

## OUR RISING SEA OF ISLANDS: PAN-PACIFIC REGIONALISM IN THE AGE OF CLIMATE CHANGE

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### **Remember, Recommit, Resist**

In 2013, one of the largest gatherings of Pacific Islanders occurred on the campus of the University of Hawai'i to mark "Nuclear Survivor's Day," promoting political and cultural solidarity, and a commitment to a just and peaceful Oceania. Established to pay respect to Marshallese victims of US nuclear testing on their islands, the gathering, which was titled "Oceania Rising," grew to include the participation of communities throughout not just Micronesia but islands of Polynesia and Melanesia as well. "It happening to us meant that it happened to Oceania, the whole Pacific," one of the organizers said, "it's a shared history, and so it's not just 'my tragedy.' It's all of our tragedy" (Verán 2013).

Cristina Verán (2013) wrote of how Oceania Rising's mission is often expressed in a three word mantra: "Remember, Resist, and Recommit." At the "Waves of Change" symposium that was part of the gathering, participants joined in a performative protest. Verán described how members stood up from different points in the audience to speak out about something personal and powerful, referencing one of the R's, and later invited others in the crowd to join in. Their chant included the words:

REMEMBER: We remember a time, when our ancestors fought against colonizers, and we had agency and control over our resources, living by our traditions.

RECOMMIT: We recommit to speaking our Indigenous tongues, so that our children may speak through their ancestors and our language can flourish throughout all our lands.

RESIST: We resist the US military taking our lands, the legacy of our colonial history and being second-class citizens on our own islands (Verán 2013).

The gathering embodied the spirit of self-determination in Epeli Hau'ofa's now celebrated essay:

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. . . . We must not allow anyone to belittle us again, and take away our freedom (Hau'ofa 1994, 160).

The "Pacific Climate Warriors," a group of passionate climate change activists from across diverse Pacific islands, expressed similar sentiments a year later with their slogan: "We're not drowning, we're fighting" (Steiner 2015, 152; McNamara and Farbotko 2017, 17). In 2014, three of these young Pacific Islanders visited the Australian National University and took part in a large, well attended forum on climate change supported by the global grassroots activist network 350.org. They were members of the Climate Warriors who had traveled to Newcastle, Australia, a major coal port, to block massive transport vessels with their canoes and kayaks.

These islanders were students, two of them female and from the University of the South Pacific, who had never traveled outside the islands until this epic trip to take on coal ships and to occupy banks and other institutions as part of the fossil fuel divestment campaign (see Fig. 1). These were not island elites or elders, these were young people in their early twenties whose first trip to Australia was not to visit relatives or have a holiday but to protest against the industrial forces that are accelerating climate change (IPCC 2014a,b).

Both Oceania Rising and the Climate Warriors represent postcolonial, antihegemonic movements that are grounded in contemporary customs, realities, and cultural identities, while simultaneously championing broader regional identities and unifying concerns. This essay tentatively explores these

twenty-first century expressions of a shared Oceania in relation to earlier unifying concepts such as those expressed by the late Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara (1997) and Professor Epeli Hau'ofa (1994).

### Critical Oceanic Regionalism

Since the 1960s, Pacific leaders, scholars, students, and artists have expressed both national and regional identities and visions in poetic and compelling ways. These have been bold ideas such as Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara's "Pacific Way" (1997) referencing Oceanian forms of dialogue and consensus building, and Albert Wendt's articulation and documentation of empowering Oceanic identities through literary expression (1986). Such visions were at times muted as critics dismissed some of the ideas as elitist or impractical, and as reinforcing unequal relations within Pacific societies, especially as neoliberal economic policies, structures and forms of governance and development began to dominate social and economic organization and regional relations (see Firth 2006; Lawson 1996).

In a paper on critical Oceanic regionalism, Kate Stone (2011, 1) wrote about how "the dominance of internationalised regional institutions by political elites influenced by external forces fuelled the need for the development of regional civic infrastructure." The participation of Pacific peoples in the regional or international arena is often viewed as marking an "elitism" that is achieved by crossing imagined local, tribal, or village thresholds to pursue more worldly, economically lucrative, and cosmopolitan identities and activities while still espousing some form of *kastom* or "tradition" (cf. Lawson 2010; Jolly and Thomas 1992; Crocombe 1976).

Pursuits involving academic, activist and artistic activities, even if these involve regular critiques of systems of power and inequality, are often conflated with that elitism regularly charged to bureaucratic, political, business, church,



FIGURE 1. Members of the Climate Warriors at the Newcastle Port in 2014 (Photo by Jeff Tan courtesy of 350.org; used with permission).

and customary leaders. Similarly, subscription to cultural identities beyond the local are seen as less authentic and disconnected from grassroots Pacific lives and realities. “Cosmopolitans” are seen by some scholars as so beyond the norm that they have inspired ever growing research on Pacific and indigenous modernities (see Besnier 2011; Lockwood 2004; LiPuma 2000). Certainly Hau’ofa was sometimes dismissed for being elite and fanciful in his thinking by both Pacific and foreign scholars (see Waddell, Naidu, and Hau’ofa 1993). Stone (2011, 1) went on to argue that “if an Oceanic identity is merely a guise for another elitism, it will fail to liberate Pacific peoples from the domination of external ideology, be it neoliberalism or post-colonial traditionalism. If, however, a collective Oceanic identity can truly recreate a Pacific for the people, then it may yet be a vehicle for Pacific autonomy and self-determination.”

I propose that a collective Oceanic identity has always been about self-determination, and in the context of climate change and earlier regional activism, both within and beyond formal organizations, Pan-Pacific identity and solidarity has been critical. While many islands are proposed to “sink” as a result of climate change-induced sea level rise, Pacific Island voices and activism are actually rising. Taking into account and moving beyond class politics, these contemporary movements are built on and deeply linked to earlier Pan-Pacific ideas such as those championed by Ratu Mara, Epeli Hau’ofa, and Albert Wendt.

Although the decades long “Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific” (NFIP) movement, the work of the Pacific conference of churches, and gender equality initiatives achieved region-wide participation, and while Hau’ofa’s “Sea of Islands” has inspired countless scholars and students to question neocolonial framings of Pacific Islands and Islanders, there have still been few, internationally visible, “whole of Oceania” grassroots campaigns until climate change and the Free West Papua movements began to achieve multiscalar resonance. The increased visibility of this activism is partly attributable to new technologies and digital platforms that allow participants to widely share opinions and activities otherwise not covered by mainstream media (Tarai interviewed by Subakti 2017).

