Confronting Australian Apathy: Latai Taumoepeau and the Politics of Performance in Pacific Climate Stewardship

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> It's about learning from us, which I find interesting because we are so invisible that our ways are not valued even by our own people. And this is what I explore in my work, highlighting the most invisible things, our social frameworks. It's the *way* we do things, not *what* we do.
>
> —Latai Taumoepeau[1]

As Australian Prime Minister Scott Morrison stepped off of his chartered military plane at Funafuti airport ahead of the Pacific Islands Forum in August 2019, he was greeted by the children of Tuvalu. The event had begun three days prior, and he was late. As he smiled and waved in a bright blue bula shirt, a flower crown was placed on his head. Children wearing clothes made of pandanus leaves awaited him, submerged in water in a moat built around a model of an island. The scene was starkly different from that when the other leaders had arrived, when the children instead wore school uniforms and sang "Save Tuvalu, Save the World." For Morrison, the children's caretakers sat behind them as the prime minister approached, a conch sounding in the distance, overlaid by the intensifying beat of a lali drum. Beginning at the right corner, Morrison crouched over the tub of water and shook the children's hands. Halfway through, he stood up and looked off into the distance behind him, but his escort motioned him to greet the remaining children. Awkwardly comported, Morrison bent over again, took a child's hands, and turned to crack a smile at the cameras as they snapped. The powerful symbol-

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ism of Tuvalu's climate justice plea to Australia to reduce emissions and move away from its reliance on coal was broadcast for the world to see (Lyons 2019).

The staging of this welcome called to mind the inspiring rallying motto of the Pacific Climate Warriors: "We are not drowning. We are fighting" (2020), highlighting the dominant visual culture concocted by Western media that presents a vulnerability and acceptance of the demise of a Pacific pushed to the brink of habitability. While the staged Morrison greeting in Tuvalu may appear to have played into such crushing visual tropes of the vanishing native, which Noelani Goodyear-Ka'ōpua described as "representing Indigenous peoples as mere vestiges of a quickly fading and increasingly irrelevant past" (2017, 184), I view this event not as an example of acquiescence or a palpable in-joke but rather as Islanders' ardent reclamation of sovereignty over their image in response to fatalistic interpretations of Oceanian futurities. Through a deliberate toying with discourses of fatalism, Tuvaluans demonstrated that they are masters of staging. The highly curated event gave the Morrison government an ultimatum: either help us by holding our hands and committing to climate action—thus achieving the aspirational kinship goal of "Pacific family" expressed in Australia's recent Pacific "Step-Up" policy—or let go of our hands and let Pacific nations d(r)own (Kabutaulaka and Teaiwa 2019; Regenvanu 2019). Former Tuvalu Prime Minister Enele Sopoaga stated that it was here that Morrison had made a promise to his fellow Pacific leaders "to develop a long-term strategy by 2020 for reducing Australia's greenhouse gas emissions" (Sopoaga 2020). However, given Australia's ultimate failure to budge on coal in the Forum's final communiqué and its reluctance to meet international climate targets, the image of the reception in Tuvalu remains as a reminder of the conservative Morrison government's shallow virtue signaling and a legacy of apathetic Australian leaders only concerned with geostrategic power plays between Pacific states rather than with actual Pacific lives in the "rush for Oceania" (Reclaiming Oceania Collective 2018; Kabutaulaka and Teaiwa 2019).

As the largest and wealthiest member of the Pacific Islands Forum, the Commonwealth of Australia, a violent fiction established on the unceded lands of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander peoples, is lamentably a significant arbiter of political decision making for the region. Vastly distinct from its neighbor Aotearoa/New Zealand, Australia, with its majority-settler public and its government with next to no Pacific representation, lacks a Pacific cultural literacy despite its historical relationship to the Pacific

and its growing Pacific Islander population. How the government, headed by Morrison and supported by Minister for International Development and the Pacific Alex Hawke, relates to and impacts the Pacific is important in the context of climate change, as is the resulting Australian apathy demonstrated by both leaders and the settler public. Here, I use the term "Australian apathy" to refer to the calculated mechanisms of obfuscation and deferral successive Australian governments have used since the 1990s to respond to Pacific leaders' demands for climate-change action. The term "settler public" refers predominately to the majority-white settler public but also to "settlers of color" or immigrants who endorse the conservative majority (see Trask 2000). Despite paying lip service to the idea of a greater "Pacific family," without compassion or a duty of care, Australia, the languid and irresponsible "big brother" of the region, appears fed up with, disinterested in, and dismissive of its Pacific "siblings'" calls to give up dependency on coal. It is willing to offer foreign aid for climate mitigation and adaptation as strategized by foreign consultants, but it is not willing to acknowledge coal dependency as the primary reason for these issues in the first place. As the catastrophic "Black Summer" bushfires that ravaged Australia in 2019–2020 confirmed, the country's misguided lack of climate goals is profoundly mutually destructive.

In all of this, diasporic artists in Australia have been critical in publicly addressing the apathy of Australia's leaders and settler public. In this article, shifting between talanoa-based interviews and analysis, I offer a visual monographic reading of the vital artistic and activist work of diasporic Tongan "self-appointed" punake (master composer) and body-centered performance artist Latai Taumoepeau. I examine how, through a series of compelling provocations, she engages Australian inertia around climate change and its environmental impacts on Oceania. Contributing to a visual legacy of creative survival of Pacific peoples through activist "art/story" (see Qolouvaki 2015), Taumoepeau artistically intervenes in the climate struggle in Australia by staging ecological crises to invoke affective and emotional responses from Australian audiences. Using her body as what she refers to as the "primary cultural material" of Oceania, she seeks to embody an inclusive pan-Oceanian regional identity that is based on resistance and "grounded in a Pacific construction of the ocean as 'place-full,' densely connected and networked, and inseparable from history, society, political and cultural identities" (Reclaiming Oceania Collective 2018, 4).

