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Ecocinema in Pukapuka: Climate Change and Pacific Island Futures in Gemma Cubero del Barrio's *Our Atoll Speaks* (2019) and *The Island in Me* (2021)

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Abstract

Examining tropical futurisms through cinema, this paper analyzes two recent documentary films directed by Spanish-American filmmaker Gemma Cubero del Barrio: the short film *Our Atoll Speaks: Ko Talatal Mai to Matou Wenua* (2019) and the feature documentary *The Island in Me* (2021). Each is filmed on the remote Pacific Island atoll of Pukapuka in the Cook Islands and features Pacific writer Florence "Johnny" Frisbie. The latter of these two films has been promoted by Cubero del Barrio as the first feature film ever made on Pukapuka, and both films in different ways consider the existential threat of climate change—especially sea level rise—on the island's longevity and future. Ultimately, I argue that Cubero del Barrio's documentaries successfully convey ideas about local knowledge and ways of preparing for climate-led change through their representations of the natural environment and local customs. By drawing upon the generic elements of ecocinema and environmental documentary, both films operate as environmental communication texts that aim to educate and inform audiences about damaging epistemological belief systems, while suggesting alternative ways of understanding the interrelation between the human, more-than-human, and place: hence providing meaningful ideas for tropical Pacific futurity.

Keywords: Ecocinema, Climate Change Documentary, Pacific Island Cultures, Pukapuka, Cook Islands, Tropical Pacific Futures, Sea level rise

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Figure 1. *The Island in Me* (©Talcual Films, 2021)

An image of the Cook Islands atoll of Pukapuka in *The Island in Me* (dir. Cubero del Barrio, 2021). Photography stills by Gabrielle Fa'ai'uaso.

Introduction

Focused on the representation of tropical Pacific futurisms, this paper examines two recent documentary films directed by Spanish-American filmmaker Gemma Cubero del Barrio, each partly filmed on the remote Pacific Island atoll of Pukapuka in the Cook Islands: the short film *Our Atoll Speaks: Ko Talatal Mai to Matou Wenua* (2019) and the feature documentary *The Island in Me* (2021). The latter of these two films has been promoted by Cubero del Barrio as the first feature film ever made on Pukapuka, while both films, in different ways, consider the existential threat of climate change—especially sea level rise—on the atoll's longevity and future, linking its fate with current problems faced by coral atolls in Tokelau, Tuvalu, Kiribati, and the Marshall Islands. *Our Atoll Speaks* was awarded funding support by the United Nations GEF Small Grants Programme to explicitly create a short film about climate change, while *The Island in Me* used a Kickstarter campaign and donations from private foundations and donors to fund the feature in which climate change is just a small part of the film's broader exploration of travel, identity, and human connection (Cubero del Barrio, 2019b).

The Cook Islands is a country of diverse tropical islands: fifteen that are laid out over more than two million square kilometres of the Pacific Ocean (De Scally & Doberstein, 2023, p. 362). Pukapuka is a small island atoll in the Northern Group, far distant from

the country's central island of Rarotonga (indeed, Pukapuka lies geographically much closer to Samoa). Pukapuka consists of three small islets—Motu Kō, Motu Kotawa, and Wale—that are connected as part of a coral atoll. Historically, the atoll has faced many hardships, including previous cyclones—or perhaps tsunamis—still remembered in collective folk memory, which decimated the population of the atoll in previous centuries. The vulnerability of atoll life has long been understood in this region of the Pacific, passed down through oral history and storytelling traditions, and in the current era, the Cook Islands face a climate-change emergency that especially threatens its low-lying atoll islands (Clissold et al., 2023). There is growing awareness that the nation is "vulnerable to many natural hazards including tropical cyclones, floods, droughts, coastal erosion and storm surges", and that climate change is likely to increase the risk of such natural hazards in the future (De Scally & Doberstein, 2023, p. 362). With a population of only about four hundred inhabitants—but a much larger diaspora of ex-residents in Rarotonga, New Zealand, Australia, and elsewhere—Pukapuka is an island group literally off the tourist map. Travel to Pukapuka is only possible with explicit permission from the atoll's council. Due to this non-existent tourism industry, the documentaries provide a form of virtual travel and visibility to a fragile place in the Pacific, which arguably imparts to this artistic production a vital role in promoting the political and social issues of a place impossible for most people to see. Certainly, awareness of such disasters can be amplified through environmental communication, such as documentary cinema that can be screened internationally. Research on nature-focused documentary as a form of ecological cinema suggests that it has an influence on knowledge and attitudes towards the environment, sometimes creating "significant increases of knowledge" (Arendt & Matthes, 2016, p. 455).