In this essay then, the “rising” in “rising sea of islands” references not just the impacts of global warming and Hau’ofa’s expansive vision of mobile but grounded islanders but the rising and increased visibility of critical and engaged Oceanians who are thinking, writing, performing, and speaking regionally and globally about a range of important issues including climate change (Steiner 2015). The participation profile of these projects involving people of all ages in and beyond the islands, and modes of communication via social media, challenges what many scholars used to critique as regional idealism of interest just to political elites.

Here, I outline a preliminary genealogy of regional activism and engagement that was sketched in dialogue with a long serving member of the Pacific Conference of Churches and other regional organizations and initiatives,

Fe'iloakitau Kaho Tevi, and based on my own observations at Pan-Pacific arts based events. "Pan-Pacific" in this context refers to participation that references and acknowledges while moving beyond national, ethnic, and class borders and the sub-regions of Melanesia, Micronesia, and Polynesia.

I contemplate the power of Pacific forms of knowledge such as art and performance, and the power in combining those forms with others for emotional, aesthetic, social, economic, and political effects, particularly those to do with ideas of self-determination. I do this in two ways, first by reflecting on the application of Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara's and Professor Epeli Hau'ofa's ideas, which I see as originating in two rather different but now overlapping regional contexts—one more technical and formal, and the other more scholarly, artistic and organic; and second by exploring intersections of the arts, activism, and regional dialogue alongside a reflection of how we approach or reframe our studies of Oceania. I propose that climate change, perhaps even more than the NFIP movement—and this is certainly enabled by the availability of user generated news content and social media—is inspiring multiscalar and transdisciplinary Pacific research, activism, and dialogue on an unprecedented level.

### **Victims and Agents**

Currently I teach a core course for the Pacific Studies major at the Australian National University called "Pacific Studies in a globalizing world." The aim of the class is not to churn out experts who know everything about the many nations, states, and territories in Oceania, or even everything about one complex island country, but rather to inspire students to learn from and with the Pacific, to be both critical and self-reflexive, and to apply what is gained in the class to any course, discipline, or aspect of their lives. All this is reflected in the kinds of diverse assessments I design for the course, which aims to bring out different strengths in students, rather than assess them within one dominant framework, which gives advantage to those who excel at reading and writing in English.

One of the assessment items is a group research project, and in 2015 one group explored the issue of environmental migration. As part of their final presentation they created two versions of a board game to reflect the stages through which an environmental migrant might go through in the process of attempting to leave their island home (see Fig. 2). You moved forward in the game if you already had relatives overseas, a high level of education, funds to relocate, and there was a well thought out policy and well-implemented national plan for relocation. However, you were stagnant or went backward if other obligations arose, no avenues for environmental migrants existed, visas were denied, funds were low, and relocation programs were unsuccessful or poorly implemented (cf. Campbell 2014).



**FIGURE 2. Students Playing the Environmental Migration Game, ANU 2015 (Photo by Katerina Teaiwa).**

My students remarked on how, while playing the game, they became anxious, especially when certain stops directed them to watch short films about the kinds of challenges people from their home countries were having adjusting to new cultural contexts. The students just wanted to get to the end of the game and attain successful relocation with dignity but in a very small way felt some of the frustration and anxiety that many in the past must have felt and many more in the future will feel in moving or being moved from their island homes. At the heart of the frustration was the lack of ability to determine their own future because the board game was inflexible, the rules controlled by its makers and the players could not make up their own rules or get to the end by skipping any of the steps. They could not determine their own future in their own way or at their own pace; they had to play the game.

The age of climate change has rightly stimulated global reflection and action addressing the devastating impact of humans on the planet and on the long-term viability of our intensively extractive, contaminating, and unsustainable ways of life (see Klein 2015; Lynas 2008; Flannery 2005). Climate Change is increasingly becoming the framework around which Pacific regionalism will need to be configured, now and into the future (Tarte 2014). It is a game-changing issue that will see humanity reconceive its relationship with the environment, and, it is hoped, eliminate many destructive consumption practices that we in Oceania are taking on at much too rapid a rate. As former President of Kiribati, Anote Tong, said regarding the urgency of collaborative international action, "...our entire survival is at stake" (ABC News 2014).

As much as livelihoods and cultural practices have changed dramatically in recent decades, many Pacific Islanders still live in relatively sustainable ways, closer to the very solutions that the globe will need to seek (cf. West 2016). I recall a discussion at my university that echoed these sentiments during the height of the Global Financial Crisis (GFC). A group of PNG women were gathered at ANU to discuss various issues and the GFC was raised. One woman said, "well, we don't care if all the lights go out and the shops close and the banks fail because we don't as yet rely on those systems. We'll be okay because we still know how to survive and feed ourselves with what we have."

That capacity is being eroded in Oceania by mining, logging, land grabbing, overfishing, many forms of tourism, and the incessant emphasis on bringing islanders into the formal (and more highly valued) economy, which often results in a movement to cities and towns where living sustainably is much more challenging. The issues are complex, national priorities and agendas are often set by aid and development partners, and lip service is paid to the wealth of solutions available from within our own cultures that have survived and thrived in Oceania for thousands of years. This is not meant to paint a romantic picture of the past but a pragmatic one. Certain practices and forms of social organization make sense in island



environments for very practical reasons and when these are dramatically transformed the effects on islander efficacy, agency, and self-determination are major.

Much of the climate change discourse has focused on Pacific peoples as small island victims of global processes who will likely have to leave their homes (ABC News 2015; cf. Steiner 2015). But many of us know that we also have something to share—other than fish and minerals—and that global humanity can learn from our historical experiences and customary practices. As Kohlitz and Mukhaibir (2015) have argued, the rhetoric of victimhood “builds on colonial perceptions of Pacific islands suffering from geographic ‘smallness,’ isolation and being resource-poor; notions that Pacific scholars consider belittling. There is, in fact, good reason to believe that Pacific islands and their inhabitants are not inherently vulnerable” (cf. Campbell 2009). If resilience and adaptability are key to navigating the effects of climate change, Pacific Islanders have already been proven to exhibit these skills in spades (cf. Campbell 2014, 7). Most Pacific Islanders still know how to move while staying rooted, “develop” while still valuing kinship within and beyond our own cultures, and maintain a sense of collective care and stewardship of the land and sea in the face of a variety of major challenges.