Centering Tongan methodologies and cosmologies in her praxis, Tau-

moepeau uses her body to compel Australians to rethink their complicity and complacency in their "first-world" positionality. She accomplishes this in three key ways: by enacting performance as a state of mourning, as in *i-Land X-isle* (2012) and *Repatriate* (2015); by highlighting histories of resource extractivism, such as that of phosphate mining in *Ocean Island, Mine!* (2015); and by imagining potential futures, such as that of deep-sea mining in *War Dance of the Final Frontier* (2018). However, in other works, such as her curation of *Archipela_GO . . . . this is not a drill* (2017) and *HG57 (Human Generator 57)* (2016–2020), rather than leaving her audiences to wallow in inaction and a complacent eco-anxiety, Taumoepeau encourages them to playfully respond to the challenges using Oceanian epistemologies. Through analyses of these works and the contexts of their creation, we find that, in synchronization with a chorus of others across Oceania spanning time and space, Taumoepeau contributes potent political assertions of Oceanian sovereignty to the visual culture of the climate justice movement.

On her Vimeo channel, which offers a fantastic visual compendium of her work, Taumoepeau has described her positionality as follows: "My Fonua buried in the Eora Nation/Baime Dreaming (Marrickville, Australia) nourishes my belonging to this land with my ancestral roots embedded in my Island Nation, The Kingdom of Tonga. Ha'a Fisi mo Ha'amoa (paternal) and Ha'a Havea (maternal) are the clans I spawn from, that guide my existence" (2019). In the diaspora, Taumoepeau is a "self-appointed" punake. In Tongan society, cultural norms conveyed through "tales, myths and legends" across generations through the creative arts encourage a "socialisation process" with "an atmosphere of *doing things by seeing*" (Māhina 1992, 16). As gifted arts practitioners, punake are master composers of ta'anga (poetry), hiva (music), and haka (choreography) (Māhina 1992, xlvii). The word itself is created by the union of two words, "puna" (to fly) and "hake" (on high). As elucidated by renowned punake 'I Futa Helu, the punake bears intuitiveness that "goes up as if flying to the heights but non-poets are not endowed by those gifts and so are held down on to lowly, very mundane emotional levels" (Helu 2005, 45). For 'Okusitino Māhina, it is only the exceptional punake, who serve as important repositories of knowledge, who understand traditional Tongan history through creative arts endowed with the ecology-centered philosophy of tala-e-fonua, or the care relations between humans and the environment (1992, 16). In storying climate change through a critical retelling of extractivist practices of Western

capitalism, Taumoepeau brings to the fore the importance of reclaiming sacred discourses imbued with Tongan notions of environmental relationality, respect, and stewardship.

After years of processing her concerns, and drawing on her considerable involvement in art collectives that examine tensions in the interface between Pacific and Australian cultures, Taumoepeau first intervened in Australian discourses on climate change with her solo project *i-Land X-isle* in 2012. From here, she has become one of the most pertinent Oceanian voices on climate change in the Australian art scene today. As many Oceanian scholars have conceptualized (see Wendt 1976; Hau'ofa 1994, 1998; T Teaiwa 2006), the arts are central to resistance in Pacific movement making. Moreover, Vilsoni Hereniko has argued the need to move beyond hard-line scientific and statistical representations of climate change and provide "a human face" through "affective and emotional truth" (2014, 227). Taumoepeau's physical insertion into a climate-change visual imaginary is therefore highly salient, as it challenges Australian audiences to contemplate their impact on their neighbors in Oceania, destabilizing the colonial myth of isolated "paradises in an otherwise imagined, empty basin" (DeLoughrey 2013).

In myriad live and video works with her body deployed at the epicenter, Taumoepeau counteracts colonial geographies that push Oceanian peoples to the periphery. Such elevation, she explains, allows her body to become an important tool for addressing the three-pronged issue of "complicity, complacency and privilege" within Western regimes of power. Astrida Neimanis and Rachel Loewen Walker have argued that this phenomenon is a result of Western ecological buffering, as the privileged in the West inhabit a corporeal "thickened time" that is "abstracted from our experiences of weather and environment" (2013, 2). While Taumoepeau's work is multi-sited in its strong aesthetic appeal to diverse audiences, it is not necessarily for the Pacific community but rather for white people who exist around it. As she recounts, the art has a deliberate and transformational activist purpose of confronting Australian apathy:

> My audience is white people, and I make work about white people *around* brown people. Art is a construction: the way it exists and the way I am complicit in it is a white people's thing. I don't have a problem with that because I feel that they are the same people that are the people who can put pressure in the right places. But it's not to say that my work can't be viewed by or experienced by Pacific people; they just aren't my priority. They aren't the people in a position of power here. So I unapologetically make that distinction.

Taumoepeau is equally disinterested in using superficial hallmarks of Pacific cultures in her work as a means of gaining clout in an economy that fetishizes ornamental or recreational art made by Indigenous and Pacific peoples in Australia. By allegorizing her Pacific body in her practice, she instead uses it as an instrument for expressing universal Oceanian concerns of climate change while also engaging broader issues of race and gender. She asserts: "I have a saying, 'The more ancient I am, the more contemporary my work is,' so the way that I make my work is a hundred percent centered around Tongan methodology and systems of knowledge. It's how I make the choices of what I make, but it sits well in a Western construct. It also doesn't have to be *identifiably* Pacific for me. The same body in that work is the same body that gets followed around in shopping malls. So my body reads outside my work as a very specific body from a very specific place." Composing everything around her body, which she knows is read by the dominant Australian gaze "as ethnic, as of color, as female, as larger," she builds into her practice a decentering of Australian regimes of surveillance that monitor race, class, and gender. Without explicit verbal engagement with discourses of identity politics, which is more or less demanded in contemporary Western art contexts, Taumoepeau subverts this emphasis on taxonomy by centering her body in performance art according to her Tongan worldview.

