwood to China. The port fees for the ship were ten times higher, were more than the sandalwood.

He starts charging fees to foreign vessels. He adapts to a shifting of world of trade and a rising globalism. He understands the concept of power at a time when, quite frankly, the European and Americans did not quite know what to do. They went from being impressed to threatened and then, of course, then we had to be savage. And then, we are navigating eugenics.

Hawaiʻians managed to somehow survive this major genocide with a population collapse of 95%. And then there is the Hawaiʻian Renaissance. They had almost convinced us that we did not like ourselves.

And then this global movement in the 70s that woke everybody up. I feel like we are hitting that again in this moment of rising fascism. The rhythm and remix in the dance is always a marker of what is going on historically. We have railroad hulas. We have whaling hulas. We have these different things that are telling the narratives, and you see this throughout the Pacific. When war comes, there is a hula, there are these marching dances.

If you listen to pidgin, it is actually a Hawaiʻian construct. The way the words flow are actually in Hawaiʻian order, but the words are taken from Chinese, from Japanese, from Portuguese, that trade language. I always see this as a very important remix that has a very Hawaiʻian structure.

It was a Hawaiʻian baseline with different notes placed on top, because what do you do with the edge? What do you do with the contact point to communicate? Well, you form a pidgin, you form a Creole, you form this trade language, and that is what is needed to survive in these estuaries, in these rich nutrient zones that cannot quite be defined.

What Pacific person is not remixing? Our land is also very much remixed as well. There was a constant extraction of our sand to other islands or to other places, or Waikiki. Our hotels cannot handle the erosion, so they bring in sand from another island or from some other part of the ocean, which has nothing to do with our natural processes. As our trees and our plants are dying, they are dropping new seeds from all over the world.

That is why Hawaiʻi looks the way that it does. I worked on an archive of one of the head curators of the Natural History Museum of

Los Angeles in the early twentieth century. He took thousands of shells from Hawaiʻi and sent it to that museum. Somebody else is benefiting from the taking of us and then we have to absorb whatever they bring in, whether that is a foreign bird, whether that is a foreign plant, whether that is a foreign animal like cattle or whatever.

When I think about New Zealand and the whole changing of the landscape through cattle and sheep, that same scaping occurred in Hawaiʻi, the constant re-scaping of our lands is a constant remix. And much of our soil has been used because our soil is nutrient-rich, and it is taken to feed other people. You notice it when there is a change in the birdsong, you notice it when there are certain plants that cannot bloom, because the bird that is needed for that is no longer there. That relationship, that deep understanding that Hawaiʻians always had of "This is growing on the land when this is happening in the ocean", we knew that. But when you remove this thing, you take that tree off the landscape, and you do not know that there are sharks mating right now, somebody's going to die.

Tourists get bitten by sharks because they are on vacation. They do not know how to read the landscape. But we had to remix, because we needed to understand our landscape and the processes of the world, as we knew it, were removed. We had to figure out another way to embody how to survive in a landscape that has been completely devastated. Even if it is in the smallest ways, it made huge shifts to our psyche and to our need for survival. In that sense, we have had to do multiple remixes.

Right now, the army leases are up for renewal in 2029, and they have received thousands of acres of land for $1 in 1964 for 65 years, and there are other leases that are coming up in 2030. There is imagining that these lands will be returned, but then what is needed for those lands to be returned? What are we imagining on those lands? Is it food? Is it cleanup? How much level of cleanup does it need? Is it a fish pond? Is it a bird sanctuary? What needs to be returned there?

Being able to envision life post-military, post-cleanup, because I am in no way worried about the earth. The earth actually is going to do whatever it needs to do. It will remix plastic and figure out a way to exist long after we have gone. We need the Earth. We need the earth and in some degrees, it needs us for certain things, but very little. The earth is remixing and about to spit us out. We are really on the verge of collapse, so I have to imagine what life post-military is going to be, because I feel like the earth is actually going to create conditions where the military will not be able to function.

We just saw in typhoon Mawar, the military did not even know what to do. That there are natural forces that could remove the military and render it incapable of functioning. These are the acts of desperate men, in which case, our embodied memory, our embodied knowledge, will be the things that save us, but we have to be able

to imagine a post-military world and a post-cleanup world, because they are fine to leave us with contaminanted lands.

So, who has always been the one to figure out how to actually clean things? Pacific Islanders, Indigenous people, Pacific people. More importantly, Pacific women. When I think about a post-military remix, it is awakening our imaginations in ways that we have not allowed ourselves to imagine for a very long time.

e-ISSN 2785-2709

Lagoonscapes
Vol. 3 – Num. 2 – December 2023

Peggy Guggenheim and the Pacific

Fanny Wonu Veys
Research Center for Material Culture, Curator Oceania, The Netherlands

Abstract This paper examines the small Pacific collection of Peggy Guggenheim, looking at how it became part of a non-Western art collection that exists in addition to her important modernist assembled works. After highlighting Peggy Guggenheim's collecting practices, I will relate some of her display experiments. Finally, the discussion will explore the use and show of Guggenheim's non-Western art collection in a twenty-first century exhibition called *Migrating Objects. Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas in the Peggy Guggenheim Collection.*

Keywords Peggy Guggenheim. Way-finding. New Guinea. Exhibition.

Summary 1 Way-Finders and Navigators. – 2 Collecting and Remembering. – 3 Playful Displays. – 4 Migrating Objects. – 5 Conclusion.

Edizioni Ca'Foscari

Peer review

Submitted 2023-09-28
Accepted 2023-11-22
Published 2023-12-20

Open access

© 2023 Veys | cc-by 4.0

Citation Veys, F.W. (2023). "Peggy Guggenheim and the Pacific". *Lagoonscapes. The Venice Journal of Environmental Humanities*, 3(2), 305-320.

DOI 10.30687/LGSP/2785-2709/2023/01/010

To listen you must be silent.
To enter otherness you must be respectful
(Dening 2008, 154)

Examining where Pacific art could be found in Venice was part of the discussions leading up to the Venice in-person meeting entitled *Talanoa Forum: Swimming Against the Tide* (11-13 October 2022), held on the occasion of Yuki Kihara's presentation of *Paradise Camp*, curated by Natalie King at the Aotearoa New Zealand Pavilion for the 59th Venice Biennale International Art Exhibition. For instance, it is known that the *Museo di Storia Naturale di Venezia Giancarlo Ligabue* (Natural History Museum of Venice Giancarlo Ligabue) holds an important collection assembled by Giancarlo Ligabue (1931-2015), an Italian paleontologist, scholar, politician and businessman. One of the star pieces, an Asmat soul canoe from New Guinea is displayed in the bottom loggia of the thirteenth-century *Palazzo Fontego dei Turchi* built for the Pesaro family. The soul canoe is one of the many exciting visual experiences for any *vaporetto* user on the Gran Canal. The Talanoa Forum was called such to foreground the Pacific concept of *talanoa* which Timote Vaioleti (2006, 21) describes as "a personal encounter where people story their issues, their realities and aspirations". It thus describes a process of dialogue that is inclusive and transparent. Less known to the general public is that not only the Natural History Museum, but also the Peggy Guggenheim Museum holds a Pacific collection, albeit small.[1] The organisers of the *Talanoa Forum* decided therefore to visit the Peggy Guggenheim Museum who had put on a display of the nine Pacific art works for the delegates to the Talanoa Forum.

This paper examines the small Pacific collection of Peggy Guggenheim, looking at how it became part of a non-Western art collection that exists in addition to her important modernist assembled works. After highlighting Peggy Guggenheim's collecting practices, I will relate some of her display experiments. Finally, the discussion will explore the use and show of Guggenheim's non-Western art collection in a 21st century exhibition called *Migrating Objects. Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas in the Peggy Guggenheim Collection*.

1 Images of the non-Western collection can be seen online: `https://www.guggenheim-venice.it/en/art/works/?c%5B%5D=2823`.

1 Way-Finders and Navigators

The quote that introduces this article "To listen you must be silent. To enter otherness you must be respectful" are the closing words of an article by the Pacific historian Greg Dening exploring the concept of Pacific way-finding as a guiding principle when embarking on an intellectual journey (Dening 2008, 154). Way-finding is a interpretive craft used by modern Islanders to describe the skills needed to pilot voyaging canoes around the great Pacific Ocean. It is "closer to the signs the systems of the cosmos imprint on the environment" (Dening 2004, 167; 2008, 147).

Hence, focused silence is needed to interpret the signs that Guggenheim's collection offers, and the application of respectfulness required to enter this different realm that is the world of Pacific art moving amongst modernist collections. These knowledge and skills stand opposed to that of the navigator who "has the security that the knowledge he applies to his voyaging has a life outside himself – in books, instruments and maps" (Dening 2008, 154). Similarly, I have no tangible knowledge about Peggy Guggenheim's thinking when assembling her Pacific collection; the information is not to be found in books or articles, apart from the one article I wrote based on spending time with her collection in 2018 and 2019 in preparation to the exhibition *Migrating objects* (Veys 2020). I felt compelled then, and feel compelled now to apply the interpretative craft of wayfinding as:

> For a way-finder, no knowledge, no image is stilled in either time or space. The temperature of the water, the movements of the winds, the habits of the birds are all in his head. And this knowledge comes to him, not through his own experience alone, but through the eyes of a long line of ancestral masters and apprentices. A way-finder finds his way with style. No voyage is the same. His way is always different but ruled by his confidence that he will find it. (Dening 2008, 147)

Wayfinding implies a reliance on what happened before while at the same time dealing with relevant contemporary issues; it involves negotiating and accepting the ever-changing nature of things. Looking at Guggenheim's Pacific collection offers the opportunity to think about the many ways to view and experience things, material culture and works of art.[2] I believe that – as for the *Talanoa Forum* – centralising this Pacific concept of 'way-finding' and contrasting it with the Western concept of 'navigation' is helpful in untangling the enmeshment that comes from a Pacific collection that has moved to a context

2 For a discussion of the difference between art and artefact see Veys 2020, 46.

of modernist art. This paper will therefore oscillate between 'navigating', relying on the scarce historical sources and 'wayfinding', the informed interpretations one might make.

