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Peer reviewed

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## **SALTWATER / Interconnectivity**

### **Abstract**

*This essay examines the recent group exhibition SALTWATER / Interconnectivity co-curated by Katharine Losi Atafu-Mayo and Giles Peterson at the Tautai Gallery in Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand (October 16, 2020 to January 30, 2021), including its public exhibition talks, forums, and performance activations. The exhibition was intended to embody the Moana worldview and explore questions of justice, equity, identity, and ecology through newly commissioned work by six multimedia Indigenous artists and designers from the Moana-Solwara (Oceania region): Katharine Losi Atafu-Mayo, Peter Elavera, Te Ara Minhinnick, Shawnee Tekki, Telly Tuita, and Gutinjarra Yunipinju.*

**Keywords:** *Moana, Solwara, Pasifika, contemporary art, Indigenous art, Oceania, saltwater, salt water, ecology*

*We sweat and cry salt water, so we know that the ocean is really in our blood.*  
—Teresia Teaiwa

*Ka mua, ka muri (Walking backwards into the future).*  
—Whakataukī (Maori Proverb)

“We sweat and cry salt water, so we know that the ocean is really in our blood,” said the late scholar, poet, and i-Kiribati activist Teresia Teaiwa. These evocative words became a reference point for Tautai Gallery’s recent exhibition *SALTWATER / Interconnectivity*. As co-curators, we aimed to transform the gallery into an embodiment of the Moana worldview and explore questions of justice, equity, identity, and ecology.<sup>1</sup> This essay describes some of the issues explored by the group exhibition—held in Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand from October 16, 2020 to January 30, 2021—including through its public exhibition talks, forums, and performance activations. The exhibition showed newly commissioned work by six multimedia Indigenous artists and designers of the Moana-Solwara (Oceania

region): Katharine Losi Atafu-Mayo, Peter Elavera, Te Ara Minhinnick, Shawnee Tekki, Telly Tuita, and Gutinjarra Yunipinju.

Several concepts guided the curation of the exhibition and its conscious engagement with local communities. **Salt water** is referred to as solwara in Tok Pisin and Melanesian Island language groups, as well as Moana, a pan-Polynesian term for the Pacific Ocean and its island peoples. Salt water is the key ingredient for the building blocks of life. It is also the essence of who we are as Solwara and Moana peoples of Oceania. This living and breathing heartbeat knows no bounds; it is an entity that acts as a highway that connects, separates, sustains, threatens, heals, and purifies as we continually navigate through it. We shaped the exhibition to reference these traits and reflect the critical relationships, worldviews, and shared histories of Indigenous Moana-Solwara peoples.<sup>2</sup> As change-agents, the exhibition's artists are a collective voice of the urban Moana-Solwara, weaving the past with the present to inform the future as they draw upon their own lived realities to investigate old and adapted systems of spirituality, social justice, equity, gender, sexuality, language, diaspora, and ancestral knowledge. *SALTWATER / Interconnectivity* was a moment to come together amid an ever-changing landscape. A space to talanoa (dialogue), celebrate, and critique our ways of life. A place to share our experiences within an ecosystem of relationships that informs who we are as saltwater people.



Figure 1. Community engagement at the opening of *SALTWATER / Interconnectivity*, October 15, 2020. Photograph by Isoa Kavakimotu. Courtesy of Tautai Gallery

“**Interconnectivity**” in the exhibition’s title refers to the connections that unite and connect Tangata o le Moana (Pacific Island peoples). **Tautua** is the Sāmoan word for service to community. **Tautai** is the Sāmoan word for navigator, one who leads and shows the way. We centred the exhibition on Indigenous ways of being, knowing, and wayfinding, as well as the navigation of ancestral,

intergenerational, and spiritual bloodlines and pathways. Tautai Gallery is a recently established (2020), Pasifika-driven space that builds on the Tautai Pacific Arts Trust's thirty-five-year legacy of championing contemporary Pacific creativity. The gallery is located on Te Karangahape Road, which sits above the ancient Te Wai Horotiu waterway, a freshwater stream of importance to Māori culture that flows from the Karangahape Road ridge, down the Queen Street Valley, and eventually to the Pacific Ocean. We referred to connections to ancient waterways of Moana peoples, the concept of katiakitanga (guardianship of waterways), and the role of waterways as a place of gathering and sustenance throughout the exhibition: in the scenography, curatorial texts presented in Te Reo Māori (Māori language) and English, and the artworks. References to the importance of the Moana as a source of life, sustenance, healing, awe, respect, and community survival were present throughout the exhibition space and in the works addressing climate change and ecological disaster.

### **Performance and Participation**

As curators, we intended the exhibition and its related programming to visually, bodily, kinesthetically, emotionally, and spiritually engage Moana-Solwara communities in Aotearoa. Focusing on performance enabled us to do this, as Moana-Solwara cultures are strongly performative. We included spoken word poetry, dance, moving image, performative photography, time-based collaborations, participatory art, and digital storytelling. Performance and audience participation empower viewers who directly witness the talent, beauty, and bravery of their youth, artists, and teachers (and themselves) in the artwork and public programs.

Katharine Losi Atafu-Mayo's opening performance articulated these ideas about participation and empowerment in space and time. She collected salt water from the Pacific Ocean and ritually poured it into five kava bowls from different parts of Oceania that were set in a line on the floor of the gallery (Fig. 2). Atafu-Mayo's simple, powerful performance activated the bowls, their contents, and the cultures they represented. The space of the gallery was likewise transformed into a charged, ceremonial Pasifika space, in part through notebooks the artist had provided for audience members to draw and write in as they engaged with the piece (Fig. 3).<sup>3</sup> In the performance, Atafu-Mayo wanted people to exchange with the Moana. Bringing the ocean water into the gallery transposed it from its usual context and allowed people to value it differently. In designing the work, she

thought about Indigenous worldviews and the ways her community celebrates, performs rituals, grieves, and forgives.<sup>4</sup> She connected these ideas to her performance, stating:

Kava is a ritual that allows connection, authentic talanoa, and a space for vulnerability and transparency. Presenting saltwater, in the place of kava, in these bowls speaks to the spatial separation and diaspora that we find ourselves in, as well as our spiritual connection by a powerful multifaceted entity and God.<sup>5</sup>



Figure 2. Co-curator and artist Katharine Losi Atafu-Mayo with artist Telly Tuita at the opening performance activation featuring Atafu-Mayo's *Feso'ota'i atu (Connection)*. *SALTWATER / Interconnectivity*, Tautai Gallery, Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand, October 15, 2020. Photograph by Isoa Kavakimotu. Courtesy of Tautai Gallery

Other programming included three performances on the opening night of the exhibition on October 15, 2020, as part of Auckland Artweek.<sup>6</sup> The first of these was a powerful spoken word poem and oratory by Aigagalefili Fepulea'i Tapua'i of 4TK (4 Tha Kulture), a South Auckland-based Indigenous environmentalist youth group committed to advocating against climate change through a lens of the perspectives and experiences of rangatahi (youth) (Fig. 4).

