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Gestures of Survivance: Angela Tiatia's *Lick* and Feminist Environmental Performance Art in Oceania

Abstract

This article describes Sāmoan-Australian artist Angela Tiatia's performance video *Lick* (2015) as an act of Pacific Islander survivance. Recorded in and with the coastal waters of Tuvalu, the work emphasizes a direct and responsive encounter with the Pacific Ocean. The video's intentional emphasis on Tiatia's *malu*, a tattoo specific to Sāmoan women, and her choreographed leg and hand gestures of balance represent a powerful visual proclamation of Tiatia's Oceanic feminist relationship with the ocean. Her performance is an important challenge to the exotifying impulses of environmental documentaries and mainstream media that often represent Pacific Islanders as passive victims of sea level rise. In the context of current decolonizing performance literature and practices in Oceania, *Lick* is read as a strategic hydrochoreography—an embodied art practice that expresses the lively interconnection of body-ocean rhythms needed to sustain Indigenous futures.

Keywords: contemporary Pacific art, Angela Tiatia, climate change, decolonial theory, environmental performance, survivance, Indigenous feminist Pacific



Figure 1. Angela Tiatia, *Lick*, 2015. Single-channel, high-definition video with sound, 6:33 minutes. Courtesy of the artist and Sullivan+Strumpf, Sydney | Singapore

In 2015, Sāmoan-Australian artist Angela Tiatia visited Funafuti, the main atoll of Tuvalu, which is globally known to be on the frontlines of sea level rise. During her visit, she made *Lick* (2015), a performance video in which she used her own body as a gestural medium that could incorporate and respond to multiple conflicting representations of climate change in Oceania (Fig. 1).¹ For the piece, she positioned the camera (operated by her long-time technician Kieren Cooney) a few yards from herself and a few feet below the surface of the water so that the audience's view would be of her tattooed legs standing on the ocean floor with her lowered arms swaying slowly in the surf. Filtered by the soft opacity of the blue-green ocean, and presented in slow motion with muffled underwater sounds, Tiatia's movements are minimal in the first minute of the video. The audience might, if they weren't paying close attention, initially mis-read the posture of her arms and legs as limp or unresponsive. But then Tiatia begins to bend her knees and slowly sweep her arms around and to steady herself in the waves (Fig. 2). She repeats this balancing act a few more times throughout the rest of the video—all in slow motion—so that the viewer ultimately comes to understand the ease and power of her collaboration with the water.



Figure 2. Angela Tiatia, *Lick*, 2015. Single-channel, high-definition video with sound, 6:33 minutes. Courtesy of the artist and Sullivan+Strumpf, Sydney | Singapore

I included *Lick* in a group exhibition I recently curated called *Inundation: Art and Climate Change in the Pacific* (2020).² Though the video is now six years old, it is an important touchstone for emerging feminist performance strategies that counteract the “engendering” of climate change in Oceania.³ “Engendering” is a phrase used by Pacific Studies scholar Margaret Jolly in her recent article “Engendering the Anthropocene in Oceania: Fatalism,

Resilience, Resistance.” Jolly articulates not only the ways in which women and those of gender and sexual fluidity are more at risk in the context of climate disaster, but also the ways in which representations of climate disaster in Oceania are gendered.⁴ Isolated women in flooded waters become the embodiment of passive, feminized, and victimized Islander populations as sea levels rise.⁵ *Lick*’s carefully abstracted movements, rhythms, and gestural refrains *in concert—or collaboration—with the ocean* offers an important response to these stereotypically gendered representations.

As in much of her recent performance work, Tiatia loves to play with the audience’s ability to read gestural tropes and narratives of power implicit in certain postures. In what follows, I will look at how Tiatia’s choreography in *Lick* deliberately creates a visual tension between the respective gestural significations of a drowned victim, a fisherperson waiting for her catch, and a dancer. Together, these are potentially meaningful in a climate change context. Even more importantly, I will articulate how the video’s underwater perspective highlights Tiatia’s strategic reframing of these gestures to actively embody her alliance with water.

Tiatia celebrates “water as an agent of decolonization.”⁶ Building on the work of decolonial theorists Melanie Yazzie and Cutcha Risling Baldy, as well as Pacific feminist scholars such as Alice Te Punga Somerville and Noelani Goodyear-Ka’ōpua—all of whom describe the importance of water in decolonizing efforts—I highlight the ocean in Tiatia’s videos as a medium and a relation. It supports the artist’s body and cultural articulations, and by extension, supports the “survivance” of Pacific Island cultures. First coined by Gerald Visenor in 1999, “survivance” is a playful combination of “survival” and “resistance,” indicating an “active sense of presence and continuance of native stories.”⁷ In the context of the potentially genocidal conditions of climate change, in which Pacific Islanders are being forced to contemplate relocation and assimilation, survivance is expressed in re-articulating Oceanic cultural narratives of water as a life force rather than a death force.

In a 2017 interview with Australian-based curator and artist Léuli Eshraghi, Tiatia herself makes roughly these points in terms of her sense of feminist decolonial agency. In response to Eshraghi, she states, “I have a decolonial art practice in that I seek to unravel the systematic inequalities that are placed upon the Pacific body and artist/curator by the forces of colonization.” She continues in terms of her own experiences as a Sāmoan woman: “In terms of sexual expression, the Pacific female has had no agency over the portrayal of her body and sexuality due to religious pathology and continual hypersexualization of her body in the West. My works give agency to the female body as one that can no longer be taken advantage of or shamed.”⁸ To relay her points back to *Lick* in particular, I will discuss how Tiatia collaborates with the ocean to assert her own Pacific Islander self-representation and presence. This is an act that simultaneously critiques current engendered climate crisis representation, while offering feminist embodied relational methods of Indigenous Pacific continuity.