2 Collecting and Remembering

I am starting with some of the navigational insights, knowledge that is well documented. The Peggy Guggenheim Museum located in the *Palazzo Venier dei Leoni* in Venice, houses an impressive collection of abstract, Surrealist, Cubist, and Abstract American Expressionist art assembled by Peggy Guggenheim (1898-1979), who was born into the wealthy American-Jewish Guggenheim family with large stakes in the mining industry. Peggy Guggenheim grew into a socialite and art collector as testifies her autobiography *Out of This Century: Confessions of an Art Addict*(Guggenheim 2005). In 1939, feeling that the art of her time was underrepresented, Peggy Guggenheim embarked on a collecting journey acquiring directly from artists themselves and sometimes from reputable galleries in London, Paris and New York. Even though her initial interest was in Italian Renaissance painting from Venice, her collecting activities gave her the epithet of 'Mistress of Modern art' (Davidson 2004, 51). Few people realise that Guggenheim also engaged with non-Western art and material culture from the early 1940s onwards. Her interest was sparked by her then husband, the German Surrealist artist Max Ernst who focused on Oceania and the Indigenous Americas. They were married between 1941 and 1946 but had already separated in 1943. Like for many of Ernst's fellow Surrealist artists, art from the Pacific was a major source of inspiration, adequately captured in the "Surrealist Map of the World", published in 1929 in the Belgian journal *Variétés*. New Guinea, the Bismarck Archipelago, and Rapa Nui appear enlarged as well as Russia, Alaska, Mexico, and Greenland (Kjellgren 2007, 18; Dixon 2007, 555). Indeed, Max Ernst was an avid collector of – and according to Guggenheim annoyingly attached to (Guggenheim 2005, 263) – sculptures from New Guinea and New Ireland, but – true to the Surrealist artistic movement – he also acquired Inuit masks and *katsina*[3] dolls from New Mexico (Kavky 2010).

When Peggy Guggenheim was first offered ethnographic items some time between 1941 and 1946, she initially felt she did not want to 'succumb', using her own words, to the tricks of Julius Carlebach (1909-64) – a major New York art dealer originating from Lübeck in

3 *Kachina* or *katsina* dolls – in Hopi spelling – are the carved representations of the *Katsinam*, the spirit messengers of the universe who come to the Hopi in the form of life-giving rain clouds (Pearlstone, Babcock 2001).

e-ISSN 2785-2709

Germany, buying and selling Surrealist art and ethnographic objects – who would incite her to buy ethnographic art and would phone Max Ernst almost every day to invite him to come to his shop (Guggenheim 2005, 263). She finally made her first purchase of non-western objects in 1959, thus becoming a relative late comer in that area of collecting. Collectors including Albert Coombs Barnes (1872-1951), Helena Rubinstein (1872-1965) and Nelson A. Rockefeller (1908-79) had preceded Peggy Guggenheim in combining their modern art collecting with African, Oceanic and Indigenous American pieces. In her memoirs Guggenheim enthusiastically recalled her first acquisition from Julius Carlebach comprising "twelve fantastic artifacts, consisting of masks and sculptures from New Guinea, the Belgian Congo, the French Sudan, Peru, Brazil, Mexico, and New Ireland" (Guggenheim 2005, 363). Josefa Silberstein (1901-2000) – wife and business associate of Julius Carlbach, who together had fled their home in Berlin by the end of 1937 sailing from London to New York on the *Normandie*, to open their first American based art gallery in 104 East, 57th Street in New York – was particularly keen on African and Oceanic art (Borellini 2008, 31; Sawin 1995, 185; de Grunne 2011; Mühlenberend 2022, 183, 190).

Guggenheim's first purchase included three Pacific items: two *malangan* objects from New Ireland, a mask (76.2553.PGC 232) and a sculpture (76.2553.PGC 233) and one Chambri flute stopper from the Sepik River area in New Guinea (76.2553.PGC 239). Later, in the 1960s she bought additional, mainly African, objects in Italy from Paolo Barozzi (1935-2018), a gallery owner with whom Guggenheim had developed a longstanding friendship, and from Franco Monti (b. 1931) an art dealer who had conducted extensive fieldwork in Africa (Borellini 2008, 37-9). Guggenheim implied that acquiring non-Western art was correcting her painful separation from Ernst who "removed his treasures one by one from the walls. Now they [the non-Western objects] all seemed to be returning" Guggenheim wrote in her autobiography (Guggenheim 2005, 363). Next to seeing the objects as "a therapeutic compensation for loss", art historian Ellen McBreen (2020, 18, 32) argues that they can also be seen as "emblems for Guggenheim's cosmopolitanism, and ultimately a vestige of a colonialist era". Applying the wayfinding skills on the collecting activities of Peggy Guggenheim, one could say that she was collecting to remember, to keep the memory of her time spent with Max Ernst in New York between 1941 and 1943 alive. Nothing points to the fact that Guggenheim was aware of the intellectual worlds encapsulated in her new acquisitions. Hence, is it serendipity or is it her wayfinding capability of reading the signs that emanate from the strong presence of these *malangan* sculptures, that her first purchases are also intimately linked with memory? In this sense the collecting of Pacific objects is part of the construction of the self (Derlon, Jeudy-Ballini

e-ISSN 2785-2709

2014, 96, 100). *Malangan* is a collective term referring to sculptures, dances, the mortuary ceremony and ceremonial exchange of people living in the northern part of New Ireland commemorating the community members who have passed away. *Malangan*-art was meant to be ephemeral. It was left to rot or was burned. From the 1840s onwards sculptures were also sold to European visitors. As the art had been removed from its context, either through destruction or through purchase, the physical designs for the art were not transmitted from one generation to the other. On the contrary, for each *malangan* ceremony, carvers recall from memory the shapes and forms appropriate for objects. Therefore, both the *malangan* mask and the sculpture are re-embodiments of memorised imagery (Küchler 1987, 238-40). The other Pacific Carlbach purchase, the Chambri flute stopper[4] was originally destined to be mounted at the end of a long bamboo flute. It would only have been played by initiated men during rituals in the village. The sound was considered the voice of the ancestors. Usually hidden or stored in the men's house, only initiated people could see the flutes and their flute stoppers, for only they understood the true meaning of these objects as the ancestors' vicinity. Guggenheim perhaps also felt that the object materialised the link between past and present, the link between the ancestors and the living.

Peggy Guggenheim collected the Asmat spirit canoe or *wuramon* (76.2553.PGC 236) most probably in the 1960s. The creative developments of Asmat art including the distortion of proportions – this *wuramon* is considerably smaller than many of the older ones that can reach up to 12.5 metres (Schneebaum 1990, 45) – and the more dynamic figurative carvings sparked the interest of western collectors and museums from the 1950s onwards. Even though Guggenheim had been living in Venice permanently by 1948, she had certainly been made aware of the exhibition in 1962 *The Art of the Asmat, New Guinea*, featuring objects collected by Michael C. Rockefeller, at the Museum of Primitive Art in 1962 (Rockefeller, Gerbrands 1962). The Museum of Primitive Art in New York had been founded in 1954 by Nelson A. Rockefeller in association with René d'Harnoncourt (1901-68). It opened to the public in 1957. In 1978 the collection from the Museum of Primitive Art in New York, which had closed its doors in 1975, was legally transferred to the Metropolitan Museum of Art (Veys 2010, 268; Biro 2014). Wuramon were habitually made for a one-time use at the end of the *emak cem* or 'feast of the bone house', that simultaneously celebrated the spirits of the dead and served as an initiation ritual during which adolescent boys became men. The canoe-shape with its dangerous Z-shaped water spirit, menacing water

4 The flute stopper has a label at the back that could be from Carlebach's hand but equally from someone else's hand.

spirits (*ambirak*) or human-like spirits (*etsjo*), helped the souls transfer from the world of the living to the world of the dead and the adolescents from boys to men. In a sense, also this ethnographic work was connected to memory. While it has proven difficult to identify Guggenheim's motivations for collecting (Davidson 2004, 51), the acquisition of the soul canoe may have been inspired by this 1962 New York exhibition, but perhaps also by her instinct in sussing out, way-finding the deeper meanings of the works, in this case its connection memory.

3 Playful Displays

Peggy Guggenheim ultimately collected nine objects from the Pacific, the vast region that covers one third of the earth's surface. Remarkably, except for the Asmat soul canoe from the current Indonesian western half of New Guinea, formerly colonised by the Dutch, all of the works come from the part of New Guinea that was occupied by Germany. Annexed in 1884, German New Guinea encompassed the north-eastern corner of the island of New Guinea, as well as the Bismarck archipelago (New Britain and New Ireland) and the northern Solomon Islands (Buschmann 2018, 203).

