

Latai Taumoepeau and Taloi Havini
**The Last
Resort: A
Conversation**

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The Last Resort: A Conversation

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Cockatoo Island is the largest of several islands in Sydney Harbour. Its forty-four acres of sandstone knolls, which sit where the Paramatta and Lane Cove rivers meet, belong to the traditional custodians and owners of the lands and waters of Sydney Harbour. These are the Borogeggal, Birrabirrigal, Cammeraygal, Gadigal, Gayamagal, Wallumedegal, and Wangal people.

Over the course of the nineteenth century, these people were forcibly removed from their homes as the colonial project built prison blocks on the island. Cockatoo Island was also deforested of its heavy timber and vegetation, and from the 1850s onward became a base for shipbuilding. This trajectory continued through the 1990s. In 2010, the island became a UNESCO World Heritage Site. It was also one of the performance sites for the 2020 Biennale of Sydney (titled “NIRIN”).

As part of the Biennale, and during the height of the ongoing Covid epidemic, Tongan-Australian artist Latai Taumoepeau performed her most recent work, *The Last Resort*. The performance took place on Cockatoo Island. Taumoepeau’s performance fit well with artistic director Brook Andrew’s vision for this year’s Biennale of Sydney – to conjure “optimism from chaos.” Optimism from chaos, Andrew continues, “drives artists in NIRIN to resolve the often hidden or ignored urgency surrounding contemporary life.”¹

The Last Resort, performed inside the Turbine Hall of the island’s industrial precinct, was an unforgettable and spectacular sight for those of us who braved the longer-than-anticipated ferry ride from Circular Quay (an international passenger shipping port in Sydney Harbour) to Cockatoo Island. Any ideas that ferry passengers may have had around escaping to an idyllic island for light relief were slightly skewered when we disembarked. We turned a corner to stand and watch Taumoepeau and her co-performer, Taliu Aloua, each armed with an ‘ike (Tongan wooden mallet), smashing and beating glass bottle after glass bottle.

Standing together in a dystopian setting, Taumoepeau and Aloua were channeling their ceremonial Tongan practices. With worn-out hotel bathrobes on their backs and brick sandals strapped to their feet, they both adorned their necks with lei or sisi – fresh tropical flowers and leaves typically worn as formal body decoration across the Pacific. Visitors could hear the sharp tap of glass breaking from the other side of the gigantic Turbine Hall. The sound of smashing glass alongside an accompanying droning soundtrack created a live, human-induced cacophony.

The Biennale describes the performance as follows:



Latai Taumoepeau, *The Last Resort*, 2020. Performance view for the 22nd Biennale of Sydney (2020), Cockatoo Island. Commissioned by the Biennale of Sydney with generous assistance from the Oranges & Sardines Foundation. Courtesy the artist. Performer / Co-devisor: Taliu Aloua; Lighting Designer: Amber Silk; Soundtrack: James Brown; Costume: Anthony Aitch. Photograph: Zan Wimberley.

The Last Resort excavates a dystopian image and experience of idyllic island landscapes, mostly considered as holiday destinations to outsiders. This endurance performance installation explores the fragility and vulnerability of saltwater ecologies and communities of Pacific Island nations in Oceania. Responding to the emotional, geopolitical and physical labour of Pacific people and their struggle in the acceleration of rising sea levels due to the melting of ice glaciers, threatening mass exodus and displacement.²

Aloua and Taumoepeau's relationship can be traced through their shared matrilineal genealogy. Aloua temporarily left his homeland of Tonga to be an integral part of the performance with Taumoepeau. Although Taumoepeau lives in Gadigal Ngurra (Sydney), her return to her ancestral island nation of Tonga is ever-present. Taumoepeau makes and presents work in the world, and will soon physically return to Tonga to learn and continue the faivā (performing art) of sea voyaging and celestial navigation before one day becoming an ancestor. Crossing the Pacific Ocean is not a new concept to islanders, who are expert travelers over large bodies of water, land, time, and space.

Longtime friend and fellow artist Taloi Havini traveled back to see The Last Resort on Cockatoo Island once again, on the last day of the Biennale of Sydney exhibition this September.