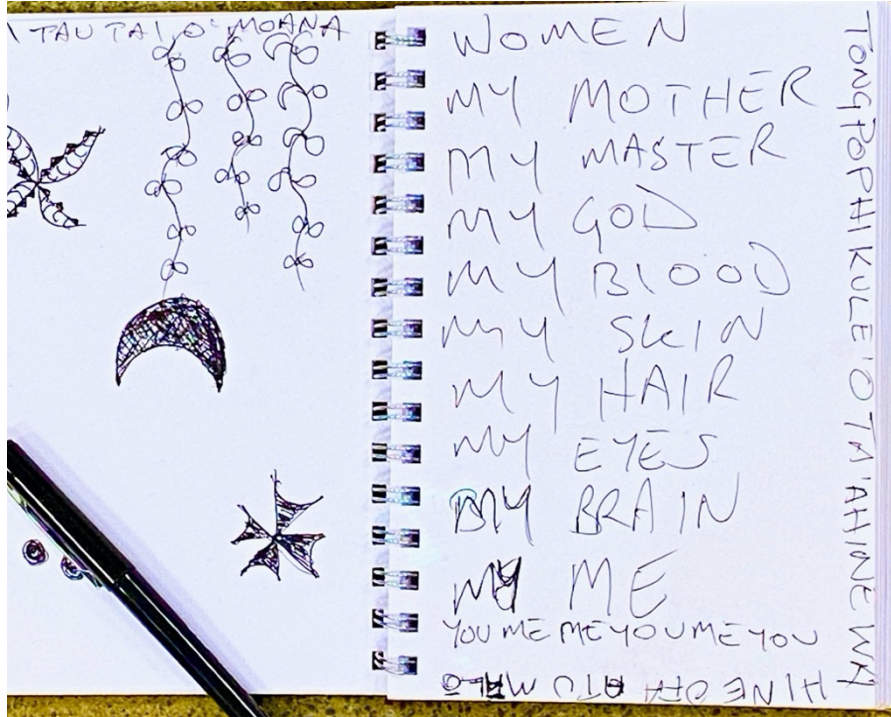


Figure 3. Katharine Losi Atafu-Mayo's notebook included in *Feso'ota'i atu (Connection)* for audiences to draw and write in as they engaged with the piece, 2020. *SALTWATER / Interconnectivity*, Tautai Gallery, Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand. Photograph by Giles Peterson. Courtesy of Tautai Gallery



Figure 4. Spoken word performance by Aigagalefili Fepulea'i-Tapua'i of 4TK (4 Tha Kulture) at the opening of *SALTWATER / Interconnectivity*, Tautai Gallery, Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand, October 15, 2020. Photograph by Isoah Kavakimotu. Courtesy of 4TK and Tautai Gallery



Figure 5. Sistar S'pacific (aka Rosanna Raymond), *Acti.VĀ.tion*, 2020. Performance at the opening of *SALTWATER / Interconnectivity*, Tautai Gallery, Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand, October 15, 2020. Photograph by Issoh Kavakimotu. Courtesy of the artist and Tautai Gallery

Rosanna Raymond—an innovator in the contemporary Pasifika art scene, long-standing member of the Pacific Sisters art collective, and founding member of the SaVAge K`lub—also contributed a performance piece. Her practice engages people, spaces, and objects to “acti.VĀ.te” dynamic relationships and to realise and reshape the *tā-vā* (time-space) duality.<sup>7</sup> She uses performance, Pasifika ceremony, chant, storytelling, spoken word poetry, costume, and adornment as ways to transform the physical world into a sacred space and make sense of the world from an Indigenous Moana-Solwara worldview.

At the exhibition opening, Raymond appeared as Sistar S'pacific in a *kaitiaki* ceremonial role (Fig. 5). *Kaitiaki* is a New Zealand Māori term for the concept of guardianship for the sky, the sea, and the land. A *kaitiaki* is a guardian, and the process and practices of protecting and looking after the environment are referred to as *kaitiakitanga*. In a practice embedded within Moana world views, values, oratory, ritual chant, and movement, Raymond blessed and activated the community space and exhibition. She honoured the Indigenous custodians of the land; the spiritual power of our Moana-Solwara peoples; the great teachers and healers who have gone before, and their struggles and sacrifices that gave new generations a better way of life; and the bravery of the artists and their *mahi*

(work). Raymond’s performance celebrated the exhibition as a powerful expression of the Pacific family and the Pacific way, uniting our communities through the healing and transformative power of art. Sistar S’pacific heralded new beginnings and called on tautai—the navigators in us all—to come together, celebrate, exchange, and be ever-vigilant in supporting Pasifika peoples’ struggles for self-determination, equity, social justice, and freedom from oppression, systemic racism, and neocolonialism.

The exhibition opening event also featured contemporary dance by choreographer Ankaramy Fepuleai and four male dancers—who performed Fepuleai’s epic dance work LALO—direct from the *Pacific Dance Festival*. LALO, which means “below,” guided viewers through ifoga, the Sāmoan custom of seeking forgiveness. This involves delivering a formal apology to another person, while bowing down and humbling oneself. The offender appears covered in an ‘ie toga (fine mat) and the only way forgiveness is granted is if the victim lifts the ‘ie toga from the offender (Fig. 6).<sup>8</sup>



Figure 6. Performance by LALO (Ankaramy (Anks) Fepuleai, Jireh Lalotoa, Jay Lisimoni, Christian Segi, and Kardia Ah Kiau) at the opening of *SALTWATER / Interconnectivity*, Tautai Gallery, Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand, October 15, 2020. Photograph by Isoa Kavakimotu. Courtesy of LALO and Tautai Gallery



## Resilience

It was important to us as curators to think about what we wanted to see in this uncertain time and in this ever-changing landscape. What does our community want to experience when they come into this gallery?<sup>9</sup> We had several major themes related to resilience in mind for the exhibition: feminine energy; community; intergenerational storytelling; activation, social justice, and protest based on “Black and Brown Lives Matter”; and climate change and ecology. These are issues that affect not only the families and communities in our own neighbourhoods and across Aotearoa and the Moana-Solwara, but every person on the planet. Our communities face hostility towards Indigenous peoples of colour and incredible social hardship, especially among our most vulnerable, our elderly and our rangatahi (youth) who are often hardest hit by global crises such as the COVID-19 pandemic, worldwide recessions and job losses, climate change, and more.