Taumoepeau is a diasporic native woman of Pacific heritage who is not living in her own country (Diaz and Kauanui 2001). While discussions around individual identity are important for others and tend to dominate within the diasporic arts community, Taumoepeau instead moves beyond rampant individualism, opting for a broader pan-oceanic concern for the security of their ancestral homes and for peoples whom she has never met. Here, a politics of solidarity for climate justice is necessary, as Pacific communities who have made the trans-Indigenous leap into Australia must reconcile their privilege in relation to the Indigenous peoples there and the stolen lands on which they live and work. Moreover, given the patterns of mobility afforded by colonial pasts, there is the reality that some stories, such as those of the majority Polynesian population, float to the surface, while others, such as those of Melanesian and Micronesian communities, sink to the bottom. Even so, by enacting Oceanian sovereignty through her body in sight of a settler government that impinges on such sovereignties, she engages the indefinite Pacific body to reinscribe the place, survival, and futurity of our peoples in our Ocean, resistant to imperial waves and anchored in collectivity.

Performance as a State of Mourning: *i-Land X-isle* and *Repatriate*

When considering climate change, Taumoepeau's defiant understanding of herself, as expressed through her body, is a "mourning process" for the future loss of ancestral lands and intangible knowledges. Her first and much lauded work, *i-Land X-isle,* was jointly commissioned in 2012 by the Museum of Contemporary Art and Performance Space in Sydney and remounted in 2013 at the Campbelltown Arts Centre. Opposite the Sydney Opera House and in front of the Museum of Contemporary Art, Taumoepeau inserted herself into the utopian Pacific rim harborside setting of Circular Quay as tourists milled past. She dressed in a high-visibility orange bodysuit and a matching lifesaver vest. Underneath an enormous steel table, head back and body fixed in a falling stance, she was horizontally suspended by white ropes from a two-ton block of ice (figure 1; see also art, 96, this issue). She hung like this for four hours each day—with

Figure 1. Still from *i-Land X-isle,* by Latai Taumoepeau. Campbelltown Arts Centre, Sydney, September 2013. Photo by Zan Wimberly, courtesy of Latai Taumoepeau.

an hour-long break for each hour suspended—for two days, while the ice, reminiscent of the melting Antarctic and Arctic regions, trickled down on her, replicating the physical stress of waterboarding, a method of torture famously used by the US government after 9/11.

Taumoepeau thinks with elements. In *i-Land X-isle,* her body was framed with the chemical composition H2O in its varying forms—solid as ice and liquid as water—to reflect the glacier-sea relationship. She investigated this simple materiality as mediated through the body (i-Land), using her body as a metaphor for land and the lashings in reference to the ta'ovala, a Tongan mat that is tied to the waist with rope as a symbol of "holding your land close." As the ice melted onto her, the ecological relationship between water and land (and peoples) was out of balance. Taumoepeau expressed to me the importance of ice to Indigenous peoples in colder climates and the changing materiality of these salt waters, reciting an anecdote: "You can't have a conversation on climate change without ice glaciers melting and sea levels rising. Two major components. When I met Inuit people in 2007, I became familiar with what ice melting for them meant for us."

Aligning with Patrick Nunn's description of a "post-glacial" worlding (2018), Taumoepeau's imagining in *i-Land X-isle* was visually referential of the reality that synchronously glacial and tropical marine environments and the Indigenous communities that rely on their resources are the ones on the front line of anthropogenic climate change (see also Buhrich 2010). The significance of ubiquitous suffering from climate change was juxtaposed with the cosmopolitan harborside domain, where tourists and city dwellers enjoyed the security of their built environment and habitual consumerism. As the day drew on, the summer heat caused the ice to melt and drip onto her. Taumoepeau was inspired by Tongan architectural lashing. The ropes placed consensually to restrain her Pacific body created a spectacle in which the bystander effect took hold of the audience. Visions of consent and support were blurred in what Rob Nixon has described as the "slow violence" of climate change (2011), while the experience was accelerated and compressed into a matter of hours. The ropes bit down into the ice and shards of ice fell off. The puddle underneath became a grieving remnant of Oceania—a telling metaphor of the inevitable impact of climate change on local populations.

Teresia Teaiwa famously said, "We sweat and cry salt water, so we know that the ocean is really in our blood" (quoted in Hau'ofa 1994, 127), but one wonders: What is ocean? What is sweat? What are tears?

Taumoepeau's movement in *i-Land X-isle* between soft and hard boundaries of bodies and lands offered an image of an Oceania on the move. Her orange jumpsuit—drawing on the Western association of the color orange with the concept of safety and its use to distinguish objects from their surroundings—provided a startling contrast with the azure sky. She was in danger and on high alert, but this could not stop the melting. The life jacket resembled a failure, a bandage solution of foreign development aid. Lamenting this, the work's title reminds us how climate change has the dangerous potential to greatly disturb Oceanian personhood (i-Land) through the process of exiling (X-isle) by destroying lands and therefore ancestral memory and knowledge.

Similarly, in *Repatriate*—originally shown as a video work at Carriageworks for *24 Frames Per Second* from June to August 2015 and then resurrected two months later as a live performance at Liveworks (see art, 123, this issue)—Taumoepeau, in an expression of Pacific climate grief, lamented the loss of land, which is tied to the loss of intangible forms of knowledge. Featuring a pastiche of Pacific dances learned over her lifetime, *Repatriate* remains one of the only works in which Taumoepeau has used visibly Pacific motifs. In both the video and the live performance, she danced inside a vertical Perspex tank while adorned in a yellow life vest and matching inflatable arm and ankle bands. The tank gradually filled with water, drenching her in the process, but she continued to dance until she was completely submerged (figure 2). The dance was brutally reframed as "modern," a powerful comment on how the changing environment in Oceania impacts its peoples.

In stark contrast to the other contributing artists in *24 Frames Per Second,* who opted to fill the cavernous Carriageworks space with grand-scale offerings—Taumoepeau displayed her work in a small, confined corridor. As she explained to me, this was "a comment on the scale that we consider climate change, which is a small, insignificant thing in comparison to everything else, which I knew was going to be huge." Oceania was specifically envisaged as a transpacific pathway—a crossing point between continental landmasses, as so often envisioned by the trivializing militourism doctrines of maritime empires (see T Teaiwa 2016; DeLoughrey 2007, 2019). In contrast to the other artists' imposing statements, Taumoepeau challenged the audience's personal level of engagement: "If one chooses to cruise through that installation then that's also their personal choice of how they engage with this issue. It means they are also coming from a place of privilege because they can afford to cruise through this as a regu-

Figure 2. Video still from *Repatriate,* by Latai Taumoepeau. *24 Frames Per Second,* Carriageworks, Sydney, 18 June–2 August 2015. Photo courtesy of Latai Taumoepeau.

lar punter in an exhibition. Of course, it might be the aesthetic of work they're not interested in, but if I say, this is a perspective of climate change and it's urgent, but you still wish to walk past it, then I believe that's how you engage with the issue—from a place of privilege."