Both of Cubero del Barrio's films are also critically important for the renewed literary focus they have put on legendary Cook Islands writer Florence Ngatokura "Johnny" Frisbie, who at the age of eighty-six was able to revisit her birthplace of Pukapuka for the first time in twenty years for the filming of *The Island in Me*, and who co-wrote the screenplay for *Our Atoll Speaks* with Cubero del Barrio and Amelia Borofsky. The ensuing publicity created by the production of the films—which occurred through the filmmaker's interest in Frisbie during the production phase—has also provided Frisbie with renewed critical acclaim for her work, including the release of a new edition of her 1948 book *Miss Ulysses of Puka-Puka: The Autobiography of a South Sea Trader's Daughter* in 2016 (Orr, 2019). As her literary name "Miss Ulysses" suggests, the extraordinary Frisbie has been a traveller for much of her life—travelling the Pacific on boat trips organised by her father in her early years, then living between Pacific-bound islands of Hawaii and New Zealand as an adult. Frisbie was only sixteen when *Miss Ulysses* was published, and the book was often marketed as the first book by a female Pacific Island author (Frisbie, 2016). Frisbie—the daughter of American travel writer

Robert Dean Frisbie and Pukapukan mother Ngatokura ‘A Mata’a—published a follow-up account of her life called *The Frisbies of the South Seas* in 1959. *The Island in Me* tells Johnny’s story, providing archival footage of Frisbie’s multi-country media history, including her role as a Pacific Island dancer in Waikiki in Hawaii in the 1950s, and her regular guest appearances on New Zealand television in the 1980s. I suggest that Frisbie’s presence in the two films as an experienced island elder and a writer with high literary status provides a longitudinal lens to consider the contemporary environmental conditions of Pukapuka, and what has changed since her birth on the atoll in 1932. Frisbie’s recognition of Pukapuka’s current, existential risk and her clear love for this part of the world help to heighten the sense of impending disaster for her beloved childhood home, which raises the stakes for Pukapuka in the films because of her long connection with this island group.

The two films are poignant examples of ecocinema, a form that has been defined as cinema that observes “human-induced problems on ecology and the environment”, alongside a strong focus on observing “natural phenomena” (Chu, 2016, p. 12). Ecocinematic approaches can include “environmental ethics and aesthetics; environmental justice studies; animal studies; pollution and toxic discourses; health, food and sustainability; post-humanism” (Chu, 2016, p. 12), and most of these topics are observable in both of Cubero del Barrio’s Pukapuka works. However, in noting that these films fit into the category of ecological films, I do not wish to limit the ways the films are understood as extending into other cinematic traditions, forms, and genres. For example, *The Island in Me* is also an artist’s profile, a love story, a history of place, a travelogue, and a lyrical travel film. To use Bill Nichols’ well-known classification of documentary types, we could also see these films fitting into poetic, expository, participatory, reflexive, and performative modes of filmic storytelling—all categories that can be folded back into the broader concept of ecocinema (Nichols, 2017).

In this paper, I provide a reading of Cubero del Barrio’s films that contribute to tropical futurisms, seeing the texts as a resistance to the popular international documentary subgenre of “sinking islands” or “sea level rising” films that have characterized many of the twenty-first century visual representations of climate change, and which through such imagery and narratives have turned the Pacific region into “a new site of visual allegories of the Anthropocene” (DeLoughrey, 2019, p. 169). In such films, any Pacific Island threatened by climate change “is used as a cautionary tale for a planetary future that is determined by western agents in the present” (2019, p.178). By contrast, I argue that Cubero del Barrio’s films resist the essentializing and melancholic gaze of this “salvage environmentalism” through their up-close focus on Pukapukan artists and creators, their close engagement with Indigenous and local representations of place, as well as representing the hybridity of island culture and its diasporic communities, which demonstrate the island’s connection and its complex identity beyond geographic

borders. Indeed, filmmaker Cubero del Barrio has explicitly mentioned that the short film *Our Atoll Speaks* deliberately avoided what she has termed a "catastrophic" presentation of climate change, noting "we didn't want to make a film that was like… it [the island] is going to disappear" (ThinkTech Hawaii, 2019). By resisting the more "catastrophic"[1] modes of storytelling and focussing on the importance of life and custom on Pukapuka, she avoids presenting Pacific Island locals as passive victims of the Anthropocene's global disaster. Ultimately, I argue that Cubero del Barrio's documentaries successfully convey ideas about local knowledge and ways of preparing for climate-led change through their representations of the natural environment and local customs. By drawing upon the generic elements of ecocinema and environmental documentary, both films operate as environmental communication texts that speak to the concept of tropical Pacific futurisms: they aim to educate and inform audiences about damaging epistemological belief systems while suggesting alternative ways of understanding the human, the more-than-human, and place.