*SALTWATER / Interconnectivity* was a rallying cry and a celebration of the resilience of Pasifika people. The exhibition was a call to revel in dazzling beauty and artistry and honour the strength and resilience of Pasifika peoples through the creative talent of its young people as they weather storms of massive social change and survive colonisation and adversity.

*Feso’ota’i atu, Katharine Losi Atafu-Mayo*

Katharine Losi Atafu-Mayo (Sāmoa, Aotearoa, Scotland, England) is a devoted daughter, sister, and godmother whose social art practice is an evolving ecosystem of Moana healing methodologies, spirituality, and community engagement grounded in unconditional love. By confronting cultural norms, societal expectations, and systematic oppressions, Atafu-Mayo uses her lived experiences to create an alternative way of operating in our everyday lives.

Atafu-Mayo’s multimedia activation/moving image installation was titled *Feso’ota’i atu*, which means “connection” in the Sāmoan language. A video depicted Atafu-Mayo, who appeared as an unidentified Polynesian woman, collecting water from the Pacific Ocean. The water was stored in glass bottles to be used in the artist’s opening performance, as described above. The five kava bowls featured in the opening ceremony, lined in a row in the main gallery space, accompanied the video projection (Fig. 7). Atafu-Mayo borrowed these bowls from personal collections representing different parts of Oceania. Giles Peterson



Figure 7. Katharine Losi Atafu-Mayo, *Feso'ota'i atu*, 2020. Digital video projection (filmed by Benji Timu), sound, saltwater, Pasifika tanoa (kava bowls), wood, mother of pearl, coconut drinking cups, 250 x 100 cm, including projection. *SALTWATER / Interconnectivity*, Tautai Gallery, Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand. Photograph by Ralph Brown. Courtesy of the artist and Tautai Gallery

loaned two bowls: one from the Sepik region of Papua New Guinea that his father had brought to Aotearoa New Zealand—underscoring the intergenerational connections that ran throughout the exhibition—and another that was gifted to him in 2009 by Papua New Guinean artist Martin Morububuna. Atafu-Mayo and Rosanna Raymond contributed two Sāmoan ava bowls, and a colleague of Peterson's loaned a Fijian bowl. In advance of the installation, Atafu-Mayo oiled each bowl to protect them from the salt water that she and other participating artists ritually poured into them during the opening performance. The bowls were filled with salt water for the duration of the exhibition and remained lined up on the floor of the gallery, while a video was projected down onto the bowls from the ceiling. Like rays of sunlight, the footage of waves lapping against the shore immersed the bowls and viewers in a saltwater world.

Atafu-Mayo included the following original poem, “Po, po, po (night), Manava i totonu (breath in),” as part of her artist statement for the exhibition:

*po, po, po*  
*manava i totonu:*

*may this space light the fire within you that has been extinguished,  
may your peace that's been disrupted find harmony in all living things,  
may your tino, mafaufau and agaga feel held,*

*I invite you to just be in this space of interconnectedness;  
remember, navigate, reflect, meditate, thank,  
manava i totonu:*

*exchange your love, your rage, your energy, your joy, your distaste, your  
healing;  
share what you must with the Moana.  
They will be returned with what you pour into them.*

*we are connected, we are profound, we are resilient, we are powerful,  
manava i totonu;  
po, po, po.*

#### *I Left My Heart in Tongpop, Telly Tuita*

Telly Tuita's<sup>10</sup> installation *I Left My Heart in Tongpop* consisted of paintings, sculptural assemblages, performative self-portraits, adornments, and found objects that transformed the exhibition space into a kaleidoscopic place of energy, vibrancy, beauty, living history, and arohanui (love) (Fig. 8). The piece consisted of about ten years of art production and testified to Tuita's experience of leaving Tonga as a child, growing up in Australia, and finally moving to Aotearoa New Zealand. Three self-portraits, interspersed throughout the installation, documented the artist's grown and coming to terms with his Tongan—and more broadly, his Oceanic—heritage. The first, *Romancing History* (2015) was an image of the artist kneeling in front of a black-and-white reproduction of a 1784 engraving titled *Poulaho, King of the Friendly Isles Drinking Kava* (Fig. 9).<sup>11</sup> Dressed in a tupenu (Tongan waist garment), Tuita appears to be at once a part of the group depicted in the engraving while also showing reverence for those who came before him. The other two, *Professional Brown Man* (2018) (Fig. 10) and *Tongpop 1–3* (2019) showed the artist in increasingly elaborate costumes and surrounded by numerous objects that evoke his relationship to Oceanic cultures, including woven mats and baskets, plastic lei, and Pasifika imagery on upcycled materials.



Figure 8. Telly Tuita, *I Left My Heart in Tongpop*, 2020. Multimedia installation. *SALTWATER / Interconnectivity*, Tautai Gallery, Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand. Photograph by Ralph Brown. Courtesy of the artist and Tautai Gallery



Figure 9. Telly Tuita, *Romancing History*, 2015. Digital print installed as part of *I Left My Heart in Tongpop*, 2020. *SALTWATER / Interconnectivity*, Tautai Gallery, Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand. Courtesy of the artist and Tautai Gallery



Figure 10. Telly Tuita, *A Professional Brown Man*, 2018. Digital print installed as part of *I Left My Heart in Tongpop*, 2020. SALTWATER / Interconnectivity, Tautai Gallery, Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand. Courtesy of the artist and Tautai Gallery

Tuita's photographs traced the evolution of his performance practice by showing how Tongan visual and material culture has become more and more central to his identity. The installation underscored the importance of art and culture in keeping the artist's connections with Tonga and Australia alive.<sup>12</sup> Tuita described the installation in this way:

How does one maintain connectivity when ties are broken? Through objects, through images, through stories, through my body. Like marks left from scars, like marks left on the earth we are always reminded of our interconnectivity to the past, present and future. The good and the bad.

