



## Epilogue: Immanence, relationality, connectivity

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Published online: 10 October 2022

In the morning hours of the UN Decade of the Ocean, the efflorescence of high-level marine governance and management discourses, instruments, and frameworks, sit alongside the accelerating pace of work in the marine social sciences in Oceania and beyond (McKinley et al. 2020). For instance, the recent 2050 Strategy for the Blue Pacific Continent report, which emerged out of the 51st Pacific Islands Forum meeting in Suva, 2022, engages with several themes that resonate with the special section, “A Sea of Connections,” including the notion of shared custodianship, that socio-ecological relations are diversely embedded in Pacific cultures and knowledges, a widespread epistemology endorsing a land-sea continuum, and the pervasiveness of a saltwater ontology. Indeed, the metaphor of a blue continent in the report title echoes Hau‘ofa’s sea of islands vision, discussed in relation to sovereignty and governance in the introduction to this collection. Present too is a tension between global extractive forces, identified as a creeping blue economy, and a determination to maintain, conserve, and foster local resources. The ocean (Ocean and Environment) is one of seven thematic areas identified in the Blue Pacific report. This incorporates a regional response to ocean-frontiering through strengthening sovereignty over maritime zones and advancing claims to the continental shelf—thereby evoking a subaltern, terraqueous territorialization (Foley and Mather 2019). Notably, community-scale sustainability and conservation efforts, cultural values and traditional knowledge are considered a ‘strategic pathway’ to address the degradation of marine ecosystems, pollution, species decline, and other hazards. Drawing on rich ethnographic inquiry, this collection thus intervenes at a crucial moment in Oceanic history when empowering local communities’ role in environmental and ecological governance is centred in national-to-regional political thought. Meanwhile, the

Ocean itself has assumed a pivotal role in regional-to-global discourses as never previously (Laffoley et al. 2022). In these contexts, several currents running through the collection deserve highlighting.

To begin with, each article in this collection explores interspecies relations in marine environments, whether this be through a world-making assemblage approach in the context of conservation in a Vanuatuan village (Pascht 2022); a Foucauldian production of discourses and practices, success and failure, in local-based marine management in French Polynesia (Wencelius et al. 2022); Fijian perceptions and measurements of value attached to finfish and invertebrate catch in Kadavu province (Harding et al. 2022); the communicative agency of a keystone reef passage in New Caledonia (Breckwoltd et al. 2022); children’s construction of marine species and their ocean worlds in Fiji and New Caledonia (Fache et al. 2022); the relational ontology of multispecies lives in Fiji (Fache and Pauwels 2022) or the pivotal connection between customary chiefs and their fishing clans in turtle conservation efforts in Fiji (Kitololei et al. 2022).

Evidence of diverse interspecies connectivities brings into focus a critical aspect of socio-ecological relations across the Pacific Islands, namely, that these are largely forged in the idiom of kinship. Attention to prior work in nearfield disciplines further illuminates what is, after all, at stake. For Kanaka Maoli (native Hawaiians), for instance, animals play a significant cosmological and political role, even though the category of animal is absent as a linguistic category. The most pertinent boundary, rather, concerns, “beings that have *kino lau* (... having many bodies—human and nonhuman) and beings that remain within a given body” (Goldberg-Hiller and Silva 2011, p. 431). After death, some people are transformed into non-human species, such as sharks, pigs or other creatures, becoming

ancestors to their ‘*ohana* (extended family) and descendants. For Māori, such transfigurations manifest in eels, red fish, sting ray, dolphins, whales and other sea creatures, who appear periodically as *taniwha*, their wrath evoked if ecological logics are transgressed. That kinship ideologies mediate the relationship between humans and nature suggests that Pacific ecologies are imbued with expressions of intimacy, that an ethic of care be perceived as continuous between human and putatively ‘natural’ domains, or perhaps that the category of human personhood is more capacious and pluripotent than normatively imagined. The omni-presence of legal-personhood across global-corporate legal contexts should remind natural scientists that even western cultural ontologies are quite a bit more complex than often assumed.

