> We refer to the ocean and the seabed and the ocean floor as the mat of planet earth... Life depends on the mat which is the ocean. It covers everything, the ocean floor, the ocean, the reefs, the seashore and then goes up to the land, the rocks, the rivers, the lakes, birds, animals, fish, and all the organisms that survive. We all depend on the ocean... When there is disturbance to the mat of the ocean and there is destruction in that, it is going to affect every other life.
>
> —Motarilavoa Hilda Lini, elder of the Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific movement.[1]

Talei Luscia Mangioni

The Ocean is our Mat

The ocean is our mat. Woven from dried pandanus leaves, like the currents of the ocean, our mat connects us to one another across our *wansolwara*, our sea of islands that stretches from West Papua to Mā'ohi Nui (French Polynesia).[2] This mat is one where we come to talk story, share, feast, laugh, learn, and imagine with one another. Our struggles across our differences are indivisible from one another, with our collective liberation requiring multi-scopic approaches that honor our region's diverse and localized Indigenous histories, cultures, and languages. While irrevocably altered by brutal violences of colonialism and its associated genocide, militarization, and extractive industries, our ancestral connections to our ocean, as well as lands, seas, stars, and skies, are recovered through grassroots histories of resistance.

A cultural and spiritual reverence for the ocean that we call home has been integral to Pacific opponents of nuclear colonialism since the birth of the popular regional movement in 1970, with the Against Testing On Moruroa (ATOM) committee in Suva, Fiji. Following World War II, Western regimes of national security and defense belittled the Pacific region as devoid of people and any modicum of cultural or spiritual significance.[3] Between 1945–1996, it became an experimental laboratory for 315 nuclear tests by the American, British/Australian, and French.[4] When French testing took place from 1966–1996, scientists deployed a grammar of "safety" with "permissible levels of fallout" that were "geographically contained" within test sites. However, the fallout reached Fiji, which was well beyond these test sites, and led Pacific thought-leaders such as Suliana Siwatibau, Graham Baines, Amelia Rokotuivuna, and others to intervene and contest the colonial logics of benign "dispersion" and "dilution" through the ATOM Committee. As Claire Slatter wrote of ATOM, the "concern about nuclear fallout in the Pacific gave rise to a spate of letters to the committee and to newspapers and to protest songs and angry poetry."[5] Through creative acts seeking to convey citizen science through popular education, ATOM upended the epistemic violence of scientific-derived data and revealed the grave dangers of ionizing radiation to the Fijian public. Pacific bodies, as well as those of their Mā'ohi kin more

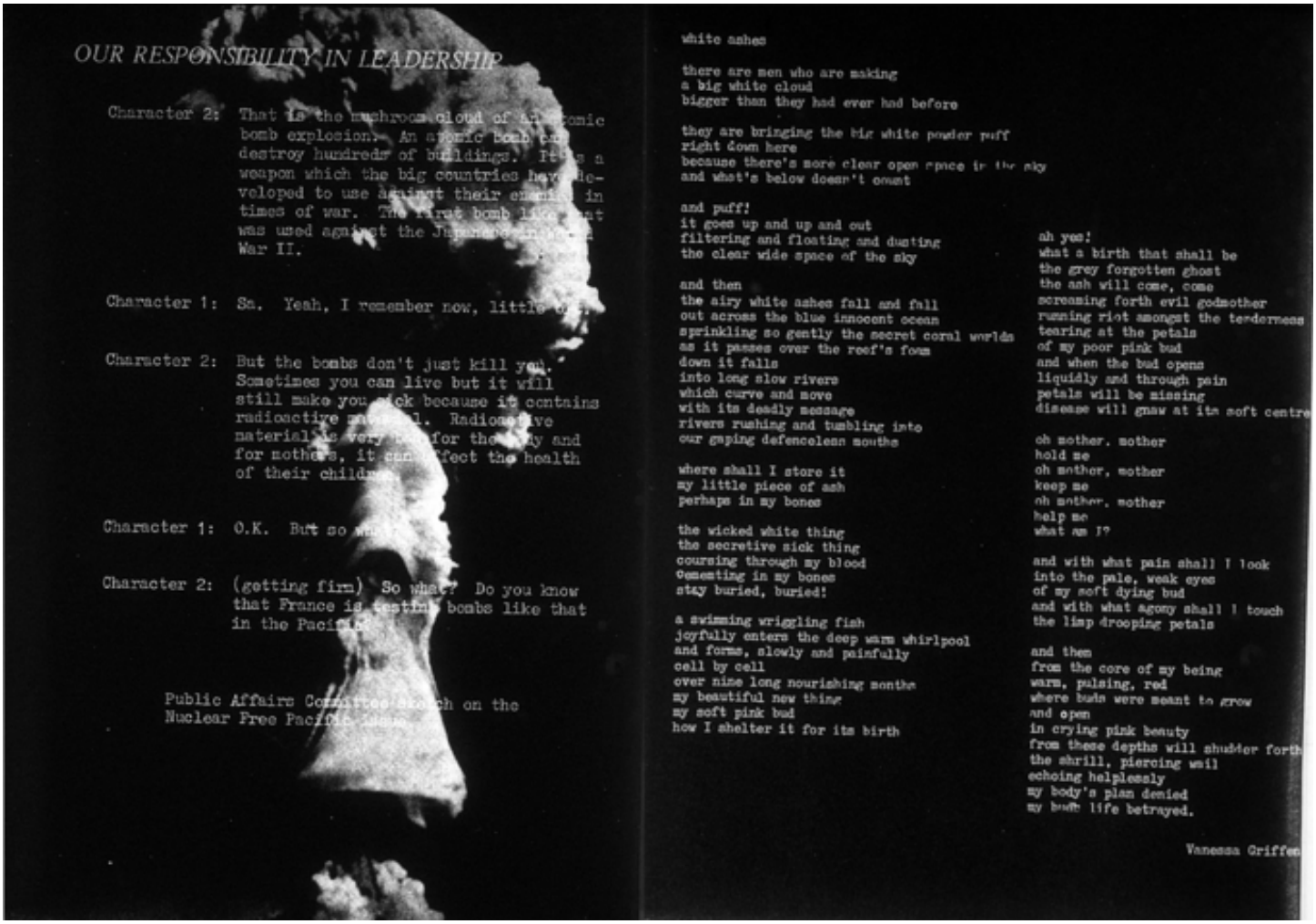
Delegates to the Nuclear Free Pacific Conference in Hawai'i 1980 including Hila Lini (Vanuatu/New Hebrides), Roman Bedor (Palau), Nelson Anjain (Marshall Islands) and Marc Pomare (Mā'ohi Nui/French Polynesia). Photo by Ed Greevy.