*I Left My Heart in Tongpop* showcases ten years of a body of work that carries the spirit of Oceania. Not as a place but a Being/Spirit/God/Mother. Able to evolve and thrive in any time, any place.

Scouring second-hand shops and dollar stores, art history volumes, and visual histories, I collect items and iconography that connect with personal narratives and idealised views of places from the past. I ritualistically gather and process my bounty, layering and repurposing to create a cacophony of colour, shape, and motif which I have ascribed as TONGPOP—A hybrid aesthetic borne from broken ties and healed scars.<sup>13</sup>

Although Tongpop is a fictional place, Tuita notes that it has its roots in Tonga. He sees unique aspects of Oceanic cultures, histories, iconographies, materials, and art processes embodied in Moana-Solwara people who sustain a living and dynamic interconnectivity.

## Healing

Atafu-Mayo's curatorial and artistic practice centres on Indigenous healing and well-being—a foundational theme for the exhibition—and is grounded in manaakitanga (respect, kindness, honesty), tautua (service), hospitality, and awahi (support). With this curatorial approach in mind, the exhibition's artworks metaphorically opened up the gallery space to foster healing through togetherness, warmth, resilience, survival, and joy. The exhibition was organised during the lockdown caused by the COVID-19 pandemic, which is still wreaking havoc on communities around the world at the time of this writing. Having a safe

and positive exhibition that united different-but-connected Indigenous Pacific ways of knowing and being was very important to her.

Healing is the restoration of that which has been wounded or broken. When connections break, we experience loss and hurt persists. The opportunity for young Indigenous artists to tell their stories and histories creates new spaces and opportunities for renewal and healing. Relationships, community, people, land, can all be recovered through healing.

*SALTWATER / Interconnectivity's* focus on Indigenous knowledges was linked to the strong emphasis in the exhibition on decolonising methodologies. The artists drew on Indigenous Moana-Solwara worldviews to create accessible, dynamic, and visually exciting artworks that spoke to the manawa (heart) of people. They sought to connect spiritually and emotionally with the diverse communities coming to engage with the healing energy of the artwork.

Gurruṭu`mi Mala (My Connections), *Gutiṅarra Yunupiṅu*

Gutiṅarra Yunupiṅu is a First Nations artist of the Gumatj clan, Yirritja moiety, and Buymarr homeland who lives and works in Yirrkala, Northern Territory, Australia, utilising film and digital media to capture the stories of his kin. Despite being deaf since birth, he has managed to overcome many barriers. Since 2015 he has worked at The Mulka Project, a Yolṅu cultural knowledge preservation project in Yirrkala. As a project officer and filmmaker, Yunupiṅu often travels to Yolṅu homelands where he regularly films cultural ceremonies and events.<sup>14</sup> Viewers bear witness to the power of healing, family, and community across oceans from the perspective and triumphs of this young artist who is recording the living histories and culture of his elders and community, as well as forging the pathway forward for future generations of Indigenous youth.

In the powerful 4K film installation *Gurruṭu`mi Mala (My Connections)*, the artist situates himself in the world of gurruṭu (translated as “kinship system”) and articulates his connections to family, community, and beyond (Fig. 11). Chris Matthews (Quandamooka people of Minjerribah) describes gurruṭu as “a sophisticated system that defines interconnected relationships between *all the elements of the world*, such as those between people, animals, plants, insects, wind, fire, water, land and so on. In Gurruṭu, a connection is usually visualised as an invisible cord that connects two elements of the world.”<sup>15</sup> Yunupiṅu describes his work in this way:

Gurruṯu`mi Mala demonstrates my connections to my family, my people, and my country through the Yolḷu kinship system of gurruṯu. Gurruṯu not only links me to my clan and my homeland, but to all clans and their homelands. Gurruṯu dictates my connections and relationships to all Yolḷu . . . past, present and future.

Here, I demonstrate my position in the world of gurruṯu through my first language barrkuṯu waṅa (language from a distance [Yolḷu sign language]). I am signing Yolḷu gurruṯu names to you, revealing how they connect and relate to me.<sup>16</sup>



Figure 11. Gutinjarra Yunupingu, *Gurruṯu`mi Mala (My Connections)*, 2019. Film installation. HD two-channel digital video, 4K. *SALTWATER / Interconnectivity*, Tautai Gallery, Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand. Photograph by Ralph Brown, Tautai Gallery, Auckland. Courtesy of the artist, Buku-Larrṅgay Mulka Centre, and Tautai Gallery

To view the piece, audience members walked into a long, rectangular room off to the side of the main gallery space. Both walls at each end of the room played a looped video that depicted the artist signing the names for his moiety, clan, and country. With the artist communicating in Yolḷu sign language on either side of the room, and surrounded by walls painted black to match the background in the videos, viewers were made to occupy the same space as Yunupingu. They entered



into the relationships that he shares, as a “saltwater person,” with the other artists and viewers.

*Gurruṭu’mi Mala (My Connections)* was also exhibited at the Art Gallery of South Australia as part of Tarnanthi 2019—an annual festival centred on Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander arts. We found it of great interest due to the concept of gurruṭu underlying this art piece. Gutjarra received the 2019 Telstra NATSIAA Multimedia Award for *Gurruṭu mi’ Mala (My Connections)* and was a finalist for the Northern Territory Young Australian of the Year Awards.