Guggenheim appears in a number of black and white photographs and fewer color photographs taken in the 1960s. She poses with her works of art – both modernist and ethnographic – in the library, hallway, living room, and dining hall of the *Palazzo Venier dei Leoni*. Relying on navigational skills, these photographs testify to the fact that Guggenheim installed her Pacific acquisitions in ever-changing arrangements in her Venetian palazzo, alongside paintings of Pablo Picasso (1881-1973), Max Ernst (1891-1976), Morris Hirshfield (1872-1946) and Paul Delvaux (1897-1994), sculptures such as an Alberto Giacometti (1901-66) bronze or a Alexander Calder (1898-1976) mobile, Venetian glass objects and antique and modern furniture (Armstrong, Vail 2020; Greene 2020a, 12). Her use of the collection – sometimes even embracing objects – with its ever-changing constellation, shows her intimate relationship with these works, as the anthropologist and collecting historian Alessia Borellini (2008, 29) argues. Parallels can be drawn with Ernst who was known to pose in Guggenheim's New York apartment with his *katsina* dolls as if they were his children (Dixon 2007, 276-7; Kavky 2010, 210-11). The anthropologists Brigitte Derlon and Monique Jeudy-Ballini describe the close relationships collectors develop with their acquisitions as a process of domestication, and sometimes even socialisation especially when personalities are conferred upon the objects (Derlon, Jeudy-Ballini 2014, 96).

Guggenheim indeed seemed to play with her collection, in the same way she manipulated her earrings and spectacles (Campione

e-ISSN 2785-2709

2008a, 23). Some Pacific objects appear regularly in different settings and compositions, others do not seem to have played an active role in her living space. This is the case for the *miamba maira* (76.2553. PGC 234), a large sculpture originating from northeast New Guinea, characterised by openwork carving representing a stylised female being surrounded by birds. Other figures including both *malangan* carvings appear in both large exhibition room settings as in more intimate living spaces. Guggenheim seems to have favoured the *malangan* mask to play with hair styles and glasses, superimposing the plant fibres of the *malangan* mask's crest, her own slightly wavy hair and her dog's fluffy hair. In another setting the *malangan* mask is juxtaposed to a Congolese *Mukinka* mask from the Salampasu living in the Kasai region. Peggy Guggenheim is seen resting her hands on the large *D'mba* mask from the Baga people form Guinea. Again, she seems to allude to the similarities in hair styles between herself and the masks. In that same set up she is also seen with her hands spread out. The Sepik suspension hook, the Chambri flute stopper and a male figure with a projection on the chest (76.2553.PGC 238) usually appear in a Guggenheim's library setting where she is sitting in the sofa or actually posing with a large coffee table art book.

As explained earlier, the flute stopper signifies sacred exclusive knowledge which Peggy Guggenheim might have intuitively appropriated to display in her library. The suspension hook (76.2553.PGC 235) probably originates from the Iatmul people of the area of the Cambri Lake, the only remnant of what was once the interior sea of the Sepik River valley (Peltier, Schindlbeck, Kaufmann 2015b, 16). This suspension hook hung from the rafters of the house with a rope pulled through the lug at the top. Bags containing food were attached to the crescent shape, thus keeping the food away from rodents and other animals. Other valuable objects such as musical instruments could also be secured. The boldly carved male figure probably refers to an ancestor, but remarkably, does not show any traces of scarification. Sometimes, branches from the betel palm were attached by way of offering in order to attract the favours of the ancestor that is represented. Would Guggenheim have felt that the suspension hook belonged to the sphere of the family house as these types of objects were used in the houses of clan elders. However, the depiction of a specific ancestor, a sacred being, make these suspension hooks objects of transition between the secular family house and the sacred men's house (Peltier, Schindlbeck, Kaufmann 2015a, 143). Again, placing the piece in the context of a library, exemplifying the Western idea of access to often esoteric knowledge, might have been Guggenheim's way of practicing the craft of wayfinding. Similarly, one will probably never really understand all the layers of meaning connected to the *kadibon* or *kandimbog* male figure (76.2553.PGC 239) from

e-ISSN 2785-2709

the Murik lagoon on the Sepik River. With its elongated projection emanating from the chest and tapering downward to the height of the knees, this figure most probably represents an ancestral being or spirit and was possibly only shown to young men during their process of initiation.

By constantly changing placement of artworks, Guggenheim stressed the polysemic character of her objects, but also the high mobility of things. She in this manner captured some of the essence of New Guinea art. She thus challenged the Western methodological logic that constantly searches for "the singular and true nature of things", a quest for certainty summarised in the question "What is it?" (Peltier, Schindlbeck, Kaufmann 2015c). Guggenheim's double-sided Sepik carving (76.2553.PGC 237) also exemplifies the movement of things. She often showed it in a living room setting together with the large *malangan* carvings (NBA00023). It is not known where exactly the figure was carved. It might have been in the village of Yamok, north of the Sepik River, where Sawos men carved larger-than-life figures. Those statues usually represented a male ancestor, who was presumably more mythological than real, and each had a name. These monumental sculptures once dominated the interior space of the men's ceremonial house, where they were probably tied to the supporting architectural posts. As the posts supported the house, the founding ancestors and their descendant clan members supported the village (Peltier, Schindlbeck, Kaufmann 2015a, 202). However, the figure looks male when observed from one perspective, female from the other. Could the fusion of the feminine and masculine be testament to the reproductive forces of both sexes that together can have agency on the social worlds that surround them (Barlow 2015, 25)? Or is it rather, as the anthropologist Günther Giovanni (2008, 158-61) suggests, part of a rare type of giant suspension hook, moving between secular and sacred realms?[5]

For a number of years, Guggenheim and her acquaintances remained the only viewers to the various settings in which her Pacific collection performed. In 1966, however, twenty of her ethnographic art objects were presented to the larger public with also a catalogue of the Venetian collection (Calas, Calas 1966). The objects were displayed without vitrines and fitted to the wall or set on small shelving in several rooms of Peggy Guggenheim's home.

The exhibition fitted the 'modernist primitivism' framework of the twentieth century. Around 1910, the so-called discovery of non-Western art by twentieth-century modernist artists was seen as central

5 As the figure is rather large (about 135 cm high), it is unlikely the figure was produced for tourists who would have had great difficulty in taking it home. Even though it seems uncertain, it is impossible to affirm whether this figure was aged by a local Sepik artist.

Figure 1 Peggy Guggenheim in the living room of Palazzo Venier dei Leoni. Behind her, Edmondo Bacci, "Event #247" (1956, PGC), and artworks from her collection of Oceanian sculptures; on the table, Joseph Cornell, "Fortune Telling Parrot" (1937-38 ca., PGC). Venice, The Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation, Venice. Photo Archivio Cameraphoto Epoche, Gift, Cassa di Risparmio di Venezia, 2005, NBA00023

in the shaping of Western art. These artists, searching for a difficult visual language started collecting these mainly African and Oceanic objects and drew inspiration from them (Clifford 1988, 190). Modernist artists that acquired or used Pacific objects in their artwork include Pablo Picasso, Emil Nolde (1867-1956), Erich Heckel (1883-1970), Ernst Ludwig Kirchner (1880-1938), Karl Schmidt-Rotluff (1884-1976), André Breton (1996-66), Wolfgang Paalen (1905-59), Max Ernst, Matta (Roberto Matta Echaurren, 1911-2002). Many of them believed they were also rescuing Pacific art from neglect (Cowling 1992, 181; Kjellgren 2007, 18). The concept of 'primitivism' regained attention in the 1980s focusing on the aesthetic comparisons between Western and non-Western art (Aagesen, von Bormann 2021, 23). The exhibition held in 1984 at the Museum of Modern Art (MOMA) in New York entitled *'Primitivism' in 20th-Century Art: Affinity of the Tribal and the Modern* probably epitomises this approach. Ethnographic art is hence often presented to a well-informed public as a way to better understand Western modernist art and European art history. The art historian Christine Gouzi (2020) argues that "the reality of European art never took stronger shape than through the prism of another art". The position is defended that one cannot talk about Pablo Picasso's iconic *Demoiselles d'Avignon* (1907) without mentioning the Fang masks or Vili statuette from Gabon of which some faces in the painting show formal resemblance. In addition, who

studies the art of Gauguin without referring to the Marquesan and Tahitian sculptures he included in many of his paintings? In the archival section of Yuki Kihara's *Paradise Camp*, she even demonstrated that Gauguin's inspiration went beyond today's French Polynesian islands to include Sāmoa. In his *Three Tahitians* (1899), Gauguin copied almost one on one the *Back View of a Sāmoan with a Pe'a* (tattoo) from a photograph made by Thomas Andrew in the 1980s.

4 Migrating Objects

In February 2020 the Peggy Guggenheim Museum opened the exhibition *Migrating Objects. Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas in the Peggy Guggenheim Collection*. It presented Guggenheim's African, Oceanic, and Indigenous Americas holdings. Instead of displaying the collection again within a 'modernist primitivism' perspective looking at the formal similarities between the non-western objects and the twentieth century art, this exhibition stressed the objects' trajectories. I was one of the curators who worked together with Christa Clarke, R. Tripp Evans, Ellen McBreen, under the general guidance of Vivien Greene. The exhibition privileged the artists' intended contexts recognising that individual artists created works for social, spiritual or political reasons that are radically different from museum display. In short, we tried to highlight the original context, something that Peggy Guggenheim in her displays had paid little or no attention to. Even in the purchasing of the Pacific collection, rarely was a people or even the person she bought it from mentioned. Mostly the names of the creators or artists are unknown. This obscuring of names has made the makers actively disappear in the mass of the artist that is devoid of any creativity but is on the contrary reproducing the canon of its predecessors. Often, the names have simply not been recorded out of disinterest in the individual skills of the artist. This was something that the Dutch anthropologist Adriaan Gerbrands argued against (1967). In the 1960s he researched the carvers of Asmat objects, stressing their individuality and artistry. All of a sudden names of carvers (*wowipits*) – who also made the soul canoe in the Peggy Guggenheim collection – such as Bapmes, Bifarji, Bishur, Initjajai, Itjembi, Matjemos, Ndojokor, and Tarras from the village of Amanamkai (southwest New Guinea) came to the fore. They left the realm of static anonymous artists who were believed to repeat movements to create designs that have been passed down by the generations that had preceded them.

