Tōmua Introduction: Vā, wā and the spaces in between

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> Va is the space between, the betweenness, not empty space, not space that separates but space that relates, that holds separate entities and things together in the Unity-that-is-All, the space that is context, giving meaning to things. The meanings change as the relationships/the contexts change. (We knew a little about semiotics before Saussure came along!) A well-known Samoan expression is 'Ia teu le va.' Cherish/nurse/care for the va, the relationships. This is crucial in communal cultures that value group, unity, more than individualism: who perceive the individual person/creature/thing in terms of group, in terms of va, relationships.
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> —Maualaivao Albert Wendt (1996)

In 1996, Samoan literary scholar Maualaivao Albert Wendt mused on the postcolonial body for a conference he would attend in Waikato, New Zealand. The resulting paper included what would come to be the first scholarly articulation of vā, a Samoan concept that was defined as 'the space between', 'betweenness' and the 'Unity-that-is-All'. Wendt describes a relational space that connects the individual to the communal and gives meaning to Samoan reality. Vā was then a tiny word with significant meaning and possibility (Wendt, 2021). It is now an important term beyond this literary context and has entered established discourses. Vā has become an organising and energising concept with a wide and enduring reach across the Moana (Pacific).

The contributors to this book examine Samoan vā, Tongan tā vā, and Māori and Hawaiian wā. They discuss them in depth across different contexts, which can be vast. As a way in, we can think of them as Indigenous notions of relational space that bond living people, ancestors and cosmologies together across time. At different times, the emphasis can be spatial, temporal or both.

For Moana scholars in diaspora in the late 1990s, vā offered Indigenous Moana ways to think through an emerging discourse in new geography (Basso, 1996; Soja, 1989) that birthed the spatial turn in Pacific studies. The emphasis on social relations helped to articulate Moana diasporic realities as located *and* mobile, rooted *and* routed, individual *and* communal. Since then, scholars, such as Hūfanga-He-Ako-Moe-Lotu 'Okusitino Māhina, Sa'iliemanu Lilomaiava-Doktor, Misatauveve Melani Anae and Tēvita O. Ka'ili have drawn on Samoan and Tongan concepts of vā ('space that relates') and tā vā (time space), as well as teu le vā and tauhi vā (nurturing relational space), to care for spaces or relations in communities outside of and between their homelands. Vā has since been deployed in diasporic contexts to influence governance and legal frameworks and as a community-building and enhancing agenda alongside related Māori and Moana concepts. It has found enthusiastic responses in educational policy, museology and art—offering alternatives to conventional approaches in each sphere (Airini et al., 2010; Anae, 2005; Refiti, 2015). More recently, wā has been investigated in te reo Māori (Māori language) and 'ōlelo Hawai'i (Hawaiian language) for overlaps and differences in pan-Pacific or Moana-wide thinking and planning (Mika, 2023). Vā offers a way to be 'attuned to power and place' (Mika, 2017, p. 35). Although its efficacy relies partly on offering an alternative to dominant Western norms, recent discussion on vā more directly acknowledges its gendered and other power dimensions. David Fa'avae, Arcia

Tecun and Sione Siu'ulua (2022, p. 1077) observe that the 'vā in-between indigeneity, race, gender and colourism must interrogate power, privilege, and oppression'. The element of gender is worth noting here as, while gender functions differently within Indigenous Moana contexts, gender power has become multilayered through processes of colonialism and missionisation. Moeata Keil (2021, p. 88), for example, discusses how the relational gendered space of vā requires reflexive management of the vā tapu (sacred vā). Thus, it is important to not oversimplify the relationality made possible with vā: some hierarchies and boundaries are still maintained. Nevertheless, vā can help us think through various ways in which gendered power dynamics are balanced in relation to Indigenous notions of gender. Additionally, we must also be cognisant of the ways that vā might obfuscate gendered power dynamics in practice.