Hung on the walls were several iPads cued up to different points of time in the dance. These intentionally bore a similarity to the idyllic tourist postcard image, commonplace in many middle-class Australian households, to subvert the utopian projection of desire onto the dance. Instead of a paradise of beaches, viewers were shown an apocalyptic vision of place. In addition, Taumoepeau selected the iPad, a common household item, to display her work, commenting on the proliferation of images exposed on these devices and their "role as [an] intermediary point" of entry into *how* Australia apathetically views the islands. Here, the spectacle of violence on Pacific bodies is the entertainment to choose whether or not to understand or disassociate from. Highlighting a Western attitude of belittlement of the islands, which many Pacific scholars, following Epeli Hau'ofa (1994), have critiqued, the work was purposefully "presented on iPads so we are looking at the scale of how we look at the Pacific. We see it as small."

In the live performance, the Perspex tank created a visceral fishbowl

dynamic between Taumoepeau and the viewer, and the sounds of splashing were more ephemeral. Through this voyeurism, Taumoepeau demanded: "Is the loss of intangible Pacific cultural knowledges something of concern to *you,* the outsider?" This falls squarely in line with Katerina Teaiwa's call for defending intangible forms of cultural heritage:

> In recent years there has been a rapid expansion of climate-change research, journalism and field schools, and scientific adaption and mitigation programs, across Kiribati and other Pacific islands. Few of these consider the precarious status of cultural heritage and knowledge, which, like lands, livelihoods, food and water systems, and built environments, also face the threat of destruction due to climate change. International teams attempt to harness indigenous knowledge to better roll out their programs, but they rarely see the indigenous knowledge and cultures themselves as in need of safe-guarding. . . . A Pacific song or dance is rarely only an empty form of entertainment—a dance and its accompanying chant may contain centuries of corporeal, social and environmental knowledge reflecting the need for balance between human societies and their natural environments. There is a rich chronicle of this in Kiribati, but its survival is not guaranteed. (2019, 55)

In conjunction with this, through *Repatriate,* Taumoepeau also sought to subvert the overtly sexualized "dusky maiden" stereotypes of Polynesian dance: "It starts with a beautiful thing that we understand as a postcard image, and it gets completely destroyed, fucked up, and killed actually."

Writing on the affective and emotional responses generated from "site-specific ecological loss," Peta Tait emphasized that in this work, Taumoepeau's use of "bodily patterns of dance movement habituated to island localities over millennia, was shown to be part of an ongoing practice of identity survival" (2018, 193). Functioning within the trope of paradise, the iPad "postcard images" and real-life dance were disrupted by the buoyancy of the floatation devices in tandem with the water's impediment of the fluid movements. The poor quality of the floaties signified Australia's substandard policies and intentions to support Oceania, reminiscent of development aid. Further, the inexpensive floaties contrasted with the expensive, high-tech iPads to underscore the Pacific's low economic standing in comparison to Western nations. Taumoepeau signaled the hypocrisy of Australia offering Pacific states foreign aid while simultaneously undermining agreed-on emission reduction targets in global forums (eg, through the use of carryover credits). Akin to the symbolism of the life jacket mentioned earlier, the dependency and "acceptance of foreign aid" represented

through the materiality of the floaties inevitably "becomes one of the things that destroy our intangible cultural heritage. [The floatie is] manufactured in comparison to the dance itself. In doing that, the struggle to hold onto the intangible cultural heritage is what I try to capture in that work. It's what we can't touch or feel. It's not an object." Overall, Taumoepeau exposed her Australian audiences to the issue of climate change by enacting a "state of mourning." Rather than bend to apocalyptic framing, like that of the popular media, Oceanian artists are able to confront climate change on their own terms and motivate the settler public into action.

Remembering Pasts and Futures of Resource Extractivism: *Ocean Island, Mine!* and *War Dance of the Final Frontier*

Here, I turn to an examination of Taumoepeau's use of pasts and futures in her works *Ocean Island, Mine!* and *War Dance of the Final Frontier* as a means of acknowledging climate change as part of an ongoing legacy of resource extractivism, environmental plunder, and green imperialism of tropical island spaces across the region (see Grove 1995). The live performance of *Ocean Island, Mine!,* held outdoors at Carriageworks in 2015 and again at the Lion Arts Centre Precinct in 2017, encouraged viewers to explore instances of environmental devastation in Oceania (figure 3; see also art, 63, this issue). Heavily referencing Katerina Teaiwa's writings on phosphate mining across Oceania in the early twentieth century (2015), Taumoepeau artistically relayed the intertwined stories of extractive industries' detrimental impacts on Makatea, Angaur, Nauru, and Banaba for the benefit of the Australian agricultural sector. Dressed all in white, she moved between two piles of ice, one representing the islands and the other Australia, and shoveled ice from one pile to the other over several hours. Sometimes she held the shovel in her hands, while other times she let it drag on the floor behind her. Taumoepeau was slowly "excavating the solid white rock into invisibility" as she solemnly moved the diminishing ice, scoop by scoop. She steered away from familiar tropes of Pacific cultural heritage practice and dance, wherein the body is the "primary cultural material," and instead opted to reinscribe an Oceanian personhood through an act of labor.

Drawing on the changing forms of labor across Oceania, particularly those compelling more people to migrate to Australia under labor schemes, Taumoepeau asserts that somatic acts such as "shoveling are more inter-

Figure 3. Still from *Ocean Island, Mine!,* by Latai Taumoepeau. Carriageworks, Sydney, May 2015. Photo courtesy of Latai Taumoepeau.

esting to me. . . . This is the dance of today. This kind of labor work. These are the movement phrases we have today. They aren't always these beautiful abstract hand gestures we have always had. Of course, those will always be beautiful, but these are still abstract and modern. Who are we today?"