Listen to the audio at: <https://www.e-flux.com/journal/112/353919/the-last-resort-a-conversation/>

What follows is an edited transcript of their conversation in September 2020.

Taloi Havini: As an islander, or someone from the Pacific Ocean – this ocean – it's all about relationships. I also come from a matrilineal land, and we have to work within our matrilineal lineage to protect and to take guardianship over the whole place: the site, the air, the land, the sea. In this particular performance, *The Last Resort*, you and your co-performer were both wearing bathrobes that had the words "The Last Resort" written on them. What is your relationship with your co-performer here?

Latai Taumoepeau: Taliu Aloua is my best friend – we grew up together. Taliu is also related to me through my mother and his mother. He's actually my uncle, generationally. The origin of our relationship is that I had a great-great grandmother, and, at one time, she and Taliu's great-great grandfather were brother and sister. This is an important relationship to observe in

Tongan culture – particularly if you are the descendant of the female, being that it's a matriarchal society.

So, we are very close, and we talk about all of our artistic endeavors together. Some of them see daylight, and some of them become pipe dreams. When we first made *The Last Resort*, it was out of necessity. I didn't have a very big budget. I really wanted to look at our relationship – and in looking at that relationship, to think about our obligation to one another as Tongan siblings.

In our culture, Taliu is actually a mother to me. That kind of reverse gender role is completely invisible in this performance. However, it's what binds our obligation to each other while we perform inside very dangerous conditions that we create using glass. So, it's a very important role. As I continue to make work about climate change, I wonder what it is we lose as a result – not only because of sea levels rising, but also what else climate change forces. What are these situations that force our people? Forced relocation is something that you know about really well. I don't mean to tell you about that. When making work about climate change, I think: What are the things that don't survive in forced relocation? It is the most intangible cultural practices that don't survive – the things that are not object-based.

Taliu and I created conditions in *The Last Resort* that came from a previous work, which we titled *Stitching up the Sea*. For the Biennale of Sydney, I retitled the work and performance *The Last Resort* – a site-specific work on Cockatoo Island. It was important for us to acknowledge the island's own history in Australia.

To go back to talking about the relationship between Taliu and I: this obligation between us is related to a concept called *Tauhivā*, which is the observance and the obligation of the space between us. And of our relationship, which is based on our genealogy. In this work, I also like to think about our relationship to the environment. What is our relationship to our homelands? To our ancestral lands? Our coastlines?

These questions are not just for the "him and I" as Tongan people, but also for all of us people from the Pacific – particularly the diaspora in Australia. So, this relationship is a really, really important thing to think about. The relationship extends to the one we have to the region, especially as it is under threat as a result of climate change – human-induced climate change, which puts developed countries like Australia in a very particular position in terms of being held accountable. You know this from your own work around the extraction and mining industries.

I think when we're looking at our Pacific



Latai Taumoepeau, *The Last Resort*, 2020. Performance view for the 22nd Biennale of Sydney (2020), Cockatoo Island. Commissioned by the Biennale of Sydney with generous assistance from the Oranges & Sardines Foundation. Courtesy the artist. Performer / Co-devisor: Taliu Aloua; Lighting Designer: Amber Silk; Soundtrack: James Brown; Costume: Anthony Aitch. Photograph: Zan Wimberley.

Island nations, one of the things that holds us together is the body of ocean which we know as the Pacific – also a name that’s come from somebody else. That’s why it becomes crucial to look at the relationships we have as Pacific Island people to this body of water – the largest continent in the world.

We are not separate from this body of water, as some scholars from this region have explained. Tongan and Fijian writer and anthropologist Epeli Hau’ofa talks about the “Sea of Islands,” which isn’t necessarily something that is evident in my work. However, these concepts are important to reference. They represent an indigenous perspective from this region that goes back more than three thousand years in having a relationship to this ocean.

TH: Yes, in fact it’s that “three-thousand” years – when people say “three-thousand years BC,” that for us is a disruptive, demarcated, violent rerouting and removal of us from our ocean. In your artwork and in mine, I see a similarity with the work that I just did, with *Reclamation*, where I filled up the whole gallery space (Artspace Sydney) with topsoil.