### **Hau’ofa’s Hope, Mara’s Way**

In his essay, “Hau’ofa’s Hope,” influential interdisciplinary scholar James Clifford wrote of the profound ways in which Pacific scholars and ideas shaped his work. This included Kanak leader Jean Marie Tjibaou and Epeli Hau’ofa of whom he wrote:

Tjibaou and Hau’ofa shared an expansive regional vision, an alter-globalization. Each in his own way was bent on re-inventing the Pacific Way in new circumstances. Post independence euphoria was gone, and they confronted structural realities of neocolonialism and globalization, along with their possibilities. Both were committed to the renewal and transformation of local traditions, to ‘indigenous’ spaces. And both refused to be limited by exclusivist ethnic or national politics projecting ‘indigenous cosmopolitan’ visions (Clifford 2009: 239–40).

Another influence for Clifford was a network—his own Pacific doctoral students including my late elder sister, Teresia Teaiwa. Although there was no structural reason why the University of California at Santa Cruz where Clifford worked should become a critical node in a growing network of Pacific scholars, it “took person to person ties—the friendships, communications, alliances, and world making projects of a far-flung community of younger intellectuals”



(Clifford 2009, 240) to carve out a dynamic space for contemplating Oceania from its California edges. Most importantly, these were Pacific Island students studying history, cultural studies, anthropology, and other humanities and social sciences—fields in which few Pacific Islanders receive scholarships to pursue graduate studies in metropolitan countries. Teresia encouraged him to read Hau'ofa's famous essay "Our sea of islands" (1994), which opened his eyes to all kinds of critical world-making projects in Oceania.

The late Ron Crocombe, reflecting on Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara's coining of a phrase that would signal Oceanian forms of dialogue and consensus building, wrote that, "The Pacific Way is spoken rather than written" (Crocombe 1976, 16). This became very clear as I was discussing regionalism with Tevi and noted how little detailed documentation there was on the kinds of grassroots and wide-ranging activism that has characterized the work of many "unofficial" Pacific leaders. These are people like Clifford's students, Pacific women like Konai Thaman (1993), Grace Molisa (1983), and Atu Emberson Bain (1994) who linked poetry or film with their thoughts on gender relations and the impact of globalization, the church ministers, politicians and diplomats who were also musicians, artists, and writers, and those in some of the movements I speak of today, who place art at the center of their critical Oceanic work.

Various scholars have critiqued or dismissed both the Pacific Way (see Fig. 3) and Hau'ofa's expansive, self-determining Oceania on charges of idealism and elitism. Lawson (2010), for example, asserts that the Pacific Way as originally articulated by Ratu Mara was an expression of traditionalism and conservatism, a "way" that maintained rather than subverted sociocultural norms, particularly to do with hierarchy and status. She wrote that: "Indeed, Crocombe's interpretation of the Pacific Way was far more attuned to postcolonial approaches than Mara's" (Lawson 2010, 299). His assessment of the great potential of the term was that it helped "to fulfill a growing demand for respected Pacific-wide identifying symbols and for Pacific unity" (Crocombe 1976, 1). Lawson (2010) believes it was Crocombe that gave the Pacific Way "its edge."

This may be partially true, especially in the formal space of customary culture and activities involving international diplomacy, trade negotiations, and the setting of aid and development priorities. But while exchanges between Europeans and Pacific Islanders have been well documented, and literature on intergovernmental or nongovernmental regional organizations is widely available, many scholars do not study contemporary intra-Pacific or interisland cultural exchanges and collaborations, and may have missed how work on the ground has been shaping a more dynamic and integrated vision of and hope for Oceania long before and continuing after Hau'ofa's "hope" and Mara's "way." Even if, as Lawson charges, Mara's original articulation of a Pacific Way was less postcolonial than hierarchical and customary, the idea that islanders often do things

