**Title**
when we dance the ocean, does it hear us?

**Permalink**
https://escholarship.org/uc/item/6fj6r2rw

**Journal**
Journal of Transnational American Studies, 10(1)

**Author**
Hobart, Hiʻilei Julia

**Publication Date**
2019

**DOI**
10.5070/T8101044007

**Copyright Information**

Peer reviewed

# when we dance the ocean, does it hear us?

HIʻILEI JULIA HOBART
Art curated by CHRISTOPHER LYNN
and FIDALIS BUEHLER

This essay considers the recent work of two Pacific Islander artists who explore the complex relationship between oceanic peoples and the sea through traditional dance forms. Yuki Kihara's *Siva in Motion* (video, 2012) and Kalisolaite ʻUhila's *Ongo Mei Moana* (live performance, 2015) are studies in embodiment, temporality, and communication. They grapple with pressing questions about Indigenous futures in a time of anthropogenic change and the vexed legacies of Indigenous histories shaped by colonial encounter.

Commissioned by the Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki of New Zealand, Kihara's *Siva in Motion* is composed of a backlit silhouette of the artist wearing a voluminous nineteenth-century mourning dress, waist tucked, hair pulled back into a clean bun, and all but her hands and her head covered by dark fabric. There is no sound, but she does a Samoan siva: a dance comprised of restrained and delicate hand movements that articulate a story of waves. As she begins to dance a taualuga, her body multiplies. Soon she is three, with hands undulating in silence as they catch the light. This restrained femininity is captured through the character of Salome, Kihara's recurring alter-ego. Salome is modeled on a found photo: an anonymous formal portrait from 1886, in which a Samoan "half-caste" woman is offered up as a specimen of postcolonial civility. While Salome has appeared in Kihara's other works (2006 onward), here she dances in response to a 2009 tsunami that devastated Sāmoa, leaving an estimated one hundred eighty-nine people dead.[1] As Kihara's gestures compound upon one another, they connect the relentless building of tsunami waves to the onslaught of colonialism, and yet, her body remains centered and controlled.

In contrast to the composed silence of Kihara's *Siva*, a video of Kalisolaite ʻUhila's *Ongo Mei Moana*—taken from his 2015 live exhibition for the Performance Arcade
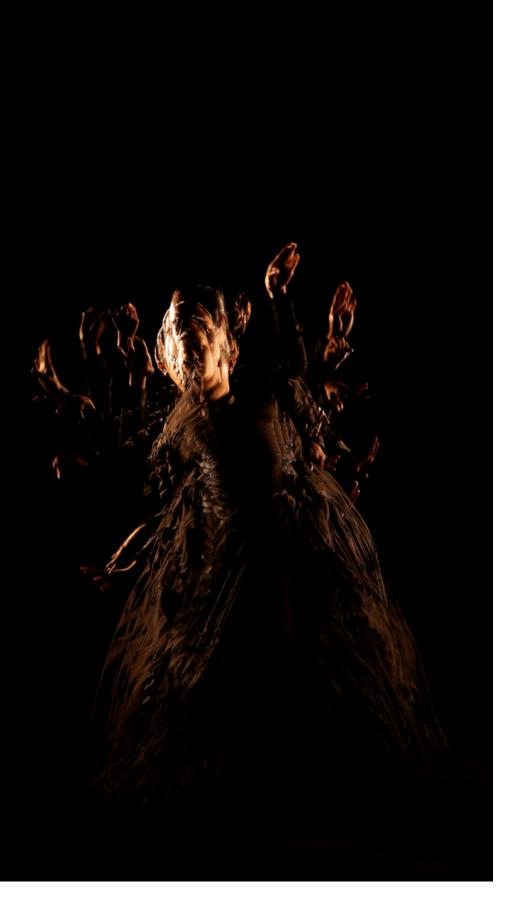
*Figure 1.* Yuki Kihara, *Siva in Motion* (still), 2012, single-channel HD Blu-ray, 16:9, color, silent, ed. 4/4, 8:14 minutes (looped). Commissioned by Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki, Aotearoa New Zealand / Courtesy of Yuki Kihara, Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tāmaki and Milford Galleries Dunedin, Aotearoa New Zealand