This was a purposely uninhabitable surface. And yet, on top of all of this soil, I placed sculptures which are made from cane harvested from my land. They indicate a form of navigation of space and knowledge, and how we perceive our world as opposed to the West – whereas mining and extractive industries rely on topographical maps. The West looks down on the world and on the ocean. They look down on the land. Whereas we look out and from within. In our generation, our works are really playing with perceptions of place and of being.

When I stood in your work and watched this whole bed of glass glistening with light, it looked to me in many ways like how the light hits the surface and reflects on and through the ocean. You were walking on the glass with bricks as sandals. I felt it was quite site-specific to Cockatoo Island, an island within Sydney Harbour which has had a lot of aggressive history – colonial history – and was a penal settlement.

LT: The island was an industry. And the jail there was mostly for women and children, and who endured hard labor. In making *The Last Resort* on Cockatoo Island, I wanted to look at the labor and ask: Who is doing the heavy lifting in terms of the impact of climate change?

The ocean is heating up: it’s not a habitable environment for sea creatures, you know? This is all human-induced, so I think that having this demonstration of dangerous work was also about emphasizing who is doing all the heavy lifting around climate change in the region. And it is people who are living on their island nations. They have to do the most, and have the most to

lose. And while they are doing a lot of the work, they are being ignored by countries like Australia and New Zealand. *The Last Resort* used glass bottles and waste matter from Sydney nightclubs. The performance wanted to expose the relationship, the genealogy, between glass and islands and sand, and that led to the “resort life.”

TH: Yeah, I actually wanted to ask you about the glass in particular. Visually, there’s tons of glass in the installation. The connection of glass to sand, the rawness, the materiality – the sand is what our feet touch on the beach, and yet glass is human induced. I wanted to ask you about the element of danger that you brought – you did so in a very sensual way. When you were smashing the glass, the sound of it went all the way to the back of my ears.

I currently live in a studio opposite a pub in Sydney (a studio in Artspace, Sydney).³ On early mornings after weekends, the rubbish trucks come to collect the glass bottles. I hear the alcohol bottles being smashed, and I immediately think of your performance. It certainly is an industry. I wanted to talk to you about wearing the bathrobes – they looked quite worn, and yet they were still hotel bathrobes. I wanted to ask you about this idea around economy, industry, tourism, and how evident all of this was on your bodies. Why were you wearing those hotel robes on your bodies in the performance?

LT: Many people in Australia see the Pacific Islands as their holiday destination. It’s a very different perspective to the one that you have of your homeland, and I have of my homeland. And so for me, when we’re talking about the impact of climate change on these islands, it’s a very vulnerable position that our relatives, our kin, our neighbors are experiencing.

The use of glass is about showing that vulnerability. I like to work with the authentic body, this body. I work from memory; I work from empathy. So, I have to work with material that produces a level of risk for me personally, as that’s what it means for people who are forced to face climate change every day. They don’t have the luxury of being in an air-conditioned office and feeling as if climate change only affects other nations. That’s not a reality for the people who are of the Pacific, and who are living in the Pacific Islands.

They are seeing overfishing in the region. They are already seeing an increase in tsunamis and king tides, and dealing with that on a daily basis. So, to make work that represents people from the region, there has to be a level of vulnerability and risk. And that’s what the glass represents and creates. It creates a circumstance where I, too, must be in danger just

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like they are, in order to let the bystanders make other decisions that have an effect. I mean political decisions.

Australians need to understand that their everyday choices have an impact on other people, and they're not going to get that from a pretty idyllic postcard that they got from their relatives while they were on holiday. Using the robes and renaming the work *The Last Resort* became reasons to speak directly to those people who access our Pacific Islands, our Pacific Ocean, in a very particular way that's different from our way.

I also come from the theater. Costuming is part of what people can read. Everything that you introduce into the space becomes available for them to try and understand what you're trying to convey. For me, it's a bit cheeky as well. It's part of my personality to make a little joke about some things. So the robes are a way of taking a little stab.

