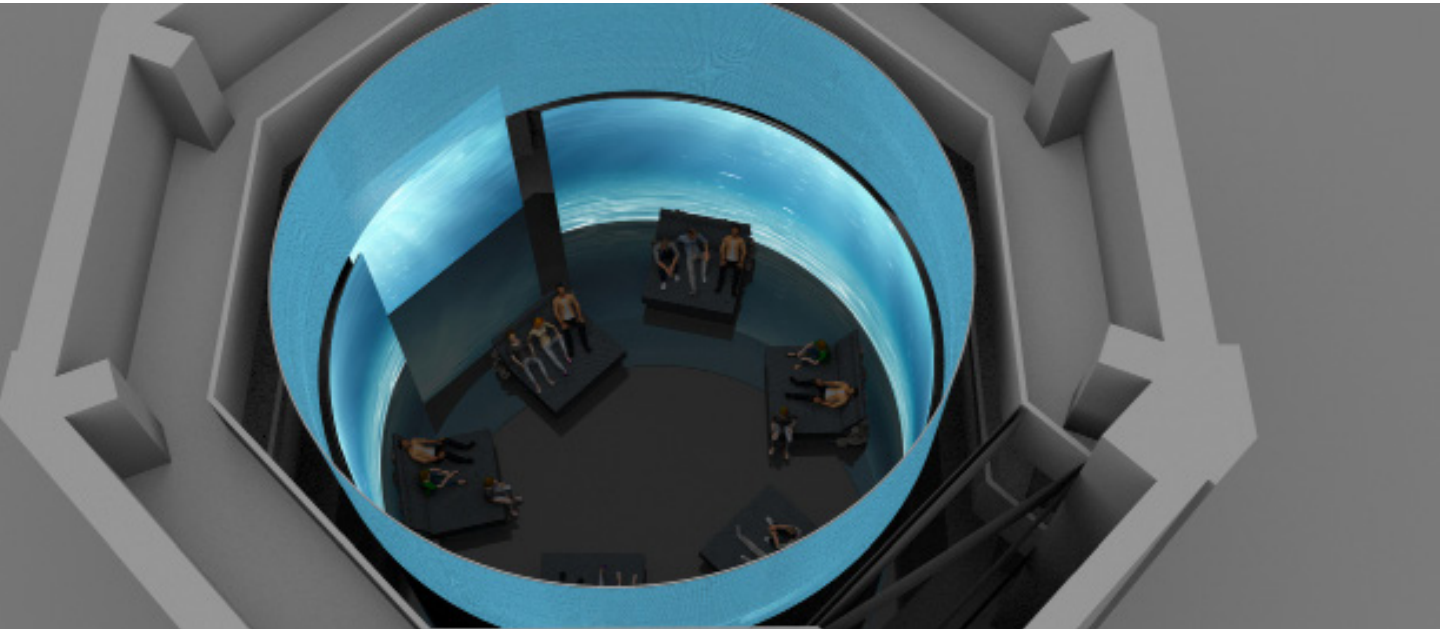


# Ethics and Ecocidal Listening: Oceanic Refractions as an Artistic Case Study

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In 2018 I was invited to visit the archipelago of Kiribati, located in the Pacific Ocean around 1000 miles from Hawaii. A big ocean state, Kiribati holds a land mass of around 315 sq. miles and an oceanic economic zone of 1,328,890 sq. mi. Tarawa, the most inhabited of the islands peaks at around 3 m above sea level. I went to Kiribati in part to meet with Dr Teweiariki Teaero, a renowned scholar, poet and educator who had directed the Oceania Center at the University of the South Pacific in Fiji for many years before returning to his homeland where at the time he had been planning on running for government. Teweiariki spoke with me at length about the status of Kiribati as one of the already most critically affected frontline nations. I asked him what was a lesson for non-Pacific Islanders to learn about understanding everyday life there. He said to me “Two ears, one mouth, don’t talk too much. Learn to listen more. Not only to hear, but to be able to develop another thing and that is to be able to interpret. These things are different, they occur at different levels. The hearing and the interpretation of the sound...it’s very much part of our world” (Teaero 2018).

1 Oceanic Refractions Kuppelhalle  
Berlin

I start with this invitation from Teweiariki, who has now passed, to listen because it is widely emerging as a methodological concern in approaches to understanding our continuing planetary existence. In her book *Undrowned, Black Feminist Lessons from Marine Mammals*, Alexis Pauline Gumbs asks “how can we listen across species, across extinction, across harm?” (2020, 15). The question posed by Gumbs is one that many of us are actively grappling with. The catastrophes of climate crisis, expressions of the colonial-capitalist violences of white supremacy, are multiplying rapidly and the urgency to do something sits in tension with a lack of knowing what to do and how. While disciplines

invested in tech are trying to forge ahead through ostensibly sustainable and green solutions, the arts are trying to communicate what is oftentimes barely comprehensible, let alone easily distilled. It is apparent that more interdependent orientations are needed, which foreground how people and communities relate to the earth as a part of the earth.