art and music festival held in Wellington, New Zealand—is noisy with wind and waves. A short film clip available on Facebook captured a small portion of the full performance, which spanned six-hour segments across the span of five days. In it, 'Uhila stands at the ocean's edge wearing a traditional Tongan girdle of ngatu and si leaves—back cloth and ti leaves—that contrasts with the modern buildings that surround Wellington Harbour's commercial waterfront (his clothing references seafaring ancestors who gathered black rocks from the Tongan-Kermadec arc for cemetery decoration).[2] The ocean, choppy and grinding, washes up to his feet and he responds in dialogue, sweeping his arms over themselves as if pulling the waves in to him. 'Uhila describes the combination of oration and traditional Tongan dance that he uses here as a way to "conduct" the ocean's tides by calling them in.
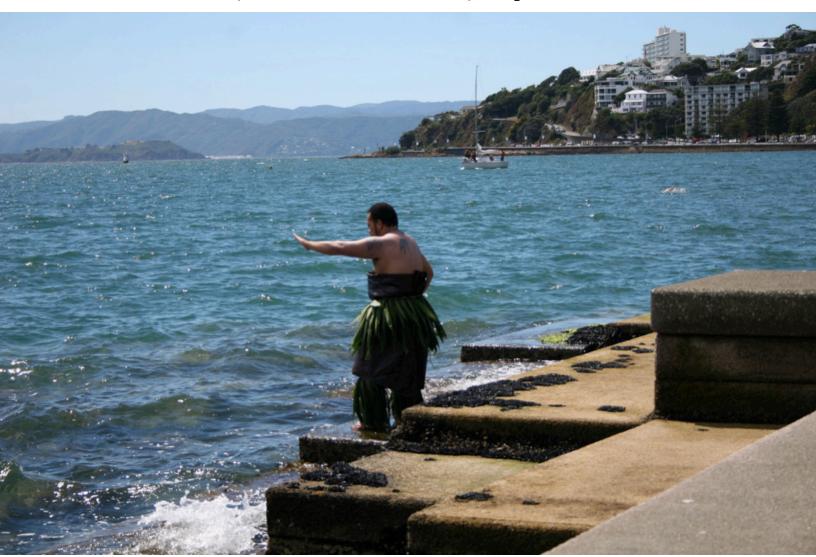


*Figure 2.* Kalisolaite 'Uhila, *Ongo Mei Moana*, 2015, performance at The Performance Arcade 2015, Wellington Waterfront, New Zealand. Courtesy of the artist

For these artists, dance provides a culturally grounded anchor for theorizing oceanic relationships across time and space, which both connect Pacific Islander communities to one another, as well as anchor specific cultures to their island homes. Pohnpeian and Filipino scholar Vicente M. Diaz uses the twinned concepts of rooted-ness and routedness in order to describe how oceans "can furnish an analytic and a practical way to advance the political and cultural struggles of indigenous people in lands heavily-settler-colonized."[3] When those relationships are performed through dance, it becomes an important way, suggests Sharon Māhealani Rowe, that Pacific peoples live their histories "in the present" by embodying the stories of ancestors.[4] Despite the colonial structures that underpin modern Pacific subjectivities, especially as they are now bound up in the constraints of modernity, capitalism, and globaliz-ation, it is oceanic relationships, rather than colonial metropoles, that articulate prior kinships and temporalities that bind Pacific peoples to each other. Thinking through fluidity and movement as both an ontological proposition for and a historical condition of Oceania and its peoples, such arguments towards intimacy and connection operate as useful and ancient affirmations of who and *how* we are.

The lived reality of anthropogenic climate change, however, adds a new and unexpected layer to this elemental relationship: What is this new mode of colonialism by which the sea is compelled to swallow up its islands?[5] Such questions are communi-cated through dance because of its ability to traverse time and space, functioning, Banaban scholar Katerina Teaiwa explains, as an archive of epistemological and onto-logical knowledge. Traditional dance thereby communicates with audiences, environ-ment, and ancestors in ways that acknowledge the present while preserving the past.[6] The use of dance by Kiahra and ʻUhila signals the kind of temporal expansiveness nec-essary for having a conversation with or about the ocean. Taualuga, which Kihara dances, is a particular dance form premised upon relationality. Traditionally, it begins with a tāupōu, a female dancer, often virginal and elite. As she dances, she is joined by audience members who ʻaiuli, or dance in dialogue with her.[7] Kihara's Salome is not joined by others, but instead multiplies, suggesting, perhaps, that such dialogues have become constrained through colonial pressures across time, in much the way that the mourning dress that corsets her body signifies the losses and limitations that have been imposed by the ecological aftereffects of imperial capitalism. This is underscored by the silence that presides over the dance, and contrasts with ʻUhila's focus on movement and sound. He calls the performance ongo mei moana, which translates to "sounds from the ocean," and thus positions ʻUhila as both the recipient and giver of communication, even if that dialogue is potentially circumscribed by the modern city that looms behind him. He chants at the sea, and his voice seems to hardly register above the noise of the waves, leaving the audience to wonder at whether the ocean can hear him, too, over its own sounds or heed his commands over its own tidal pulses.