Figure 3. Angela Tiatia, *Tuvalu*, 2016. Three-channel, high-definition video with sound, 20:32 minutes. Courtesy of the artist and Sullivan+Strumpf, Sydney | Singapore

The Intimacy of Climate Change

Tiatia's visit to Tuvalu resulted in the related video projects *Lick, Holding On* (2015) and *Salt* (2015)—all featuring the artist's own body in performance. Additionally, she made the three-channel video *Tuvalu* (2016) (Fig. 3) focused on the daily life of the Tuvaluan community. These projects first grew out of Tiatia's concern about her coastal family home in Fagamalo, Sāmoa. She grew up between this home, where her mother was raised, and Auckland, where she was raised. During a visit to Fagamalo in the early 2000s, after eight years away, she noticed dramatic changes that had occurred in the land and sea around the family house.⁹ The green grass, taro, hibiscus shrubs, and abundant breadfruit, mango, guava, and frangipani trees had all disappeared. They had given way to a thick brown sludge coming up to her ankles. This experience led her to research climate change across Oceania more rigorously and eventually to visit Tuvalu, which has strong genealogical, political, and economic connections to Sāmoa and currently faces even more serious flooding. The nine islands and atolls that comprise Tuvalu are an average of less than two meters above sea level.

Tiatia watched many documentaries before her visit, including *The Disappearing of Tuvalu: Trouble in Paradise* (2004) by Christopher Horner. She found the film so intensely mediated by tropes of the mournful disappearance of islanders that she felt she needed to see the situation for herself and hear from people directly.¹⁰ Arriving on Funafuti as a Sāmoan sister, Tiatia committed herself to a different kind of filmmaking than most environmental documentaries, a style that would reflect and embody the multiple and often conflicting beliefs about climate change held by Tuvaluans themselves. As Tiatia put it, in a talk given to the Oceania Rising program at the Australia Museum in March 2018, she wanted to show climate change “not on a global scale but on an intimate one—to glimpse how life is lived in an environment where climate impacts are part of the everyday, rather than dramatic one-off events.”¹¹ *Tuvalu* focuses on vignettes of kids playing in the water, women conversing on porches, and men maintaining coastal roads. In contrast to the dramatic musical score of *The Disappearing of Tuvalu*, the rhythm of ocean waves, church bells, and other everyday sounds make up the film's ambient soundtrack. Tiatia filmed daily activities and asked Tuvaluans how they thought they needed to respond to climate change. She recounts that she received a variety of answers. Some were most interested in continuing to work on climate-adaptation projects like building sea walls, while others were interested in seeking international representation for climate change via the United Nations. Still others were committed to the idea that God would intervene. Reflecting on these conversations, Tiatia decided she needed

to do some performances in which she could come to terms with these various viewpoints about climate action, which ranged from advocating for Oceanic agency to putting Pacific Islanders in positions of sacrifice.¹²

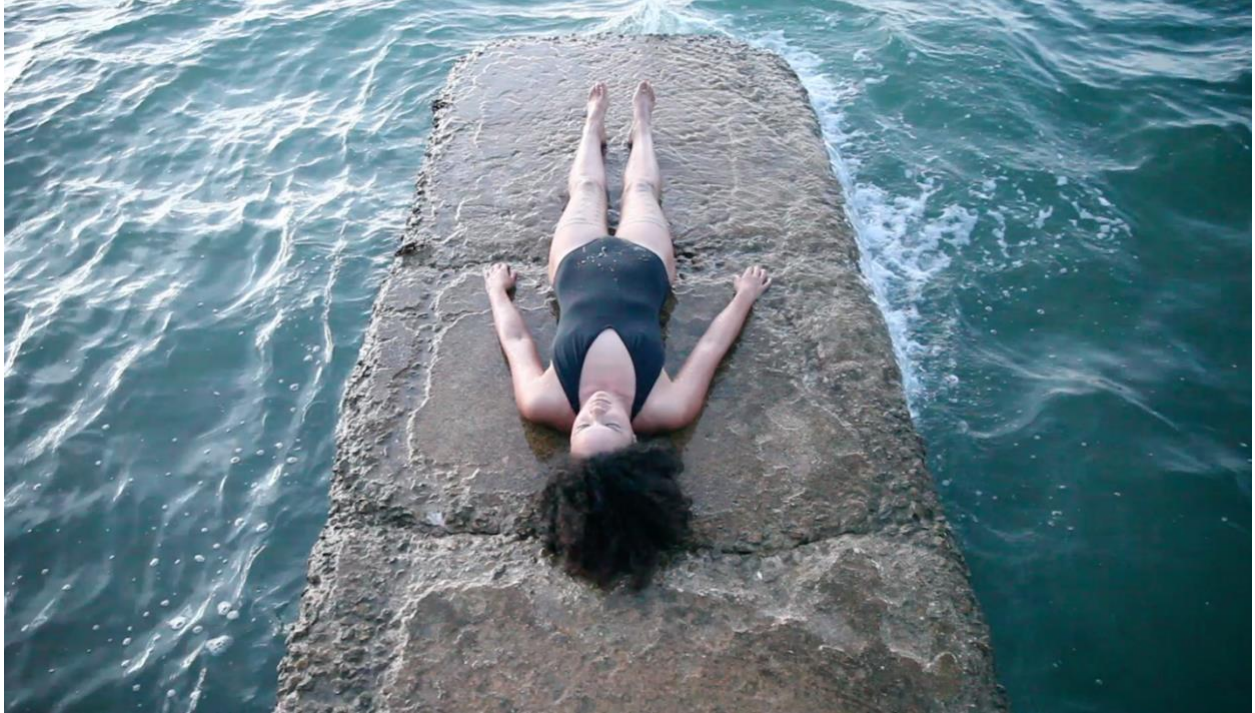


Figure 4. Angela Tiatia, *Holding On*, 2015. Single-channel, high-definition video with sound, 12:12 minutes. Courtesy of the artist and Sullivan+Strumpf, Sydney | Singapore

Holding On (Fig. 4) is a performance in which Tiatia attempted to process the discussions that the artist had with Tuvaluans while there about the role of Christian faith in climate change. She lay on a concrete slab jutting into the ocean with her arms outstretched and legs placed together. As the viewer watches the tide come in, the sun sets and a crab comes out to explore her. Tiatia sways in the water, at times holding her head up over the oncoming water, but remaining calm and focused. As the tide rises and she is forced to hold the edges of the slab, her body takes on a cruciform position.