In my work as an interdisciplinary sound artist, geographer and writer I develop practices of listening and attunement to approach the relations between people, places and ecologies (Image 1). My training as a geographer informs how I come to the sonic field because I am interested in deconstructing what it means to listen to, make sense of, and translate the sounds of environmental and human entanglements through the assumption of an Anglo-European onto-epistemological lens. A crucial aspect of what I do is situating what how I listen as a white European-Australian, and how I inhabit place as a settler-coloniser. My work is grounded in a commitment to finding ways to be in what Metis Professor Zoe Todd calls “good relations” (Kanngieser & Todd 2020) with where I am, and most crucially, knowing the boundaries around this and what that means for how I comport myself in the communities I collaborate with.

For the past several years I have been speaking with communities about the impacts of the climate crisis in the Pacific and examining how European colonisation through resource capitalism and environmental racism exacerbates these. My orientation in this is toward the everyday ways that communities determine their own practices of liberation and care within and despite ecocide. In my work with communities on climatic crisis and survival, I prioritise listening to contested and difficult environments with sensitivity and pause. This listening doesn't just mean the physiological and psychological process of hearing. It's listening also to silences and cacophonies of expression by people and environments, and attempting to understand how to interpret these appropriately across local and global contexts. For the largest part, what this listening tells me are the many ways that my own assumptions, directions and interpretations are wrong. In this brief paper I want to emphasise how over the years my collaborators and I have slowly and carefully implemented what we have been told, particularly in the space of artistic production.

I am going to focus on our upcoming large scale audio-visual installation, *Oceanic Refractions*, co-produced with Fijian artist Mere Nailatikau and Fijian Australian artist Elike Reade. This piece is launching in January 2024 in

Berlin across two long-standing European art and media festivals, *Transmediale* and *CTM*. *Oceanic Refractions* emerges from years of consultation, preparation and consideration of what it means to ethically share front-line stories to audiences with different ways of knowing and being. *Oceanic Refractions* has its foundations in a longer-term project *Climates of Listening*, which began in 2015 working with predominantly Pacific women, queer and transgender artists, organisers and scholars to amplify movements for self-determination and liberation in the face of resource extraction, environmental racism and ecological disaster. The Pacific region is susceptible to a number of devastating changes including sea level rise, erosion, intensifying drought, floods, earthquakes, cyclones and tsunamis. Along with intersecting challenges such as economic development, health epidemics, and under and unemployment, nations of the Pacific, like other small island developing states, are held up as case studies for vulnerability. Through this lens of vulnerability, the sea of islands that Pacific poet and educator Epeli Hau'ofa spoke about becomes reduced to the limited perspective of “islands in a far sea” (1994, 152), which emphasizes remoteness and marginality over self-determination and autonomy. To counter the narrow definitions of resilience and vulnerability that the region tends to get pushed into through government, policy and NGO discourses, the project seeks to showcase the nuanced and variegated ways that people understand, produce knowledge about, and collectively attend to their lived experiences of ecocide.

Prior to *Oceanic Refractions* were a number of audio and audio-visual commissions including this year's *Listening Across Faultlines*: a long form three-part radio series for Deutschland Radio, and *Crenulations Pacific Drift*: an installation created in partnership with audio company Bang and Olufsen for the Struer Tracks Biennale in Denmark. Both of these works curated over thirty quotes from extensive ethnographic interviews with community Elders and advisors, fisher people, scholars, cultural ministers and chiefs. They focused on the testimonies of Professor Unaisi Nabobo-Baba, Dr. Teweiariki Tezero, Philip Tacom, Lydia Jacob and Simone Sevudredre from Kiribati, Papua New Guinea and Fiji on the themes of sound, silence and environmental relations. The thematic of listening and silence was substantially influenced by a book written by Professor Nabobo-Baba in which she outlines a typology of silence in Indigenous Fijian (iTaukei) knowledge systems, which allow for a “pedagogy of deep engagement” (2006, 94). Ideas and practices of listening as an Anglo-European construct are not adequate to encompass the vast meanings of listening as held by Pacific cultures. Simone Sevudredre notes:

I remember seeing in some print, the Indigenous way of listening is similar to how a psychologist listens. The listening is not only for the vocabulary and the intent, the subjects, the tone, the intensity, all these are taken into account and analysed, so we not only listen, we hear. What do we hear? We hear the said and the unsaid. So this is how relationships are very important in Indigenous iTaukei society. When the living people are in harmony, the land and the sea will reflect that, because they are an extension of us, we are an extension of them (Sevudredre 2022).

Rather than reconstruct conventional frontline narratives, it was important for us to orientate away from what Unangax̄ scholar Eve Tuck calls damage centred research – research that submerges the contexts of colonization and racism to locate “deficits” within minoritized communities rather than in the processes those communities are forced to endure. By emphasising Pacific cultural approaches that prioritise intergenerational knowledge of land and environments, we acted on the interviewees guidance to turn toward relations and care.

