

# Experiencing Pacific Environments: Pasts, Presents, Futures<sup>1</sup>

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Being a Pacific Islander to me means having this incredible heritage of an intense relationship with the environment. The Pacific Ocean is the largest single geographical space on the planet. Our ancestors found it, settled it; and it is a gift [that] we have a responsibility to look after it with our minds, with our hearts, with our spirits.

—TERESIA TEAIWA<sup>2</sup>

The Pacific is the largest ocean and indeed the largest single geographical area on earth, a vast sea of islands (Hau‘ofa 2008) with different land- and seascapes: from the continental islands of New Guinea and Aotearoa New Zealand to the volcanic islands and atolls of seafaring Oceania (D’Arcy 2006). Oceania’s remarkable geographic and topographic diversity is matched by its cultural and linguistic richness (Nuttall and Veitayaki 2015).<sup>3</sup> Some of the islands are rich in minerals and natural resources, while others are small locations in large maritime spaces. Some people in the highlands of New Guinea may never see the sea in their lifetimes, while others are fighting to preserve their tiny land masses in an era of rising sea levels (Bryant-Tokalau 2018; Crook and Rudiak-Gould 2018).

This diversity of Pacific environments has always been subject to a range of environmental challenges, often triggering profound social change. Oceania has been prone to natural disasters such as cyclones, earthquakes, volcanic eruptions, and tsunamis (Ballard, Calandra, and McDonnell forthcoming). The long and ongoing histories of migration, from early settlements of the islands (D’Arcy 2006; Kirch 2000) to present transnational migrations (Lee and Francis 2009; Taylor and Lee 2017), have always involved adaptation to, and the making of, new environments. Some of

the significant changes that Pacific peoples have experienced over the last decades and centuries include those related to Christianity (J Barker 1990; Choi and Jolly 2014; Robbins 2004); colonialism (Douglas and Ballard 2012; Flexner 2014); urbanization (Dussy and Wittersheim 2013); nuclear testing (H Barker 2004; T Teaiwa 1994); and forced relocations (Kiste 1974; K Teaiwa 2015).<sup>4</sup> Yet the contemporary era has often accelerated these experiences and lent them new qualities and meanings. Today, environmental changes occurring across the Pacific, and indeed the world, are more profound in terms of scale, more rapid in terms of pace, and more complex in terms of the actors involved (Tsing 2005, 2015). Climate change, for example, exacerbates previously known cycles of natural disasters (Jacka 2009; Hofmann 2018). Floods, cyclones, and droughts recur more frequently and with greater intensity. These existential changes are further intensified by the ever-aggravating consequences of the externally driven forces of capitalism and globalization, such as mining (Kirsch 2006, 2014; Golub 2014; Jacka 2015); large-scale plantation agriculture; and deforestation (Bell, West, and Filer 2015). These unprecedented scales of damage produce new modes of being, living, making, and knowing the world (West 2016, 27).<sup>5</sup>

Given the pressing environmental challenges confronting the region, in this special issue, we shed light on the diverse ways in which people in Oceania experience their “intense relationship with the environment” (T Teaiwa, quoted in Tagata Pasifika 2015), as well as the diverse ways in which environmental knowledge can be articulated. In doing this, we advocate for equal recognition of different worlds and seek to advance the decolonization and pluralization of scholarship about environmental and ecological pasts, presents, and futures (Mawyer and Jacka 2018; Bennett and others 2019). We follow suit by traversing disciplinary boundaries between the arts and academia and by engaging with different epistemologies and ways of presenting and disseminating knowledge. To achieve this, it is essential to conduct inquiries in various modes by considering multiple ways of constructing and articulating knowledge. For instance, across Oceania, customary teaching and learning are embedded in daily practices, and Pacific scholars situate their experience and knowledge not only in Pacific epistemologies but also in Pacific ways of expressing and communicating (Oliveira 2014; T Teaiwa 2001; Tengan 2005). They often cross the boundaries between poetry, literature, drama, and academic writing without prioritizing one over the other (Hereniko 1995; Thaman 2014). Due to these specific positionalities, their works are crossovers that

address significant academic and political issues through personal experiences and from particular subject positions.