As a group of researchers, we can trace our own journey with vā back to Wendt. The opening quotation of this introduction is still, to this day, the most frequently cited one—beginning, most likely, with Albert L. Refiti's 2002 essay, 'Making Places: Polynesian Architecture in New Zealand', published in *Pacific Art Niu Sila*. As in that essay, we began to consider vā in the fields of design and architecture. Discussions in those Western-dominated disciplines tended to focus on formal elements—the building, the architectural artefact—and emphasised the importance of invention, reinvention and the novel in material culture. However, a look at Pacific architecture shows that the fale (Samoan house) and related forms remain relatively unchanged over time, even when that architecture is now built in diasporic environments (Refiti, 2015). This phenomenon might hint at a different understanding of the role of time in space and, indeed, the relationship between space and time became an important aspect of our project.

But first, in 2006, two of the co-editors of this collection and long-time collaborators Albert L. Refiti and Tina Engels-Schwarzpaul discovered a fale at the Tropical Islands Resort, an indoor theme park in Germany: its aerial image (this was when Google Earth became a tool for research) looked like the roof of a giant fale afolau, but turned out to be the steel dome of an aircraft hangar that housed a much smaller fale as part of a 'tropical village'. The initiator of the project was a multimillion-dollar tourism entrepreneur from Malaysia who was concerned to build the houses from different regions in the world as authentically as possible. To that end, he flew in, for example, building elements produced in Sāmoa and had them assembled on site by the tufuga faufale (master builders), who were accompanied by a pastor and his wife, and a Samoan performing troupe of around 80 dancers and musicians (Engels-Schwarzpaul & Simati Kumar, 2014, p. 3). The research of this fale and its production and performance context was formalised in the project 'Travelling Houses', which also engaged other Moana scholars, as well as Salā Lemi Ponifasio as a creative practitioner (Engels-Schwarzpaul, Lopesi & Refiti, 2022). Although the starting points were architectural phenomena, an abiding interest lay in the relationships between Pacific spaces and their communities. Thus, the focus shifted from the actual artefact to the social relationships and events that happen inside and around buildings, and to the question of how social relations and architecture co-determine each other.

In 2012, the Pacific Spaces research cluster was formed at Auckland University of Technology (AUT). In 2017, it was renamed 'Vā Moana Pacific Spaces' for a funding application to the Royal Society of New Zealand Marsden Fund—Vā Moana being the literal translation of Pacific Spaces in Samoan.[1] The multi-year project was titled 'Vā Moana: Space and Relationality in Pacific Thought and Identity'.

[1] While translated as space here, it is only one translation of a polysemic field as discussed throughout the book. See, in particular, the Afterword.

Led by AUT researchers Refiti and Engels-Schwarzpaul and associate researchers Māhina, Billie Lythberg, Ty P. Kāwika Tengan and Brett Graham, and supported by postgraduate researchers Lana Lopesi and Rosanna Raymond, the project's goal was to 'work the spaces between vā and wā', as Kalei Nu'uhiwa and Tengan (Chapter 3, this volume) put it in order to consolidate and significantly extend existing research on the concept's genealogy and future potential. Since 2019, we have held numerous talanoa, working sessions, panels and reading groups with an extended network of scholars. Each talanoa, in its own way, conceptually investigated vā and wā across different locales, offering insights that have shaped and continue to shape our thinking.[2]

A central point of convergence for these talanoa was the Marsden project's conference of the same name, 'Vā Moana: Space and Relationality in Pacific Thought and Identity', held in November 2021. Co-hosted with the University of Hawai'i (UoH) Mānoa, this conference brought together 280 participants—academic researchers, cultural historians, artists, students and community members—including many leading scholars on vā/wā. Exploring histories and current practices of vā, and their relevance for Moana futures, the conference offered an opportunity for rigorous engagement with vā to test ideas. Many of these are now presented in this volume.

The conference was initially envisaged as a multi-nodal, hybrid gathering. Groups were to gather in person at several locations across the globe, and each of these nodes would also participate online. From the outset, we had planned to assemble participants from different locations, cultural contexts and disciplines—mostly people who were used to finding creative and effective means to connect across oceans. Our aim was to provide an online space to engage and hold this multiplicity. As it became clear during the Delta wave of Covid-19 that it would be impossible to deliver in this format, we redirected our efforts to create an online space that would support collective research and talanoa. Under the label 'Global Talanoa Network', we entered talanoa over several months to develop a suitable platform for hosting the conference. Many of our conversations explored what rituals that maintained their function online should look, sound and feel like, and examined the reasons for particular ceremonial elements of Māori and Moana gatherings. Thinking through their purpose enabled us to grow—rather than merely translate—modes of connecting into an online space.