Tōtō [Blood], *Te Ara Minhinnick*

*Mehemea ka pātai mai koe ki ahau;  
“He aha Te Awa o Waikato ki a koe?”  
Māku e kī atu, he rite tonu ki te toto o ōku tūpuna.*

*[If you ask me;  
“What does the Waikato River mean to you?”  
I will say that it is like the blood of my ancestors.]*  
—Te Ara Minhinnick



Figure 12. Te Ara Minhinnick, *Tōtō*, 2020. Blocks of earth gathered near Waiuku. *SALTWATER / Interconnectivity*, Tautai Gallery, Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand. Photograph by Ralph Brown. Courtesy of the artist and Tautai Gallery

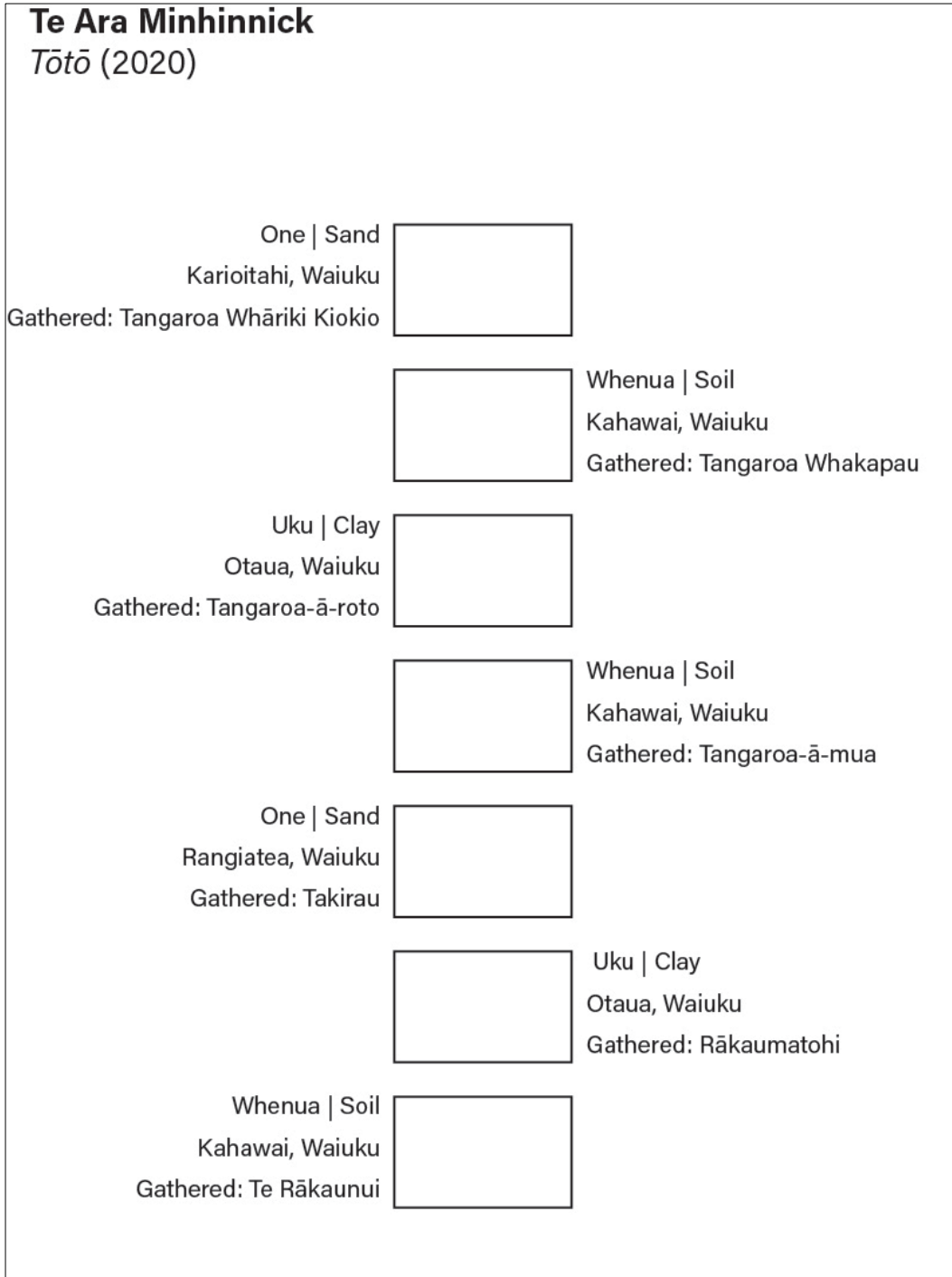


Figure 13. Te Ara Minhinnick, flyer that accompanied *Tōtō*, 2020. Text and layout by Te Ara Minhinnick. Design by Gloriana Meyers, Tautai Gallery. Courtesy of the artist and Tautai Gallery

The installation and time-based work of Māori artist Te Ara Minhinnick centres around the alliances of people, space, and place experienced in her ipukarea, her ancestral homeland, and waterways within Waiuku, where her iwi of Ngāti Te Ata (Aotearoa New Zealand) lives. She emphasises a responsibility to her homeland and iwi by employing methods of “wayfinding” through the contemporary realities of Mātauranga Māori (Māori knowledge). The title of Minhinnick’s work in *SALTWATER / Interconnectivity, Tōtō*, connects the Waiuku waterways with the blood of her ancestors and provides a means for the artist to learn her whakapapa (genealogy), history, and stories of her homeland. The piece consisted of seven stacks of whenua (earth) that she gathered from the shores of Waiuku, the same place her ancestors would have gathered food resources (Fig. 12). The specific time and lunar phase, according to the Māramataka (Māori lunar calendar), during which the earth in each stack was collected was recorded on a flyer that accompanied the work (Fig. 13).

Juxtaposing the concept of the constantly-moving-yet-stable natural cycle of the Māramataka with the solidity and permanence of the earthen blocks, the installation recalled the actions of the artist’s body and of her whānau (family) moving with seasonal rhythms and the push and pull of the tides. Much like Atafu-Mayo’s piece, this installation was a performative, embodied project because of the care and attention paid to the process of bringing the soil to the gallery, pouring water onto the soil in order to shape it into blocks, and letting the dirt dry, crack, and respond to the conditions of the gallery space. Exhibiting *Tōtō* at Tautai, itself located on a site connected with an ancient waterway, was particularly significant for the artist as a gesture of healing; the blocks of whenua created a sense of home, safety, and whakapapa within the gallery space and allowed her to sync with the temporal cycles connected to places and people.<sup>17</sup>

## Connections

Te Moana Nui a Kiwa (the great ocean of Kiwa, the Pacific Ocean) as giver of life links all the artists in the exhibition. The theme “salt water,” however, is not just about the physical connections between Pasifika peoples and communities—it also embodies shared histories; colonial experiences; ecologies; worldviews and spiritualities; gods and ancestors; blood lines; and current cultural, social, political, and environmental challenges.