Thus, in the Pacific settler colonial societies of Aotearoa and Hawai‘i, or across Oceania’s contexts, as the articles collected here amply demonstrate, there is little room left for surprise when other-than-Homo sapiens ancestors feature strongly in Indigenous and Oceanian engaged conservation and sustainability science, practice, or environmental justice claims. The failure to recognize and accommodate the profoundly felt, experienced, lived connectedness between communities and marine worlds in governance and management practices, or in settlements and other forms of reparations around past harms, owes a great deal to the inadequacy of much prior research to take such culturally grounded realities into account.

The presence of such complex human dimensions across these articles highlights the challenge of *immanence*, broadly, the manifestation of the divine, the sacred, the otherwise transcendent, in the materiality of the everyday, for instance in marine species and other Ocean entities. For marine sciences, and scientists, developing a sensitivity to, and tools for engaging with, a metaphysical pluralism amidst the “peopled seas” to grapple with the human dimensions of contemporary sustainability, conservation, governance, or marine resource and environmental management in Oceania and beyond, is unavoidable. The Pacific cosmologies, socialities, generational knowledges, keystone places and the spiritual agency of non-human and totem species highlighted in these articles as central to ensuring the health of marine environments and their dependents, raises important question regarding recognition in global and regional endeavours aimed at maintaining species biodiversity. The connectivities established by assemblages of such relationalities form what Whyte refers to as the governance value of Indigenous knowledges, though this is often disavowed in formal scientific research and policy making. Instead, indigenous knowledges are commonly rendered as ‘supplemental value’, that is, “...as inputs for adding (i.e., supplementing) data that, scientific methods do not normally track” (Whyte 2018,

pp. 62–63); a markedly temporal form of recognition. The findings of Wencélius et al. (2022) regarding how natural resource management policies are received and repurposed by local actors, represents a radical reversal in this respect (cf. Fabre et al. 2021).

Similarly, the articles collected here reflect an ongoing turn in research methodologies and practices. The authors’ navigations of inside-outside community positionalities, sensitivities to historical legacies and contemporary challenges of (post)colonial contexts, decolonial methods in Indigenous and local worlds, and the entanglements of cultural-protocols in co-production are all integral to contemporary research. The articles strongly re-focus and re-engage issues of research object focussed methodologies, disciplinary epistemologies, and the roles of Indigenous and place-based ontologies for environmental and conservation sciences and practices as in conversation with multiple threads—decolonizing methodologies (Smith 2021); the “methodological mayhem” (Smith et al. 2016) posed by transdisciplinary research which incorporates Indigenous knowledges, and best practices for research in relational spaces (Koya-Vaka’uta 2017) particularly when they are metaphysically plural. For marine research, the state of the conversation within and between disciplines, and within and between scientists and communities, is thrillingly but also challengingly subtle. An important character of the articles gathered in the “Sea of Connections” special section rests in their collective recognition of the significance of contemporary marine research for the agency of Indigenous and local communities. As Hau‘ofa wrote for those positioned within and of the region, “Contemporary developments are taking us away from our sea roots...We have thereby allowed others who are well-equipped with the so-called objective knowledge of our historical development to continue reconstituting and reshaping our world and ourselves with impunity, and in accordance with their shifting interests at any given moment in history” (Hau‘ofa 1998). For scholars positioned differently, the challenge to listen and attend to such insights remains of the first moment due to linkages between basic science, justice, equity, and the everydayness of marine resources (Bennett 2022).

A final urgent theme in this collection concerns the heightening tension between frontier work and local Pacific boundaries occurring in the context of a proliferation of global environmental governance regimes including supra-national bordering with contradictory effects at the kinds of local scales reflected in this collection (see Miller et al. 2022). The United Nations sustainable development goal 14, ‘Life below water’, is referred to in a number of these articles as signalling an element of hope. This signal, the pulse of hope across these empirically grounded articles, draws attention to something of a tension in and around

flowing time. Ethnographic focus on the here-and-now recalls that the ‘now’ is in every sense always already about the morrow. This is what the presence of hope woven across the collection reminds us—we are all perched on the rim of time, peering over the maw of possible tomorrows and confronted with the existential challenge of choice, of knowing that our individual and collective actions matter towards the sustainable wellbeing of not only marine spaces and resources but of us all.

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