The welcome ceremony began with a mōteatea (chant) and video that flew the audience across the Moana to Tāmaki Makaurau, acknowledging mountains and waterways before landing at AUT's Ngā Wai o Horotiu marae. The handover between hosts, from AUT to UoH, was through the sound of pūtātara played in both locations. We could not share breath through hongi, but, midway through each session, an 'actiVĀtor' led participants in collective inhalation and exhalation, maintaining our sense of connection. Moana cosmograms—short moving-image pieces—were played to begin, transition and end each session. Layering John Pule's cosmograms, Emily Parr's moving-images and Salvador Brown's sonic responses, they called the Moana and several shared homelands into our online space. A Mozzilla Hub space was custom-built by Nooroa Tapuni as an informal gathering place (in lieu of a tea/coffee station). To engender the sense of being in a shared space during the sessions, Emily Parr designed a Zoom background that, when repeated across the grid format, connected at the edges to hold participants in a 'net'.

In a project about relationality, the global Covid-19 pandemic obviously impacted our research significantly, prohibiting face-to-face meetings, research visits and interviews. Yet, it also offered an opportunity to think through vā/wā in new and important ways. As Maia Nuku (2021) noted in her pre-recorded conference presentation:

[2] A number of these talanoa have been produced in the form of short videos published on our website. See: vamoana.org.

> How pertinent to reflect on the vā together in this virtual space. Though not initially planned as a digital gathering, there is conceptual clarity to the now virtual convening for Vā Moana: Space and Relationality in Pacific Thought and Identity. I speak to you from a distant place (over here) in the past (one day ago, when I recorded this); you listen and receive my disembodied voice beaming itself (now, today) into your home-office, university college, your garden or the beach. Here we are in our multitudes, caught in a slipstream of time, interacting with each other across space in unique ways.

The circumstance offered an opportunity for all participants to enter the 'rich temporal and spatial domain of vā—allowing us to temporarily contract the space in-between to connect, examine, share and discover together its volumetric forms, its borders and thresholds' (Nuku, 2021). In that moment of time–space convergence, dynamic relationships across the Moana came together collectively and virtually. The project, in its own way, created its own vā—a relational space of thinking through and with vā and wā. The outcomes of this gathering, this Vā Moana, are presented here in this volume.

As can be expected with a project that deals with vā, the relational net of those who have contributed to this project extends into constellations far beyond the core Vā Moana – Pacific Spaces research cluster. Integral to the project have been our advisors, cluster affiliates, interviewees, organisers (including postgraduate students in several faculties of two universities) and conference participants, and the support offered by Te Pūtea Rangahau a Marsden, the Royal Society of New Zealand Marsden Fund.[3]

Chapter overview

As we embarked on 'Vā Moana: Space and Relationality in Pacific Thought and Identity', we expected to find a shared baseline of understanding vā and wā across the Moana. We thought this would emerge from comparing different Moana uses of the term across Aotearoa, Sāmoa, Tonga and Hawai'i—in homelands and diasporas. However, what we found is that vā and wā, while sharing spatio-temporal and relational dimensions, also vary noticeably across Aotearoa, Sāmoa, Tonga and Hawai'i. This collection reflects multiple ways of thinking through vā and wā, understanding that each strand of thinking can weave in with the others without losing specificity. Each of the chapters in this volume grapples with how still powerful and influential understandings of vā and wā found in Indigenous Moana worldviews and cosmologies can be re-imagined and re-enacted in the present. With the returning influence of ideas of relationality, vā seems to be a useful and productive concept for scholars in Moana diasporas. Relationality offers a counter to the hyper-individualistic societies we live in. This is, then, a decolonial project that refutes the dominant individualistic mode of social relations and asserts a will to rewrite things in our terms.