TH: After seeing, witnessing, and being part of the performances that you and your cousin Taliu were doing, I started to read John Puhiaatau Pule's book *The Shark That Ate the Sun* (1992). In the book is a legend, and upon reading that legend I immediately thought of the Carteret Islanders. And it also made me think of you. It's quite prophetic, this legend. John Pule wrote this quite a long time ago now, and here I am in the year 2020 reading a passage that says (toward the end of the legend):

The airport had more than ten flights a day come in and take off, bringing passengers from all over the globe to see the hole. Documentaries, religious investigations, and interviews kept the government as well as the village elders busy. The tiny country appealed to the tourist trade as the prime spot to build hotels for the millions of people who have lost paradise or wanted to see one and were encouraged to visit the Last Resort. When uranium was discovered on the Rock, the owners of the land as well as government officials sweated at the thought of money and were saying yes, yes, yes to the company that would supervise the project. TV was introduced. Each village had more than two hotels. The Sheraton was built over spiritual land removing the bones that had been sleeping there for hundreds of years; they cleared away the middens and burial caves and built a hotel to sleep two hundred people and employed only Europeans. *Ze capital looks lik za streets in Nu York*, said the French man who had an appointment with the head of government that hot day. In his pocket a fat cheque book stood up to the sun to shine.

He was planning to build a port before the year 2020 and more hotels, hotels, hotels. That is all you see along the coast. Hotels, hotels, hotels. American warships watched from the harbor.⁴

LT: Crazy!

TH: *The Shark That Ate the Sun* was published in 1992, and here he is, as it turns out, writing about the year 2020. And here I was witnessing the artwork-installation-endurance performance you did of *The Last Resort* this year, which speaks to all of these issues.

All these experiences made me think about Tulele Peisa, an organization from the Carteret Islands.⁵ The community living there has had to relocate to Bougainville – or some people are choosing to not relocate, but there are forced relocation programs to move the whole population from the island because it is becoming uninhabitable. You can still live there, of course, because we believe in living on the ocean, and we know how to do that.

But as the survival rates drop, and the need for fresh water and crops increases, all of these things are causing us to adapt, move, be uprooted to higher ground. What happened there was that they actually had to stop documentary filmmakers and news reporters from entering their island because it became “Hollywood” – the landowners started calling the island “Hollywood.” They banned people from coming, because even reporting on climate change created an inundation of people, and this disaster tourism became an industry in itself.

LT: Exactly. I think this is a huge, huge problem. After you read that part of John Pule's book and brought it to my attention, I couldn't believe it! I'm a huge fan of his but I have never read this book, so it was crazy to get that message from you. It was so serendipitous, and I just love it. Now there's this connection! Absolutely. It makes total sense to me that you thought of the Carteret Islands.

Back in 2007, I met people from the Carteret Islands. Hearing them talk about their deep sorrow at having to move to higher land in Buka (Bougainville) and negotiate this fact was one of the most touching, emotional stories for me – especially after having met Rufina, a Carteret Island elder. Rufina was a seventy-something-year-old woman from the Carteret Islands, and we met while traveling to the United Nations Climate Change conference in Bali that year. She told me about her production of *Beroana*, a traditional shell currency made by women, and how they have been exchanging *Beroana* for land as a result of the sea levels rising. She also told me that they are not able to grow food anymore, because of the salinity levels coming through the

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water table and contaminating their food gardens. To think about this woman at that age ... and she was a chief, as well.

She also taught me a dance from her home. She'd never left her island before. So to think about this – that this story also reminded you of that – is really important, because people from the Pacific have been talking about these things for a long, long time. This didn't just start recently, but now that people in the West – people in developed countries – are starting to suffer themselves, they are finally thinking about it. Yet this is the human injustice of it all. Other people – let's call them the canaries in the coal mine – have been saying this for a long time. And the delayed reaction is coming at the cost of their precious islands in the Pacific Ocean. Showing this is the important work of artists.