By according the maker agency, even if unknown, the exhibition *Migrating Objects* aimed at avoiding the trope of which the display of non-Western objects are often accused, i.e. "Ethnographic exhibitions have often portrayed Indigenous People as distant in time and

place, as 'over there' and 'back then'" (Schorch 2020, 43). Considering people whose art had previously not received any attention or whose presence had not been noticed is happening increasingly and consistently since the beginning of the 21st century, making this often-academic discourse available to a general audience. Think of the exhibitions focusing on the forgotten black presence including *Black is Beautiful: Rubens to Duma*s at the Nieuwe Kerk in Amsterdam (2008), *Black Chronicles: Photographic Portraits 1862-1948* at the National Portrait Gallery in London (2016), and *Le modèle noir: de Géricault à Matisse* (The Black Model: From Géricault to Matisse) at the Musée d'Orsay in Paris (2019).

Displaying the non-Western collections in dialogue with Guggenheim's modernist painting and sculpture was an exhibition technique based on the perceived formal and conceptual characteristics of the works. This pairing of modernist and non-Western art addressed the tradition many European and American artists engaged in and which I have just described above. By going beyond the simple pairing, but by addressing the sometimes difficult colonial histories, the exhibition *Migrating Objects* again fitted in the now established tradition of delving deeper into the narratives of this non-Western collection. The growing awareness of the necessity of addressing narratives that go beyond aesthetic appreciation was exemplified in an exhibition that was consecutively held at the National Gallery of Denmark in Copenhagen and the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam *Kirchner and Nolde. Expressionism. Colonialism* (2020). It examined the colonial context that made the art of these *Die Brücke* artists, Kirchner and Nolde, possible, simultaneously underlining the flawed narratives imposed on moving objects during their histories of new owners. It is a way to outline their lives, from maker to market, to museum (Aagesen, von Bormann 2021).

This wayfinding journey finishes off by a quick tour through the exhibition focusing on the contexts the Pacific objects were presented in. Actually, the nine Pacific works featured in only two rooms. The first room starts discussing the mythologisation of the varied groups of peoples who settled amid the steep sandstone cliffs of Mali's Bandiagara region several centuries ago that have come to be known as the Dogon. Their arts are among the most researched, collected and mythologised in all of Africa. The second room featured the first Pacific objects and was entitled *Sepik Carving and the Sculpture of Henry Moore*. It explained that the Sepik area is named after New Guine's longest river, which meanders 1,100 km from the central mountain ranges to the coastal area in the northeast of the island. Over the centuries the peoples from this area have been in contact with one another, exchanging ideas and objects, thus blurring the boundaries between them. The three carvings in this gallery by the Iatmul and the Chambri in the Middle Sepik and the Murik Lake people of the

e-ISSN 2785-2709

Lower Sepik reflected only a tiny part of the area's diversity, where about ninety languages are spoken. The suspension hook represents a sacred ancestral being and was used to keep food away from rodents. The flute stopper was fixed to a long bamboo flute played during important rituals. The *kadibon* sculpture was likely revealed to young men during initiation ceremonies.

We explained in the exhibition that the Sepik lands, peoples, and art conjured a rich visual imaginary, fed by travel accounts, academic writings, and objects such as these which foreigners – from colonists and missionaries to civil servants and dealers – obtained for ethnographic and art collections. When, in the 1930s, Henry Moore began creating his representations of the human body in a Surrealist style in, he borrowed from the remarkable forms of Sepik works and other Oceanic sculpture he saw at the British Museum in London and in publications. He believed that one should just look at Pacific art and not try to understand the history of the makers, their religions or social customs. Henry Moore's response was thus typical of many artists who thought that not bothering to understand the original meaning of the the objects allowed for a deeper understanding of their visual complexities.

A more intimate room focused on the small South Americas collection with the Chimu feather poncho from Peru that Guggenheim had collected in 1959. The next rooms focused on a number of works from Africa, with its twenty pieces the largest non-western collection of Peggy Guggenheim. It included a headdress that has been attributed to the Adugbologe atelier, a family-based workshop of sculptors in the Yoruba city of Abeokuta, Nigeria; a Bamana Ci Wara headdress created to be worn in performances honouring Ci Wara, the half-human, halfanimal divine being credited with introducing agricultural skills to Bamana communities in Mali; a number of Senufo objects that were plentiful on the market in the 1960s through a combination of circumstances, including discarded cultural traditions, economic opportunity, and outright theft. The art of initiation was represented by works originally created in male initiation ceremonies known as *mukanda* in the southwestern Democratic Republic of the Congo.

Before entering the final room with mostly Pacific objects, the visitor could see a Nayarit terracotta pair from Mexico. The final room was entitled *Imagining the Pacific*. The concept developed there, was that Oceanic cultures fascinated the Surrealists who were drawn to their art with its dreamlike subjects and processes of transformation. Max Ernst, for example, used selected Oceanic and Native American themes in his work. In 1942, Ernst gave Guggenheim his painting, *The Antipope* (1941-42), as thanks for her years of support and help in escaping Europe during World War II. She called the painting *Mystic Marriage*, since it materialised their complicated relationship. She is likely evoked by the hybrid horse-headed warrior

in red. We then stressed that the Pacific works in this gallery manifested a different kind of social exchange. The *malangan* sculpture from Tabar Island was used during the commemoration of the dead. It depicts snakes, flying fish and birds overlapping each other, representing the essence of the deceased. The Sawos ancestor figure is also in flux. One side has male attributes, the other female. It also embraces the secular and sacred. Although meant to support the village spiritually, it would have been located in the men's ceremonial house, a space where boys are initiated, and the stories of the community are retold and safeguarded. Unlike *malangan* carvings, ancestor figures would be preserved for future generations. In pursuit of imagery untethered from reality, we explained in this exhibition that the Surrealists were profoundly influenced by these objects because of their movable. In the object label they wrote:

> They [the Surrelist] believed that mechanized Western society had tragically distanced itself from the imaginative ethos present in Oceanic work. By the extractive mining of the cultures of the Pacific islands, the Surrealists sought to reconnect with longed for non-visible realms of experience.

5 Conclusion

Guggenheim was guided by instinct and resolve when assembling art of the avant-garde movements of the first half of the twentieth century (Davidson 2004, 51). The same can be said for her ethnographic collection in which she instinctively seems to have captured some of the essence of these carvings. The collection demonstrates entanglements of creative makers and collectors with memory and it presents to those who are wanting or allowed to look, the possibility to experience different parts of hidden and visible realms. Whether displayed in Peggy Guggenheim's private home for her own enjoyment, or that of her family and acquaintances, the Pacific collection is in fact polysemic. Each object can have multiple meanings depending on in which grouping it is placed (Hooper-Greenhill 2000, 77). Presenting the ethnographic collection in its own right, without needing to educate the public about its role within the meanderings of Western art history opens up possibilities of glimpsing into different worlds if only one can listen and be respectful. Through the perceived bedazzlement, the spectator oscillates between looking, seeing, and understanding the abundance of visual and hidden worlds. We are all left to seesaw between way-finding and navigating.

Bibliography

Aagesen, D.; von Bormann, B. (2021). "Expressionism and Colonialism: Introduction". Aagesen, D.; Vestergaard Jørgensen, A.; von Bormann, B. (eds), *Kirchner and Nolde. Expressionism. Colonialism*. Copenhagen; Amsterdam; Berlin: Hirmer, 20-33.

Armstrong, R.; Karole, P.B.; Vail. (2020). "Director's Foreword". Greene 2020b, 7.

Barlow, K. (2015). "Enchantement et séduction. Pirogues à balancier et idéologie de genre sur la côte nord de la Papouasie-Nouvelle-Guinée". Peltier, P.; Schindlbeck, M.; Kaufmann, C. (éds), *Sepik. Arts de Papouasie-Nouvelle-Guinée*. Paris: Skira; Musée du quai Branly, 22-9.

Biro, Y. (2014). "The Museum of Primitive Art in Africa at the Time of Independence" in "The Nelson A. Rockefeller Vision: Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas". *The Metropolitan Museum of Art Bulletin*, 72(1), 38-48.

Borellini, A. (2008). "Peggy's Ethnopassion". Campione 2008b, 28-41.

Buschmann, R.F. (2018). "Oceanic Collections in German Museums: Collections, Contexts, and Exhibits". Carreau, L. et al. (eds), *Pacific Presences. Oceanic Art and European Museums*. Leiden: Sidestone Press, 197-229.

Calas, N.; Calas, E. (1966). *The Peggy Guggenheim Collection of Modern Art*. New York: H.N. Abrams.

Campione, F.P. (2008a). "Il paradigma della complessità. Introduzione al valori della collezione d' arte etnica di Peggy Guggenheim / The Paradigm of Complexity: An Introduction to the Values of the Peggy Guggenheim Collection of Ethnic Art". Campione 2008b, 10-27.

Campione, F.P. (ed.) (2008b). *Ethnopassion. La Collezione d'arte di Peggy Guggenheim / Peggy Guggenheim's Ethnic Art Collection*. Milano: Mazzotta.

Clifford, J. (1988). *The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth-Century Ethnography, Literature, and Art*. Cambridge (MA); London: Harvard University Press.