The individually and collectively authored chapters in this collection document and conceptually investigate the current conditions of vā and wā (as well as related notions), contributing to broader, and regionally and historically specific, understandings of space/place/relationality across the Moana. Important to note is that much of our work is not only multidisciplinary but also creatively driven and influenced by an approach to knowledge that develops in the process and practice of working and thinking collectively. While this collection marks a moment in time, and perhaps serves as a bookend to the multi-year project discussed earlier, the process of developing our thinking and understanding on vā is ongoing. Thus, the scholarship here is intended to stimulate further thought, rather than to offer finished takeaways.

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[3] Project 18-AUT-015, funded in 2018 for activities in 2019–23.

The chapters have been organised into four sections. Each chapter will be discussed in more detail below but, to give an overarching sense of the collection, we can think of each section as centring a different temporal and spatial site for thinking through vā. In 'Whakapapa: Samoan, Tongan, Māori and Hawaiian Origins', we begin with the whakapapa or genealogy and origin points of wā, vā and tā vā from Māori, Hawaiian, Samoan and Tongan perspectives to locate and orient ourselves. Then, in Section II, 'Sea of Islands: Vā within Global Constellations', we move beyond specific 'home' contexts to the regional, global and cosmopolitan constellations that honed Pacific thought within the academy—including articulations of vā. Section III, 'Tauhi Vā: Vā in Diaspora', looks to specific and localised diasporic, professional and disciplinary uses of vā, wā and tā vā being put to work, so to speak, and the final section, 'Whānau Whānui: Expansive Relationality, Place-making and Online Vā', explores vā-beyond—beyond the sites of focus in this project, and beyond embodied vā—to discuss vā through digital waves, sound waves and beyond the human.

In Section I contributors investigate the whakapapa (genealogy) of vā and wā across different Indigenous locales and cosmologies as a basis for their contemporary inflections. We present a combination of academic and cultural expositions and transcribed talanoa or oral accounts. This variety in approach echoes the varied approaches to Indigenous Pacific knowledge and genealogies (held in memory yet accounted for orally) and also shows the generative character of the project more broadly.

Albert L. Refiti traces the genealogy of vā within the Samoan cosmos, exploring an early oral account of the Samoan cosmogony to explain how the concepts of space and becoming allowed Samoans to understand, transform and communicate their lifeworld.

Moving into te ao Māori, Te Ahukaramū Charles Royal discusses how wā in te reo Māori is used both for space and time in conversation with Brett Graham. Royal speculates on whether tūpuna (ancestors) consciously blurred the relationship between space and time by collapsing space into time, so that wā became a portal to possibilities *beyond* space and time.

Ty P. Kāwika Tengan and Kalei Nu'uhiwa explore wā within a Hawaiian context through contemporary Kanaka 'Ōiwi (Native Hawaiian) engagement, and by reconceptualising wā through genealogical returns to Wākea, specifically in the movement to protect Mauna a Wākea (Mauna Kea). They offer a new set of understandings and practices of wā.

In conversation with Albert L. Refiti, Hūfanga-He-Ako-Moe-Lotu 'Ōkusitino Māhina discusses tā-vā and Moana thought in his own body of work and the plurality of hoa (binary). Tēvita O. Ka'ili adds to the Tongan perspective shared by Māhina and discusses tauhi vā and tā-vā, tracing the origins of the Tā-Vā Theory and Philosophy of Reality and speculating on its future directions. Ka'ili draws on Tongan cosmogony to shape contemporary responsibilities to tauhi vā (care for the vā) and tauhi fonua (care for the land).

In Section II, we move beyond the specific locales featured in the first section to the Oceanic regionalism that we are familiar with today. Notions of vā were reinvigorated and refined through Pacific thought and Pacific mobilities from the 1970s, when groups of Pacific scholars coalesced in places like the University of the South Pacific. For instance, Teresia Teaiwa identified a seminal constellation between Pacific thinkers in the 1970s at the University of the South Pacific in Fiji, which produced what she called 'the crucible effect': scholars like Marjorie Tua'inekore and Ron Crocombe, Albert Wendt, Epeli Hau'ofa, Konai Helu Thaman and she herself as a student (but also Futa Helu in Tonga) tried to jettison colonial inflections of Pacific Islands traditions and thinking by turning towards the varied richness of Pacific cultures. Their collective efforts, manifested most clearly in Hau'ofa's *Sea of Islands*, reconceptualised traditional notions of vā.