hazardously, were affected and were in solidarity with one another.

Today, the ocean and Pacific bodies within contain an archive of evidence of the fallout of nuclear tests conducted in the Marshall Islands, so-called Australia, Kiribati, Johnston Atoll, and Mā'ohi Nui. This archive is compounded by the histories of unsafe transport, storage, and disposal of nuclear weapons and hazardous substances, wastes, and military debris. Survivors and supporters of directly impacted communities whose bodies and illnesses are testament to these harms continue to seek nuclear justice for this unresolved legacy in the Pacific. This encompasses but is not limited to financial compensation, healthcare, and environmental remediation of contaminated sites. And yet, survivors must endure the burden of proof to prove that these injustices really happened to them.

Access to any form of reparations remains woefully inadequate considering the extent of damage, which includes health impacts such as cancers and other chronic illnesses, the destruction of ecosystems and wildlife, the loss of (in)tangible cultural heritage due to deaths, displacement, and enduring exposure. Extraterritorial military populations seeking recognition for their service tend to come before those of Indigenous civilian populations whose homes were these islands and Indigenous militaries who participated in the tests (for example, Fijian servicemen in Kiritimasi Island, Kiribati). For affected Pacific peoples, resolution needed from the United States, Britain, and France is reliant on the bilateral dynamic between colonizer/colonized, and as a result of this power imbalance, their claims are consistently denied. This has made nuclear legacy issues historically difficult to negotiate and address on a regional scale.

In brief, the situation varies according to state jurisdiction across Oceania. Only four atolls in the Marshall Islands are entitled to a now-exhausted $150 million nuclear compensation fund, which they are currently attempting to renegotiate within their Compact of Free Association with the United States.[6] There is no comprehensive British compensation scheme or recognition for Aboriginal peoples across affected nations in Australia and Indigenous I-Kiribati for radiation exposure. For Mā'ohi,



OUR RESPONSIBILITY IN LEADERSHIP

Character 2: That is the mushroom cloud of an atomic bomb explosion. An atomic bomb can destroy hundreds of buildings. It's a weapon which the big countries have developed to use against their enemies in times of war. The first bomb like that was used against the Japanese during World War II.

Character 1: Sa. Yeah, I remember now, little girl.

Character 2: But the bombs don't just kill you. Sometimes you can live but it will still make you sick because it contains radioactive material. Radioactive material is very bad for the body and for mothers, it can affect the health of their children.

Character 1: O.K. But so what?

Character 2: (getting firm) So what? Do you know that France is testing bombs like that in the Pacific?