Salt, by contrast, was a more mediated performance. The looped video features uncannily multiplying images of Tiatia submerging and reemerging from the water. In “Contemporary Māori and Pacific artists Exploring Place,” Pacific art historian Caroline Vercoe argues that *Salt* “embodies all of the familiar forms of a scenic tropical paradise—the exotic dusky maiden, walking away from the viewer, towards and into a picturesque island beachscape, against a dramatic moonlight glistening across the water as the skyline meets the ocean on the horizon.” But, Vercoe continues, the “once postcard perfect scene, with its myriad of female forms walking into the ocean, takes on a disturbing viewing encounter across the three-minute looped sequence.”¹³ In the context of her article, Vercoe articulates Tiatia’s *Salt* as a place-based performance. Referencing Epeli Hau‘ofa’s identification of

Oceania as a vast and diasporic place of Indigenous collectivity, Vercoe muses on the role of the present rising levels of the Pacific Ocean “in forcing a new kind of migration and exile experience on its community.”¹⁴

In viewing *Salt*, especially in relation to *Lick*, and considering Tiatia’s interest in creating intimate relations with climate change, I also wonder if the performance in *Salt* might be strategically reclaiming Hau‘ofa’s vision *in spite of* the climate crisis narratives and the threat of climate-induced migration. Its looped format and proliferating bodies performatively counter the linear capital time of climate crisis in which modern Euro-American nations recognize climate change as the end of the (settler-colonial) world. The loop emphasizes a practice and patterning of Indigenous resurgence/re-emergence. It impels viewers to think of the ocean not only as a climate-transformed place, but also as an embodiment of cyclical time and as a genealogical force—a spiritual and elemental matrix through which Tiatia can challenge dominant frameworks of climate change.

The endurance performance mode (a type of performance art often focused on repeating a single simple task) in *Lick* also plays specifically and strategically on damaging stereotypical Pacific climate change tropes and twists them to affirm Oceanic futuring narratives. From below the surface of the water, already positioned and aligned from the ocean’s point of view, viewers are privy to the way Tiatia uses her legs and arms to keep balance as each gentle wave rolls past and “licks” her. The waves are not strong enough to wipe her out or defeat her, but instead seem to offer her a caress.

This double meaning of the title plays with the imagery itself. At first, the title recalls the opening minute of the performance along with the visual refrains of “drowning” Pacific Islanders (like the ones in *The Disappearing of Tuvalu*).¹⁵ Environmental decolonial literature scholar Elizabeth DeLoughrey calls the emergence of such documentaries with repeating images of islanders walking in waist-high waters after major storms “salvage environmentalism,” in which “Pacific Islanders as the harbingers of climate change, [are] habitually rendered as figures of an isolated, natural and nature-loving culture that were being appropriated to critique American petrocapiatalism.”¹⁶ Fundamentally, she means that the trope of the “islander drowning” is part of the long-held colonial and capital representational history beginning with the European discovery of “Edenic” paradises. Western societies use the same Edenic imagery to now signal the death of paradise, while also denying their part in Oceania’s destruction.

In fact, the mournful gaze of environmentalist films—framing islands and islanders on the verge of disappearance—are extremely disingenuous given colonialism’s two centuries of resource extraction that have caused the seas to rise around low-lying islands. The reality is that sea level rise’s displacement of Pacific Islanders and poor coastal communities is simply the newest wave of many other kinds of displacement caused by land privatization, development, extraction, and more. As the discourse of climate change has mobilized Oceanic communities, Pacific Climate Warriors and other Indigenous activists have called out these damaging narratives.¹⁷ Through 350.org, Facebook, and other social media platforms, these groups are representing themselves in the water with signs that say “we are not drowning.” The act of repeating this shoreline performance across islands also creates or composes an alliance through the water that can help to cultivate global political recognition.

As Jolly has attested on multiple occasions, the role of gendered representation in Oceania and climate change also plays out here.¹⁸ The “dusky maiden” has long been a privileged trope in images of the Pacific. There are established visual histories in the Pacific in which women have explicitly represented the innocence, purity, and availability of entire cultures.¹⁹ As tropes of exploration have turned toward environmental mourning, that same feminized innocence is now re-figured as a virginity lost. Simply put, tropes of the life cycles of womanhood as seen from a patriarchal perspective become conflated with an island’s eventual degradation. To counteract this history, images of powerful female warriors in the shore waters are now central to the message of the Pacific Climate Warriors.²⁰

Lick represents a quieter parallel performance that expresses not only Tiatia’s ability to endure the ocean’s waves but also her desire to build capacity of care and relation through repeated gestures of embrace and balance. In the repetition of her balancing sweep, other details come into focus. Tiatia’s head and her steady gaze—down or toward the open ocean—is visible through reflections on the surface of the water. Over the course of six minutes, the video asks viewers to concentrate on the subtle arrangement of her balancing movements, which Tiatia could only create with the density of the salt water and the forces of the tides (Fig. 2). The waves are supportive and buoyant, and her body is active, relaxed, and full of breath. Her concentrated engagement expresses a willingness to experience, understand, and work with the elements and environment.