This is not to imply a scenario in which Oceanic peoples were once intimate with, and are now estranged from, the ocean. However, works like the two in question here suggest that understanding the Pacific—particularly a Pacific that is changing

profoundly through the effects of rising sea levels and extreme weather patterns—
may require us to find modes of engagement that may exceed spoken language.
Teaiwa describes Oceanic forms of dance as an expression of empathy that "spatially
map[s bodies] onto the land and seascape."[8] Through the embodied histories of
traditional dance, Kihara and 'Uhila communicate in ways that reach beyond the
present moment. Instead, they gesture across time and space in order to negotiate
what it means to be an Oceanic peoples.

## Notes

[1] Billie Lythberg, "New Works at Home AKL," exhibition review in *Art Monthly
Australia,* 258 (April 2013): 14–18.

[2] Tautai Contemporary Pacific Arts Trust. "Kalisolaite 'Uhila."
http://www.tautai.org/artist/kalisolaite-uhila/.

[3] Vicente M. Diaz, "Voyaging for Anti-Colonial Recovery: Austronesian Seafaring,
Archipelagic Rethinking, and the Re-Mapping of Indigeneity," *Pacific Asia Inquiry* 2, no. 1
(Fall 2011): 21.

[4] Sharon Māhealani Rowe, "We Dance for Knowledge," *Dance Research Journal* 40, no. 1
(2008): 31–32. This idea is echoed in the 2014 documentary film *Taualuga*.

[5] I borrow this characterization of climate change as a mode of colonization from
Potawatomi philosopher Kyle Powys Whyte, "Indigenous Climate Change Studies:
Indigenizing Futures, Decolonizing the Anthropocene," *English Language Notes* 55, no. 1–
2 (2017): 153–62.

[6] 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), 108–09.

[7] 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, and Jeanette Mageo,
"Zones of Ambiguity and Identity Politics in Samoa," *The Journal of the Royal
Anthropological Institute* 14, no. 1 (2008): 61–78.

[8] Teaiwa, "Saltwater Feet," 110.

**Selected Bibliography**

Diaz, Vicente M. "Voyaging for Anti-Colonial Recovery: Austronesian Seafaring, Archipelagic Rethinking, and the Re-Mapping of Indigeneity." *Pacific Asia Inquiry* 2, no. 1 (2011): 21–32.

Hereniko, Vilsoni. "Taualuga: Decolonising and Globalising the Pacific." In *Transpacific Americas: Encounters and Engagements Between the Americas and the South Pacific*, edited by Eveline Dürr and Philipp Schorch, 167–74. New York: Routledge, 2015.

Lythberg, Billie. "New Works at Home AKL." Exhibition review in *Art Monthly Australia* 258 (April 2013): 14–18.

Mageo, Jeanette. "Zones of Ambiguity and Identity Politics in Samoa." *The Journal of the Royal Anthropological Institute* 14, no. 1 (2008): 61–78.

Rowe, Sharon Māhealani. "We Dance for Knowledge." *Dance Research Journal* 40, no. 1 (2008): 31–34.

Tautai Contemporary Pacific Arts Trust. "Kalisolaite 'Uhila." http://www.tautai.org/artist/kalisolaite-uhila/.

Teaiwa, Katerina. "Saltwater Feet: The Flow of Dance in Oceania." In *Deep Blue: Critical Reflections on Nature, Religion, and Water*, edited by Sylvie Shaw and Andrew Francis, 107–26. New York: Routledge, 2008.

Whyte, Kyle Powys. "Indigenous Climate Change Studies: Indigenizing Futures, Decolonizing the Anthropocene." *English Language Notes* 55, nos. 1–2 (2017): 153–62.