In light of discussions around the increased labor migration across Oceania to prepare for climate change, Taumoepeau also addresses this pressing issue through her evolving efforts to generate more sustainable, immediate, and striking works. For example, while she consulted a world-champion ice sculptor to manufacture the giant ice block in *i-Land X-isle,* for *Ocean Island, Mine!,* she used everyday "party ice" with the "expectation that the audience will read the materials." She proposes that environmental issues like climate change cannot be dependent on big budgets and infinite resources, and the changes she has been making to use more accessible resources and significantly reduce costs reflect this stance. The use of simple, everyday materials has allowed her to create impactful works quickly and with more autonomy: "Moving on from an ice supplier that produced my two tons of ice, after a few years I created a formula for

myself to construct images cheaper and faster by using party ice on a similar scale. . . . I didn't need a license or bureaucracy. It's about having autonomy all the time."

The sourcing of sustainable materials has been a concern, but more pressing is the autonomous distribution of powerful images of Oceanians' engagement with climate change. Taumoepeau emphasizes that to be fair, "in reality, this is the amount bars go through every day." Space then, as defined by the materiality of water in distinct climates, collapses as ice is brought to resemble the deteriorating islands that Taumoepeau has imagined. The urgency to address these issues employs a reflexive Pacific cyclicality to acknowledge that climate change is not the first instance of environmental devastation in Oceania. The slow disintegration of each ice pile reflects the invisibility of the impact of phosphate mining on these islands in the wider cultural imagery. Despite this invisibility, the deterioration is serious: phosphate mining eventually rendered Banaba uninhabitable and forced environmental migration. Repetitive movements across the large expanses between the two ice piles recalled how Oceanian indigeneity can be both "routed" and "rooted" (Clifford 2013). Katerina Teaiwa has described this as an empowering form of artistic Indigenous "remix" in tracking the movement of phosphate to create alternative standings and artistic creations (2014, 2015). These are evidenced in Banaban "performance genres, signalling centuries of cultural exchange, trade and dialogue between islands" in the context of Banaba and Rabi, as well as the profiteering nations of New Zealand and Australia (K Teaiwa 2014, 14). The use of ice in both *i-Land X-isle* and *Ocean Island, Mine!* was thus commanding, as it signified that the atrocities of climate change cannot be severed from past ecological extractivism. Audiences were forced to question the ambivalent contribution of the Australian agricultural and labor industries to the long-term "mining" of Oceania over recent centuries.[2] Moreover, by exhibiting the labor that Oceanians may engage in in the future as a result of labor mobility schemes and environmental relocation, Taumoepeau questioned how this will alter Oceanian relationships to new lands and environments.

Taumoepeau also considered the dangerous futures of deep-sea mining in the cautionary work *War Dance of the Final Frontier.* This disordered genealogical timescale sits in line with a Pacific temporality that is contingent on pasts, as famously proposed by Epeli Hau'ofa, who stated that "the past is alive in us, so in more than a metaphorical sense the dead are alive—we are our history" (2000, 460). In contrast to Western linear and

teleological assumptions of time, Oceanian cultures' conceptualizations of tā and vā (time and space) "locate the past as the time in front, the present as time in the middle, and the future as the time that comes after or behind" (Ka'ili 2008, 39). Consistent memorializing of past ecological crises in Oceania is therefore vital as a spiritual parable for the present and future.

In this work, created for the exhibition *Climate Century* at Hart's Mill Packing Shed in Port Adelaide, Taumoepeau combined live performance and animated video (figure 4). The installation was a speculative response to Canadian deep-sea mining company Nautilus Minerals Inc's 2018 exploration of the mine site Solwara 1, located in the Bismarck Sea of Papua New Guinea, for seafloor massive sulfide deposits of copper and gold. In body armor composed of materials resembling obsidian, volcanic rock, and bleached coral, Taumoepeau embodied the figure of a potent underwater guardian and used a war dance to fight the onslaught of towering structures—the spiked drills and dredging machines used in deep-sea mining. Lofty yet severe electronic music beats by Tongan musician Lonelyspeck built emotional tension in the scene. Taumoepeau choreographed a new dance, recontextualizing figments of Pacific war dances often used in contemporary sports contexts, to counter the encroaching machine. Here, typically meaningful gestures for Pacific diaspora were reassigned to something else just as meaningful. By mobilizing the stereotypical visual cues of Pacific masculinities—like Māori haka, Samoan siva tau, Tongan sipi tau, and Fijian cibi—that saturate Australian media's imagining of Islanders, Taumoepeau wittily used pan-Pacific performance as a tool to defend the seabed. This converted what is commonly seen as a David and Goliath–type battle into a match of remixed tradition (the guardian) standing in the path of the monster of modernity (the machine). The scene ultimately subverted the image of the underwater Pacific as a vacant and cosmic unknown horror, offering a discursive refilling of the ocean with submarine spirits fighting in solidarity with those above water.

The "Ban Experimental Seabed Mining in the Pacific" campaign calling for a Pacific-wide moratorium on the development of deep-sea mining, led by an array of nongovernmental organizations and community groups from across the Pacific and its rim, assisted in halting the controversial deep-sea mining projects in the Bismarck Sea in 2019. However, Nautilus Minerals Inc, among other deep-sea mining companies, plans to grow its tenement holdings in exclusive economic zones across the Pacific (Ban Experimental Seabed Mining in the Pacific 2020). Through her art,

Figure 4. Still from *War Dance of the Final Frontier,* by Latai Taumoepeau. *Climate Century,* Hart's Mill Packing Shed, Port Adelaide, 18 November 2018. Photo by Jenn Greer Holmes, courtesy of Latai Taumoepeau.

Taumoepeau adds to a chorus of Indigenous Pacific voices resisting and expressing their concern over this potential disaster and how it will disturb the human cultures and oceanic spirit guardians they depend on (see, eg, Kanngieser and Tau 2019). She challenges the passive Australian bystander and beneficiary of environmental dominance and disaster to understand the pasts of resource extractivism as well as potential multisited Oceanian futures.