Cowling, E. (1992). "'L'oeil sauvage': Oceanic Art and the Surrealists". Greub, S. (ed.), *Art of Northwest New Guinea. From Geelvink Bay, Humboldt Bay, and Lake Sentani*. New York: Rizzoli, 177-89.

Davidson, S. (2004). "Focusing an Instinct: The Collecting of Peggy Guggenheim". Davidson, S.; Rylands, P. (eds), *Peggy Guggenheim & Frederick Kiesler. The Story of Art of This Century.* New York; Vienna; Venice: Peggy Guggenheim Collection; Austrian Frederick; L. Kiesler Private Foundation, 50-89.

de Grunne, B. (2011). "Statuette en ivoire, Lega, R. Démocratique du Congo". *Sotheby's: Arts d'Afrique et d'Océanie*. `https://www.sothebys.com/en/auctions/ecatalogue/2011/arts-dafrique-et-docanie/lot.65.html`.

Dening, G. (2004). *Beach Crossings. Voyaging Across Times, Cultures, and Self*. Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press.

Dening, G. (2008). "Respectfulness as a Performance Art: Wayfinding". *Postcolonial Studies*, 11(2), 145-55. `https://doi.org/10.1080/13688790802001659`.

Derlon, B.; Jeudy-Ballini, M. (2014). "Domestication and the Preservation of Wildness: The Self and the Other in Primitive Art Collecting". *Material Culture Review,* 79, 92-101.

Dixon, C. (2007). "Max Ernst, Artist and Collector". Quanchi, M.; Cochrane, S. (eds), *Hunting the Collectors: Pacific Collections in Australian Museums, Art Galleries and Archives*. Newcastle-upon-Tyne: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 275-88.

Gell, A. (1992). "The Technology of Enchantment and the Enchantment of Technology". Coote, J.; Shelton, A. (eds), *Anthropology, Art and Aesthetics*. Oxford: Clarendon, 40-66. https://doi.org/10.1093/oso/9780198277330.003.0003.
Gerbrands, A.A. (1967). *Wow-ipits. Art in Its Context. Studies in Ethno-Aesthetics*. The Hague; Paris: Mouton & Co. https://doi.org/10.1515/9783111387505.
Giovannoni, G. (2008). "Figura di antenato / Ancestor Figure". Campione 2008b, 158-61.
Gouzi, C. (2020). "European Art Facing Otherness". *Encyclopédie d'histoire numérique de l'Europe*. https://ehne.fr/en/node/12195
Greene, V. (2020a). "Introduction". Greene 2020b, 12-15.
Greene, V. (ed.) (2020b). *Migrating Objects: Arts of Africa, Oceania, and the Americas in the Peggy Guggenheim Collection*. Venice, New York: Solomon R. Guggenheim Foundation; Peggy Guggenheim Collection.
Guggenheim, P. [1979] (2005). *Out of This Century. Confessions of an Art Addict. The Autobiography of Peggy Guggenheim*. London: André Deutsch.
Hooper-Greenhill, E. (2000). *Museums and the Interpretation of Visual Culture*. London; New York: Routledge.
Kavky, S. (2010). "Max Ernst in Arizona: Myth, Mimesis, and the Hysterical Landscape". *RES: Anthropology and Aesthetics*, 57-8, 209-28.
Kjellgren, E. (2007). *Oceania: Art of the Pacific Islands in the Metropolitan Museum of Art*. New York; New Haven; London: The Metropolitan Museum of Art; Yale University Press.
Küchler, S. (1987). "Malangan: Art and Memory in a Melanesian Society". *Man*, 22(2), 238-55.
McBreen, E. (2020). "Migrating Objects: From Maker to Museum". Greene 2020b, 17-34.
Mühlenberend, S. (2022). "Julius Carlebach (1909-1964). Optikhandel als Fluchthilfe". *Transfer. Zeitschrift für Provenienzforschung und Sammlungsgeschichte / Journal for Provenance Research and the History of Collection*, 1, 181-91.
Pearlstone, Z.; Babcock, B.A. (2001). *Katsina: Commodified and Appropriated Images of Hopi Supernaturals*. Los Angeles: UCLA Fowler Museum of Cultural History.
Peltier, P.; Schindlbeck, M.; Kaufmann, C. (2015a). "Les objets au long du fleuve". Peltier, Schindlbeck, Kaufmann 2015b, 116-339.
Peltier, P.; Schindlbeck, M.; Kaufmann, C. (eds) (2015b). *Sepik. Arts de Papouasie-Nouvelle-Guinée*. Paris: Skira, Musée du quai Branly.
Peltier, P.; Schindlbeck, M.; Kaufmann, C. (2015c). "Une image n'est jamais fixe". Peltier, Schindlbeck, Kaufmann 2015b, 114-15.
Rockefeller, M.C.; Gerbrands, A.A. (1962). *The Art of the Asmat, New Guinea, Collected by Michael C. Rockefeller*. New York: The Museum of Primitive Art.
Sawin, M. (1995). *Surrealism in Exile and the Beginnig of the New York School*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
Schneebaum, T. (1990). *Embodied Spirits. Ritual Carvings of the Asmat*. Salem: Peabody Museum of Salem.
Schorch, P. (2020). *Refocusing Ethnographic Museums through Oceanic Lenses*. Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press.
Vaioleti, T. (2006). "Talanoa Research Methodology: A Developing Position on Pacific Research". *Waikato Journal of Education*, 12, 21-34. https://doi.org/10.15663/wje.v12i1.296.
Veys, F.W. (2020). "Peggy Guggenheim and the Pacific". Greene 2020b, 45-55.

e-ISSN 2785-2709

Lagoonscapes
Vol. 3 – Num. 2 – December 2023

An Archipelago of Ecological Care
Venice, Its Lagoon and Contemporary Art

Cristina Baldacci
Università Ca' Foscari Venezia, Italy

Abstract This essay situates Venice and its archipelago among the small islands that, despite the uncertainty of the future and the emergency given by extreme climate scenarios, provide effective examples of local sustainability that can also be replicated in other parts of the world to promote positive and collective change on a global scale. Being aware of the changes that Venice is facing as a consequence of the environmental crisis, learning from them, and taking care of the city and its lagoon is an increasingly ethically and politically urgent action to try to guarantee its survival. Venice's few but tenacious inhabitants – a small community, where vernacular knowledge has been handed down and where conscious citizens, including activists, cultural workers, artists, and researchers, promote a renewed ecological awareness – are the actors involved at the forefront of what can be addressed as 'curatorial activism'. By taking as case studies some recent projects and practices – such as walking the lagoon – the article explains how contemporary art can effectively contribute to the ecologies of care, protecting the dignity of life and human rights on par with the rights of nature, encouraging critical thinking, emotional involvement, ethical responsibility, and public imagination for the well-being of the Earth.

Keywords Venice. Contemporary art. Curatorial activism. Small islands ecologies. Ecologies of care. Climate crisis.

Summary 1 Sustainable Worlds in Miniature. – 2 Ecological Care and Curatorial Activism in Venice. – 3 Walking the *lacuna* as an Act of Caring for the Environment (Giorgio Andreotta Calò).

Edizioni
Ca'Foscari

Peer review

Submitted 2023-09-27
Accepted 2023-11-24
Published 2023-12-20

Open access

© 2023 Baldacci | CC BY 4.0

Citation Baldacci, C. (2023). "An Archipelago of Ecological Care. Venice, Its Lagoon and Contemporary Art". *Lagoonscapes. The Venice Journal of Environmental Humanities*, 3(2), 321-334.

DOI 10.30687/LGSP/2785-2709/2023/01/011

> I still believe that the future lies not with the great powers, but with the little islands, lands, and cities
> Édouard Glissant
> (Glissant, Obrist 2021, 98)

1 Sustainable Worlds in Miniature

The report of 28 February 2022 from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) of the United Nations states that small islands are among the places most threatened by the environmental crisis (Mycoo et al. 2022). Despite serving as extraordinary examples of resistance, adaptation, and both cultural and biological diversity – in their unique equilibrium between land and water – small islands have been rendered vulnerable by climate change. Subject to dual threats – frequent flooding, induced by rising sea levels and extreme rainfall, and drought, caused by the converse issue of water scarcity – these conditions, along with pollution, contribute to the gradual decline of the rich ecosystems that characterise them. These ecosystems include, among others, coral reefs in tropical oceans and salt marshes in lagoons. The ultimate risk facing these small islands is complete submergence, whether as individual entities or as entire archipelagos, like contemporary Atlantis.

However, despite the uncertainty of the future and the emergency given by extreme climate scenarios, islands provide effective examples of local sustainability that can also be replicated in other parts of the world to promote positive and collective change on a global scale (Pugh, Chandler 2021).

As Édouard Glissant, the well-known theorist of archipelagic thought,[1] claims in his book dedicated to the coast of Lamentin (*La Cohée du Lamentin*, 2005), a small town in Martinique, his homeland: “We can start from a tiny corner of the world, a real place. We can start from this real little place located in an archipelago, a small archipelago of the world, and from there live the life of the world in a global sense” (Glissant, Obrist 2021, 111).[2] This apparently utopian vision is in all respects concrete and applicable from the Caribbean

1 For a definition of this concept, see Glissant’s following quote: “We need archipelagic thinking, which is one that opens, one that confirms diversity – one that is not made to obtain unity, but rather a new kind of Relation. One that trembles – physically, geologically, mentally, spiritually – because it seeks the point, that utopian point, at which all the cultures of the world, all the imaginations of the world can meet and understand each other without being dispersed or lost” (Glissant, Obrist 2021, 164-5; see also Glissant 1997; 2020).