Climate Change Representations in Ecocinema of the Pacific Islands

The creation of these two documentary films, each with a strong eco-gaze, points to the broader popularity of the ecofilm and/or the environmental documentary in the twenty-first century. A distinctive cinematic genre, Paula Willoquet-Maricondi has characterised the ecofilm as "a powerful tool for knowledge dissemination, consciousness-raising, public debate, and many hope, political action" about the environment (2010, p. xi). Charles Musser notes that in the early 2000s, the rise of a range of international environmental film festivals—in places as diverse as Israel, South Korea, the United States, and New Zealand—helped to consolidate the genre's popularity (2014, p. 55). The twenty-first century has witnessed the massive success of eco-critical films such as *The Day After Tomorrow* (2004), *An Inconvenient Truth* (2006), *The 11th Hour* (2007), and more recently *2040* (2019). Willoquet-Maricondi suggests that environmental films and documentaries are produced with the noble aim "to bring about greater understanding of the environmental challenges facing us today and to inspire action" (2010, p. xi); although whether these films can lead to such media effects raises further questions, such as: what kinds of impacts do these films have on environmental activism? Can they really lead to social or ecological changes in thinking? And how can such impacts be measured?

Along with this interest in the environmental documentary in the early 2000s, some films have explicitly aimed to show the impacts of climate change and the tragedy of ocean level rise, and Pacific Island nations have frequently had starring roles in these films, which purport to show the first waves of climate change damage that is visually

[1] For a recent critical analysis of the genre of "catastrophe" ecocinema in the tropics, see Claros, 2024.

perceptible. In this regard, Elizabeth DeLoughrey has suggested that there is a noticeable subgenre of Western-made documentary that "mourns" the inevitability of sea level rise in the Pacific, including films such as: *Rising Waters: Global Warming and the Fate of the Pacific Islands* (2000), *Paradise Drowned: Tuvalu, the Disappearing Nation* (2001), *The Disappearing of Tuvalu: Trouble in Paradise* (2004), *Time and Tide* (2005), *There Once was an Island* (2010) and *The Hungry Tide* (2011). Such documentaries have tended to focus on the worst-hit islands, which to date have included the low-lying atolls of Kiribati, the Marshall Islands, Tokelau and Tuvalu. These island nations have become internationally symbolic of the most detrimental effects of environmental change: their rising tidelines have become metaphoric of the frontline of the global battle against rising global temperatures. In her examination of what she has coined the "salvage environmental" subgenre, DeLoughrey argues that this overarching narrative and aesthetic approach positions local Pacific Islanders as victims of Western, modernist ideas of "progress" (2019, p.170). She notes that this subgenre draws upon early anthropological conventions concerned with dying cultures which were a feature of ethnographies during eras of colonization and imperial expansion (called "salvage anthropology"). As this designation conveys, to "salvage" something—in this case an ethnic group or a culture—suggests that the loss of the culture will necessarily occur as part of the impact of global modernisation. Anthropology, during colonial times, believed the discipline thus had a crucial role to record and document the loss of the local culture as part of a melancholic "*Tristes Tropiques*" (sad tropics) of the twentieth century, drawing upon the modality of mourning due to a (misguided) belief in imminent loss. The "salvage environmental" filmic subgenre, which is connected with humanities-focused research on the Anthropocene, notes a deep connection between recent alterations to the environment and the Pacific region's violent colonial history (see DeLoughrey, 2019). For example, Charlotte Weatherill argues that climate change can be seen as part of the "colonial continuity, a harm that is not new but has repeatedly produced extractive violence and dispossession in the Pacific" (2023, p. 2). The Pacific region has faced many perils, including colonial violence and dispossession for extractive industries (agricultural, mining), militarism/warfare, and being used as a "playground" for nuclear testing by the USA, Britain, and France (Firth, 2021).

In relation to these former colonial and neocolonial-militaristic discourses that were couched in a Western rhetoric of development, the more recent impact of climate change has strangely inverted these narratives of the progress of technological industrialization. Instead of the once-positive sense of the "progress" of modernity, global warming and the impact of rising sea levels presents a pessimistic futurity due to over-industrialization and over-consumption of fossil fuels. There is still the old sense of loss or melancholia, but now it is literally the loss of land, and the

traditional/local communities are now constructed as victims of the neoextractive industries of neoliberal globalism. So, in these films, DeLoughrey notes that they:

> …focus almost exclusively on village life, feature ample images of the ocean, islanders fishing, children running on the beach, sunsets, palm trees, the camera person at work on the island, images of flooded homes, and interviews with subjects who are considering migration to metropolitan centres of Australia and Aeoteoroa New Zealand. Atoll life is quite beautifully imagined in the romantic light of the setting sun over the ocean, reflecting what the film suggests is a dying culture. (DeLoughrey, 2019, p. 243)

Such films present climate change as a *fait accompli*, which provides no agency to its inhabitants and tends to position them as hopeless victims.