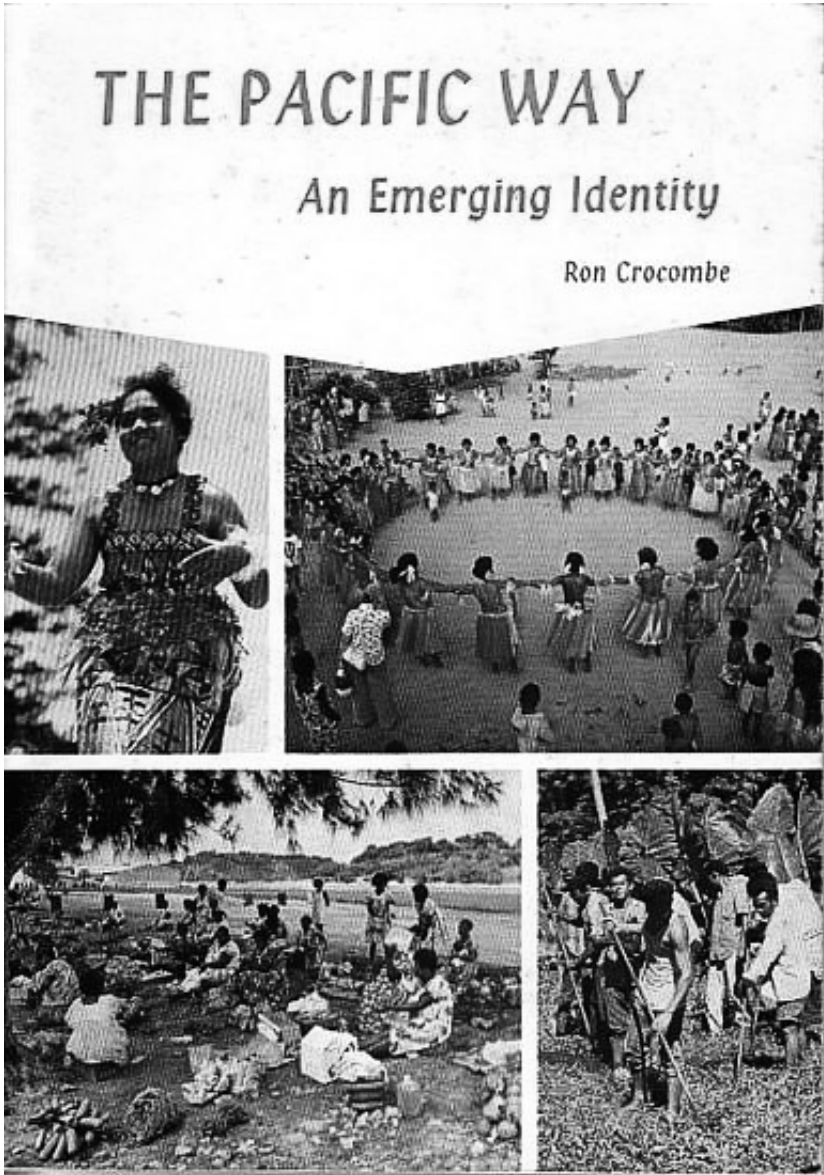


FIGURE 3. The Cover of Crocombe's 1976 Book Now Out of Print.

“differently,” and if unconstrained by foreign agendas and limitations would leverage their wide kinship networks for much Pan-Pacific good, still stands.

Pacific Islanders in the 1960s and 70s were actively seeking models and ideas from each other, and other black and brown peoples according to Tracey Banivanua-Mar (2015), who gave the 2015 Australian Association for Pacific Studies Epeli Hau’ofa public lecture on twentieth century Melanesian activism and exchanges with Caribbean and African American activists—links that have also been explored by David Chappell (2005 and see Teaiwa 2012), and links that certainly inspired Hau’ofa. These exchanges alarmed British and Australian officials and intelligence agencies. Banivanua-Mar spoke about how the Australian Security Intelligence Organisation (ASIO) was keeping an eye on Epeli Hau’ofa during his time as a young man in Papua New Guinea. One of the insights in her presentation was the way in which Australia was particularly interested in keeping PNG and other Melanesian countries isolated from broader ideas and dialogue, regionally and internationally. But, as Hau’ofa (1993) had stated and as backed by research in linguistics, archaeology, and genetics, which examines the flows of language, genes, and material culture between islands in more ancient ways, such desires for geopolitical insularity were and will always be futile (Spriggs 2009; Evans 2009).

I repeatedly cite an essay by archaeologist Matthew Spriggs (2009) called “Oceanic Connections in Deep Time” in which he wrote:

It would seem that about 3,000 years ago people from the New Guinea Islands and out as far as Tonga and Samoa were more interconnected than at any time until the age of mass transportation began some two centuries ago. People were moving between islands, pots were moving, obsidian was being exchanged and art styles that developed in one area could spread across many thousands of kilometers. The Lapita culture is the shared heritage of almost all Pacific Islanders today and could provide a powerful message of shared values and connections (Spriggs 2009, 14).

This is what makes our region unique, the actual, traceable shared genealogies, histories, and art forms that cross thousands of kilometers of ocean. The kind of voyaging that—not without controversy—recently inspired the Disney film *Moana* (Musker and Clements 2016) set 3,000 years before the present, which wove together elements of Samoan, Tongan, Fijian, and other Pacific oral traditions and material cultures and highlighted stewardship of the environment. And we are still voyaging today, in spite of attempts to bound islands in provinces, nation-states, subregional blocs, and geopolitical spheres. Marshallese poets are inspiring Samoan and Rotuman artists and activists, I-Kiribati dancers are inspiring Samoan choreographers, Fijian musicians are inspiring Papua

New Guinean and Ni-Vanuatu youth, and representatives of most islands have been involved in climate change activism and in supporting sovereignty for West Papua. Regionalism exists in many forms through the institutions, bureaus, and programs that leaders like Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara helped shape, and the scholarly and student networks inspired by Hau'ofa's work, but there are many more collaborations and activities that exist regardless of either Mara's or Hau'ofa's ideas.

Thus, I would like to explore some of the specific gatherings and projects that are happening across the region that embody the "Pacific Way" and Hau'ofa's vision and are partially inspired by them but would also likely happen regardless of them because in many ways Ratu Mara and Epeli Hau'ofa were articulating something that had already been there and would be happening whether or not scholars or politicians pronounced them. Coincidentally, many of the projects here are conceived of or driven by women, and although I do not intend to imply there is some kind of deliberate division of labor between men's individual vision, leadership and scholarship and women's collective action, there is definitely a gender dimension to how regionalism is conceptualized, for what ends, and mobilized accordingly.

### **Wansolwara Rising**

There is a very consistent antihegemonic dialogue focused on self-determination that has been happening for decades in Oceania crystalizing around a number of NGOs and projects who run things in a "Pacific Way." This is possibly not in the exact same way as Ratu Mara may have imagined given his chiefly status and work in the more formal political and economic sphere, but nevertheless it is a Pacific Way defined by Pacific peoples themselves.

"The rethinking and renewing Oceania" dialogue on Facebook, the Wansolwara ("one saltwater" in Melanesian pidgin) and Youngsolwara (youth) activist collectives, and the "We Bleed Black and Red" campaign for West Papua all emerge out of the efforts and alliances built through people involved in one way or another with the Pacific Conference of Churches. This has been a long-term dialogue that unfolds in poetic, pragmatic, and deeply reflective ways with ideas of self-determination, postcolonial, and neocolonial critique at the core. I have tried to sketch some of the participating movements or organizations in Figure 4.

Wansolwara, for example, emerged in 2014 out of a group of people gathered for a planning meeting of four days at the Nadave Training Centre in Fiji:

Participants came from Rapa Nui, Guam, West Papua, Bougainville, Hawaii, Papua New Guinea, California, Aotearoa, Vanuatu, Fiji and Australia. Individuals and representatives of organisations, people of diverse professional and organisational backgrounds and personal



FIGURE 4. A Preliminary Sketch of Regional Resistance and Activism by Katerina Teaiwa in Dialogue with Fe'iloakitau Kaho Tevi (PANG: Pacific Action Network on Globalisation; ECREA: Ecumenical Centre for Research, Education and Advocacy; ECOPAS: European Consortium for Pacific Studies).

journeys. Yet, they share the one dream for our Ocean, free to be self-determining. The intention was to tell stories and share experiences on what the “Rethinking the Household of God in the Pacific” is asking. The movement is coordinated by regional partnership from Pacific Conference of Churches (PCC), Bismark Ramu Group (BRG), Pacific Network on Globalisation (PANG) and Social Empowerment and Education Program (SEEP) (PNG Mine Watch 2014).