2 It is interesting to note that the conversation between Glissant and the curator Hans Ulrich Obrist from which this quote comes was published by Isolarii, a small publishing house whose books “revive the ‘island books’ that emerged in Venice at the start of the Renaissance”. These books – as it is further explained – collect poems, stories, and

to the Mediterranean Sea. For Glissant utopia is neither an object, nor a goal, nor even a dream, but rather "what is missing to us in the world […], it is about accepting the idea of change" (Glissant, Obrist 2021, 58, 67) – therefore fully achievable.

Let's take an example close to us, Venice and the islands of its lagoon. It is a fact that the Venetian archipelago is among those globally most at stake. Although it has always had to deal with the phenomenon of the so-called *acqua alta* (high tide), in recent years, exceptional floods have occurred more and more frequently. The maximum peak, after the historical *acqua granda* (big flood) of 4 November 1966, was reached on 12 November 2019, as the apocalyptic images that were broadcasted worldwide have extensively documented. These extreme weather events have tested both the ecosystem of the lagoon and the centuries-old negotiation between the natural environment and the anthropic landscape that Venetians have engaged in. Nevertheless, Venice appears more resilient than ever. It has thus become not only a privileged place for observing how planetary changes manifest locally but also a paradigm for understanding how to confront future challenges.

Undoubtedly, Venice is not the only example of virtuous insularity that can be taken as a large-scale adaptable model. The biogeographer Sietze Norder sees islands, each with its own local specificity, as microcosms; that is, worlds in miniature, where good practices, which are determined by more sustainable relationships between human beings and nature – from energy autonomy and food independence to ecotourism – take root faster than elsewhere (Norder 2021).

Despite being an ecosystem in danger, where exceptional floods – currently mitigated by the MOSE mobile dam system – along with the passage of large cruise ships and overtourism represent peak levels of environmental and social crisis, Venice also functions as a microcosm. Within this context, one can observe, imagine, and adopt sustainable attitudes and solutions that arise from a constant rebalancing of the relationship between humans and nature.[3] Being aware of the changes that Venice is facing as a consequence of the climate crisis, learning from them, and taking care of the city and its lagoon is an increasingly ethically and politically urgent action to try to guarantee its survival. Those involved at the forefront are its few but tenacious inhabitants: a small community, where vernacular knowledge has been handed down and where conscious citizens – including activists, cultural workers, artists, and researchers – promote a renewed ecological awareness, in order to rethink

artworks like ready-to-hand islands, each dedicated to a specific topic but forming, altogether, an archipelago. `https://www.isolarii.com/`.

3 For a study of Venice in relation to both climatic and social and cultural changes in the Anthropocene era, see Baldacci et al. 2022.

(environmental, social, cultural) adaptation practices in the present for the future – because "Venice lives" (Vettese 2017).[4]

2 Ecological Care and Curatorial Activism in Venice

The themes of care and of what have been called, from various disciplinary perspectives – including medical humanities, feminist and gender studies, environmental humanities, and visual and performing arts – "ecologies of care",[5] are more pressing today than ever; especially after the COVID-19 pandemic raised awareness of how necessary it is to invest more time, attention, and resources in every different relationship that defines our being-in-the-world or, to say it with Donna Haraway, *with* the world (Haraway 2016).

As it has been pointed out, in the artistic and cultural fields in particular, the prevalence of themes of care – specifically in curating – is not just mere fashionability, it is rather:

> a response to a dual crisis: the crisis of social and ecological care that characterizes global politics and the more recent professional crisis of curating. The convergence of these two developments has resulted in both a call for 'curating care' – an invitation to give curatorial attention to the primacy of care for all life – and a call for more 'caring curating' – a change in the practices of curating to foreground caregiving as framed through social and political analysis. (Kransy, Perry 2023, 1)

To initiate and make this change effective, by turning curating into an ethical and political set of practices able to contrast the still widespread capitalist, colonialist, racist, and sexist attitudes, care must be elected as a method. Caring with mutual respect, by protecting the dignity of life and human rights on par with the rights of nature, means being able to use institutions and infrastructures in a more sustainable way, by making them (eco)cultivated; that is, updated and informed with respect to today's pressing issues. And, even before that, it implies freeing our collective imagination from stereotypes through art and culture, and granting bodies and ideas a space for action as broad, participatory, and inclusive as possible.

4 Similar to a motto, this is the title of a book that describes a dynamic Venice, experienced by somebody, like the author Angela Vettese, who lives and works there, respecting and loving the city's uniqueness and beauty, despite its paradoxes. Vettese's ode to Venice can be read as a response to the *memento mori* written by Salvatore Settis (2016).

5 Among the many recent volumes released on the subject, see, for example: Bauhardt, Harcourt 2019; Buser forthcoming; Kleinman 2020; Krasny, Perry 2023; Millner, Coombs 2022; Ndikung 2021; Wendt 2021.

This is a specific "curatorial activism"[6] that calls to action the curator and the artist, the researcher and the cultural worker. All roles which, not surprisingly, often intertwine in field work, by contributing to a continuous redefinition of practices – albeit in the specificity of individual knowledge and experiences – and establishing profitable collaborations.

From this perspective, Venice serves as a particularly interesting case study. Numerous artistic and cultural projects, focused on care, awareness, and empowerment towards local environmental concerns – experiences that are also widespread among islands and cities on water on a global level – have taken root, promoting more responsible interactions with the environment.[7] As an insular community, therefore 'in miniature' but with relationships that extend internationally, Venice is also particularly prone to collaborations, which actually take place among the many organisations, groups, and individual actors involved in the various initiatives that have been arising in town.[8]

One of the most recent projects that can be considered an exemplary case, although it is too soon to detail its future activities and developments, is the reclamation of the Island of Sant'Andrea. This serves as a space for sharing and research among nature, culture, and public commitment.[9] Located in the Northern Lagoon, Sant'Andrea is among the smallest 'atolls' of the Venetian archipelago. At the forefront of the redevelopment project are the Microclima collective, founded in

6 The expression is usually used to describe an ethical approach to curating museum collections and exhibitions (Reilly 2018) and is taken up here to extend it to a wider context, meaning, and set of practices. Among the many examples of recent curatorial projects focused on care that could be mentioned in this direction, see in particular (it is significant that the initiators of these projects are all women): *The Bureau of Care*, by State of Concept Athens (iLiana Fokianaki), https://thebureauofcare.org/; *Ecologies of Care*, by Igor Zabel Association (Urska Jurman and Elke Krasny), https://ecologiesofcare.org/; *How Do We Curate For a Broken World?*, by Collective Rewilding (Sara Garzón, Ameli M. Klein, Sabina Oroshi, Sofía Shaula Reeser del Rio), https://www.collectiverewilding.com/; *The Firsts Solidarity Network* at the 2022 Venice Art Biennale, promoted by Yuki Kihara, https://www.e-flux.com/announcements/450780/firsts-solidarity-network/.

7 Presented here are some emblematic examples of an obviously much richer constellation of experiences.

8 Among the Venetian collectives that have been promoting alternative cultural production models and projects, in contrast to neoliberal ideology, involving citizens and institutions, it is worth mentioning S.a.L.E DOCKS. Founded in 2007 as an independent space for contemporary arts in one of the former Magazzini del Sale overlooking the Giudecca Canal, it is led by a group of activists, among which cultural workers, artists, and students. Undeniably S.a.L.E DOCKS is rather a unique paradigm of 'curatorial activism' in Venice. https://www.saledocks.org/.

9 The word 'reclamation' is here used with reference to the ecological actions pursued by land artists in the 1960s and 1970s, such as Robert Morris, Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison, and Robert Smithson. See Morris 1979 and Ryan 2007.

2011 by Paolo Rosso, and the artist Giorgio Andreotta Calò. With civic sense and love for their city, they have joined forces to both try to make the life on the island sustainable and prevent it from becoming prey to building speculation and tourist appetites – as it has already happened with other abandoned lagoon islands, which cannot be reached other than with private boats. Despite being an initiative that has only recently been officially launched, through the winning of a public competition, it has already a long history behind it. The initial idea dates back to more than ten years ago, when the land artist Richard Nonas was invited to rethink the anthropic landscape of the island. Historically, de facto, Sant'Andrea was an important military fortress built in the sixteenth century to defend Venice, and its ruins are still there, although partly reconquered by native vegetation.[10]

The project for the Island of Sant'Andrea is in line with another non-profit regeneration initiative with environmental and cultural purposes, which saw the nearby Island of the Lazzaretto Nuovo – first site of a Benedictine monastery, then destined to a hospital (whose methods of treatment and prevention of infections were so effective to be known abroad) and to an Austro-French military fortress – to become an ecomuseum open to the public, as part of the wider redevelopment project of the Venetian Lazzaretti.[11] The highlight of the naturalistic visit is the walk along the so-called 'Sentiero delle Barene' (The Salt Marsh Path). For about a kilometre, this path immerses the ecotourist in what is both the most precious and the most threatened lagoon habitat. As semi-submerged lands, these salt marshes not only showcase unique fauna and flora but also play an essential role in naturally maintaining the level and circulation of the lagoon waters.

Another collective, Barena Bianca, formed by the artists-activists Pietro Consolandi and Fabio Cavallari,[12] has chosen these characteristic intertidal areas as its symbol. Through exhibitions, workshops, talks, and publications, Barena Bianca has been establishing collaborations on ecological and social issues since 2018, involving citizens, artists, activists, and academic-scientific research institutions, such as The Institute of Marine Sciences of the National Research Council of Italy (CNR-ISMAR) and THE NEW INSTITUTE

10 Nonas' journey on the island of Sant'Andrea in 2011 was documented in a film presented at the 94th young artists collective of the Bevilacqua La Masa Foundation in Venice. Cf. *Nonas*, 5′45″, 2011, documentary film, HD; directing and editing: Enrico Casagrande; photography: Alessandra Messali; co-editing: Leo Cabiddu. The project is also mentioned in Paolo Rosso's master's thesis *Microclima: an Independent Cultural Project*, Ca' Foscari University of Venice, 2012-13, an analysis of the already numerous activities of what at the time was a nascent Microclima. https://microclima.net/en.