Against this representation it is important to note a second, and alternative, colonial impulse in the history of ethnographic visual representation that fetishized local culture and costume, and purposely suppressed the idea of cultural "disappearance" through the domination of modernization or adaptation to the West. In her history of travel films, proto-films, and photography, Ellen Strain notes that with the rise of anthropology and an ethnographic visual gaze at the end of the nineteenth century, the idea of visually presenting traditional practice and customs had a distinct colonial/imperial function, for it provided reassuring visual evidence that colonial exploitation and its connected resource extraction was causing little harm to traditional peoples and their homelands. The photographs and films that were produced as part of this ethnography were visual documents that aimed to educate the Western spectator: "[t]he viewer as a vicarious traveller gleans a form of anthropological knowledge from looking into the anonymous lives of a so-called primitive people, a worldliness that places the developed West at the centre of that world" (Strain, 2003, p. 92). Hence, the ethnographic photographs, and later the films, of this late nineteenth-century/early twentieth-century period often presented indigenous peoples involved in traditional practices, with any sense of modernity erased. Commenting on the careful staging of portraits of people within their traditional home environments as proof that custom and practice continues regardless of the economic and social shift in the culture/society, Strain notes the cognitive dissonance of an approach that sought to ameliorate the harm of Western presence, and hence indicated how the visual cultures created by photography and cinema in aid of ethnography acted to promote hegemonic ideologies:

> The decimating effect of colonialism on indigenous peoples was becoming evident, thereby requiring renewed rationalizations for colonialism and the suppression of visual signs of European intrusion.

> Contextualising exoticized peoples within a lush, natural environment with crudely built shelters and minimal clothing denied contact with Europe and strengthened the presumed connection between the primitive and nature. (Strain, 2003, p.63)

In the contemporary era, such tropes of colonial ethnography are still enacted in documentary cinema. It is exceedingly difficult to be a Western filmmaker and not to engage with these legacies of representation.

Finally, there is a third mode of visual representation that bears thinking about in relation to Cubero del Barrio's work on Pukapuka. In Weatherill's research on discourses of vulnerability of Pacific Islanders and the visual representation of climate change in mass media of the Pacific, the researcher has noted a similar visual trend to what DeLoughrey has named the "sinking paradise island". Weatherill examines this trope appearing in photographs accompanying news stories about climate change, but differently to DeLoughrey's "salvage environmentalism" films, the images are utterly devoid of people and culture entirely. Examining both online news features and Google image searches that depict stories about the "sinking" islands of the Pacific, Weatherill notes that the mass media of the twenty-first century tends to frame news about climate change with aerial photographs of beautiful, unpopulated atolls that are deliberately juxtaposed with "stories of an approaching uninhabitability" (2023, p.5). She suggests that the juxtaposition between the imagery of paradise and the "sad" (the *tristes tropiques*) scenario is used deliberately as a storytelling technique to highlight the inherently tragic nature of this imperilment. However, in removing images of people, particularly an island's inhabitants, Weatherill contends it also ignores the dispossession of land that takes place during human-led climate change, and emphasises a kind of tragic inevitability for these vulnerable locations that in the photographs are already devoid of people (2023). While Weatherill's discussion concerns a different visual medium—press photography—than the research of DeLoughrey and Strain, its potential influence for visual documentation of climate change in popular media discourses of the Pacific region deserves attention when considering contemporary documentary.

I raise these three different interpretations of ethnographic and climate change from very different discourses as I contend that these modalities of visual representation all contain strategies of power that need to be understood as part of the background for the contemporary spectatorship of documentary ecocinema. This also raises a representational problem for film-makers keen to highlight political and social problems in the Pacific region. Whether Pacific Island atolls are represented as being full of life and community (DeLoughrey, 2019) or as completely empty paradises (Weatherill, 2023); as places deeply damaged by modernity (DeLoughrey, 2019) or as pure and

idyllic local paradises untainted by globalism (Strain, 2003), all these conflicting visual cultural traditions bear colonial and hegemonic meanings that indicate ways of dispossessing place from local cultures and communities. Contemporary filmmakers operate within and negotiate these forceful and conflicting representations as they investigate climate change in the Pacific and the politics of local inhabitants (*Vai,* 2019*,* in Anderson, 2020, pp. 190-192). So, this analysis also considers how Cubero del Barrio negotiates these competing representations in her films as a visitor to Pukapuka with an American-European background. In the following sections, I will critically examine her two Pacific documentaries to analyse their messages about climate change and environmental communication, particularly in consideration of the ethnographic and mass media representations of the Pacific as outlined above. I will examine the longer documentary *The Island in Me* first, as while it was more recently released, it is the film that Cubero del Barrio commenced work on first, and it established her relationship with Johnny Frisbie. As I aim to indicate, Cubero del Barrio's films are in dialogue with these existing modes of representation, but the narrative construction and connection to local viewpoints and cultures represent hybrid perspectives that can illuminate the limitations of existing representational modes, providing pertinent ideas for presenting tropical futures.