The major Wansolwara 2014 event supported by the Pacific Conference of Churches was called “Madang Wansolwara Dance.” Dawea for the *Solomon Star* (2014) and Act Now! For a Better PNG (2014) reported on how the event had attracted attendance from all over the Pacific, including artists, musicians, traditional leaders, academics, clergy, activists, youth and university students, and civil society representatives. Spokesperson, Reverend Francois Pihaatae (Act Now! For a Better PNG 2014) said: “. . . dance is a narrative of decades and centuries of exiles, expulsion, persecution and pogrom, beginning with the first colonisation of our ‘sea of islands’ to where we are today.” He talked about the celebration as a protest against a dominant narrative where: “development means selling of/or exploiting our lands and our seas for the riches within; it is about adopting universalist ideals, it is about endless growth in which people and cultures are nothing less than commodities; and it is about not having moral limits to what we can do” (Act Now! For a Better PNG 2014). He said:

We live in the world of the faceless empire(s). We see, think and construct our realities with the frames and lenses of the alternative, and have become its impeccable protégés in alienating our mother from her children, in condemning our people to a life of poverty and shame. . . . The gathering will affirm who we are as Pacific people using our own art, music, dance, poetry and story-telling to be the writers of our own history (Act Now! For a Better PNG 2014).

Several newspapers reported that Bismark Ramu Group Coordinator and local host, John Chittoa said the celebration of this Pacific gathering was centered around “reclaiming of our Wansolwara: one people, one sea.” Reflecting on the Free West Papua campaigns inspired through Wansolwara such as the wearing of black and red on Wednesdays under the banner of “We Bleed Black and Red,” University of Hawai‘i PhD student Tagi Qolouvaki (2015) wrote:

While artists and activists consistently respond with creative/storied protest across Oceania to injustices occurring throughout our Wansolwara—aided as much by the connections made possible by



social media platforms as by our kinship networks—not since the launch of the Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific (NFIP) movement in the 70s has there been so much pan-Pacific unity around an issue as that of West Papua . . . both movements of our salt water people have had to stand strong against incomprehensible power—of capital, militaries, occupying regimes/the support of nation states powerful in the region, such as the United States, Indonesia, Australia, and unfortunately in the case of West Papua, some of our own “independent” Pacific nations like Fiji and Papua New Guinea, and both necessarily utilize Pacific arts/stories and kinship . . . for mana-full resistance and an Oceanic imaginary that is decolonial, contagious and muscled.

### Oceania Interrupted

And that decolonial imaginary has a powerful reach. Working in dialogue and solidarity with those involved in the “We Bleed Black and Red” Campaign is the “Oceania Interrupted” (see Fig. 5) Auckland based collective who staged a series of performance protests in New Zealand in 2015 highlighting the fight for freedom and independence in West Papua. Oceania Interrupted is a group of Pacific women, many of them Polynesian, and at the core are three Leilanis:



FIGURE 5. Oceania Interrupted Logo by Katarina Katoa (Used with permission).



Leilani Salesa, Leilani Unasa, and Leilani Kake along with Ema Tavola, Luisa Tora, Kolokesa Mahina-Tuai, Marama Davidson and others. The goal of the group is empowering collective action with a commitment to undertaking public interventions to raise awareness for issues that affect Pacific Islanders in New Zealand and throughout the region (Oceania Interrupted 2014).

They planned actions to mobilize a New Zealand response in support of freedom for West Papua, the first six of which involved: raising the West Papua flag (“The Morning Star”) on Queen’s Street in Auckland; a silent march through the Otago markets titled “All I want for Christmas is a Free West Papua”; “Free Pasifika-Free West Papua,” a two-hour silent march through the hugely popular Pasifika festival in 2014; “Freedom Is, . . .” involves a video production with Tanu Gago on 3 May, World Press Freedom Day; and finally “Whose Pacific Shame?” a gathering to welcome and host West Papuan journalist Victor Mambor at a seminar. Here, Oceania Interrupted intends to gently interrogate the ideas of blame and shame from the perspective of Pacific women in Aotearoa (Oceania Interrupted 2014).

The rationale and the passion behind these Pacific women’s work is described by Leilani Salesa:

Our freedom as indigenous Māori and Pacific women in Aotearoa New Zealand is inextricably bound up with that of our Pacific West Papuan brothers and sisters.

Our mouths are adorned with the Morning Star flag as symbol of enforced West Papuan silence. Our hands are bound to symbolise the lack of freedoms experienced by West Papuan people. Our voices and movement are restricted to symbolise the lack of freedom of expression of political opinion, the lack of access to just and equitable resources, the lack of access to free and independent media. Our bodies are adorned with black to celebrate the female form and to draw on black as a symbol of mourning (Oceania Interrupted 2014).

In the context of what Julie Bishop began calling the “Indo-Pacific” soon after beginning her tenure as Australian Foreign Minister, many Pacific nations feel they need to tread lightly around the West Papua issue to respect Indonesian sovereignty. This is in spite of the fact that Indonesia’s claims to the land are controversial and resistance from the Melanesian West Papuans has been consistent since the 1960s (King 2004). According to many local, scholarly and media sources thousands of West Papuans have been killed over the years because their minerals and lands are exploited for Indonesian profit. Their plight has resonated strongly with other Pacific peoples who view them as their Oceanic kin.

### Oceania Now: Hau'ofa's Hope in the Suburbs of Melbourne

My final example is from an event that I attended in March 2015—the Contemporary Pacific Arts Festival (CPAF) at the Footscray Community Center in Melbourne (see Fig. 6). The gathering was a tightly scheduled three-day event consisting of two days of symposium that ran from 10:00 am to 9:30 pm each day and a community day from 12:00–6:00 pm on the Saturday. It was organized by a passionate group of volunteer artists, curators, and producers including Lia Pa'apa'a, Torika Bolatagici, Grace Vanilau, Léuli Eshraghi, Thelma Trey, Jacob Tolo, Pauline Vetuna, Jess Latham, Fipe Preuss, and a host of more volunteers with the support of the Footscray Community Centre (2015).