Public Affairs Committee Research on the Nuclear Free Pacific Issue

white ashes

there are men who are making
a big white cloud
bigger than they had ever had before

they are bringing the big white powder puff
right down here
because there's more clear open space in the sky
and what's below doesn't count

and puff!
it goes up and up and out
filtering and floating and dusting
the clear wide space of the sky

and then
the airy white ashes fall and fall
out across the blue innocent ocean
sprinkling so gently the secret coral worlds
as it passes over the reef's foam
down it falls
into long slow rivers
which curve and move
with its deadly message
rivers rushing and tumbling into
our gaping defenceless mouths

where shall I store it
my little piece of ash
perhaps in my bones

the wicked white thing
the secretive sick thing
coursing through my blood
Cementing in my bones
stay buried, buried!

a swimming wriggling fish
joyfully enters the deep warm whirlpool
and forms, slowly and painfully
cell by cell
over nine long nourishing months
my beautiful new thing
my soft pink bud
how I shelter it for its birth

ah yes!
what a birth that shall be
the grey forgotten ghost
the ash will come, come
screaming forth evil godmother
running riot amongst the tenderness
tearing at the petals
of my poor pink bud
and when the bud opens
liquidly and through pain
petals will be missing
disease will gnaw at its soft centre

oh mother, mother
hold me
oh mother, mother
keep me
oh mother, mother
help me
what am I?

and with what pain shall I look
into the pale, weak eyes
of my soft dying bud
and with what agony shall I touch
the limp drooping petals

and then
from the core of my being
warm, pulsing, red
where buds were meant to grow
and open
in crying pink beauty
from these depths will shudder forth
the shrill, piercing wail
echoing helplessly
my body's plan denied
my bud life betrayed.

Vanessa Griffen

Clippings from YWCA Fiji of the scene of a play and the poem 'White Ashes' by Vanessa Griffen. 1976. Clippings from YWCA Fiji Archives/Pacific Manuscripts Bureau.

the amended Morin law in France is exclusionary with an eligibility deadline, proof of one millisievert dose, and a limited list of acceptable radiation-induced diseases.[7] Environmental remediation of contaminated sites in the Pacific is equally lacking accountability. Islands within Bikini atoll were vaporized or otherwise severely damaged and rendered unlivable. There have been some attempted clean-ups, but they have been largely unsuccessful, with the failed remediation efforts of Enewetak and Maralinga being notable examples. At the same time, most affected communities do not have access to proper healthcare services, especially cancer clinics, and must either travel far and often abroad to get treatment that they usually pay for themselves.

Survivors are relentlessly subject to an exhausting bureaucratic process to access the finances they need. The proof of living in proximity to an irradiated landscape and sick bodies are overlooked, with survivorship only legally extending to those who can prove they lived or worked within the geographically defined zone of the test site during the testing period, and if they suffer from a narrow list of illnesses. Demonstrating any of this almost always depends on access to the documentary, and frequently classified archives of colonial states (if they exist at all); particularly military archives as well as scant medical and professional records. These archives generally don't exist in the islands themselves but in the metropoles of Washington DC, London, Canberra, and Paris. And documents created in secrecy were also likely destroyed in secrecy. If we depend on the imperial archive, the full extent of fallout—recorded or not—is likely to always be elided.

The grasruts strikes back!

In place of the obfuscations, gaps, and omissions in the colonial record and imperial archive, the Indigenous and anti-colonial press of the Pacific has testified as a staunch and vocal critic of nuclear colonialism. Supporters of the Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific movement wrote to

one another across the ocean, sending fragile bundles of newspapers, magazines, bulletins, and conference reports via ship and plane, all at a time where to condemn the local government was done often at great personal risk. Through the alternative press, these connections were nurtured and sustained through grassroots education of one another's struggles.

When Fijian student Vanessa Griffen attended the first regional Nuclear Free Pacific conference in 1975, which brought together activists and advocates from the entire region, she was unsure if she was going to leave truly convinced of the grave threat of nuclear apocalypse. Young and strong-willed, she kept quiet and sat at the back of the room, absorbing all of the information until she made her decision. After six busy days of hearing testimonials from ninety delegates including survivors of nuclear tests and many living under colonial rule, she and many others were transformed, adamant that nuclear testing in Mā'ohi Nui was an irrefutable extension of the multiple colonialisms operating in the region.

Feeling a "sense of unity, support, and above all else the will to fight together," Griffen got to work helping establish the continuations committee, the local Pacific Peoples' Action Front with her fellow Fijians.[8] Along with her friend Claire Slatter, the two began their first regional anti-colonial newspaper: *POVAI*, the name for a Tongan war club. But "povai" has wider meaning, Griffen and Slatter stated in their first issue: "It is the force or resource available to anybody, even commoners, to use against anything which oppresses them, and which they wish to take action against."[9]

Every two months, Griffen and Slatter would painstakingly gather information from their contacts across the Pacific, collate and edit the material, and send newspapers in bundles to their subscribers worldwide. Featuring articles in English and French, one could read about the Kanaky struggle from activist-poet Déwé Gorodé, about plans for the Palau oil superport from Moses Uludong and the Save Palau Organization, or even about details of the Brisbane Three trial, a principal campaign organized by Guwamu woman Cheryl Buchanan. Solidarities between independence struggles like those in Vanuatu, Kanaky New Caledonia, Aotearoa, Australia, Mā'ohi Nui, West Papua, East Timor, and beyond, were deeply interconnected in the fight for a Nuclear Free Pacific.