Throughout our process we consulted with our advisory board of Pacific Elders and community members who underscored that sensory engagement is endemic to Pacific storytelling; that it is heard, felt and seen. In a paper for WIRES climate change (2017) Harriet Hawkins and myself identified the need for sensorially attuned audio-visual work to address audiences on embodied and experiential registers. Rather than seeking to invoke empathy, Oceanic Refractions moves towards immersion and resonance – an attempt pay respect to the expression of the ocean as a “corporal and psychic relational vehicle” (2008, 111) as Banaban, I-Kiribati and African-American anthropologist Katerina Teaiwa describes it.

The project does this through a number of artistic technologies and techniques. In its largest site-specific iteration, Oceanic Refractions will be installed to fit the 17m high and 202m sq. Silent Green Kuppelhalle in Berlin (Image 2). We have worked with fabrication and projection specialists, Sara Murphy and Frank Prendergast at Space Forms and Olan Clarke at Algorithm, to create 5D immersivity. The installation features two ground level curved screens and the vertical space is hung with two flying screens and a flying string curtain onto which underwater videography produced by Fijian filmmakers, Dave Lavaki and Meli Tuquota, will be mapped. The projections feature a spacious array of underwater scenes predominantly taken from a diving depth of 2-3m below surface level, with a focus on light diffractions to emulate floating underwater looking upward toward the sky. We are working with

olfactory artists Smell Art to create the oceanic scents choreographed with the audio-visual storyline. The audience are situated on custom built seating that mimics the ebb and flow of currents and drift; a movement intensified through the use of transducers that reverberate with the sound composition.

I want to stay for a moment with the sound as my area of expertise. The surround sound multichannel audio, composed by myself and musician Joseph Kamaru, comprises excerpts from the testimonies of Unaisi Nabobo-Baba, Teweiariki Teaero, Philip Tacom, Lydia Jacob and Simione Sevudredre, considering the cultural significance of water, marine subsistence, sea level rise and practices of listening to the ocean. The field recordings featured in this composition come predominantly from the places where the Elders we are hearing from reside, and there is an ethical and spiritual importance in keeping the integrity of these sounds, and voices, in emplaced relation. This is explained by Teweiariki:

If you look at the environment, it's part of the land and everything that surrounds that. In fact, in Kiribati, if you look at the language very closely, the word of our people and the word for land is the same. We call it te aba. ABA. You can talk to te aba and you mean land. You can talk about te aba and you mean people. So, there's a very close connection between land and people (Teaero 2018).

The sound recordings and the voices cannot be separated because peoples, lands and oceans cannot be separated. This onto-epistemology is almost impossible to reconcile with European ways of approaching environmental relations, which always inevitably centre the human even when attempting to dissolve this division. Because of this irreconcilability we are actively working with, rather than against, the tension and inexperience with unbiased listening. Xwélméxw (Stó:lō) philosopher Dylan Robinson writes that settler coloniser listening “is hungry for the felt confirmations of square pegs in square holes, for the satisfactory fit as sound knowledge slides into its appropriate place” (2020, 51). Such settler coloniser listening positions constitute, as Robinson puts it, “particular assemblages of unmarked structures of certainty that guide normative perception and may enact epistemic violence” (2020, 10). By dislocating the hierarchy of voice over environment and playing with non-didactic storytelling, Oceanic Refractions invites audiences into a comportment that may be more suited to approaching Pacific ways of interdependence.

By attending to these different sensorial registers, Oceanic Refractions seeks to create portals for intentional

listening. Across the team's extensive experience in community advocacy, environmental and arts research and regional Pacific governance we are acutely aware of the challenges in asking audiences to not only listen, but also change behaviour. A number of existing Pacific centred climate projects, such as Our Home Our People and Sea of Island, even Tuvalu's own metaverse project, are deploying VR and other technologies to preserve memory and compel empathy. There are enormous impediments to systemic change over individual, national and international scales, and it is critical that projects offer audiences pathways toward education. Projects that work closely with communities are best equipped for clarifying community needs. Fundamentally, for Oceanic Refractions to complete its cycle the request has been made that it is returned to its homes in the Pacific. There is a stated desire that the work is accessible to use as a teaching resource for school curricula. There have also been requests to store interviews, recordings and transcriptions in local and national archives that are accessible to community members. As part of the listening work of the project we have drawn together a collective philosophy influenced by Pacific Research protocols, which explicitly lays out the importance of relationships to the longevity of the work – this extends from how the material is gathered and disseminated, to who is cited and how, to how money is distributed and circulated, to cultures of communication and respect for differing needs.

As I have outlined here, the larger project of Oceanic Refractions is founded on ethics of care and interdependence that incorporate humans and ecosystems beyond Anglo-European worldviews. This is a material shift that is relevant to projects and disciplines intent on cultivating respectful relations for anti-colonial social and environmental liberation. The commitment of relationality, writes Trawlwulwuy geographer Lauren Tynan, is “not a new metaphor to be reaped for academic gain, but a practice bound with responsibilities with kin and Country” (2021, 598). By pausing on listening and silence, with Oceanic Refractions we hope to contribute to the much larger and ongoing commitments to overturning and repairing the violence caused by Anglo-European colonisation and white supremacist, capitalist systems and their beneficiaries.

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## IMAGE CREDITS

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