Bougainvillean curator from the National Gallery of Victoria, Aunty Sana Balai, was viewed as a Pacific elder for all regardless of cultural, national, and regional differences. Aunty Sana was like a thread that wove together the intellectual, institutional, historical, and home island dimensions together with the diasporic context of the event. Two things were very striking about this gathering.

Firstly, most participants were of mixed heritage and/or trilingual and Aunty Sana regularly referenced this by speaking about what she called “the next generation” of Pacific Islander Australians. These participants were not just

#### CPAF 2015 – Symposium



The Contemporary Pacific Arts Festival 2015

FIGURE 6. Screenshot from the Contemporary Pacific Arts Festival Website.

Afakasi, mixed heritage or “kai loma” as we say in Fiji, that is of mixed Pacific and European heritage, but rather embodied intra-Pacific and intra-Australian, or cross-Tasman encounters and exchanges. There was Samoan–Persian visual artist and *Oceania Now* journal editor Léiuli Esraghi, Fijian-Maori visual artist Margaret Aull, Samoan–Chinese–New Zealand artist Angela Tiatia, Welsh-I-Kiribati producer and author Marita Davies, Indo-Fijian-Tuvaluan animator and multimedia innovator George Siosi Samuels, and a special youth performance from three young female storytellers/poets who shared their experiences and interpretations of the festival theme: “Oceania Now.” These were Ileini Kabalan of Tongan and Lebanese descent, Niuean-Samoan Nala Taukilo and Clara Sione of Samoan and Fijian heritage. There were also dance and acrobatic performances from Hawaiians Noelani Le Nevez, founder and director of professional dance group Nuholani, and Lilikoi Kaos, a circus, burlesque performer and comedian from Circus Oz, daughter of a single Hawaiian circus performing mum who traveled the world. The three days ended with a stirring live performance from Radical Son, an artist of indigenous Australian Kamilaroi and Tongan descent.

The second important thing about this gathering, and I am sure it was because I am used to a less dynamic institutional or university-based context of learning and knowledge exchange, was that the volunteer organizers had genuinely pulled off a stunning gathering that truly showcased diverse Pacific forms of knowledge production with clear political, social, and economic framings and concerns. Participants, both organizers and presenters alike, moved seamlessly between song, poetry, standup comedy, political, philosophical, legal, economic, and cultural description and analysis.

In a recent ANU symposium celebrating the culmination of Margaret Jolly’s Laureate project in Canberra, a doctoral scholar, Areti Metuamate, talked about how Tongans “are Tongan” and “are Tonga” wherever they are, and wherever they are born. They carry their island within them. In that symposium, I argued that a Pacific Studies environment, as has been the case at ANU for decades, focused solely on researching the islands, which does not engage or note the Suva or Lautoka in Sydney, the Port Morseby or Port Vila in Brisbane, the Apia or Tarawa in Melbourne, or doesn’t consider these movements and sites as relevant to Pacific Studies, are missing out on what Oceania is in the twenty-first century. And what Oceania is in the twenty-first century, what Oceania is now, may not be so different from what it was 3,000 years ago as we have already noted in Matthew Spriggs’ work with respect to Lapita cultures.

As a migration destination, Melbourne is not San Diego, Utah, Auckland, Sydney, or Brisbane where there are clear and fast growing Pacific suburbs and hubs, often most visible in terms of the primary and high school demographics and establishment of Pacific churches and community centers. There are many

small, emergent Pacific communities in Melbourne who have to learn to talk to and get along with each other in order to come together to create any Pacific space at all among the strong Greek, Lebanese, Vietnamese, and other communities who have worked hard at carving out their own voices and visibility on the Melbourne landscape. Thus, within the space of three years, the CPAF and its largely female Pacific Islander team of organizers and participants has grown from a tentative one-day event, to a full blown, three-day extravaganza, including a Fiafia bar and dance space, and strongly supported by the Footscray mayor, council, and community center, Victoria University, the University of Melbourne, and other corporate and community partners such as the Copyright Agency Cultural Fund.

The symposium was a major highlight of the gathering, and I want to end this section with a description of the climate change panel that was a standout for me among a really inspiring lineup of talks and performances. The panel started with Angela Tiatia's amazing visual interpretation of the effects of global warming, king tides and salination of the freshwater lens in the atolls of Tuvalu. Tiatia showed beautifully framed underwater footage of saltwater bubbling up into the only source of freshwater on Tuvaluan atolls while fish darted toward and past the camera. She also showed images of life continuing as usual, the ringing of a bell for church against a sound of crashing waves.

We then moved to journalist Nic Maclellan's sharing of stories of what he called "ordinary people doing extraordinary things" in the context of research, activism, and education on climate change. These included chief entomologist Hugo Bugoro from the Solomon Islands, community organizer and poet Kathy Jetnil-Kijiner from the Marshall Islands, and geography teacher Tangaroa Arobati from Kiribati, all of whom work in a multiscale fashion to educate students, the public, their countries, and the world more broadly on the effects of climate change.

We then heard from the energetic Marita Davies on writing and illustrating a children's book called *Teaote's Wall* (2015). This was based on Davies' mother's long process of building a wall back in Kiribati to protect their home from the rising tide. Davies is from Gippsland, the heart of Victorian farming country and remarked regularly about how few people in her region knew anything about the Pacific and how most had never heard of Kiribati. During the Q and A I reminded everyone about how Victoria was awash with land from Kiribati, specifically from Banaba, making its way through the ecosystem after a century of Australian phosphate mining and superphosphate topdressing (Teaiwa 2015). It was ironic that an I-Kiribati woman emerges from that landscape to highlight another issue where Kiribati land is being threatened by the effects of regional and global forces and specifically, human consumption habits.

Davies posted a picture on Facebook, which I was able to gain her permission to use in consultation with the teacher whose students feature in Figure 7. We agreed to blur the children's faces, but essentially Davie's self-published book has gone global and primary school students at St. André in Saumur, Loire Valley, in the west of France read *Teaote's Wall* with teacher Marie Lenoir. In response, they made their own Kiribati costumes including T-shirts with the Kiribati flag.