*Unity Wall, Peter Elavera*

Peter Elavera is a Papua New Guinean artist and currently a leader in urban street art in Port Moresby. His artwork incorporates social activism statements on injustice, inequality, and conservation of the natural environment. His interest in harnessing the potency of street art started in 2007. Currently, Peter and his team, known as the Kamilion Art Krew (KAKS), are working on an 800-metre-long seawall-mural project in Port Moresby on the theme “Radioactive Ocean,” which brings awareness to the conservation of ocean and marine life.

*Unity Wall* is a 769-metre-long mural that Elavera painted with KAKS. It surrounds the Sir Hubert Murray Stadium in Port Moresby, the capital of Papua New Guinea (PNG), where the country hoisted its flag of unity on September 16, 1975—the day of its independence from Australia. This was a significant political event that united about a thousand different Indigenous tribes and cultures. The mural celebrates the diversity of PNG Indigenous cultures and their interconnections through traditional trade and cultural exchange routes, such as Kula in the east and Hiri in the west. For the exhibition, Elavera presented a six-metre-long photograph of a section of the mural in situ that showed the stadium in the background (Fig. 14). The chosen section of the mural depicts four billboards that chart the colonial history, Indigenous bloodlines, customs, languages, and self-determination movements of PNG, especially those in the southern part of the nation.

A painting of the Union Jack, for instance, serves as the backdrop for an encounter between two figures painted in black and white: Commodore James Epstein, captain of the British Navy and Pacific Fleet, on the left, and a Papua treaty chief (most likely from Aroma Coast as indicated by his war shield), on the right. On one side of this encounter is the insignia for the Territory of Papua, annexed by Great Britain in 1883, and on the other side is a portrait of the reigning British monarch at the time, Queen Victoria. Reading left to right, the next segment of the mural depicts a circular portrait of Reverend James Chalmers of the London Missionary Society. Stretching out from either side of the portrait is a banner depicting body tattoo patterns of the Motu people, coastal trade voyagers who originally inhabited, and still inhabit, the PNG coast near Port Moresby. Other scenes in the mural that were not reproduced for the exhibition include historical figures such as Henry M. Chester, the First Magistrate of British Papua in 1883, and Sir Peter Scratchley, the First Administrator of British Papua from 1884 to 1885. Altogether, the mural provides a history of the travels and encounters that continue to shape PNG.



Figure 14. Peter Elavera and Kamilion Art Krew (KAKS), *Unity Wall*, 2019. Photograph of a portion of the painted mural, each section 6 x 2.5 m, 2020. *SALTWATER / Interconnectivity*, Tautai Gallery, Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand. Photograph courtesy of the artist and Tautai Gallery

In the photograph of the mural displayed in the gallery, Elavera also included more recent images of colonial occupation and the enduring Indigenous cultures of PNG. The third billboard (from the left in Fig. 14) depicts the Morning Star Flag of the Free West Papua movement. Elavera superimposed a raised fist, evoking the Polynesian Panthers and the legacy of the Pasifika freedom fighters, over the flag. He asserts that *Unity Wall* “calls for a united voice against tyranny and for political independence to the West Papuan determination for freedom. Free West Papua.”<sup>18</sup> In an interview, Elavera connects anticolonial and decolonising movements with Moana-Solwara art and unity:

For me, personally, as an East Papuan, I see the West Papuan struggle for self-determination and human dignity as enshrined under the UN Convention on Human Rights Declaration [and] as the struggle against the old colonial regime under the new “political reform policy” propaganda. The struggle of our brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers, in West Papua is [the] Pacific’s fight against political oppressors and capitalism. The global rhetorical perception of the Pacific as a peaceful, friendly, and timid region has drawn wolves in sheep’s clothing. Government-controlled, mega-conglomerate enterprises [use] the age-old tactic of “divide and control” [to sustain] the pyramid of slavery, world dominance, and economic manipulation.

Genealogically, we—One Solwara Pacific Family—are all related and connected through our cultural heritage, languages, Indigenous arts, and values. In a nutshell, the Pacific region is one big family. We will not refrain, nor will we cease, from activism for

the freedom of our brothers and sisters, mothers and fathers in West Papua. We the Pacific must stand together in solidarity, undivided nor intimidated. As Pacific Islanders, whether we are Micronesian, Polynesian, or Melanesian, we must sustain unity in social, political, cultural, and economic consciousness and awareness of neocolonialism through global capitalism and global consumerism. Finally, Olgeta Wan Solwara [altogether one Pacific] family, please bear in mind that in the wake of neocolonialism under the pretext of political and economic reforms, the Pacific family now stands on the verge of being pushed over and being pushed under. The West Papuan struggle epitomises Pacific vulnerability. In light of all this, ultimately, West Papua's freedom will be the Pacific's freedom.<sup>19</sup>

### Fake News, *Shawnee Tekii*

Cook Islands artist Shawnee Tekii uses art as a tool for social engagement and connecting communities. The digital age plays a large role in underpinning her practice, which is often influenced by mainstream media, digital apps, and interactive art. Her awareness of the ways social media and data configuration have influenced how we react, think, move, and perceive the world is keenly present in her art projects. Through the use of bold graphics that are often focused on urban Pacific imagery, she aims to communicate her political views on local and global issues directly to audiences of her generation. Her work encourages the use of mobile phones to either document or activate deeper conceptual content. She often draws inspiration from graphic design in advertising and branding, resulting in attention-grabbing works.

*Fake News* is a series of urban Pacific paintings that Tekii produced in response to news reports in mainstream media and social media that largely omitted Moana-Solwara peoples (Fig. 15). One painting featured a disembodied hand holding a smartphone horizontally, the way people often do when they are watching a video. On the screen, a hypnotic series of orange and yellow concentric circles appeared to recede into the background. The other painting depicted a bright pink television against an electric-green background with alternating pink and blue squares on the screen evoking televisual static. The bright colours intentionally recall the 1960s and '70s and the rise of Aotearoa's Polynesian Panthers, who led social change and Pasifika activism. They were inspired by the Black Panthers' revolutionary movement against police brutality and racial injustice, which continues today in the form of Black Lives Matter.