This was the same for associated presses that of the same era as *POVAI*, which included *Vanuaku Viewpoints/ New Hebridean Viewpoints*, *Black News Service, Seli Hoo!*, *Nouvelles 1898*, *Tia Belau*, *Pandanus Press*, *Pacific News Bulletin*, and many more. While the national presses of these countries were often aligned with colonial or elitist interests and funding, this alternative press offered an opportunity for critique that was multi-layered and reflexive. These small presses provided an avenue for information sharing, as well as press freedom at multiple scales, from the local to the regional and international. As Motarilavoa Hilda Lini articulated about her reasoning for selecting the name *Nasiko* for her Bislama, French, and English publication:

> It is the bird that warns of badluck and goodluck. When Nasiko cries on your right side it is your goodluck and when it cries on your left, that is badluck... By calling this magazine *Nasiko*, I hope it acts like the king of the birds and warns everyone of the dangers ahead: the government, the opposition, the businessman, the people and *Nasiko* magazine itself.[10]

Between conferences that would take place every two or three years, from 1975 until the early 2000s, the Indigenous alternative press became a reliable and transparent news source for the movement.

In addition to regular conferences and the press, there was a vibrant community of creative practices encompassing stories, chants, songs, poetry, posters, festivals, films, concerts, costumes, theater, and other performances that have largely been consigned to the footnotes of the movement's history.[11] This creative chronicle are what Joy Lehuanani Enomoto and D. Keali'i MacKenzie of Hawai'i may describe as "saltwater archives" which retain "culture and Native-owned information through the embodied archives, those vital pieces of our culture that are not considered valid records for imperial archives."[12] Through collective creativity and playful transgressive practices, the Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific movement articulated a cultural renaissance grounded in trans-Indigenous and multicultural solidarities, as well as a critical grammar for nuclear abolition and the disarmament, demilitarization, decolonization, and self-determination for the Pacific.

Over the past couple of years, as the Covid-19 pandemic has raged and as nuclear arsenals, military spending, and geopolitical tensions has rapidly escalated in our region, the embodied transmission of these stories of resistance through storytelling and the recuperation of these archives has been revitalized by Pacific youth movements. By connecting our elders and youth both in person and on Zoom, the critical and creative importance of the Nuclear Free and Independent Pacific movement has been sustained.

This revitalization was catalyzed by several major occurrences. In 2017, the United Nations General Assembly passed the Treaty on the Prohibition of Nuclear Weapons (TPNW), the first legally binding international agreement which not only seeks to comprehensively prohibit nuclear weapons, but also reassess nuclear legacy issues for Pacific affected states through positive

Clippings from several Pacific presses of the 1970s-1980s – POVAI (Fiji), Tia Belau (Palau) and Nasiko (Vanuatu).

obligations. In 2021, the Japanese government and TEPCO announced plans to start “discharging” nuclear wastewater from Fukushima into the Pacific in 2023. Also in 2021, the AUKUS military pact was announced between Australia, the United Kingdom, and the United States, which included nuclear-powered submarines and nuclear-capable B52 bombers. In 2022, new proposals by mining companies like Rio Tinto were made to resurrect uranium mining projects against the wishes of Traditional Owners like at Jabiluka. At the same time, biennial “Rim of the Pacific” (RIMPAC) international maritime warfare exercises have continued unabated. But so have struggles for West Papuan, Kanaky, Mā’ohi, Bougainvillean, Chamorro, Kānaka Maoli, Māori, Aboriginal, and Torres Strait Islander independence.

Recirculating these grassroots histories in the struggle for peace remains an important project of Pacific movements led by regional networks such as Youngsolwara Pacific, MISA4ThePacific, Koa Futures, the Free West Papua campaign, the Australian Nuclear Free Alliance (ANFA), and others. As the Pacific world is becoming increasingly reoriented according to the warmongering states on the rim, recuperating these archives and stories to communities of resistance is critical. An exercise in mat-making, recollection, and embodiment of these histories reweaves our wansolwara’s pasts, presents, and futures of resistance for liberation.

Hawaiian dance troupe at the Nuclear Free Pacific Conference in Hawai'i 1980. Photo by Ed Greevy.

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