The Island in Me (2021)

Figure 2. *The Island in Me* (©Talcual Films, 2021)

An image of Florence "Johnny" Frisbie holding a coconut crab in *The Island in Me* (dir. Cubero del Barrio, 2021). Photography still by Gabrielle Fa'ai'uaso.

The Island in Me (2021) follows the moving journey of Florence "Johnny" Frisbie and Amelia Borofsky and their late-in-life return to the small atoll island group of Pukapuka. The film threads their stories with filmmaker Gemma Cubero del Barrio's own journey of discovery as she visits the atoll for the first time, and her deepening friendships with Johnny and Amelia. The equal time given to the three women in the documentary—and the expert interweaving between each narrative story—demonstrates a non-hierarchical structure and an oceanic modality of storytelling where each narrative presents small ripples of information about the protagonists. As is outlined in the film, Gemma Cubero del Barrio first learned about Pukapuka through her close relationship with Amelia Borofsky, who had been haunted by memories of early childhood on the small island. Amelia lived on the island in the late 1970s from the age of six months to four and a half years. This unusual infancy for a Jewish-American child was due to her father Robert Borofsky's work as an anthropologist on a years-long project; he eventually published a Pukapukan ethnography in 1987 called *Making History: Pukapukan and Anthropological Constructions of Knowledge* (reprinted 1997). During this childhood, she had lived a non-Western, local existence, where children were largely independent of adult supervision. So in her childhood, she played away from her parents or was with other adult minders for long periods of time. At the beginning of *The Island in Me*—which starts with Amelia and Gemma based in Hawaii—Pukapuka is presented as a mythical, dreamlike destination. Amelia reflects in the film that she had wondered if the atoll was real or conjured. This representation of a Pacific atoll as a lost paradise—a place that Amelia needs to psychically and geographically relocate—is typical of the mode of the travel documentary, and it presents Pukapuka as a mythical, ideal paradise. However, along with overwhelming paradisiacal reveries, she also had traumatic memories, suggesting a "feeling of trauma and survival and life on the edge…an intense daily life", as well as a remnant vision of "being cold, hungry and on the verge of death".

As the film elegantly conveys, these memories will take Amelia to Pukapuka as an adult to reconnect and come to terms with her lost past. Part of the trauma that she had encountered seems linked to the abrupt severance of her life on the island, and this separation of self-identity had led to her feeling displaced in America as an adult. Amelia's need to rediscover her childhood home forms the backbone of the documentary and enacts the film's travel narrative, which draws on the subgenre of the travelogue. The film travelogue subgenre initially developed in early silent cinema as an extension of the travel lecture and aimed to educate and inform about foreign and little-known locations through an ethnographic and "modern" gaze (Strain, 2003, p. 108). The coincidence of Gemma's ethnographic gaze of the travel film from a European-American background and Amelia's story as the daughter of an American anthropologist indicates the entangling of global connection and cultural experience through these lenses on an understanding of place. Thus, in these films, the

environmental communication messages about collapsing ecosystems are conveyed through the lens of personal connection—through visitors and locals—as narratively they raise the stakes about what is about to be lost: the site of vital, identity-forming memories; an intertidal connection between the personal and the communal.

Equal prominence is given to Johnny Frisbie's moving life story, which begins with her connection with Amelia and Gemma when they were all living in Hawaii. The film shows how Johnny shares a strong link with Amelia, as while they are very different ages, they are both diasporic "Pukapukans" with strong remembrance of a vibrant childhood on the island that was ended through personal tragedy and parental decisions to leave (when Amelia read *Miss Ulysses* as an adult, she said the description of Pukapuka felt like reading her own memories). The film also narrates how both had experienced the loss a family member on the island: for Johnny it was her mother, while Amelia lost a sibling who died soon after childbirth. Both women needed to leave the island shortly after these tragedies. Also, both women had American fathers who were writers and had spent time on Pukapuka for work reasons. While Johnny and Amelia had not lived on their childhood island for decades, they each bring to their return to Pukapuka a lifetime of knowledge accumulated from Pacific travel and engagement. Johnny is furthermore shown to intimately connect with the land—with its coconuts, crabs, and taro—with her family, suggesting a combination between human and more-than-human, which brings with it a renewed responsibility to country. As Johnny's daughter, Carla describes her mother's relationship to the atoll in the film; the idea of the maternal combines both land and person: "Pukapuka is her mother. It is where her mother was born, where her mother died…that is why she has yearned for it". And Johnny suggests her own, permanent link to her childhood home: "where I'm going to go, where I die is Pukapuka".