Environmental Feminist Performance Theory

How can a body (re)compose itself through gestures in the water? This question is important to Tiatia’s practice, but also to a growing movement or “wave” of Indigenous and feminist performance research across the world interested in foregrounding embodied and affective attunement with water as a key decolonial environmental justice practice. In *Downstream: Reimagining Water*, a recent collection of writing geared toward this question, Dorothy Christian and Rita Wong gather a number of different voices—from First Nations Waterkeeper Anishinabe-kwe Violet Caibaiosai, who performed healing water walks across the Great Lakes region, to dancers Alannah Young Leon and Denise Marie Nadeau, who describe their movement pedagogies as embodied practices of Indigenous and settler decolonial watery relations. Many of the contributors to this volume explore the possibilities of movement and gesture in articulating water as kin or relation. Young Leon and Nadeau in particular emphasize the importance of feminist and Indigenous somatic and affective remembering (in song, dance, and drawing) that “we are borne of, dependent on, and created in water.”²¹

Downstream’s focus on decolonial feminist embodied relations with water is one of the latest contributions in a wider discussion about the importance of feminist environmental performance practices in general. Kaya Barry and Jondi Keane’s 2019 *Creative Measure of the Anthropocene: Art, Mobilities, and Participatory Geographies* argues that creative arts practices can “alter the perceptions, expectations and capacities...produced in the Anthropocene era.”²² They voice a long-standing feminist principle that the scale of bodily movement is of ultimate importance for developing new, lively compositions that produce, in turn, new

psycho-social-environmental spaces. It is only through affective practices that sensitivity toward each other and the environment can shift the objectifying habitudes of patriarchal colonial-capital logic.

Barry and Keane's arguments are made in the context of evolving theorizations of the performative and the political. Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou's *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* (2013) and Natalie Alvarez, Claudette Lauzen, and Keren Zaiontz's *Sustainable Tools for Precarious Times: Performance Actions in the Americas* (2019) both articulate the importance of feminist performance research on postures of empowerment and solidarity to remediate and transform multiplying situations of precarity (poverty, environmental racism, gender or sexual violence, etc.).²³ How? Performance and embodiment demand a meditation on the ways in which our habitual bodily movements are amplified across different scales and rhythms of life. Performance, especially in the context of art and activism, can concentrate on (re)new(ing) relational gestural refrains. These are repetitions of movement that practice care and interconnection—practices that can become new habits. New gestural refrains can release the performer's body, and often also the social body, from mechanical states and colonized habits, while also (re)composing the body in alternative/Indigenous life worlds. In sum, feminist performative political transformation understands that changing people's minds is not merely a conceptual or informational problem, but a deeply embodied and emotional one. Only when affective bodies are engaged can deep systemic change occur.

Hydrochoreography

Colombian artist Carolina Caycedo has a powerful articulation of these feminist decolonizing principles, which she calls "geochoreography." Caycedo's videos and performances—a combination of community-based filmmaking and symbolic performance—are centered around building local and Indigenous opposition to corporate hydropower dams in Colombia and across South America. She mainly collaborates with the communities being displaced by the rerouting of water for dams. Through film documentation and activist performance, she captures the importance of a community's intimate and daily practice of sustaining and being sustained by rivers with access to fishing and agriculture. She focuses on net throwing, farming, and swimming as gestures that need to be sustained and amplified in order to counter the corporatized view of water as energy. As Caycedo puts it, geochoreography is "the sum of everyday and extraordinary gestures and actions intrinsic to the social, political and environmental context of the river."²⁴ She continues:

A geochoreography aesthetically imprints a living image on the landscape, producing an expansive motion of the body and its location. Expanding the body helps to avert fear, and to counter physical and psychological displacement. Intimate acts like remaining at home becomes (sic) a mechanism of holding the ground, a practical resistance to displacement and relocation, and serves (sic) as a tactic to negotiate better compensations.²⁵

Caycedo's geochoreography, as it enacts a "practical resistance" to displacement, translates powerfully to Tiatia's gestural research in the waters of Tuvalu. Like Caycedo's choreographies, Tiatia's endurance performances amplify daily gestures so that they take on resonant meaning. In *Lick*, her specific stance in the water celebrates the presence of her moving, cultured body, clearly marked with her *malu*, a tattoo specific to Sāmoan women. After the first minute of the video, Tiatia stands with power, certainty, and attention to what is going on beneath the surface of the water. Her body expresses a comfortability and ongoing sustaining relationship with the water that feeds her. The underwater camera position allows the viewer to see the fish moving around her body. From within the water's expansive medium, her slow balancing sweeps seem to combine the patience of fishing in the shallows and the grace of Sāmoan dance.

The specificities and subtleties of gestural cultural expression in *Lick* are linked to a prominent genealogy in Pasifika feminist performance art. Rosanna Raymond set this precedent with her participation in Pacific Sisters, a collective of Pacific Islander and Māori fashion activists founded in the 1990s, as well as through her own performative photography practice.²⁶ *Eyeland* (1997) and *Full Tusk Maiden* (2005) were significant hallmarks in (re)activating her body while simultaneously addressing a visual history of the colonial gaze.²⁷ Raymond continues this work today through important relational art spaces including the SaVAge K'lub, which emphasize the continued struggle against the regulation of Indigenous bodies in the context of international art exhibitions.²⁸ Likewise, the performative photography of Yuki Kihara has established the ways in which her non-binary *fa'afafine* body challenges the colonial tradition of medical, anthropological, and tourist photography that has continually exotified and objectified Pacific Islanders.²⁹