I'm not surprised that John Pule has already written about this and foreseen this. You know about this yourself, from your experience as part of a family from Bougainville who were exiled as a result of the extraction industry. And so you know how that experience of exile doesn't just go away – you know it's important that these things are documented from our perspective, from our own oceanic indigenous Pacific perspective. Otherwise, there are other historians that respect the dominant voice and the dominant culture. So, in the arts we have our work that we make and it's important that it exists. And I think that this serendipitous experience is testament to that – that another artist from the region has already spoken about it. I make work about it. You've been making work about it.

TH: How these things materialize and intersect ...

LT: ... it's so important.

TH: It's a continuum. It's a continuum of our stories. I find that there's a cynicism in the title *The Last Resort*, but there's also a relief. If it's the "last resort" – I feel like that's fine ... and what is beyond the last resort?

LT: The last resort is always going to be where we find ourselves. It's our fight for a place that we belong to, not that we own. *We belong to it*, and that's where *The Last Resort* comes from. It's from our own sense of self-determination, our own independence, our own relationships that we have and continue to form and regenerate as we go, even as a diaspora. *The Last Resort* is really a continuum.

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Latai Taumoepeau makes live art. Her *faivā* (performance practice) is from her homelands, the Island Kingdom of Tonga, and her birthplace, Sydney, land of the Gadigal people. She mimicked, trained, and unlearned dance in multiple institutions of learning, starting with her village, a suburban church hall, the club, and a university. Her body-centered performance practice of *faivā* centers Tongan philosophies of relational space and time, cross-pollinating ancient and everyday temporal practice to make visible the impact of climate crisis in the Pacific. She conducts urgent environmental movements and actions to create transformation in Oceania. Engaging in the sociopolitical landscape of Australia with sensibilities in race, class, and the female body politic, she is committed to making minority communities visible in the frangipanni-less foreground. In the near future she will return to her ancestral home and continue the ultimate *faivā* of sea voyaging and celestial navigation before she becomes an ancestor.

Taloi Havini was born in 1981 in Arawa, Bougainville and is currently based between Sydney and the Hakö constituency in the Autonomous Region of Bougainville, Papua New Guinea. Havini's work is often a personal response to the politics of location, exploring contested sites and histories in the Oceania region, and employing photography, sculpture, immersive video, and mixed-media installations. Taloi holds a Bachelor of Arts (Honours) from the Canberra School of Art, Australian National University, and has exhibited internationally in the Royal Academy of Arts, London; Palais de Tokyo, Paris; Sharjah Biennial 13, UAE; 3rd Aichi Triennale, Nagoya, Japan; Dhaka Art Summit, Bangladesh; Honolulu Biennial, Hawaii, USA; and Musée du Quai Branly, Paris.

1

Brook Andrew, "Briefing
Speech," Biennale of Sydney,
September 12, 2020
[https://www.biennaleofsydney
.art/brook-andrew-briefing-s
peech/.](https://www.biennaleofsydney.art/brook-andrew-briefing-speech/)

2

See
[https://www.biennaleofsydney
.art/artists/latai-taumoepea
u/#:~:text=Photograph%3A%20Z
an%20Wimberley,-,Latai%20Tau
moepeau%2C%20'The%20Last%20R
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20Foundation.](https://www.biennaleofsydney.art/artists/latai-taumoepeau/#:~:text=Photograph%3A%20Zan%20Wimberley,-,Latai%20Taumoepeau%2C%20'The%20Last%20Resort'%2C%202020.,from%20the%20Oranges%20%26%20Sardines%20Foundation.)

3

See my latest exhibition at
Artspace, Sydney
[https://www.artspace.org.au/
program/exhibitions/2020/tal
oihavini/.](https://www.artspace.org.au/program/exhibitions/2020/taloihavini/)

4

John Puhiaatau Pule, "Tales of
Life's Legends" (Legend 1:
Chapter Thirty-One), in *The
Shark That Ate the Sun = Ko e
māgo ne kai e lā* (Penguin,
1992), 260–63.

5

See [https://www.equatorinitiativ
e.org/2017/05/30/tulele-peisa/.](https://www.equatorinitiative.org/2017/05/30/tulele-peisa/)

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