I would argue that the film's focus on older histories helps to describe the distinctiveness of the problem of climate change in the present, and Johnny Frisbie is presented as an expert witness of Pukapuka and the Pacific, with nearly a century of accumulated knowledge about the impacts of climate in the region. As Bridges and McClatchey have suggested, "over many generations these atoll cultures have survived major, unpredictable and locally devastating changes that are of the same magnitude as those expected from climate changes" (2009, p. 140). For example, the film outlines Johnny's horrifying experience of surviving a hurricane with her family on a deserted islet called Suwarrow as a small child, which is also memorably described in her first book, as well as in her father Robert Dean Frisbie's memoir *The Island of Desire (The Story of a South Sea Trader)* published in 1943 (Frisbie, 2016). In *The Island in Me*, Johnny recounts how waves rose over the entire island, and her family only survived because they waited it out by climbing the highest trees. The film's longitudinal recounting of this mid-twentieth-century natural disaster helps to position

Johnny as a resilient survivor of severe weather-based events, it situates her as an expert who can detect the change in conditions and recognise the new type of disaster that is now affecting the Cook Islands. Hence, it is no surprise that one of the film's central comments about climate change is delivered by Johnny, who voices concerns of the local community. She says:

> The people of Pukapuka are realising now something strange is happening, the land is getting smaller. Many of them are leaving, moving to New Zealand. Many of the old people refuse to move, they're going to be there and disappear with the land as far as they're concerned.

Interestingly, Johnny's comment plays over the top of idyllic footage of the Pukapuka atoll showing the land as empty, as well as footage of the atoll amid a glowing orange sunset, which seems to place the film within the same representational landscape of the "sinking islands" and "sinking paradise islands" tropes that DeLoughrey and Weatherill have both clearly critiqued about documentary cinema and the mass media, respectively. Yet, the film's narrative focus complicates the simplicity of these tropes: it interweaves story and perspective from both locals and foreigners, thus avoiding the sense of catastrophic end and mourning found in the tropes of the sinking island. Here the "sinking island" is presented as just one of the future possibilities for Pukapuka—while the fact that many of its people do not plan to leave, and the film's focus on the atoll's vibrant community life suggests that there are other futures available—especially as Amelia Borofsky decides to move permanently to the atoll and sees her future there, as well as the future of her family. Amelia provides another perspective about ecological change on Pukapuka as she speaks to Lotama, a local Pukapukan man, about his knowledge of lowering fish stocks at the atoll:

> Amelia: How come there aren't as many fish here, on Pukapuka? There used to be more in the old days?
> Lotama: Yep. Before we go fishing, it takes only a few hours to get fish. Not now.

While this is not directly attributed to climate change in the film, it is clear that the region is undergoing a long-term transformation beyond the control of the community that manages the aquaculture and agriculture of Pukapuka. The trans-oceanic interconnection of the protagonists—diasporic Pukapukans who traverse Oceania and Australasia—provides a perspective that brings together the traveller and the local islander and shows the responsibility that comes from imagining strong trans-Pacific relationships, which also includes imagining connections between the human and more-than-human. The film ends with a sense of transformation occurring for all the

protagonists after their visit to Pukapuka. As the title *The Island in Me* intimidates, the island has entered the minds and memories of all three women, suggesting a vital psychic/geographic connection. While this is a convention of the travel film—for travel to transform perspective—the complex interweaving between the stories of the three women and the gentle move between different stories indicates the need to focus on place and the need for this atoll to survive and to have a future.

Our Atoll Speaks: Ko Talatal Mai to Matou Wenua (2019)

Figure 3. *Our Atoll Speaks: Ko Talatal Mai to Matou Wenua* (©Talcual Films, 2019)

An image of children playing in the Cook Islands atoll of Pukapuka in *Our Atoll Speaks: Ko Talatal Mai to Matou Wenua* (dir. Cubero del Barrio, 2019).

Unlike *The Island in Me,* Cubero Del Barrio's 2019 short film *Our Atoll Speaks: Ko Talatal Mai to Matou Wenua* is clearly devoted to looking at the impacts of climate change in Pukapuka as a central focus, and it has an urgent environmental message for its viewers:

> How long can we call Pukapuka the island home? Climate change is the biggest threat to our existence. We need to look at the risk of rising seas in terms of our cultural practices, so that we don't lose them. We cannot allow Pukapuka to disappear.