A dialogue between Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars adverts to possible differences between immediate versus communicated experience for the production and articulation of situated knowledges (Haraway 1988). Most academic knowledge is built on the interpretation of interlocutors' expressions of their experiences and of the research experience itself (Bruner 1986). These partial knowledges or visions emerge mostly from outsiders' long-term engagements with Indigenous individuals and communities. Indigenous scholarship, however, is often grounded in personal and community experiences and engages with academic knowledge from these specific subjective perspectives (Smith 2012). Yet it is important to note that all kinds of knowledge and all scholarly traditions are multilayered, intersectional, and shaped by particular historical developments and sociocultural embeddedness.

Originally presented as keynotes at the 2017 European Society for Oceanists conference in Munich, Germany, the articles brought together in this special issue respond to this context by bringing into dialogue a range of disciplinary perspectives presented through different but coproduced registers and positionalities, including those of Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars. Action research and exhibitionary interventions (Huhana Smith) as well as performative arts (Michael Mel) challenge us to reflect on how environmental knowledge can be expressed and disseminated. The dialogue between (oral) history (Chris Ballard), linguistics (Nicolas Evans), and anthropology (Deborah Gewertz and Frederick Errington) sheds striking light on human relations with environments. A position piece about Pacific alternatives for navigating the challenges of the twenty-first century (Myjolyne Kim) prompts us to convert scholarship into action. The collection concludes with an afterword (Anne Salmond). Each essay contributes to our understanding of how the represented communities have engaged and are engaging with specific dimensions of their environments. In this way, we seek to map out the diversity of environmental experiences in the Pacific.

This focus on experiencing environments allows us to illuminate empirical realities and to highlight people's agency and perspectives as well as their innovative capacities to retain, transform, and (re)create ways of life in their interactions with human and other-than-human entities in relation to, and embedded in, specific environments. In our effort to study experiences of Pacific environments, the term "experience" could be quickly

overdetermined and conceptually and normatively limited through a too narrow engagement with the frames of phenomenology, psychoanalysis, and so forth. Here, we suggest the everyday use of the term “experience” as referring to the ways through which people locate themselves in time and space. We are interested in this duality of environmental experiences, their simultaneous spatial embedding and temporal negotiation, for instance through memories, narratives, and genealogies. It seems to us to be of great importance to examine and document how Pacific environments are experienced, which presents new research challenges: How are experiences and environments spatially and temporally reconstituted in rapidly changing times, and how are Pacific lifeworlds (re)created and experienced through interactions between human and other-than-human entities? To address these questions, the articles collected here explore how cosmologies are modified through environmental negotiation processes and how ontological features are entangled and transformed as they interact with one another.

This sort of focus on experience can be informed by seminal works in the anthropology of experience (Turner 1982; Turner and Bruner 1986), which build on Wilhelm Dilthey’s concept of experience incorporating both living through (*Erleben*) and giving meaning and value to, or objectifying, what one has lived through (*Erfahrung*). Victor Turner and Edward Bruner alerted us to the concept of experience as a multilayered subjective process that can only be communicated to and understood by others through its expressions (Bruner 1986; Turner 1982). These expressions can be, for example, artworks, exhibitions, stories, performances, and texts that are articulated and represented through different registers available to differently positioned interlocutors, such as Indigenous and non-Indigenous scholars. Both the process of objectifying what one has lived through and the ways in which one expresses lived experiences are informed and shaped by sociopolitical, cultural, and historical contingencies (Bruner 1986; Turner 1982). This focus on experience and expression frames the wide range of themes covered in this issue, as well as the different formats through and different positions from which these contributions have been written in order to privilege multiple ways of constructing and expressing knowledges. While a more recent “anthropology of experience” also entails other fields, such as embodiment (see, eg, Csordas 1994; Mascia-Lees 2011); phenomenology (eg, Ram and Houston 2015; for an overview see Desjarlais and Throop 2011); and the senses (see Pink and Howes 2010; Porcello and others 2010), we are interested in the everyday

use of the term “experience” as outlined earlier and the various ways in which it can be expressed.

Similarly, in this collection, the term “environment” is understood in a broad sense, encompassing land, water, climate, and material things in different social, political, and economic formations and spaces. We draw on previous work that conceptualizes environment not as a given, definite, and specified entity but as a constantly changing category in relation to other agents, thus stressing coactivity and entanglement (Haraway 2016; Latour 2005; Ingold 2000; see also Pascht and Dürr 2017, 9). Environments are thus in flux, in a constant state of evolving and responding rather than existing and being acted on. The authors in this special issue, then, do not so much define what *the* environment *is* as scrutinize the diversity of conceptualizations and practices through which *an* environment *is produced* in a specific moment or period of time, as well as what it *might be* in a particular context.