Building Automated Responses: *Archipela_GO . . . . this is not a drill* and *HG57*

As Taumoepeau employs the themes of mourning and remembering in an attempt to raise awareness of environmental decline in Oceania, she also actively seeks to improve the threshold of disaster response mechanisms across the Oceanian diaspora and Australian communities. Working across various disciplines alongside scientists, artists, and activists, she implements a multifocal methodology to approach climate change,

encouraging the preparation of "automated responses" in the case of future emergencies. In *Archipela_GO . . . . this is not a drill,* held at the Museum of Contemporary Art (MCA) in Sydney, Taumoepeau curated multiple environments of upheaval related to Oceania: cyclone, heat wave, earthquake, and tidal wave. In these constructed environments, artists and activists broached a complex set of environmental issues facing Oceania and encouraged participants to build resilience in situating themselves as "part of this ecology." Conscious of how her work may provoke "eco-anxiety" and how apocalyptic allusion can cause paralysis and deter action, Taumoepeau encouraged her audience to playfully engage with the exhibition, keeping an element of fun. Rather than repeating a generic MCA ARTBAR—a periodic "party night" on the final Friday of every month—Taumoepeau assertively wedged Oceanian protest issues within the prestigious Eurocentric entertainment space. She affirms the necessity of play in her work rather than stories of deficit:

> That boundary between Anthropocene-type apocalypse and where we are now. . . . We are at the threshold of that. I'm conscious of that imposition of fear where it incapacitates people. Shang Lun [contributing artist to *Archipela_GO . . . . this is not a drill*] has a term that I really like: the idea of "playing in the dark." There's so much we don't know, but we must have a strong sense of play and curiosity about the unknown in order to create what we *should know* or give us ideas on what we *should do*. Very simple. Keeping heightened imagination and curiosity as we negotiate inevitable issues, I think, is key to moving forward constructively.

A combination of Oceanian artists and activists contributed to the project. In the spirit of recycling, some performances drew on Taumoepeau's intent to repurpose past artworks of renowned artists and give them new meaning through community engagement. The event generated new relations between artists and performers, and the audience took on the role of both participant and observer as they moved through a series of chaotic environments.

Taumoepeau started the night outside the venue with her own reinvigoration of *Eko Drum,* by Canadian Métis scholar Jen Rae (figure 5), as a cleansing ceremony. This performance, which involved rolling a steel oil drum across the floor, represented a ritual water cleansing and was intended to draw attention to the water component of the climate crisis. Next, Tongan and Māori dancer Kilia Tipa and Māori dancer Jamaica Moana from House of Slé, a West Sydney vogue dance collective, learned *Thong Dance,* an iconic excerpt from Wiradjuri choreographer Vicki Van

Figure 5. Still from *Eko Drum,* by Latai Taumoepeau. *Archipela_GO . . . . this is not a drill,* curated by Latai Taumoepeau, MCA ARTBAR, Sydney, 30 June 2017. Photo by Sam Whiteside, courtesy of and © MCA Australia.

Figure 6. Still from *Thong Dance,* choreographed by Vicki Van Hout (2004) and performed by Jamaica Moana and Kilia Tipa. *Archipela_GO . . . . this is not a drill,* curated by Latai Taumoepeau, MCA ARTBAR, Sydney, 30 June 2017. Photo by Sam Whiteside, courtesy of and © MCA Australia.

Hout's *My Right Foot Your Right Foot* (2004) (figure 6). An embodiment of place from Hout's body to theirs, the movement piece also commented on the commodification of Indigenous cultures, absurdly expressed through the repetitive slapping of flip-flops against the gallery's concrete floors.

Recycled Wearable Art, by Fijian fashion designer Bayvick Lawrence, turned rubbish found washed up on a Fijian beach into a wedding dress and other clothing items (figure 7). The presence of the models throughout the night reminded the audience of the fashion industry's focus on consumption and highlighted the impact of Australian consumerism on Oceania, especially as soil erosion has begun to affect raw materials for traditional assets like "mulberry trees and its bark which is used for masi making" (Silaitoga 2015).

Choreographer Deborah Kelly's *Tank Man Tango* (2009), a dance inspired by the famed Tank Man of the Tiananmen Square protests, was reimagined by the Matavai Pacific Cultural Arts collective from the Sydney suburb of Liverpool (figure 8). Suggesting the deadly ecological

Figure 7. Still from *Recycled Wearable Art,* by Bayvick Lawrence. *Archipela_GO . . . . this is not a drill,* curated by Latai Taumoepeau, MCA ARTBAR, Sydney, 30 June 2017. Photo by Sam Whiteside, courtesy of and © MCA Australia.

impact of plastics on the oceans, the dance was performed in traditional tapa clothing to the beat of Oceanian drums. The juxtaposition of the traditional dance and tapa with the plastic bag was a challenge to the audience to consider the impact of their use of plastics on Pacific environments and the cultures they sustain. Another kind of bag appeared in the video work *Pacific Wash-Up* (2003), by Rachael Rakena, Fez Fa'anana, and Brian Fuata, which portrayed migrant Islanders in striped Chinese laundry bags rising from the waves on the sands of Bondi Beach. As the video played, members from the Pacific Climate Warriors' Sydney chapter walked around the museum wearing the same laundry bag as clothing and discussed their cause with guests. The vaka (canoe) from their famed Newcastle Flotilla protest against Australian coal ports in 2014, which was acquired by the Australian Museum, was vibrantly displayed.

Countless other activities saw Oceanians and Australians jointly consider climate change over the course of the night. Lee Shang Lun's *EXODUS* allowed visitors to decide the fate of the Maldives in an inter-

Figure 8. Still from *Tank Man Tango,* choreographed by Deborah Kelly (2009) and performed by Matavai Pacific Cultural Arts. *Archipela_GO . . . . this is not a drill,* curated by Latai Taumoepeau, MCA ARTBAR, Sydney, 30 June 2017. Photo by Sam Whiteside, courtesy of and © MCA Australia.

active board game. In *Salt Stone,* by Samoan Angela Tiatia, a slow-moving painting of the Tuvaluan sea bubbled over concrete while the audience was immersed in the soundscape from Taumoepeau's *Repatriate,* which was inspired by the me'etu'upaki, a Tongan liturgical dance performed before sea voyages. People were invited to engage in Oceanian cultural activities such as making lolly lei to be subsequently gifted, joining a rugby drill, or learning a Māori haka. The night concluded with Filipinx Justin Shoulder's performance as the post-climate-apocalypse character Carrion singing a warped rendition of Lana Del Rey's 2012 hit "Summertime Sadness" (figure 9).