Our Atoll Speaks is a fourteen-minute documentary film that presents a lyrical reflection on life working and living in Pukapuka, along with a description of the perils it faces in the new era of Anthropocenic climate change. In their review of the film, Baxter, Cepeda, and McLean have described the documentary as a **"**compelling visual

poem", and one that "provides a collective voice of the resistance to climate change of the native peoples of Pukapuka/Nassau" (2020, p. 785). Bautista notes how:

> [t]his short film shares deeply important lessons that help us understand the importance of maintaining indigenous and more-than-human alternative forms of knowing, which can result in new ways of thinking about our own environments, societies and troubles. (2020, p. 790)

The documentary contains a voiceover narrated by Johnny Frisbie. The documentary screenplay was written collectively by Borofsky, Cubero Del Barrio, and Frisbie—and the three women also pieced together the narrative from interviews conducted with current Pukapukans between visits to the island in 2015-2017—so the film aims to draw together a range of local and diasporic knowledges as it communicates about the island's ecological significance. Cubero Del Barrio has stated that the film is intended to facilitate "the communal voice of the Pukapukan people" (2019b). Bringing together these heterogeneous voices—both the local voices of the Pukapukan community and the international voices of the Pukapukan diaspora—allows the film's narrative to move across ethnic and cultural borders, bringing into relation a western ethnographic impulse with an Indigenous perspective. Arguing for its socio-political significance as a form of cinematic environmental communication, Bautista suggests that the film's contribution "goes beyond a mere descriptive documentary, as it can be viewed as a collective project and formative message to the world" (2020, p. 789).

The film features sublime drone footage of the island and underwater photography shot by local Pukapukan teacher Kolee Tinga, which highlights fishing and boating moments around the island, as well as the visual connections between land and sea (some of the same footage was also used in *The Island in Me*). This sublime representation shows the terrestrial and the underwater attractions of the atoll, as well as its people working and playing on the land and water. While the film is comprised of idyllic cinematography that concurs with perceptions of the "south seas" as a type of paradise, Cubero del Barrio also notes that she wanted the movie to be realistic and/or authentic: "I also wanted to take you to this real place: it's magical, but it's real" (ThinkTech Hawaii, 2019). Perhaps in aid of this realism, the film draws on moving *a cappella* music and chants recorded by Kevin Salisbury on the island from the 1970s. This adds to the sense of historical importance of the film—that it draws from a rich cultural heritage, aided by the presence of the Cook Islands' literary star Johnny Frisbie, who, as in *The Island in Me,* provides a rich longitudinal perspective. The film demonstrates that what we are seeing is not the "non-place" of a utopia—as we often see in tourist-based depictions of the South Pacific—but rather a real-life paradise that is achieved, built, and sustained through the ongoing hard work of the local

community. Unlike the "sinking islands" films that DeLoughrey suggests present Pacific islands (and cultures) as doomed to disappear, the islets of the atoll are shown to be sustained and maintained through this perpetual work and the traditional gendered caretaking that takes place on the atoll. Cubero Del Barrio's film oscillates between mythic and realist modes of representation, presenting the island and its community in traditional ways. Pukapukans are also positioned as being distinctive from other Cook Islands cultures, precisely because they have not repudiated their traditional ways of life. This distinctiveness is represented here as a saving feature for the islanders, as they can use this knowledge of local tradition to fight climate change:

> If we are going to combat climate change then people must connect with the environment. We must use the knowledge of the past to carry us into this new future. Many of our own Cook Islands people look down on us because we are different. Our language is different, our customs are different, and we haven't lost…that knowledge.

Finally, as part of the broader cultural understanding of this short film, we can also look at the ancillary information about climate change that has been especially created by Cubero del Barrio to provide spectators with ways of responding to the issues raised in the film. Paula Willoquet-Maricondi notes that "ecocinema strives to have a social, political, and material impact, and to be a tool for activism" (2010, p. xi), and through this need for action, often features supplementary information, which has included online/material special features with call-to-action activities and even "activist toolkits" (2010, p. xi). Supplementary information about climate change issues and the Pukapukan environment has been created for the *Our Atoll Speaks* site, part of the Cubero del Barrio's Talcual Films website, manifesting through topical blog posts. The posts provide "Action" links to the United Nations Climate Change Summit, The Leap Manifesto and a Climate Change Petition, and information on environmental texts such as Naomi Klein's 2014 book *This Changes Everything: Capitalism vs the Climate*. Socio-political information is provided about Pukapukan local knowledge for managing local agricultural and marine food supplies. The webpage provides ethnographic information about how local islanders manage diversity and limit the overconsumption of any local food:

- Rotating harvests, monitoring species, and sharing food may help us all conserve more wisely. Local climate and conservation knowledge can help guide education and policy. The atoll has three motus (islets). The population of 450 rotates between the motus to ensure food security.
- The chiefs carefully regulate how and when to catch different fish species.