In thinking about how Tiatia's work is especially informed by that of Kihara, there is potential to see how her feminist environmental performance is rooted in and related to feminist deconstructions of the colonial patriarchal gaze. As Tiatia has recounted, growing up in urban settings in New Zealand and Australia as a Pacific Islander brought into focus the history of colonialism and its exotification and commodification of Oceanic female bodies. Before becoming an artist, Tiatia worked as a model, where she began to understand how the global fashion industry employs race and gender stereotypes. This instilled in her a desire to confront these depictions, oftentimes using her own body to exaggerate or denaturalize common feminine gestures. In her ongoing series *Inventory of Gestures*, she counters the fetishization of her body through awkward yet powerful poses that destroy the fantasy of its availability to the viewer. For instance, in *Heels* (2014) and *Walking the Wall* (2014) Tiatia created endurance performances that reappropriated the gestural language of the catwalk: while wearing high heels, she also reveals her *malu* and references *taualuga*, a Sāmoan dance.³⁰

Like *Lick*, these performances ask viewers to pay attention to the subtleties of gestural language. In the case of *Walking the Wall* (Fig. 5), Tiatia undermines a superficial reading of her body as a commodity with her dramatic re-orientation of the catwalk to the wall. While lying prone on the floor may seem, at first, to put her in a powerless position, she deliberately and slowly uses the high heels she is wearing to dig into the wall and pull herself up. As Tiatia walks up and down the wall, all the while meeting our gaze, we are cued to her strength and endurance.



Figure 5. Angela Tiatia, *Walking the Wall*, 2014. Single-channel, high-definition video with sound, 13:04 minutes. Courtesy of the artist and Sullivan+Strumpf, Sydney | Singapore

It is important to fully consider the ways in which such gestural refrains release Tiatia's own body from the histories of violent appropriation and feminization of Oceanic bodies in environmental discourse. In Tiatia's view, there is value in showing the *malu* and having it play such a central role in her performances. It affirms her commitment to diasporic Sāmoan cultural life while also challenging strict rules against women displaying their *malu* that have often been reinforced through colonial-Christian attitudes of feminine modesty.³¹ Wearing and showing the *malu* reminds Tiatia of her responsibility to protect relationships between family, community and environment while also "giv[ing] agency to the female body as one that can no longer be taken advantage of or shamed."³² Her statements recall Sāmoan writer Albert Wendt's important comment that "the act of tatauing a tatau... on the post-colonial body gives it shape, form, identity, symmetry, puts it through the pain to be endured to prepare for life, and recognizes its growing maturity and ability to serve the community." This body is a "body 'becoming,' defining itself, clearing a space for itself among and alongside other bodies..."³³ The pride with which Tiatia displays her *malu* while engaging her own body in both *Walking the Wall* and *Lick* recalls a similar oppositional gaze in Kihara's *Fa'a fafine: In the Manner of a Woman* (2004–2005). In all cases, the artists return the gaze of the viewer, while also articulating the complexity of negotiating the gendered coding of their bodies.

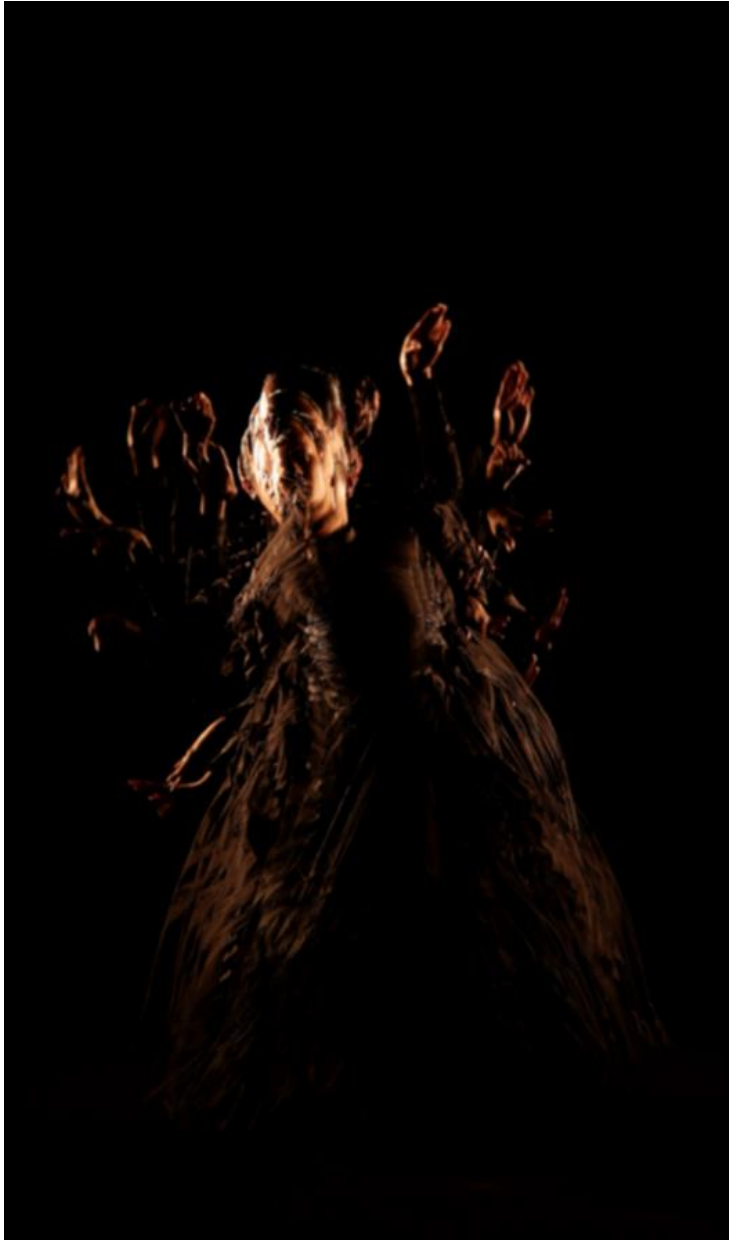


Figure 6. Yuki Kihara, *Siva in Motion*, 2012. Single-channel HD Blu-ray, silent, 8:14 minutes looped. Commissioned by Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, Aotearoa New Zealand / Courtesy of Yuki Kihara, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, and Milford Galleries Dunedin, Aotearoa New Zealand