The section is opened by Maia Nuku, who explores the visual power of Oceanic artworks in the Metropolitan Museum. Conceptually, she foregrounds the artworks' relationships to ancestral time, and voyaging and mobility, exploring ideas of ancestral agency and visual

efficacy in these practices whose resonances continue to unify communities in the twenty-first century.

Moving into the academic context, A-Chr. Engels-Schwarzpaul and Albert L. Refiti discuss connections between the individual and collective lives of early Moana Cosmopolitans and their relevance in the development of a Moana Cosmopolitan way of rethinking life in Moana hubs—predominantly Suva and Honolulu—whose energy enabled the reworking of Indigenous concepts like vā.

Lana Lopesi conceptualises the social world of Moana Cosmopolitanism as Vā Moana or relational Pacific space. Combining vā (relational space) and the regional descriptor Moana, Vā Moana describes the relational webs of a cosmopolitan Moana collective. Vā Moana, then, is a (geographic) space that is at once relational, rooted and routed, physical and digital.

As someone working at the cross-section of art and academia and with a Moana Cosmopolitan reality, Rosanna Raymond extends thinking on vā to the body. Raymond argues that activating the mauli (vital force) of measina (treasures) in international museums and archival spaces requires acknowledging measina as multidimensional beings connected within relational webs, re-energised in contact with the Vā Body across oceanic and global contexts.

To better understand the tensions between vā relations, Indigenous Oceania and Hollywood filmmakers' spatial conceptions of 'The South Seas', Aaron Nyerges explores the production context of the 1926 film *Moana*. He argues that European cartographies of discovery and conquest should be complicated by a respectful engagement with other views of space, including that offered by vā.

In Section III, authors discuss the diasporic or transnational re-'coil'-ing of concepts that remake Indigenous identities away from home within specific professional and physical sites. Some early exponents of vā outside of Sāmoa or Tonga emphasised the recuperation or refinement of concepts from the homelands, often engaging precolonial or early colonial concepts. Vā became part of a process of indigenising artistic and professional values and practices. The section explores the key roles vā has played in Pacific people's understandings and articulations of their sociality and ways of being in diasporic contexts, and how they put it to work in Aotearoa through creative practice, within academia and in public service work.

Vā as a concept has been productively worked on by artists from the 1980s. The burgeoning of 'Pacific arts' occurred in the 1990s, as artists of Moana heritage navigated their own identities in diaspora and reclaimed cultural concepts in a new place. Artists Ioane Ioane, Lily Aitui Laita, Lemi Ponifasio and Brett Graham recount this time through talanoa with Albert L. Refiti.

Graham then explores the place of vā—and more specifically wā—within his own exhibition *Tai Moana Tai Tangata* (2021–22). The structure of wā cosmology and whakapapa became a structure in the exhibition that enabled Graham to present multiple histories simultaneously.

Teu le vā (caring for the vā) found use in education policy with the seminal publication of *Teu Le Va—Relationships across Research and Policy in Pasifika Education* in 2010. Anae, one of that publication's authors, writes here with curator Leone Samu Tui, tracing the use of teu le vā in another sector, museology. They discuss the Tāmaki Paenga Hira Auckland Museum's *Teu Le Vā: Pacific Dimension at Auckland Museum* document and policy, and the use of teu le vā in both education and museology through these documents.

Tamasailau Suaalii-Sauni, Robert Webb and Juan Tauri also look at the practical applications of vā, this time within youth criminal justice. Drawing from their research conducted in New Zealand, Australia and the United States, they explore the possibility of vā as an Indigenous Pacific criminal justice model.

In another application of these concepts, James Miller demonstrates how the Hawaiian wā can ignite an architectural design approach. For Miller, applying the spatio-temporal

philosophical notions of wā to design encourages engagement with the land and one's own genealogy, creating the foundation for Indigenous design knowledge.

Each chapter in this section reminds us of the multiple ways in which vā and wā have found homes across a vast range of Pacific practices, both professional and creative.