This comprehensive understanding of the environment and the multiple forms in which it is experienced draws on posthumanist approaches and is particularly relevant in the context in question (Haraway 2016; Tsing 2015). While humanist ways of thinking highlight how humans express themselves through material forms (Miller 2005), posthumanists emphasize the very nature of things, including their properties, and thus their status as “things” altogether (Ingold 2007; Latour 2005). This line of thinking de-privileges humans—not to deny their powerful agency but to foreground the efficacy of other-than-humans and their participation in the production of worlds. Importantly, these worldly assemblages do not occur accidentally but instead are situated in, and enacted through, specific sociopolitical and interest-driven contexts (Bessire and Bond 2014; West 2016; Fortun 2014).

The culture/nature divide—first postulated scientifically, then widely taken for granted, and heavily contested over recent decades (MacCormack and Strathern 1980; Latour 1993, 2017)—has normatively underpinned conceptualizations of “the environment” that are no longer sustainable, as the gathering debate around the Anthropocene and the global history of the environmental anthropogenic impact attests (Davies 2016; Tsing 2015). Rather than critiquing these normative frames in politics, law, and academia, the articles collected here suggest that it is more meaningful and productive to (re)turn to the empirical or experiential foundation from and through which an environment becomes a human and other-than-human reality and where, arguably, the culture/nature divide has hardly

ever existed in practice. Collectively, they set out to study Pacific environments “from below” and “in motion,” so to speak.

Experiencing environments also entails an ontological dimension. Anthropology in the Pacific has always dealt with ontological questions, even though they have not necessarily been framed as such (see Hviding 1996; Munn 1986; Strathern 1980, 1988; Wagner 1981). Considering these principles explicitly adds further analytical and theoretical potential to our inquiries in this special issue. It helps us to delve more deeply into Pacific ways of thinking and being and allows for a reconceptualization of categories that are often conceived of as given, such as “environment,” “plants,” and “memory.” We find that drawing on ontological dimensions is particularly apt for revealing what these categories might be rather than taking them for granted or as self-evident (Holbraad and Pedersen 2017, 4).<sup>6</sup>

The study of the multilayered and mobile systems of relations underpinning human experiences of environments requires us to consider the ways in which other-than-human entities participate in the organization of the social world, taking into account the unequal distribution of power among the various agents (Glowczewski 2015; Salmond 2014; West 2006). With this in mind, some of the articles here suggest that we must pay attention to the wider contextual framework in which these processes are situated—in terms of political constellations, economic interests, and social inequality that impact the myriad layers of an environment. This includes being attentive to the heterogeneity of voices—and ways of knowing and being—regarding gender, generation, and social position.<sup>7</sup> In doing so, this special issue not only contributes to the wider ontological debate in anthropology but also engages with recent Pacific affirmations of plural ecologies in environmental struggles and disasters in the region, affirmations that have been made across a range of disciplines, from geology to Pacific studies (eg, Hikuroa 2017; Salmond 2014, 2015; K Teaiwa 2015).

These posthumanist and ontological strands of thought are relevant for our endeavor, as Pacific cosmologies make few if any dualistic distinctions such as culture versus nature or subject versus object. Pacific Islanders are part of, and move through, land and sea (Hau‘ofa 2008; Diaz 2011; K Teaiwa 2014, 2015). Across Oceania, “land and sea are specific materially, culturally, and spiritually grounded and often animated spaces” (K Teaiwa 2014, 78); they are the roots and routes of Oceanic lifeworlds (Clifford 1997). Here, environments entail relations between people and spirits, animals and plants, deities and materialized ances-

tors (Henare 2007; Hereniko and Schorch 2018). These relationships are enacted through processes of exchange and reciprocity that are constitutive of personhood, sociality, and environments (Munn 1986; Strathern 1988). For instance, gift and food exchanges are avenues of connection with, separation from, and transformations of clans, lineages, and individuals, including ancestors (Leach 2003). In the maritime spaces of Oceania, relations and gift exchanges connect islands and travel across the sea while simultaneously affirming belonging and claims to land and place. These “saltwater socialities” move along social networks and physical pathways for everyday life practices, such as fishing, as well as for ritual purposes (Schneider 2012). Movements embody and reveal the state of social relations. Movement, however, also implies mooring, which is critical in maintaining belonging by constituting places and social relations (Hofmann 2016). Teresia Teaiwa coined the notion of “Islanding” as a verb to refer to islands as practice, action, and performance (Teaiwa in Baldacchino and Clark 2013). Environments, like people, are thus relational and mobile (Diaz 2011). They are far from unchangeable. Rather, they are dynamic and subject to social change (see Gewertz and Errington, this issue).