The ambivalence of the postcolonial condition is palpable in all these works and becomes even more accentuated when these two artists also confront issues of climate change. Recently, Kihara has represented Oceanic survivance responses to climate change through a series of performance pieces featuring her interpretations of *taualuga*. In a suite of works—*Taualuga: The Last Dance* (2002), first performed at APT4; *Siva in Motion* (2012); and *Galu Afi: Waves of Fire* (2012)—Kihara dressed in a constraining colonial mourning dress and used the embodied language of the dance to celebrate Sāmoans’ persistent struggle against colonization and the various kinds of constrictions and destruction it brings along with it.³⁴ In *Taualuga*, Kihara’s solo dance used dramatic lighting to amplify her shadow and bring greater drama and attention to her hand gestures and the sweeping and swaying of her body. The

piece interrogates postcolonial gender performance through the dance's very specific and subtle orchestrations of movement and hand gesture usually performed by a ceremonial virgin as the last dance of a social function. It speaks to the complex pre-and post-contact history of *taualuga* and its gendered enactment of balancing social and locational dynamics.³⁵ *Siva in Motion* and *Galu Afi* both used chronophotography to record Kihara's choreography, and also specifically addressed the tsunami of September 2009 that took the lives of 189 people in Sāmoa and Tonga. In these two works, Kihara's carefully composed hand movements follow the pattern of the stormy seas, as the ocean disappears and reappears with incredible force (Fig. 6). Hi'ilei Julia Hobart describes *Siva in Motion* as "a dance comprised of restrained and delicate hand movements that articulate a story of waves."³⁶ The recorded gestures offer a critique of a history of colonial constraints on Sāmoan culture, but even more importantly, they are embodied methods of processing colonial trauma and articulating new environmental knowledge of the transforming ocean. Kihara's dances revive and transform *taualuga* as a valid contemporary cultural response to climate change.

Tiatia's *Lick* complements Kihara's *Siva in Motion* by literally engaging the waters of the rising Pacific. The slow grace and strength of Tiatia's expansive bending and sweeping gestures made with her legs, arms, and wrists are also reminiscent of *taualuga*. In contrast to Kihara's *Siva in Motion*, which focuses attention on small, carefully articulated hand movements, Tiatia emphasizes large gestures that help her maintain her poise as the tide rolls in. With her tattooed legs immersed in the surrounding waters, Tiatia's movements are freed from the strict constructs of the dance's colonial reinforcement of gender roles and notions of modesty and chastity. Instead, her movements emphasize the relational elements of the dance—her body as an extension of the land and ocean, past and future.³⁷

In fact, because of the medium in which Tiatia literally makes her gestures, it is less useful to cross-reference Tiatia's particular movements with *taualuga* than it is to think of how her own body memory, trained by learning the dances in her childhood, informs her effort to balance on rocks while facing the wide expanse of the ocean.³⁸ That is, Tiatia highlights the ways in which her *training* in the language of dance helped her follow the flow of ocean water that carries along or *entrains* molecular water bodies from eddies into global currents and storms. Tiatia is literally re(en)training her body with the water. This is to see Tiatia's movements also with respect to Oceanic political theorists who emphasize Indigenous ontologies of relationality emerging from the space of the ocean itself. In "Where Oceans Come From," Alice Te Punga Somerville offers her own refrain on behalf of Indigenous Oceania. Long before the Pacific was named or claimed as such, she states, "We have already been here: thinking about oceans and how to think with them."³⁹ In "Indigenous Oceanic Futures," Noelani Goodyear-Ka'ōpua (also building on Vincente Diaz's studies of *etak navigation* techniques from Micronesia) offers specific ontological lessons learned from the ocean, especially that of "directionality in relation to other bodies-on-the-move."⁴⁰ The lessons of this dynamic positionality and directionality help to "negotiate the complexities of restoring Indigenous land/water-based relationships."⁴¹ In short, Somerville and Goodyear-Ka'ōpua emphasize that Oceanic decolonial practices are strengthened when aligned with and within the forces of ocean water.

With respect to the various global feminist decolonial understandings of protecting and building ontological relationships with water I have offered in this section, and in

comparison to Oceanic performance artists like Yuki Kihara, it is useful to think of Tiatia's *Lick* as *hydrochoreography*. Like Caycedo's *geochoreographies*, Tiatia's intimate gestures of balance help expand the body and avert fear. Tiatia's gestures bring particular visibility to her lively *hydro-movement* with the ocean—a way to stay centered-in-movement. Her embrace of the water moving through her arms, even as it “licks” her, emphasizes her kinship with the Pacific Ocean—its genealogical role in sustaining life by gestating fish, conveying canoes, bringing rains, and providing guidance.

Survivance and Watery Relations

Climate change is happening, and waters will rise, but Tiatia's work emphasizes the importance of an Indigenous survivance framework to shape action. Survivance is now coming into the foreground of decolonial practice because, as Métis anthropologist Zoe Todd emphasizes, it is more than mere survival and anti-colonial critique—it suggests the importance of futuring, the positivity of carrying forward cultural knowledge and making new knowledge. In her contribution to the 2018 collection “Indigenous People and the Politics of Water,” she describes survivance as the “active assertion of, tending to, and enactment of Indigenous self-determination.”⁴² In the introduction to that same collection, Melanie Yazzzy and Cutcha Risling Baldy also specifically emphasize survivance through the language of feminist relationality with water to “generate lively embodiments, socializations, and theorizations that exceed and influence academic meditations.”⁴³ In sum, Todd, Yazzzy, and Baldy highlight the importance of feminist ontological practices of survivance—that being a part of the ongoing struggle while also being in relation to the world and others is just as important as the more formal political work of resistance. They make a compelling argument about the need to pay attention to reproducing water relations in everyday and ritual gestures related to water because, ultimately, this kind of cultural endurance and cultural creation can upset colonial-capital processes, habits, and imaginaries.