Given the acute omission of contemporary Pacific art in Australian museums (see Zeplin 2013), Taumoepeau's curation of artworks that address climate change from a diverse array of Oceanian perspectives was an important act in representing climate change in a thoughtful yet playfully engaging way. As a Pasifika attendee, I found seeing so many contemporary Oceanian artists and activists in one museum space to be, without question, incredibly empowering. In *Archipela_GO . . . . this is not a drill,*

Figure 9. Still from *Carrion,* by Justin Shoulder. *Archipela_GO . . . . this is not a drill,* curated by Latai Taumoepeau, MCA ARTBAR, Sydney, 30 June 2017. Photo by Sam Whiteside, courtesy of and © MCA Australia.

embodied collective processing of issues through art-story was encouraged and the Pacific's survival through joyful resistance was celebrated.

On another, more seriously corporeal level are Taumoepeau's 2016 and 2017 contributions to the recurring exhibition *HG57*. Every year since 2016, Refuge Arts House in Melbourne has brought together artists, emergency management personnel, and local and regional communities to create a twenty-four-hour relief center for an imagined climate disaster. There were different themes for each year: *Flood* (2016), *Heatwave* (2017), *Pandemic* (2018), *Displacement* (2019–2020). In organizing these events—or drills—Refuge Arts House underlines the importance of "social and community resilience and valuing an artistic approach to complex issues," as well as propelling "a growing cohort of artists into leading edge innovators of creative preparedness" through innovative and experimental art (Arts House 2017). A unique program pioneered by Emergency Management Victoria, *HG57* emphasizes that imagining a "climate disaster" is critical: "Through an interdisciplinary approach, artists, service providers, and the community work together to rehearse climate-related emergencies, exploring the impact of creativity in specifically building preparedness through a longitudinal action-research project, led by experimental contemporary artists" (Actipedia 2017).

For Taumoepeau, the work is a community exercise in preparedness for emergency events—an intervention predominantly about "building an automated response" in Australians, who currently do not have experience in disaster risk reduction and response due to the Australian state's struggle to adequately address the present reality of climate-inflicted catastrophe. Disaster preparedness requires establishing and rehearsing crisis responses so that things will eventually "click into place" and people will take appropriate action automatically. Drawing on the collectivism intrinsic to Oceanian cultures, Taumoepeau emphasizes that ecological vulnerability makes these people "constantly aware of the physical threat that they're in, but they also have social structures to let them act quickly, proactively and together." Their holistic ability to respond to a crisis is not limited by categorization into emergency-relief professions and vocations as seen in Australia: "They do it because of their connection to place, but what do we [in Australia] do? We wait for E.S. [Emergency Services] to tell us what to do." In her words, the project encourages those of the North Melbourne community to consider "that process [as] a framework enabling Australians to think bigger than they are and consider the 'macro' space around climate change through disasters. Which is not thinking about

yourself. We don't have that in our country; it's not automated. If you go to any of the islands or the village, automated responses are thinking collectively. What's my part? How do I participate? What can I do for us?"

Both *Flood* and *Heatwave* centered on the Tongan concepts of maāma (light) and māfana (warmth). Expanding the idea of tauhi vā, or the Tongan art of social relations (see Ka'ili 2008), the aesthetics and symmetry of tā-vā configurations in both works allowed Taumoepeau to create routinized rhythms to evoke the strong emotions of māfana. Here, she questioned how people generate these outside of conventional exercise rituals by framing a recognizable, futile exercise routine—running laps around an athletic track—as a human board game, which she described as a "generator." Through its futility, the game became a think tank that forced the players to consider their respective privileges and dependencies. Moreover, it promoted discussion between players around notions of clean energy and our production and consumption habits. By playing with the ways people understand athletic tracks and running around ovals, the exercise became rhythmic and, to Taumoepeau, "a bit humorous because what could running around in circles be or become?" What knowledge about floods and heat waves might people share when there is no visible end in sight?

The *Heatwave* "Power Station" in 2017 took on even more significance after the Australian bushfires of 2019–2020, during which there were not enough trained and volunteer firefighters available to provide emergency services due to frequent exhaustion and heat stress. Here, members of all professions in society were invited to complete a forty-minute choreographed exercise circuit (figure 10). Resembling a large board game "comprising two sections of HOT&COOL, for up to 20 people to train at a time," the work had the "collective goal for the participants to produce a target amount of energy, with the output of calories converted to kilojoules displayed on a large screen" (Intimate Spectacle 2017). Throughout, the participants experienced a rise in body temperature, but they also had the option to cool down their bodies or those of others with items such as fans or wet towels. Taumoepeau stated that in this iteration she demanded that her more physically able participants consider what their own contributions would be in the event of a heat-wave disaster brought on by climate change: "What can we assume and demand from them? What can we demand from them outside of running around for a ball when the emergency is here? Because in the islands, the most physically fit

Figure 10. Still from *HG57*, by Latai Taumoepeau. Refuge Arts House, Melbourne, 2017. Photo by Bryony Jackson Lores, courtesy of Latai Taumoepeau.

[need] to take on a position. They want to assume a position of being a warrior. 'Well, what *else* can you do?' is my question to them."

Given the intersectionality of the audiences present for these works, Taumoepeau also hoped that *Heatwave* would inspire us to ask what the *HG57* project will mean for those of us who are women or nonbinary: "What are the ways you can be a resource to the community, and where else can you put yourself on the line?" She shared an anecdote from when she approached the men's and women's football teams for the project: "I approached the most professional [men's] teams in North Melbourne, but there were a few complications with engaging them. But the women's teams, which are about three hundred strong, are actually engaging, which for me is *telling*. In disasters, women are the most impacted and vulnerable because they are generally the caregivers and they will do thirty-five different things. So it's interesting that the women's teams are engaged in that."