Finally, there was George Siosi Samuels, another young, energetic, and talented cultural animator of Indo-Fijian, Samoan, and Tuvaluan descent who, although having never been to his maternal island, was reviving ancient Tuvaluan oral traditions through his digital work. His presentation was striking in that, unlike other scholarship and policy work that focuses on the material, environmental, or geological consequences of climate change, he was concerned with the potential historical, cultural, and social losses and was driven by the need to translate and popularize Tuvaluan knowledge and histories.

His animation project *Tales from Nanumea* was inspired by a series of recurring dreams in which ancestral voices urged him to tell Nanumea stories. Samuel's work for me is a remix of an ancient Pacific practice of paying attention to such dreams, and acting upon them producing something in response,

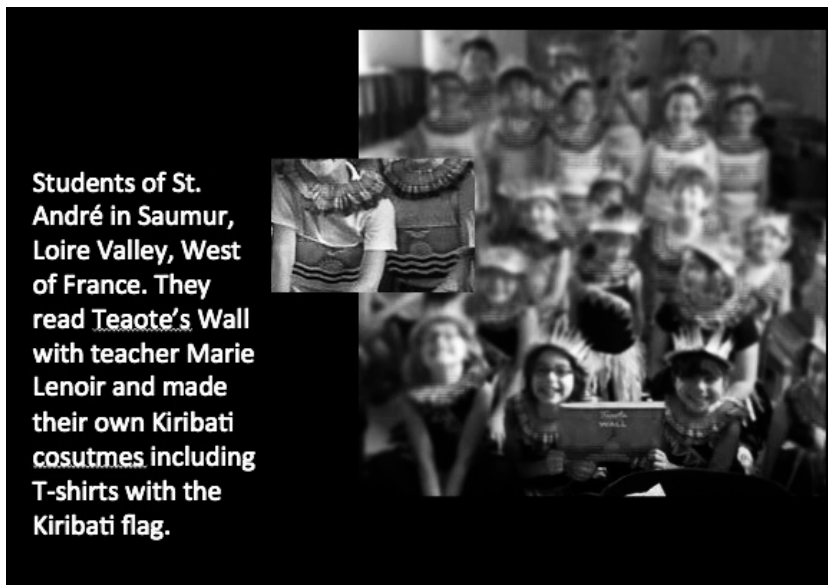


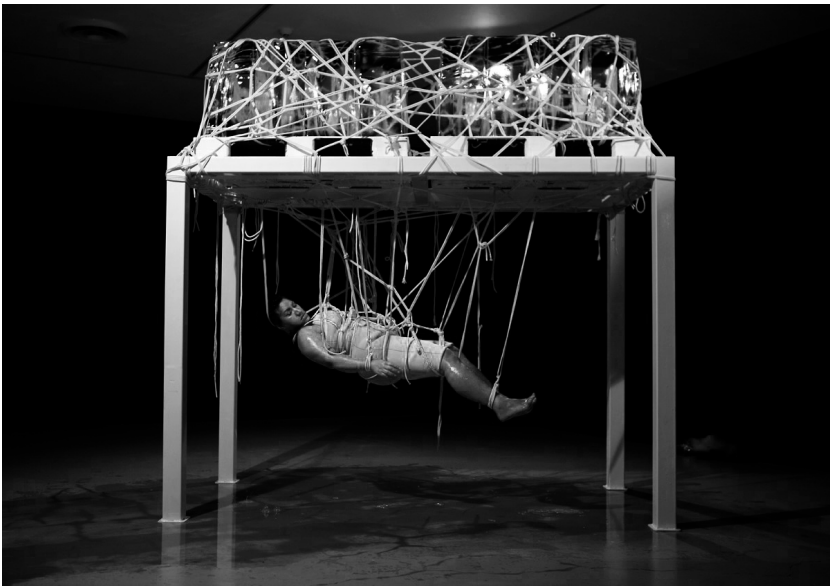
FIGURE 7. Screenshot of French Students Holding Marita Davies Book (Used with permission).

and this is happening in Melbourne to a young man who has never been to Tuvalu. His animation, done in a familiar graphic illustration style, speaks of ancient relations between Tonga and Tuvalu.

George Samuel's engagement with Tuvalu's deep ancestral ties with its Tongan neighbors dovetails with Tonga's contemporary diaspora, and my broader reflections on climate change, via the extraordinary work of Sydney based Tongan artist Latai Taumoepeau. *i-Land X-isle* was commissioned in 2012 by the Museum of Contemporary Art and Performance Space, Sydney and remounted for the "Towards the Morning Sun" Exhibition at Campbelltown Arts Centre. In an outdoor setting, Latai is bound to two tonnes of ice with white rope and a white metal frame. She hung there during four one-hour performances: an hour on and an hour off over eight hours for two days with the ice, like the polar caps, melting and dripping on her (see Fig. 8).

In Taumoepeau's words, her work:

... tries to prioritise a holistic indigenous Pacific perspective of human induced climate change using time based performance, spectacle and risk as a device to portray the vulnerability of Pacific communities facing the real human injustice around the dependency on developing



**FIGURE 8. *i-Land X-isle*. (Photo courtesy of Latai Taumoepeau, copyright belongs to the artist.)**

countries, displacement, relocation, dispossession. I use cultural metaphors and concepts of land, belonging and collectivism by using my own body to construct evocative images and experiences that make ordinary citizens in developed countries consider their complacency around climate change and make better political choices. I also make these works as a legacy for future generations that may question what we did in our time . . . (2015, pers. comm.).

### **Reflection: Seeing with Many Eyes**

Like Clifford and his students, Hau'ofa had a massive impact on my own academic journey, particularly my research on phosphate mining on my ancestral island of Banaba, which began in 1997. One of the first published pieces from that research was called "Our Sea of Phosphate." I took Hau'ofa's reframing of "islands in a far sea" as a "sea of islands" and its broader implications of the deceptive quality of scale and tried to apply it to an actual, specific island in material ways. Although many of us do research on land, few have delved further into thinking about land in a multisited, multiscale way. In Hau'ofa's writing, he moves seamlessly between multiple spiritual and cultural realms, between ancestors and contemporary traveling islanders, between mountains and oceans, and between the arts and the world of policy and politics. This inspired me to think about the kinds of optics and scales we use to explore and understand Pacific phenomena.