Tiatia's own endurance performances celebrate the power of seemingly small gestures and postures if practiced and proliferated. Beyond her work (and the substantial bodies of work by Raymond and Kihara already mentioned), there are a number of other contemporary feminist Oceanic performance artists who also focus on relational gestures with and through water. The Tongan-Australian *punake* (body-centered performance artist) Latai Taumoepeau's live endurance pieces such as *i-Land x-isle* (2013) feature the artist suspended from two tons of slowly melting ice. Taumoepeau's performances often articulate the stresses of colonial-capital processes on her Oceanic body while also achieving ceremonial states of regeneration. Taloi Havini's *Habitat* (2017) offers an immersive multi-channel video installation featuring a solo female figure wading in the beautiful, haunting, and damaged rivers flowing from the open copper pits of the Panguna mine on Bougainville. Havini emphasizes the importance of her collaboration with the women of Bougainville, who affirm that after the miners are gone, and even in a devastated landscape, they will “always be here.”⁴⁴ *Rise: From One Island to Another* (2018), a video poem by Marshallese poet and performance artist Kathy Jetñil-Kijiner and Greenland poet Aka Niviâna, launched on the

environmental media platform 350.org, features images of Jetñil-Kijiner in the coastal waters off Majuro and on the melting glaciers of Iceland.

There is an affinity between *Rise* and *Lick* in the ways the artists conceive of water as a force that supports islander resistance to neo-liberal narratives of Pacific Islander vulnerability. Both build on the visual language of the 350.org Pacific Climate Warriors by representing themselves literally immersed in the ocean as a way to strategically claim self-determination and autonomy in climate change discourse.⁴⁵ In *Rise*, Jetñil-Kijiner repurposes the language of sea level rise, calling for human-ocean solidarity through her refrain “we will rise.”⁴⁶ Likewise, Tiatia’s looped video performance of *Lick* ends as Tiatia allows an oncoming wave to pick her up and carry her out of the frame and towards the shore (Fig. 7). Rising with the water is emphasized in both video performances as a gesture to be repeated so that it can become embodied habitude and an emotional orientation from which to draw strength.



Figure 7. Angela Tiatia, *Lick*, 2015. Single-channel, high-definition video with sound, 6:33 minutes. Courtesy of the artist and Sullivan+Strumpf, Sydney | Singapore

To consider Tiatia’s choreographies as gestures of survivance is to think about the importance of recalibrating water/body relations—to reclaim water as the source of both inspiration and of life outside of a damaging colonial framework, with its extractive and development-based economies that have brought on the most negative effects of climate change. Tiatia’s gestures are not essentializing ones that simply perpetuate “woman as nature”—they are ongoing, performative responses both to the transformations of the ocean and Oceanic cultures, and to the global politics of climate crises. Her actions cultivate the ability to face sea level rise not with fear, but with a celebration of kinship. Finally, to use the words of Yazzy and Baldy, Tiatia’s performances can be read as “act[s] of (re)making our

accountability in relationship to water and (re)claiming our relational theories of water culture [to] remind us that we are water based, that we have water memory.”⁴⁷ With her body’s movement in the water, Tiatia practices postures of breath, presence, strength, and control in relation to, and in communion with, the elements. She relies on the ocean as a space of composition and repose through which to cultivate creative responses to the world around her. It is important that Tiatia at first does not allow us a full view of her head. Only through the water’s reflective and refractive surface can we see her concentration, and with it, the cultural significance of her breath and rhythmic movement. This is the ultimate gesture of survivance.

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Notes

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² *Inundation: Art and Climate Change in the Pacific* was held at the Art Gallery, University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, January 29–February 29, 2020.

³ Margaret Jolly, “Engendering the Anthropocene in Oceania: Fatalism, Resilience, Resistance,” *Cultural Studies Review* 25, no. 2 (December 2019): 172–195a.

⁴ Jolly, “Engendering the Anthropocene in Oceania,” 176.

⁵ See also Jaimey Hamilton Faris, “Sisters of Ocean and Ice: On the Hydro-feminism of Kathy Jetn̄il-Kijiner and Aka Niviāna’s Rise: From One Island to Another,” *Shima* 13, no. 2 (2019): 76-99.

⁶ Cutcha Risling Baldy and Melanie Yazzie, “Introduction,” in “Indigenous Peoples and the Politics of Water,” ed. Cutcha Risling Baldy and Melanie K. Yazzie, special issue, *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 7, no. 1 (2018): 1.

⁷ Gerald Vizenor, *Manifest Manners: Narratives on Postindian Survivance* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1999), vii.