- The village carefully regulates how and when to harvest coconuts, sugarcane, and taro.
- Everyone gathers and shares food communally. For example the three villages will play volleyball. The loosing [sic] team will fish for the winning team and all families will receive the same number of fish (Cubero del Barrio, 2019c).

Such information about local food production potentially distorts the importance of home-grown food in Pukapukan diets: imported food does not receive a mention in this short film, although the longer documentary feature *The Island in Me* focuses on Rarotongan supermarket shopping and the bulk food freight as an aspect of preparation for ship travel to the small island, which demonstrates the atoll's binding connection to the global food system. Does this focus on traditional food production elide the atoll's modern identity and its people's cosmopolitan links to national and international networks? Here, there is the concern that the representation of local identity moves toward Strain's ethnographic mode that fetishizes traditional modes of living, eliding the modern and fluid structure of the Pukapukan community. However, I would argue that this film combines information about traditional food preparation and islander customs with a sophisticated positioning of the atoll as a cosmopolitan place. Thus, the focus on tradition is purposely a way of emphasizing future ways of mitigating climate change in the Cook Islands. At the end of the short film, a gesture towards global interest and youth culture concludes the film on a hopeful note, where Johnny, as the poetic voice of the atoll, implores: "may the youth connect to their environment. May Indigenous climate knowledge and conservation lead us forward". The final part of the film constitutes a prayer:

> If Pukapuka goes under the sea, we are all under the sea. My umbilical cord is buried here, if that goes underneath, that is literally me going under the sea. We pray the international community can do something so that I don't go underwater. If Pukapuka goes under the sea, an important part of the world is lost. We pray that youth all over the world learn to respect their environment for many generations. Our atoll speaks.

Conclusion

In this paper, I have examined *The Island in Me* and *Our Atoll Speaks* as examples of ecocinema. I have argued that their unusual modes of storytelling—as poetic short film and feature documentary—reject sensationalist and catastrophic narratives that are often used in films that examine rising sea levels in the Pacific region, especially the "sinking islands" documentary type that DeLoughrey identifies as a form of "salvage environmentalism". By contrast, Cubero del Barrio's films draw upon local knowledge

and Pacific Island tradition to demonstrate the continued importance of these traditions for countering climate change. The human and the more-than-human connect and interact through Indigenous ideas of the atoll, its living creatures, and its landscapes. Both films represent the small coral atoll of Pukapuka as a remote Polynesian "paradise" with a distinctive local culture; yet they also present the island as an endangered, vulnerable region due to concerns about the rising sea levels of human-created climate change and the potential for other weather-related connections. The films offer a unique, insightful perspective as discussions about tropical futures in the Pacific are increasingly politicised around climate change action.

The longitudinal perspective provided by featuring renowned Pacific Islands writer Johnny Frisbie in both films—an artist and creator who has encountered many weather-related disasters, including a devastating hurricane as a young child on the uninhabited atoll Suwarrow—allows an examination of the Pukapukan atoll that demonstrates resilient approaches to considering the land. The films have produced new forms of knowledge, which have informed the filmmaking process. Cubero del Barrio notes in an interview that filming Pukapuka has changed her perspective on Pacific Island concepts of place and geography, especially on the idea of islands as being isolated and remote. It has afforded her a new, more-than-Western lens for perceiving the importance of the sea as a form of intercultural connection:

> At the beginning when I was working on the film, I thought about Puka Puka as a remote island. But it's not remote, it's really connected by the sea. Look at Johnny—she is a traveller, she's always had a capacity to move through cultures, to move through oceans and waters. It's an ability to navigate through life that's just so remarkable. I think that's also very Puka Pukan too (Orr, 2019, p.335).

Through this changed outlook, possible tropical futures can be measured: Lyz Soto, speaking about *The Island in Me* in an online conversation about the film, has suggested that it "reminds us of the importance of bringing our heritage and our past into present and future moments, seeking recovery and rebuilding" (Hawai'i International Film Festival, 2021). As researchers consider the role of visual culture in environmental education, we can see how ecocinematic documentaries can "engender awareness of the environment and a willingness to act in sustainable ways" (Ahn, 2020, p. 77). Ultimately, there is the sense in these films that future possibilities are created both for the environment and Pukapukan communities, which comes through this nuanced interaction with place, bringing into relation both local and distant perspectives with an ecological and tropical gaze.

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