Overall, this section has tracked the evolving art of Taumoepeau in her quest to encourage audiences to build automated responses to disaster sit-

uations. In *HG57,* she sought to encourage people to take whatever action they can through mental and physical training exercises. Western ideas of profession and vocation were deconstructed through the use of Pacific collectivist values that promote role-based systems, allowing those who physically *can* to step up and be trained on how to mitigate heat-wave disasters. Moreover, in her work for *Heatwave,* she attempted to understand (and perhaps overturn) how notions of gender influence dynamics of ability in Australian societies. Working in tandem with emergency-response services, artists and communities followed a multilevel response process that provided guidance on how we might assist those in Oceania as a region, which in turn reflexively built capability in the individual participants.

Conclusion

Latai Taumoepeau's art is exemplary of the critical work that a chorus of contemporary Oceanian artists are doing to address climate change. Such artists include Angela Tiatia and Brian Fuata, as well as members of activist groups and art collectives such as the Australian chapters of the Pacific Climate Warriors (Jacynta Fuamatu, Lisa Viliamu, Bayvick Lawrence, and Folole Florence Tupuola); Black Birds Creative Arts Co (Emele Ugavule, Ayeesha Ash, and Sela Vai); and New Wayfinders (Yasbelle Kerkow and Alec Reade). The works described in this article were not just static representations of a historical narrative; rather, they constituted an active and interactive endeavor to enhance awareness, modify perceptions, and effect meaningful change in people's climate responsiveness. Through a series of compelling and evolving provocations, Taumoepeau has garnered critical attention to and focused the spotlight on engaging Australian audiences in their complicity within the fossil fuel industries. With Tongan methodologies and cosmologies centered in her praxis, as we saw with *i-Land X-isle* and *Repatriate,* Taumoepeau characterizes her work as a state of mourning the loss of land and intangible ancestral knowledges. These themes also extend to her other works, such as *Ocean, Island Mine!* and *War Dance of the Final Frontier,* which identified the long-running foreign impact on Oceania as a result of resource extractivism through the example of mining. Instead of inaction, however, Taumoepeau calls for resistance, preparation, and the development of constructive automated responses through interactive art experiences such as *Archipela_GO . . . . this is not a drill* and *HG57.*

Given the lack of deep critical attention paid to artistic aspects of Pacific movements and diplomacy and the sparsely documented work of climate-justice artists, I assert that documenting the activist art-story work of artists like Taumoepeau is a critical task for Pacific academics today. Contemporary Pacific artists are vital contributors to articulating the contours of a new counter-story of Oceania and have expanded a grammar for the types of environmental and humanitarian harms that have been inflicted by climate change in the region. Taumoepeau certainly creates works in solidarity with other climate justice–oriented artists, activists, and scholars, such as Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner from the Marshall Islands and Joy Lehuanani Enomoto from Hawai'i. Such artists adhere to an ethos of the influential regional Pacific movement Youngsolwara, powerfully advocated for by the beloved scholar Teresia Teaiwa, that champions "art as a tool for social change across the solwara/moana" as a means of transformative decolonial intervention into the everyday discourses about the Pacific and of remaking Pacific worlds that are imbued with a strong sense of environmental stewardship and Indigenous sovereignty (Youngsolwara 2021).

In essence, this article has demonstrated the value of listening to Pacific voices—not only to critique and expand narrow representational practices in the climate-justice movement but also to provide more nuanced understandings of climate change from a diasporic perspective. This is especially important for those living in places like Australia that produce massive carbon emissions and are committed to the coal industry. Drawing on a vast genealogy of resistance from cultural pasts (K Teaiwa 2018), Taumoepeau demonstrates resistance within vulnerability and negates the Western definition of resilience that insists that the collapse of our environments necessitates the collapse of our cultures. In fact, culture informs and is responsive to climate change and vice versa. Her approach allows for a reframing of climate change and provides insight into how Oceanians in diaspora politically confront asymmetrical power relations and the apathy of powerful nations like Australia.

* * *

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Notes

1 Unless otherwise noted, all quotes by Latai Taumoepeau are from interviews with the author conducted on 1 September 2017.

2 The histories of phosphate mining on Banaba were also addressed at Carriageworks and MTG Hawke's Bay Tai Ahuriri through the collaboration *Project Banaba* (2017, 2019), by Katerina Teaiwa and curated by Yuki Kihara (in 2017) and Kihara and Jess Mio (in 2019). The 2017 iteration was reviewed by Mitiana Arbon (2019).

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Abstract

Over the past two decades, foreign discourses of climate change have envisioned the demise of the tropical island as a tragic metaphor for the fate of the world. Oceanians have indeed borne the brunt of the age of climate change; however, not all have submitted to the colonial trope of passive victims on the frontline of global forces beyond their control. While political, legal, and cultural forms of resistance have been well documented in the scholarship of Oceania, there remains a largely unexplored field of academic inquiry concerning the role of Oceanian activist art-story. This article seeks to redress this shortfall by examining the central importance of Tongan artist Latai Taumoepeau's body-centered performance art within the settler-colonial context of Australia. Given the historical failings of successive Australian governments to address climate change, since 2013 Taumoepeau has consistently used embodiment-driven art performance to confront the apathy of Australia's leadership and settler public and to highlight the importance of Indigenous Pacific environmental stewardship and leadership in addressing these issues. Weaving talanoa-based interviews with critical analysis, I examine several of her artistic works, including *i-Land X-isle* (2012); *Repatriate* (2015); *Ocean Island, Mine!* (2015); *War Dance of the Final Frontier* (2018); *Archipela_GO . . . . this is not a drill* (2017); and *HG57 (Human Generator 57)* (2016–2020). These projects illuminate the power of diasporic Pacific arts not only to solidify an enduring regional identity vested in Oceania but also to engage the broader Australian public around the ongoing environmental concerns of Oceania.

KEYWORDS: Oceania, Pacific diaspora, climate change, performance art, resistance, Pacific regionalism