11 https://lazzarettiveneziani.it/en.

12 https://www.barenabianca.earth/en/.

e-ISSN 2785-2709

Centre for Environmental Humanities (NICHE). The duo's outputs include also photographic and video works, e.g. Consolandi's visual poem *De Crea e de Paltan* (Of Clay and Mud), which gives voice, endowing them with personhood, to the salt marshes of Campalto, an area located near the Venice airport (Baldacci et al. 2022, 157-60).

The need to study, understand, and talk about Venice and its lagoon, both as a physical environment and as a metaphorical milieu, as well as a place for sharing inhabited by different communities and traditions, is a starting point for another ambitious project, *Metagoon*. This is a digital, open archive, initiated in 2015 by the artist Matteo Stocco, that on a daily basis collects information through direct observation and testimonies, which are partly oral (interviews) and partly visual (photographs and videos), in an attempt to physically and conceptually map the Venetian ecosystem, by identifying its uniqueness, secrets, fragility, and urgencies. As such, it is a shared knowledge tool, which, following the description on its website, comprises high and low knowledge held by

> scientists engaged in research, university professors working on projects to protect the ecosystem, local inhabitants going about daily activities closely linked to the aquatic environment, and pilots of boats, both large and small.[13]

This self-reflective attitude, which is highlighted by the title's portmanteau between 'meta' and 'lagoon', is essential to understand how to take care of Venice, learning from the long experience of its inhabitants and from the monitoring of the changes produced, more and more, by the climate crisis.

These are transformations that primarily impact the fauna and flora of the lagoon, and consequently have repercussions on eating habits as well. The gastronomic collective Tocia focuses its study on the altered food needs arising from the climate emergency.[14] Its name derives from the vernacular word 'tocio', namely a sauce comparable to a 'compost' that is produced and preserved as a common good. *Tocio* and therefore Tocia become synonymous with care and sharing. The founder of Tocia, Marco Bravetti, invites the community to follow a more sustainable and conscious diet. Tocia's philosophy extends from the selection of raw materials – where utilising waste (nothing is discarded) and invasive species like the blue crab is encouraged – to the methods of preparation, among which

13 https://metagoon.net/.

14 To find out more, see the Instagram page "TOCIA! Cucina e comunità", where the project is described as a "convivial collective that investigates the time and place of the landscape, and the relationships that inhabit it, through cuisine and its rituality".

e-ISSN 2785-2709

fermentation stands as one of the most employed practices.[15] Bravetti describes his cuisine as an interdisciplinary and essentially humanistic practice. As a nomad-activist, he navigates the lagoon's environment, unveiling it to his followers through both sight and taste. The eco-gastronomic walks he organises with intimate groups serve dual purposes: they are opportunities for learning to identify edible species not facing extinction, and they are moments for social interaction. This is further evidenced by the travelling banquets he arranges, either autonomously or in partnership with local organisations and institutions.[16]

3 Walking the *lacuna* as an Act of Caring for the Environment (Giorgio Andreotta Calò)

Walking as a re-enactment, as an action that is always the same but also always different – in relation to both the environment in which it takes place and the psychophysical state of the person who performs it – and, more specifically, as a crossing and a re-appropriation of the landscape, which establishes a close connection between man and nature, is also at the core of the artistic practice of the forementioned Giorgio Andreotta Calò.

Andreotta Calò situates himself within a long tradition that spans from the eighteenth-century painters and illustrators of the Grand Tour to the intrepid explorers of nineteenth-century naturalistic and ethnographic expeditions. This tradition culminates in contemporary artists – most notably, conceptual and land artists attuned to environmental issues – who have elevated the practice of walking to an art form (Adams 2017; Mueller 2023). Among them is the walking artist par excellence, Hamish Fulton.

As a philosophy, cultural practice, and form of healing, walking has a far-reaching and interdisciplinary tradition, both Western and non-Western. This touches on numerous domains, including religion,

---

15 In terms of methods and objectives, while intentionally remaining a more local and situated project, Tocia is close to international experiences such as that of the artistic duo Cooking Sections (Daniel Fernández Pascual and Alon Schwabe), who have developed the Climavore project, a sustainable diet that follows the food needs of "the new seasons of the climate emergency" (`https://www.climavore.org/`). One of the main initiatives promoted by the duo is the removal of salmon, as the most requested and eaten fish – hence its intensive farming and genetic modification – from the menus of restaurants and cafes of cultural institutions worldwide (see Tate in London) and its replacement with a more sustainable dish from the Climavore diet. Cf. Cooking Sections 2020.

16 See for example the Convivial Tables that Bravetti conceived together with TBA21-Academy-Ocean Space as "the perfect avenue to discuss the complex ties between what we eat and its ecological impact, with a particular focus on its effect on bodies of water". `https://www.ocean-space.org/activities/convivial-tables`.

e-ISSN 2785-2709

anthropology, geography, and sociology – with particular issues concerning disability – as well as medicine, straddling the domains of both physical and mental well-being. Furthermore, sport and leisure are implicated, and, not to be overlooked, literature as well (De Certeau 1984; Solnit 2000; Phillips 2005; Seger 2022).

In the last years, walking has been studied from a more specifically ecological perspective, which has highlighted its agency as an "embodied encounter with/in nature" (Blades 2021), even when reciprocity in the nature-human relationship happens at the level of the microbiome, with all the resulting implications for the interaction between species and for human health (Robinson, Mills, Breed 2018).

As brilliantly described by Rebecca Solnit, who has written an exhaustive history on walking across centuries and cultures:

> Walking, ideally, is a state in which the mind, the body, and the world are aligned, as though they were three characters finally in conversation together, three notes suddenly making a chord. Walking allows us to be in our bodies and in the world without being made busy by them. It leaves us free to think without being wholly lost in our thoughts. [...] The rhythm of walking generates a kind of rhythm of thinking, and the passage through a landscape echoes or stimulates the passage through a series of thoughts. This creates an odd consonance between internal and external passage, one that suggests that the mind is also a landscape of sorts and that walking is one way to traverse it. (Solnit 2000, 5-6).

This description of walking as a "passage through" a landscape that is both physical and mental is well suited to the thought and practice of Andreotta Calò, who among his most recent actions includes *lacuna* (2021), a solitary journey around the entire perimeter – a distance of 270 kilometres – of the Venetian lagoon. The Latin word that he chose as title, 'lacuna', refers by assonance to the term 'laguna' (which in Italian stands for 'lagoon') and is etymologically synonymous with emptiness.[17] The lagoon as a void, thus, as a space which marks an interruption of the ground that can be crossed on foot, which can only be experienced by walking around it, or – as the artist did – by immersing oneself up to the ends of the legs wearing the typical fisherman's boots that Venetians use for exceptionally high tide.

17 Another artwork that reflects on the etymology of 'lacuna' is Elena Mazzi's 2014 video project *Lacuna: Land of Hidden Spaces*, in which she seeks to find possible solutions to the increasing environmental issues affecting the lagoon. Although not Venetian by birth and not based in Venice, Mazzi's relationship with the city and its lagoon is long-standing (she received her MFA in Visual Arts from IUAV University of Venice in 2011). For an in-depth analysis of *Lacuna*, see Guaraldo 2021 (in particular 116-19).

e-ISSN 2785-2709

As Andreotta Calò says, referring both to his personal experience of the lagoon, which he knows intimately, since he was born in Venice, and to the relationship that each of us establishes with this particular aquatic environment:

> We are instinctively led to imagine a crossing of this liquid space via water. This is how I have always lived the lagoon: as an extension of Venice and its canals, and at the same time as an enclosed, protected space, separated from the sea. I was interested in reconsidering this place from what lies outside of it, that is, from a dimension of bodily crossing, by moving along its boundary lines. I was interested in considering it as a void, a gap to be gradually filled, slowly circumscribed and observed. To walk…[18]

To the solo experience, a month later the artist also associated a shorter group walk (*Walking a Wavy Line*)[19] on the stretch of coast where the water of the lagoon joins the Adriatic Sea. This is a particularly significant place from an oceanographic and climatological point of view, as the balance of the lagoon ecosystem depends on the quantity of sea water that enters it.

Sharing with others, is not only an integral part of Andreotta Calò's work, it is also a custom of the organisation that commissioned *lacuna*, the TBA21-Academy, whose Venetian headquarters, Ocean Space, was significantly opened in 2019 as a place of "care and action for the Ocean".[20] Among its many activities, Ocean Space organises walks to get to know and learn to respect the lagoon in the broader context of the aquatic environment, following an interdisciplinary approach between Marine Sciences and Blue Humanities, where art plays a central role.[21]

Lacuna is closely linked to a previous walk, a poetic and epic undertaking that Andreotta Calò completed between August and October 2019 along the stretch of the fault (a distance of more than 500 kilometres) that from Venice leads to L'Aquila, the city in the Abruzzo region which was heavily hit by a violent earthquake three years

18 Giorgio Andreotta Calò. Cf. https://tba21.org/lacuna.

19 As part of the project, see also the conversation "In Girum (A Dialogue on Walking)" between Andreotta Calò and the curator Barbara Casavecchia, held at Ocean Space also in 2018. Cf. https://www.ocean-space.org/activities/in-girum-dialogo-attorno-al-camminare. Another talk on walking, which the artist held more recently (2021), is "Motus (On walking)", addressed to students of the Academy of Fine Arts in L'Aquila. Cf. https://www.abaq.it/notizie/2021/09/incontro-con-giorgio-andreotta-calo/.