Figure 15. Shawnee Tekii, *Fake News*, 2020. Aerosol paint and acrylic on canvas. 170.8 x 122 cm each. *SALTWATER / Interconnectivity*, Tautai Gallery, Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand. Photograph by Ralph Brown. Courtesy of the artist and Tautai Gallery

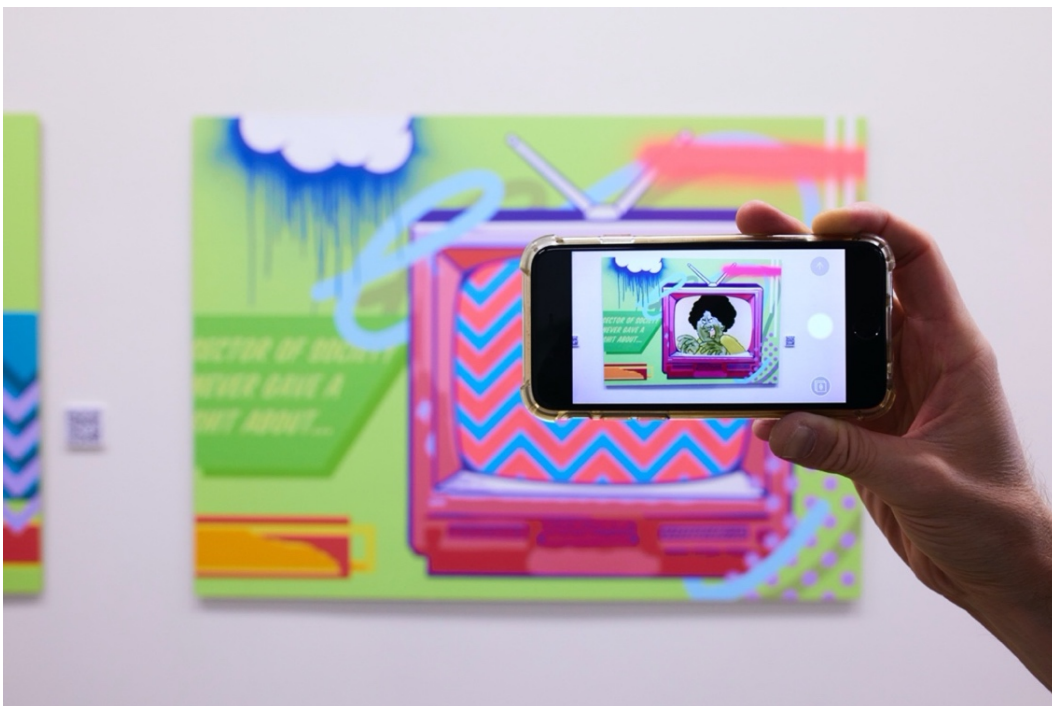


Figure 16. Gallery visitor using an app designed by Shawnee Tekii for *Fake News*, 2020. *SALTWATER / Interconnectivity*, Tautai Gallery, Auckland, Aotearoa New Zealand. Photograph by Ralph Brown. Courtesy of the artist and Tautai Gallery

Drawing connections between the struggles against racism by Black and Brown communities speaks to the real power and community in shared oppression, which is something Tekii wanted to underscore in *Fake News*. Viewers

could interact with the paintings by using a mobile phone app that played documentary footage of the Polynesian Panthers and the Black Panthers, news broadcasts, and popular media from the 1970s (Fig. 16). The transformation, made possible by the phone screen, of the bright 'static' into false and racist news coverage mirrors the misleading nature of popular media. Tekii's work recentred Aotearoa in political, social, and economic news coverage by focusing on the ongoing fight for social justice and human rights. This work can connect and motivate us to continue fighting systems of oppression and to create a world of our own.

\* \* \*

Through the concepts of resilience, healing, and connection, *SALTWATER / Interconnectivity* provided an important space where artists from across Oceania could come together and engage in the most pressing issues facing the region today. As Atafu-Mayo stated:

As Moana-Solwara/Saltwater people we are multifaceted, vast, dynamic, and . . . powerful. We stand on the shoulders of giants who have navigated oceans [. . . and . . . ] paved pathways. . . This show [was] more than a response to global events and our ever-changing landscape. It [was] a representation of Moana leadership, creativity, and world views. Our understanding of interconnectedness to all living things is embodied throughout Te Moana-nui-a-kiwa. . . [T]hese truths . . . will help heal this capitalist and patriarchal place which houses systems of oppression against us Brown and Black folk. The more we creatively access [our Indigenous worldviews] and see ourselves . . . in spaces . . . *we have formed and maintain*, the more we are able to imagine and then rebuild a world in which we lead and live with empathy and love.<sup>20</sup>

In many ways, Tautai Gallery and the exhibition operated much like the Moana-Solwara in its capacity to bridge space, time, and culture as well as connect people for centuries. In her closing address for the exhibition, Courtney Sina Meredith, Director of the Tautai Contemporary Pacific Arts Trust, stated, "*SALTWATER / Interconnectivity* foretells Tautai's ongoing commitment to artists from Te Moana Nui a Kiwa. Presenting an understanding of reality in the present—within urban, environmental, and sacred realms: the ever-flowing Moana connects us all, keeper of our salt spray stories."<sup>21</sup>



*Giles Peterson was born in Papua New Guinea and is a lecturer at Whitecliffe College of Arts and Design (Auckland), where he teaches courses in New Zealand/Pacific art and design history, contemporary art, fashion theory, and arts management. He was a founding member of the Tautai Contemporary Pacific Arts Trust and has mentored three generations of Tautai artists. He is also an independent curator whose most recent exhibitions include Tiaho: Photography from Oceania (2010) and Garden of Memories: Extending Quilt Making Traditions from around the Pacific (2019).*

*Katharine Losi Atafu-Mayo (Sāmoa, Aotearoa, Scotland, England) is a devoted daughter, sister, and godmother with a beautiful vessel that houses her resilient soul, powerful heart, and unshakable spirit. She is a multidisciplinary artist, curator, creative and well-being director, and world builder. Her social art practice is an evolving ecosystem of Moana healing methodologies, spirituality, and community engagement grounded in unconditional love to create alternative ways of living in the everyday. Her artworks include installations, workshops, moving image, and poetry. She is best known for ceremonial rituals based on intuitive activation.*

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> The curators and the director of the Tautai Contemporary Pacific Arts Trust, Courtney Sina Meredith, are grateful to Creative New Zealand, Foundation North, Fetu Ta’i, and the Tautai Board of Trustees for their support of the exhibition. We are also very thankful for the outstanding work of the staff, volunteers, contractors, and suppliers who made the exhibition and programming possible.