We further argue that the spatial and temporal dimensions of experiencing environments are inextricably linked. Therefore, we must take historical processes and their contemporary resonance into account. In Oceania, the past is not only a remembrance (Hau‘ofa 2008), for instance in terms of collective memories of changing environments, but also one of the ways many Pacific Islanders define their present identities in continuity with cosmological foundations and genealogical relations. For example, by memorializing ancestral landscapes (see Evans, this issue) or by integrating capitalist developments into totemic practices (see Gewertz and Errington, this issue), the then and there is tied into the here and now. In addition, topographic features can act as markers to structure time and create genealogical ties, or they may even be seen as part of, or as an extension of, the self (see Ballard; Evans, this issue; Kuchler 1993). Moreover, historicities and collective memories are constructions of the past made in the present and geared toward the future (see Ballard, this issue). As such, they are always embedded in contemporary contestations and power relations (Berliner 2005; Stewart 2016).

In Oceania, knowledge of the past—of genealogies, ancestors, and myths—has always been crucial for claiming land and political power, and, as such, it has always been subject to change as well as manipulation (Rumsey and Weiner 2001; White and Lindstrom 1997; France 1969).

Today, knowledge of the past has become a crucial factor in mobilizing Indigenous struggles for and claims to customary land and coastal areas all over the region and is seminal in claiming sovereignty and territory against the interests of governments; extractive industries (Bainton 2010; Kirsch 2014); and capitalist expansion through land grabbing (McDonnell, Allen, and Filer 2017; Bambridge 2016; Jacka 2015; West 2016). It is important to note, as Epeli Hau'ofa reminded us, that in Oceania time is both circular and linear: "That the past is ahead, in front of us, is a conception of time that helps to retain our memories and be aware of its presence" (2008, 67). The past and memories of human and other-than-human ancestors are narrated through genealogies and cosmologies, performed in rituals and dances, and culturally and physically inscribed in Oceanic land- and seascapes (Ballard 2014; Hau'ofa 2008, 41–59). These acts of remembering in and of different environments constitute memoryscapes, for example, through spaces of performance (see Mel, this issue) and exhibitions (see Smith, this issue); the transmission of stories and narratives (see Ballard; Kim, this issue); the planting and knowledge of coconut trees in the landscape (see Evans, this issue); or the ownership and protection of totemic knowledge in the face of capitalism (see Gewertz and Errington, this issue)—all of which are addressed in this special issue.<sup>8</sup>

As the contributors to this special issue show, "environmentally situated experiences" (Ingold 2000, 138) of Pacific pasts have shaped collective memories and cultural knowledge that correspond with Pacific presents and inform Pacific futures. More specifically, the experience of environmental transformations caused by climate change and the environmentally harmful consequences of neoliberal capitalism across the region spur the mobilization of "ecologically based oral narratives" (Hau'ofa 2008, 64) to respond to and (re)interpret changing circumstances in the present and to (re)imagine potential futures (Schorch and Pascht 2017). Further, the contemporary global concern with environmental challenges sparks new ideas and practices to address the question of how best to interact with the environment. More often than not, these calls, or even imperatives, are framed in ethical terms and predominantly coined in Western, or Western-dominated, institutional contexts, frequently with an eye on developmentalist politics. Indigenous peoples respond to these notions in their own creative ways, harnessing and rearticulating them to meet their needs and interests, in accord with their worldviews and ontological prin-

ciples (Sahlins 1985; Gewertz and Errington 2016; Mageo and Hermann 2017; Gneccchi-Rusccone and Pains 2017).

In this special issue, Pacific environments and Pacific experiences, diverse and transformed, homely or risky, are considered. The authors deal with different cases and themes and operate through different positionalities to reveal some of the multiple ways of experiencing Pacific environments—their pasts, presents, and futures.

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## Notes

1 The theme of this special issue is inspired by the eleventh conference of the European Society for Oceanists, *Experiencing Pacific Environments*, held at the Ludwig-Maximilians-Universität München in Germany in 2017. We refer to the Pacific as synonymous with Oceania, as defined in Epeli Hau'ofa's seminal essays "Our Sea of Islands" and "The Ocean in Us" (2008, 27–40, 41–59) and as commonly applied in contemporary Pacific studies.