I did much of my research in the National Archives of Australia exploring the British Phosphate Commissioners records that documented the industrial enterprise. These ranged from both text and photographs of rocks, nails, buoys, skips and hoppers, storage, loading, and transport to sport, recreation, and native labor and services. The diverse collection of writing and images had a very "cinematic" effect on my research that also encouraged me to see the whole Pacific region in a new way (see Marcus 1990). Banaba was described by photojournalist Thomas McMahon as "Let's-all-be-thankful island: a little rock in the Pacific that multiplies the world's food," and this helped me understand Hau'ofa's point about how size and scale are deceptive and how a reframing of the significance of small islands and islanders in national, regional, and global contexts and discourse is absolutely necessary to coming up with more creative and better solutions for many of the material and ethical challenges we face today (Teaiwa 2005, 2014, 2015).

Hau'ofa made a charge of belittlement against Western policies and approaches, and for me, Banaba proved that "small" was indeed very, very big. If a two-and-a-half square mile rock protruding out of the central Pacific Ocean



can be so important to the British Empire, and to Australian and New Zealand agricultural stakeholders, it was also hard to accept the dominant idea that small islands are irrelevant or marginal to global processes and issues, or merely victims of them. It's especially unconvincing when one begins to understand what an island is in the geological sense, and with Banaba, I took my optics, chemically, down to the phosphate molecule itself. Reading the science was important here but only because it helped me understand land in a way that was much closer to the way my ancestors did. Land, like language, contains layers of spiritual, biological, chemical, and geological significance and agency. Facing the chemical formula for the transformation of Banaban land—*te aba*—into superphosphate fertilizer gave me new tools for reframing the broader island region in a multiscale, multidimensional way—to see things with new or many eyes.

I teach this approach in my Pacific Studies class, encouraging students to consider the range of multiple, even if competing, perspectives and approaches that one could take to understanding our region. This, for me, is transdisciplinary Pacific Studies, which makes space for diverse views simultaneously and considers knowledge and impacts of knowledge beyond the academy. This is not unlike the idea profoundly captured by Hawaiian artist Carl Pao in his series *ki'i kupuna*. In his piece, *ki'i kupuna Makawalu*, the ancestral figure sees with eight eyes. It is this kind of multiscopic sensibility that I encourage in my Pacific Studies students and attempt to apply in my own work.

I am personally and pedagogically committed to a transdisciplinary field of Pacific area studies, rather than to the disciplinary ways in which Pacific topics and content could be approached in the separate fields of anthropology, linguistics, political science, archaeology, history, and so forth. I teach Pacific Studies students to think about the whole region and to think between islands as they zoom in and out of specific local issues to those that link and resonate with people across island borders and boundaries. The local, national, regional, and global are fluidly present and relevant, and students are encouraged to think in a multi- or transscale fashion as they navigate their way through topics such as gender relations, popular culture, and environmental displacement.

I think we are at the point where we should be able to talk about and map the range of regional scholarly, political, technical, and cultural architectures, alongside the work most of us do on one corner, country, or subregion of Oceania. What I mean by this is we need to be able to think, research, and teach Oceania in a multiscale fashion. This is not a static scalarity but a fluid one in which various levels or frames—such as local, national, regional, and global, or micro and macro—are imagined and accounted for together.

This is nothing revolutionary, and I am aware there are countless theories on multiplicity and complexity with which we could attempt to shape and fit phenomena in Oceania, but I am speaking of something, methodologically,

more simple, and free of the rules and debates that come with Euro-American genealogies of thought. I am speaking of comprehending Oceania in its totality and diversity together. Of thinking of Suva or Melbourne when you think of Moresby, of pieces of rock when you think of land, of dance when you think of politics, and of a saltwater bubble percolating up through a freshwater lens when you think of climate change. Thus, I am also thinking of the poetic with the practical, the passion with the policy and freedom of thought and idea with discourses and programs of regulation and governance.

Certainly many regional technical organizations are operating in a multiscalar fashion from the Parties to the Nauru Agreement, to the Pacific Community and Pacific Islands Forum to the Pacific Islands Applied Geoscience Commission and Pacific Tourism Organization. However, in the same way that anthropologies of global, development, and policy organizations and processes are emerging, so too, do we need critical, culturally informed lenses to be applied to the ever increasing number of IGO, NGO, and other organizations and collaborations in Oceania.

The Wansolwara and Youngsolwara movements, the Pacific Conference of Churches, the Oceania Interrupted collective, 350 Pacific and the Pacific Climate Warriors, the organizers of Oceania Rising, the Contemporary Pacific Festival of Arts, and countless other Pan-Pacific and Oceanic collectives are rising up. Ideas about the “Pacific Way,” the “sea of islands,” and the coming together of Melanesians, Micronesians, and Polynesians, in spite of attempts to insulate and divide regions, classes, and cultures, persist and are growing. The urgency and concern in this era of climate change, and the digital communications platforms that allow us to instantly share events and ideas, has amplified this process.

Writing for one of the many Pacific Islands blogs that has appeared in recent years, Qolouvaki (2015) shares how she learned a Fijian proverb: *a kena laya sa vakaoqo, sa drau na kena votu*. This translates as: “its buds—the calyx of the breadfruit—are like these, its fruit will be hundreds.” She refers to the thousands of years of cultural resilience in Oceania, and the seeds of Pan-Pacific regionalism, creative expression, and resistance that have been planted during and after colonial rule:

From seed beginnings, great things will come. And so the art, the stories, the movements . . . were seeded by our ancestors; they are bearing fruit (Qolouvaki 2015).

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Teresia, had similarly delivered an ESfO keynote while pregnant several years earlier. Sadly, she has now passed away after a very short battle with cancer. I would like to dedicate this essay to her memory and her incredible service to scholarship, teaching, and activism, in and beyond Oceania.

I would also like to thank the organizers, especially Toon van Meijl, for inviting me to participate and for the opportunity to develop my talk into this essay, which took many months because of the arrival of my child. I also thank Fe‘iloakitau Kaho Tevi for sharing his invaluable insights and observations from the region across the decades. My discussions with him very much informed this paper, as did those with fellow Pacific Islanders on the “Rethinking and Renewing Oceania” Facebook page. Thank you as well to students in PASI 2001, from whom I learn so much, and to Latai Taumoepeau for her inspiring words and permission to use images of her performance art. And finally, thank you to my daughters, Tearia and Kiera, and especially my husband, Nicholas Mortimer.

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