- ⁸ “Bodies that Matter: Léuli Eshraghi Interviews Angela Tiatia + Jasmine Te Hira,” in “Indigenous Art: New Media and the Digital,” ed. Heather Igloliorte, Julie Nagam, Carla Taunto, *PUBLIC* 54 (Winter 2016):150 and 154.
- ⁹ Angela Tiatia, conversation with the author, December 17, 2019.
- ¹⁰ Tiatia, December 17, 2019.
- ¹¹ Tiatia, December 17, 2019.
- ¹² Tiatia, December 17, 2019.
- ¹³ Caroline Vercoe, “Contemporary Māori and Pacific Artists Exploring Place,” *Journal of New Zealand and Pacific Studies* 5, no. 2 (October 2017): 136. https://doi.org/10.1386/nzps.5.2.131_1.
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- ¹⁵ Elizabeth DeLoughrey, “The Sea Is Rising: Visualising Climate Change in the Pacific Islands,” *Pacific Dynamics* 2, no. 2, (November 2018):185–197; Carol Farbotko and Heather Lazrus, “The First Climate Refugees? Contesting Global Narratives of Climate Change in Tuvalu,” *Global Environmental Change* 22, no. 2 (2012), 382–390; and Wolfgang Kempf, “Representation as Disaster: Mapping Islands, Climate Change, and Displacement in Oceania,” *Pacific Studies* 38, nos. 1–2 (2015): 200–228.
- ¹⁶ DeLoughrey, “The Sea is Rising,” 189.
- ¹⁷ Jolly, “Engendering the Anthropocene in Oceania,” 181–184; Candice Elanna Steiner, “A Sea of Warriors: Performing an Identity of Resilience and Empowerment in the Face of Climate Change in the Pacific,” *The Contemporary Pacific* 27, no. 1 (2015): 147–180.
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- ¹⁹ Marata Tamaira, “From Full Dusk to Full Tusk: Reimagining the ‘Dusky Maiden’ through Visual Arts,” *The Contemporary Pacific* 22, no. 1 (2010): 1–35; Erika Wolf, “Shigeyuki Kihara’s *Fa’a fafine; In a Manner of a Woman: The Photographic Theater of Cross-Cultural Encounter*,” *Pacific Arts* 10, no. 2 (2010): 23–33.
- ²⁰ Jolly, “Engendering the Anthropocene in Oceania,” 183–185.
- ²¹ Alannah Young Leon and Denise Marie Nadeau, “Moving with Water: Relationships and Responsibilities,” in *Downstream: Reimagining Water*, ed. Dorothy Christian and Rita Wong (Waterloo: Wilfrid Laurier University Press, 2017), 199.
- ²² Kaya Barry and Jondi Keane, *Creative Measure of the Anthropocene: Art, Mobilities, and Participatory Geographies* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019), 26.
- ²³ Judith Butler and Athena Athanasiou, *Dispossession: The Performative in the Political* (Cambridge: Polity, 2013); Natalie Alvarez, Claudette Lauzon, and Keren Zaiontz, eds. *Sustainable Tools for Precarious Times: Performance Actions in the Americas* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2019).
- ²⁴ “Geochoreographies,” Carolina Caycedo, 2015, <http://carolinacaycedo.com/geochoreographies-2015>.
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- ²⁶ Jacqueline Charles-Rault, “More Than Simply Traditional—The Pacific Sisters,” *Pacific Arts* 10, no. 2 (2010): 5–15.
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- ²⁸ Karen Jacobs and Rosanna Raymond, "Rosanna Raymond's *SaVAge K'lub* at the eighth Asia Pacific Triennial of Contemporary Art," *World Art* 6, no. 2 (2016): 238. <https://doi.org/10.1080/21500894.2016.1224270>.
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- ³⁰ "Bodies that Matter," 150.
- ³¹ Tiatia, December 17, 2019.
- ³² "Bodies that Matter," 154.
- ³³ Albert Wendt, "Tatauing the Post-Colonial Body," in *Inside Out: Literature, Cultural Politics, and Identity in the New Pacific*, ed. Vilsoni Hereniko and Rob Wilson (New York: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999): 401 and 411.
- ³⁴ Wolf, "Shigeyuki Kihara's *Fa'a fafine*," 23–24.
- ³⁵ Richard Moyle, *Polynesian Music and Dance* (Center for Pacific Island Studies, Auckland University, 1991); Jeannette Marie Mageo, "Zones of Ambiguity and Identity Politics in Samoa," *Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 14, no. 1 (March 2008): 61–78; Vilsoni Hereniko, "*Taualuga*: Decolonising and Globalising the Pacific," in *Transpacific Americas: Encounters and Engagements Between the Americas and the South Pacific*, ed. Eveline Dürr and Philipp Schorch (New York: Routledge, 2015), 173.
- ³⁶ Hi'ilei Julia Hobart, "When We Dance the Ocean, Does it Hear Us?," *Journal of Transnational American Studies* 10, no. 1 (Summer 2019): 187.
- ³⁷ For more on the body as an extension of land, see Katerina Teaiwa, "Choreographing Difference: The (Body) Politics of Banaban Dance," *The Contemporary Pacific* 24, no. 1 (2012): 75; and Katerina Teaiwa, "Saltwater Feet: The Flow of Dance in Oceania," in *Deep Blue: Critical Reflections on Nature, Religion, and Water*, ed. Sylvie Shaw and Andrew Francis (New York: Routledge, 2008), 108–9.
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- ⁴⁰ Noelani Goodyear-Ka'ōpua, "Indigenous Oceanic Futures," in *Indigenous and Decolonial Studies in Education*, ed. Linda Tuhiwai Smith, Eve Tuck, and Wayne Yang (London: Routledge, 2018): 94.
- ⁴¹ Goodyear-Ka'ōpua, "Indigenous Oceanic Futures," 94–95.
- ⁴² Zoe Todd, "Refracting the State Through Human–Fish Relations: Fishing, Indigenous Legal Orders and Colonialism in North/Western Canada," in "Indigenous Peoples and the Politics of Water," ed. Cutcha Risling Baldy and Melanie K. Yazzie, special issue, *Decolonization: Indigeneity, Education & Society* 7, no. 1 (2018): 66.
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- ⁴⁶ Hamilton Faris, "Sisters of Ocean and Ice," 91.
- ⁴⁷ Baldy and Yazzie, "Introduction," 2.