20 Cf. https://www.ocean-space.org/.

21 As a first compendium of an ongoing thinking, see the catalogue, which accompanied the exhibition *Territorial Agency: Oceans in Transformation* (Ocean Space, Venice, 3 May-29 August 2021). Cf. Zyman 2021.

earlier (2016). This walk is certainly also an empathetic, personal homage to the territory and the population affected by the earthquake, but it is first and foremost a geographical and experiential mapping performed through the body and carefully described, in diaristic form, in the artist book *Gloria* (Andreotta Calò 2021). The title takes up the name of the fault that crosses Italy underground, connecting the European plate to the African one, and causing most of the telluric movements of the Peninsula. It is another void, similar to the "lacuna", to be walked along and observed in order to fully understand a territory, with its natural and cultural features.

Andreotta Calò's work and poetics, which are inspired by the leitmotifs of time and the double (Tenconi 2020), are in close relationship with the environment even when they take the form of sculptural installations, as in his main series *Carotaggi* (Sample Core), *Meduse* (Medusa), and *Clessidre* (Hourglass). All of them are *Ersätze* of geological and cultural elements that are present in the lagoon. As such, they contribute to integrating the ecosystem, between art and nature: the *Carotaggi* as extractions of *caranto*, the deepest and most solid layer of submerged mud; the *Meduse* and the *Clessidre* as reproductions of the particular shapes that the *bricole* – namely the oakwood posts that regulate the traffic on water in Venice – take due to the erosion produced by the rising and lowering of the tides (the *bricole* usually erode at the mean sea level).

At the beginning of the 1970s, a visionary Gyorgy Kepes had already anticipated – in the introductory essay of his *Arts of the Environment* (1972), which he eloquently entitled "Art and Ecological Consciousness" – the role that the artist, moved by the concern of caring for others and for the environment, would conquer between the twentieth and twenty-first centuries, facing the various challenges of an era characterised by profound "displacement, disillusionment, and social upheavals":

> He [the artist] has had to cut through the ego-tangled scene to reach the free horizons that held a promise of the new "common" of man-environment. Clearly, the artist's sensibility has entered a new phase of orientation in which its prime goal is to provide a format for the emerging ecological consciousness. The tasks he assumes differ from previous tasks in kind as well as in scale. The values he uncovers become the values of us all, giving sharpness and definition to the need we sense for union and intimate involvement with our surroundings. Thus the artist has moved from a marginal role to a more central position. (Kepes 1972, 9-10)

Although Giorgio Andreotta Calò escapes both the definition of land artist and of ecoartist, he can undoubtedly be counted among those contemporary artists who care about the environment and produce

e-ISSN 2785-2709

works and actions that give rise to an ecosystem of thought. These artists, with an experimental and free approach, explore and challenge different fields of knowledge, encouraging critical thinking, emotional involvement, ethical responsibility, and public imagination on urgent contemporary issues for the well-being of the Earth (Guaraldo 2023).

What can we hope for the future well-being of Venice? In the first place, that initiatives and practices such as those described continue to increase, through both private and public initiative, encouraging – locally as well as internationally – the collaboration and involvement of different communities (Mollona 2021), to give rise to ever greater effective (and affective) forms of responsibility.

Bibliography

Adams, R. (ed.) (2017). *Wanderlust: Actions, Traces, Journeys 1967-2017*. Cambridge (MA): The MIT Press.

Andreotta Calò, G. (2021). *Gloria*. Milan: Humboldt Books.

Baldacci, C. et al. (eds) (2022). *Venice and the Anthropocene: An Ecocritical Guide*, Venice: wetlands.

Baldacci, C. (2023). “Everyone Talks About Water in Venice”. Roelstraete, D. (ed.), *Everybody Talks About the Weather*. Milan: Fondazione Prada, 198-201.

Bauhardt, C.; Harcourt, W. (eds) (2019). *Feminist Political Ecology and the Economics of Care: In Search of Economic Alternatives*. Abingdon; New York: Routledge.

Blades, G. (2021). “Making Meanings of Walking With/In Nature: Embodied Encounters in Environmental Outdoor Education”. *Journal of Outdoor and Environmental Education*, 24, 293-318. https://doi.org/10.1007/s42322-021-00087-6.

Buser, M. (forthcoming). *Ecologies of Care in Times of Climate Change: Water Security in the Global Context*. Bristol: Bristol University Press.

Cooking Sections (2020). *Salmon: A Red Herring*. New York: Isolarii Press.

De Certeau, M. (1984). “Walking in the City”. *The Practice of Everyday Life*. Transl. by S. Rendall. Berkeley; London: University of California Press.

Glissant, É. (1997). *Poetics of Relations*. Transl. by B. Wing. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press.

Glissant, É. (2020). *Introduction to a Poetics of Diversity*. Transl. by C. Britton. Liverpool: Liverpool University Press.

Glissant, É.; Obrist, H.O. (2021). *The Archipelago Conversations*. Transl. by E. Ramadan. New York: Isolarii Press.

Guaraldo, E. (2021). “Resisting the Tourist Gaze: Art Activism Against Cruise Ship Extractivism in the Venice Lagoon”. *Lagoonscapes: The Venice Journal of Environmental Humanities*, 1(1), 101-24. http://doi.org/10.30687/LGSP//2021/01/008.

Guaraldo, E. (2023). “Geological Pasts, Speculative Futures: A Conversation with Beate Geissler, Oliver Sann”. Guaraldo, E. (ed.), *Building Common Ground: Ecological Art Practices and Human-Nonhuman Knowledges*. Venice: Edizioni Ca’ Foscari, 151-60. http://doi.org/10.30687/978-88-6969-756-2/012.

Haraway, D. (2016). *Staying with the Trouble: Making Kin in the Chthulucene*. Durham (NC): Duke University Press.

Kepes, G. (ed.) (1972). *Arts of the Environment*. New York: George Braziller.

Kleinman, A. (2020). “Varieties of Experiences of Care: Perspectives in Biology and Medicine”. *Perspectives in Biology and Medicine*, 63(3), 458-65. http://doi.org/10.1353/pbm.2020.0033.

Krasny, E.; Perry, L. (eds) (2023). *Curating With Care*. Abingdon; New York: Routledge.

Millner, J.; Coombs, E. (eds) (2022). *Care Ethics and Art*. Abingdon; New York: Routledge.

Mollona, M. (2021). *Art/Commons: Anthropology Beyond Capitalism*. London: Zed Books.

Morris, R. (ed.) (1979). *Earthworks, Land Reclamation as Sculpture*. Seattle: Seattle Art Museum.

Mueller, E. (2023). *Walking as Artistic Practice*. Albany: Suny Press.

Mycoo, M. et al. (2022). “Small Islands”. Pörtner, H.-O. et al. (eds), *Climate Change 2022: Impacts, Adaptation and Vulnerability. Contribution of Working Group II to the Sixth Assessment Report of the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change*. Cambridge; New York: Cambridge University Press, 2043-121; http://doi.org/10.1017/9781009325844.017.

Ndikung, B.S.B. (2021). *The Delusions of Care*. Berlin: Archive Books.

Norder, S. (2021). *De wereld in het klein: Wat eilanden ons vertellen over de relatie tussen mens en natuur*. Amsterdam: Prometheus. Italian transl.: *Il mondo in miniatura: La vita sulla Terra raccontata attraverso le isole*. Transl. by M. Cavallo. Torino: ADD Editore, 2022.

Phillips, A. (2005). “Walking and Looking”. *Cultural Geographies*, 12(4), 507-13.

Pugh, J.; Chandler, D. (eds) (2021). *Anthropocene Islands: Entangled Worlds*. Westminster: University of Westminster Press. http://doi.org/10.2307/j.ctv1v3gqxp.

Reilly, M. (2018). *Curatorial Activism: Towards an Ethics of Curating*. London: Thames & Hudson.

Robinson, J.M.; Mills, J.G.; Breed, M.F. (2018). “Walking Ecosystems in Microbiome-Inspired Green Infrastructure: An Ecological Perspective on Enhancing Personal and Planetary Health”. *Challenges*, 9, 40. https://doi.org/10.3390/challe9020040.

Ryan, L. (2007). “Art+Ecology: Land Reclamation Works of Artists Robert Smithson, Robert Morris, and Helen Mayer Harrison and Newton Harrison”. *Environmental Philosophy*, 4(1-2), 95-116.

Settis, S. (2016). *If Venice Dies*. Transl. by A. Naffis-Sahely. New York: New Vessel Press.

Seger, M. (2022). *Toxic Matters: Narrating Italy’s Dioxin*. Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press.

Solnit, R. (2000). *Wanderlust: A History of Walking*. New York: Viking Press.

Tenconi, R. (ed.) (2020). *Giorgio Andreotta Calò: Città di Milano*. Milan: Skira.

Vettese, A. (2017). *Venezia vive: Dal presente al futuro e viceversa*. Bologna: il Mulino.

Wendt, W.R. (ed.) (2021). *Ecology of Common Care: The Ecosocial Approach as a Theory of Social Work and Human Service*. Berlin: Springer.

Zyman, D. (ed.) (2021). *Oceans Rising: A Companion to “Territorial Agency: Oceans in Transformation”*. London: Sternberg Press.

Semestral journal
THE NEW INSTITUTE
Center for Environmental Humanities

Università
Ca'Foscari
Venezia