2 Quoted in Tagata Pasifika 2015.

3 Since the early days of imperialism, outsiders have made attempts to classify and categorize these diverse lifeworlds and their different environments. The European division of Oceania into Melanesia, Polynesia, and Micronesia was substantially influenced by early ethnologists (Thomas 1989) and racial and colonial histories (Douglas 2008; Tcherkézoff 2003). While in many ways oversimplistic and overgeneralizing (Douglas 1979), the distinctions have informed postcolonial collective identities and political alliances (Kabutaulaka 2015; K Teaiwa 2007; Thomas 1989). It is in this contemporary sense that we apply these terms, as they are widely used by Pacific Islanders and political leaders themselves.

4 It would be misguided to see this as a one-dimensional process. How people experienced these processes depended on multiple factors such as location;

social position and mobility (Standfield 2018); gender (Jolly and MacIntyre 1989); and the surrounding political situation. Pacific Islanders indigenized Christianity (J Barker 1990; Choi and Jolly 2014), and they migrated to urban centers and built Pacific urbanities (Dussy and Wittersheim 2013; Jourdan and Lindstrom 2017). With European colonialism and missionization came new materialities that were appropriated by both Islanders and Europeans (Thomas 1991). That said, the violence that occurred in some parts of Oceania cannot be denied. In various parts of the Pacific, people were abducted by blackbirders and taken to the plantations of northern Queensland (Banivanua-Mar 2007). Nowhere were environmental damages as devastating as in the northern Pacific and French Polynesia, where the United States and France tested their nuclear weapons (Genz 2019; Saura 2015). There, Islanders suffered the consequences of militarism, nuclear testing, and forced relocations (DeLisle 2015; Kiste 1974; K Teaiwa 2015).

5 The literature is too wide to be completely cited here. What most studies reveal, however, is the complexity of the processes involved in and people's experiences of environmental changes. Just as earlier studies of change and encounter in the Pacific highlight Indigenous agency and meaning making for the accommodation of new events (Sahlins 1985; Schieffelin and Crittenden 1991; Wagner 1981), recent works emphasize Indigenous ontologies, epistemologies, and agency in the ways Pacific Islanders deal with a rapidly changing world (Bell, West, and Filer 2015; Dürr and Pascht 2017; Jacka 2015; Kirksey 2012). Furthermore, there is always both rupture and continuity in change (Sahlins 1985, 1999; Schorch and Pascht 2017).

6 We are aware of the critique that ontological positions fail to examine the political issues surrounding the environment (Bessire and Bond 2014; Gewertz and Errington 2016; West 2016), but our focus on experience warrants an engagement with the ontological dimensions of human existence. These, however, should always be placed within, and not isolated from, wider sociopolitical contexts.

7 This also allows us to reflect critically on who speaks for whom and on what terms instead of generalizing and ultimately essentializing individual perceptions or strategies as cultural markers or ethnic traits (Abu-Lughod 1991; Mohanty 1991).

8 These contributions address a diverse range of intense relationships between people and their environments in the Pacific through experiences and expressions in the present. Quite naturally, however, this issue does not cover *all* relationships, experiences, and expressions. For example, the contributions do not cover large-scale capitalist-driven environmental changes—such as those caused by fisheries, mining, and deforestation—and their impact on human lifeworlds, which are discussed in the widening literature we have referenced throughout this introduction.

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*Abstract*

In the context of pressing environmental challenges in the Pacific and indeed the world, this special issue sheds light on the diverse ways in which people in Oceania experience environments, as well as the diverse ways in which environmental knowledge can be articulated. Inspired by previous work that conceptualizes the environment not as a given, definite, and specified entity but as a constantly changing category in relation to other agents, the articles collected here stress coactivity and entanglement and promote a broad sense of the environment in Oceania as encompassing land, water, climate, and material things in different social, political, and economic formations and spaces. By focusing on experiencing environments, this collection illuminates empirical realities and highlights people's agency and perspectives as well as their innovative capacities to retain, transform, and (re)create ways of life in their interactions with human and other-than-human entities. It advocates for equal recognition of different worlds and seeks to advance the decolonization and pluralization of scholarship. This special issue works toward this by traversing disciplinary boundaries between the arts and academia and between Indigenous and non-Indigenous epistemologies and ways of presenting and disseminating knowledge.

KEYWORDS: environment, experience, knowledge, epistemologies, decolonization of scholarship