In reconceptualising and recontextualising customary notions in the Moana and beyond, Pacific people experiment with concepts akin to vā in their 'dwelling away' practices (Carter, 2014, p. 66) of place-making. In interpretations of Epeli Hau'ofa's *Sea of Islands*, individual places are not seen as 'outer islands' or outliers of some imaginary centre but, rather, as integral parts of a network organised as an oceanic 'highway' (Carter, 2014, p. 61). In our final section, several contributors explore the limits of an idea that arose from local contexts and within kin relationships within an expansive network that includes the more than human. Vā, in this way, goes beyond intersubjectivity and is thus capable of addressing issues like climate change and digital connectedness. Others explore concepts that resonate with vā to probe potential alliances with cultures beyond the four centres this collection focuses on.

From a long-term relationship with the Biangai-speaking communities of Elauru and Winima (Morobe Province, Papua New Guinea), Jamon Halvaksz explores the Biangai concept of ngaibilak (looked after ground), which connects kin through reciprocal exchange, gardening and shared labour, and its relationship with the linguistically distinct vā concerning 'spaces between'.

With the onset of the Covid-19 pandemic, community relationships in large institutions changed radically and suddenly. As at many universities, a vast range of activities at AUT were moved online. Valance Smith recounts the challenges and opportunities of online communities by drawing not only on personal and collective experiences of Māori online engagement, but also on Pacific notions of vā as a relational realm that needs activation and care.

Tanya Volentras discusses ways in which sound, music and singing mediate vā. Sound, in this context, becomes a communal acoustic realm for relational experiences. The relational element of vā, for Volentras, is not just received by the ear but felt by the whole body.

Expanding this notion, Kahikina de Silva explores the collapsing of time and space or wā through mele (chants, songs) of resistance. De Silva uses wā to articulate a collective Kanaka Māoli history of resistance through mele, spanning three distinct wā: from 1893 to 1898, during the 1970s and 1980s, and the movement for Maunakea.

Halena Kapuni-Reynolds also discusses wā within a Hawaiian context. Kapuni-Reynolds engages the Hawaiian practice of huaka'i hele—described as purposeful, storied journeying—to make a case for the radical, decolonial remembering of the names and stories of 'āina aloha (beloved lands) that permeate our coastlines.

Finally, we end this collection with a post-human speculation on vā. Extending the main mode of thinking through vā, namely as social relations between humans, David Taufui Mikato Fa'avae proposes that vā already exists between all entities creating diverse relational interconnections across time, contexts, spaces and places. Re-imagining vā beyond the human calls for the intensification of its capacity and speculation.

Throughout the volume, Indigenous languages and concepts figure in a variety of ways. It is therefore accompanied by a glossary that includes translations of te reo Māori, gagana Sāmoa, lea faka Tonga and ōlelo Hawai'i—the Indigenous languages of the four main sites in focus here. Additionally, demonstrating the scope of this collection, the glossary includes translations for words from the Marshall Islands, Niue, Biangai, Caroline Islands, Tanimbar Islands, Iban peoples, Iatmul, Kanak, Massim region, Sabarl Island, Tahiti, Vanuatu and Austral Islands. To support the ease of the reader, words have also been glossed in the text where possible. However, Indigenous language and concepts do not always cleanly translate into English; language is treated within the purview of the author in some cases, and that

treatment is acknowledged in the chapter itself. To support the varied approaches to Indigenous knowledge central to this project, much of which is derived through language, we have rejected standardisation for its own sake.

The chapters here reflect on, and render accounts of, locally specific developments of vā practices and concepts in and beyond their homelands, as well as the kinds of collective transformations that occur when Pacific people live together in new settings. All those changes contribute to new understandings and uses of vā/wā and the spaces in between. Our approach, drawing on Indigenous and Western thought, scholarship, practice, data, policy and art is to think things together—not for the sake of synthesis but rather for intellectual stimulation. We hope that this book will become a useful resource for scholars, students and researchers, as well as for members of the wider community interested in this Indigenous Moana concept, and that readers will join our collective effort in thinking through and with vā/wā. We offer *Vā Moana: Space and Relationality in Pacific Thought and Identity* as a node within an already existing relationship web of time–space confluence.

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