<sup>2</sup> The terms Moana-Solwara, Moana, and Pasifika are used in this text interchangeably. With the incredible diversity of languages and cultures in the region, there are numerous terms that people use to identify their place, family, and heritage. By using terms that are more regional than local, we acknowledge the simultaneous diversity and unity that this exhibition celebrates.

<sup>3</sup> Throughout the duration of the exhibition, Atafu-Mayo would activate the gallery space with karakia (prayers), talanoa (dialogue), and ceremony. Rituals, prayers, and thanks were also enacted at the exhibition’s closing in a private ceremony for the artists, curators, Tautai exhibition team, and our whānau (extended family) supporters Rosanna Raymond and Ema Lyon, who have been mentoring Atafu-Mayo.

<sup>4</sup> Tautai Arts, “Artist Spotlight: Katharine Losi Atafu-Mayo,” video by No Six for SALTWATER / Interconnectivity, 2020, accessed September 9, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Emc4nunCcjo>.

<sup>5</sup> Katharine Losi Atafu-Mayo, email exchange with Giles Peterson, January 29, 2022.

<sup>6</sup> Tautai Arts, “Opening Night: *SALTWATER / Interconnectivity*,” video by No Six, 2020, accessed September 9, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rIUFGfEm3lo>.

<sup>7</sup> “Acti.VĀ.te” is a term and concept developed by Rosanna Raymond who highlights the vā as a central practice within the word. “Acti.VĀ.te” uses the vā as a methodology to bring the past into the present through an embodied practice. “Acti.VĀ.tor” is the performative agent, or avatar, who uses the vā as an embodied practice. Rosanna Raymond, personal communication, September 10, 2021.

<sup>8</sup> On the ifoga, see La’auli A. Filoiali’i and Lyle Knowles, “The Ifoga: The Samoan Practice of Seeking Forgiveness for Criminal Behaviour,” *Oceania* 53, no. 4 (1983): 384–8; and Cluny Macpherson and La’avasa Macpherson, “The *Ifoga*: The Exchange Value of Social Honour in Samoa,” *Journal of the Polynesian Society* 114 (2003): 109–33.

<sup>9</sup> Tautai Arts, “Meet the Curators: Katharine Losi Atafu-Mayo and Giles Peterson,” video by No Six for *SALTWATER / Interconnectivity*, 2020, accessed September 9, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9GjUKhfHRPo>.

<sup>10</sup> Artist Telly Tuita was born in Tonga in 1980, immigrated to Brisbane in 1989, and immigrated to Lyall Bay, Wellington, Aotearoa, in 2017. He has a BFA from Western Sydney University, a bachelor of art education from the University of New South Wales, and a master’s degree in special education from the University of Sydney. Tuita has been a high school art teacher, a special education teacher, and an assistant principal at Green Square School. In 2017, he returned to making art full-time. Tuita’s art practice encompasses painting, printmaking, sculpture, photomedia, and performance. He has contributed to exhibitions in Australia and Aotearoa New Zealand, and his work is included in the collection of the New Zealand Ministry of Foreign Affairs.

<sup>11</sup> William Sharp, after John Webber, *Poulaho, King of the Friendly Isles Drinking Kava*, 1784. Engraving, 273 x 410 mm, British Museum, 1841,0313.74, [https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P\\_1841-0313-74](https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/object/P_1841-0313-74).

<sup>12</sup> Tautai Arts, “Artist Spotlight: Telly Tuita,” video by No Six for *SALTWATER / Interconnectivity*, 2020, accessed September 9, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=iD9CcFlgh50>.

<sup>13</sup> Telly Tuita, “Telly Tuita: I Left My Heart in Tongpop,” in *SALTWATER / Interconnectivity*, ed. Katharine Losi Atafu-Mayo and Giles Peterson (Auckland: Tautai, 2019), 11.

<sup>14</sup> See Buku-Larrŋgay Mulka Art Centre, “About the Mulka Project,” accessed August 26, 2021, <https://yirrkala.com/about-the-mulka-project/>.

<sup>15</sup> Chris Matthews, “Indigenous Perspectives in Maths: Understanding Gurruṯu,” *Teacher Magazine*, April 27, 2020, Australian Council for Educational Research, accessed August 26, 2021, [https://www.teachermagazine.com/au\\_en/articles/indigenous-perspectives-in-maths-understanding-gurruu](https://www.teachermagazine.com/au_en/articles/indigenous-perspectives-in-maths-understanding-gurruu). Emphasis in original.

<sup>16</sup> Gutinjara Yunupijū, “Gutinjarra Yunupijū: Gurruṯu’mi Mala (My Connections),” in *SALTWATER / Interconnectivity*, ed. Katharine Losi Atafu-Mayo and Giles Peterson (Auckland: Tautai, 2019), 19.

<sup>17</sup> Tautai Arts, “Artist Spotlight: Te Ara Minhinnick,” video by No Six for *SALTWATER / Interconnectivity*, 2020, accessed September 9, 2021 <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=c1sp97PhctY>.

<sup>18</sup> Peter Elavera, “Peter Elavera: Unity Wall,” in *SALTWATER / Interconnectivity*, ed. Katharine Losi Atafu-Mayo and Giles Peterson (Auckland: Tautai, 2019), 25.

<sup>19</sup> Tautai Arts, “Artist Spotlight: Peter Elavera,” video by No Six for *SALTWATER / Interconnectivity*, 2020, accessed August 26, 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nY6cB9QFLXA>.

<sup>20</sup> Katharine Losi Atafu-Mayo (@KattyMayo), Instagram, October 21, 2020, accessed September 12, 2021, [https://www.instagram.com/p/CGlcPaBH5uiHMcuw5euP\\_LtYcr1FfVDmvQx9OM0/](https://www.instagram.com/p/CGlcPaBH5uiHMcuw5euP_LtYcr1FfVDmvQx9OM0/).

<sup>21</sup> Courtney Sina Meredith, “Acknowledgements,” in *SALTWATER / Interconnectivity*, ed. Katharine Losi Atafu-Mayo and Giles Peterson (Auckland: Tautai, 2019), 29.