

Wayfinding Under the Stars

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Abstract

This voyage follows a mother–son practice of *vā wayfinding*—an Indigenous method of relational navigation and critical autoethnography. Through poetic fragments, inter-generational *talanoa* (relational dialogue), and moments of spiritual encounter, the narrative traces how Sāmoan diasporic identities are held, fractured, and rewoven across shifting relational currents. Grounded in *vā tapuia* (sacred relational space) as both ontology and method, this work shows how knowledge arises through collective witnessing, ethical refusal, and genealogical responsibility. Here, story becomes ceremony, silence becomes epistemology, and memory becomes a navigational star. Aligned with *Presence Tense*, this voyage reveals histories shaped through relational accountability and ancestral presence. *Vā wayfinding* emerges not as metaphor but as lived epistemology—formed through 'āiga, spirituality, and the ongoing work of becoming—inviting readers toward futures guided by story, presence, and Indigenous relational ethics.

Keywords

vā tapuia (sacred relational space), *vā wayfinding* (relational navigation), Indigenous autoethnography, Sāmoan diaspora, relational presence, *talanoa* (relational dialogue), ancestral memory

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Introduction

We are navigating our way to Chicago, moving from one island to another, guided by the celestial movements of stars above. Each journey is a weaving of past, present, and future, and this one—crossing vast oceans and cultural spaces—is no different. As we travel, I contemplate the sky, the familiar stars of the southern hemisphere gradually disappearing behind us. I wonder, will the northern hemisphere's stars align with those of the southern, as they once guided our ancestors (Tuagalu, 2008)? Will they offer the same kind of assurance, a constant presence in an ever-shifting world?

I entered the space of ICQI as a newcomer, stepping into a community that had already unfolded for 12 years before I even knew it existed. Known as the “conference of all conferences,” ICQI stands apart because autoethnography is valued equally alongside other qualitative methodologies (Bochner & Ellis, 2016; Denzin, 2014). This balance felt like navigating by stars—each method a light illuminating a path toward discovery, yet each star, each approach, holding its own integrity and brilliance. Autoethnography spoke to me as a way of connecting my personal history, my family's stories, and the broader academic discourse—a practice that mirrors the very process of wayfinding itself (Smith, 1999).

For me, the journey to ICQI began with Norman Denzin. My first encounter with his work, where he acknowledged Indigenous scholars like Linda and Graham Smith, was a pivotal moment—a guiding star recognizing the brilliance of our tangata whenua-people of the land that we live on in Aotearoa New Zealand (Denzin, 2014; Smith, 1999). It was as if Denzin's words opened a door to a broader constellation, inviting me into a space that was both foreign and familiar. In that moment, I realized that ICQI was not just a gathering of scholars but a community—a place where Indigenous voices, stories, and experiences were seen and valued (Harris & Holman Jones, 2019).

This sense of belonging deepened through my encounters with Dan Harris and Stacy Holman Jones. Attending their Critical Autoethnography conference under the brilliant stars of Naarm-Melbourne was transformative. Standing in awe of Stacy in person felt like encountering a celestial body—unreal, luminous, and awe-inspiring. But beyond the initial wonder was the sacred *vā*¹ of recognition. When she clasped my hand and called me “sister,” something shifted. It was not performance—it was presence. Dan, too, greeted me not as a guest, but as kin, weaving my story into the circle without hesitation. Over shared meals, late-night talanoa, and quiet moments between panels, they listened without interruption, held space without judgment. They didn't just see me as another academic navigating the often-isolating space of white-dominated academia. They saw me, beyond my skin, beyond the exterior. They saw me, truly, in a way that felt deeply familial and profoundly validating.

This connection affirmed that ICQI was not just an academic space; it was a safe space, a sanctuary for those of us whose stories are often sidelined or erased. It was a place where my queer, scholarly son Joshua would find belonging—and he did. I still remember the moment when Stacy looked him in the eye and said, “You belong here.” Not as a token. Not as someone's child. But as a scholar in his own right. The room paused, and in that pause, a lineage was affirmed.

We attended ICQI during a time of political precarity, when Trump was president, and traveling to the USA as two people of color—a woman and a queer body—felt like a dangerous act of resistance. Everything about the journey screamed, “Don’t do it.” The risk was palpable. But we didn’t listen. We went.

The trip was fraught with heightened scrutiny. Security at the airport was relentless, targeting Joshua and me. The sense of being watched, judged, scrutinized—these were familiar feelings, but they were magnified tenfold in this context. We shopped with the beautiful white scholar Julie Brien, standing side by side as we made our purchases. Yet, while her money was accepted without question, ours was held up to the light, examined and scrutinized. It was a constant reminder of the precariousness of our existence in the USA. Even in spaces where we should have felt safe, the specter of racial and queer marginalization lingered, casting shadows over every interaction. And when the time came to leave the conference, we were reminded once again that our bodies were unwelcome. At the airport, the authorities attempted to prevent us from boarding the plane. It was an all-too-familiar reminder of the systemic structures that seek to keep us out, to deny us passage.

But none of this erased the mark ICQI had already left on us. The memory of Dan and Stacy ushering us into a constellation of autoethnographers, a space where our stories, identities, and experiences weren’t merely included—they were etched into the very fabric of the conference. It wasn’t just about attending—it was about being seen, being recognized, and being held within a *vā* of scholarly kinship.

Together with Norman Denzin, Art Bochner, Caroline Ellis, Tami Spry, Ron Pelias, Elissa Foster, Rosemary Riley, Dave Purnell, Sohini Madison, Bryant Alexander, Kakali Bhattacharya, Donna Henson, Chris Poulous, Jonathan Wyatt, Diversi, Dominique Hill, Durrell Callier, and Claudia Marcello, they wove us into the ICQI cosmos. Autoethnography was not a sidebar—it was central. And our presence—Pasifika, queer, Indigenous—was not a deviation from the norm, but a necessary expansion of it.

The inner markings of this conference became like *tatau*² beneath our skin, inscribing the people we met into our hearts and bones. ICQI wasn’t just a conference—it was a living, breathing imprint of *vā*: of stories and sacred relational space that continued to pulse and expand, year after year. The marks ICQI left were much like the *pe’a*³ that Joshua would later receive—deep, enduring, and sacred.

Tap, tap, tap

The sound of the *au*⁴ striking Joshua’s skin echoed the rhythm of our journey. Memory fractured and reassembled itself with every pounding beat—time cascading through him like shattered light. Each tap of the *au* was a reminder of rupture, of pain, of return. A return not just to culture, but to selfhood. The *pe’a* began with the *va’a*—the canoe of our journey—and with each strike, that *va’a* became flesh.

As Joshua lay receiving his markings, I was carried back to the stories of our ancestors. I saw my great-grandfather Muava’a, working on the fale⁵ of the *va’a*, hands shaping sacred space. Now, Joshua’s body became that space. *Tap, tap, tap*. The

rhythmic beat of the *au* was a sacred drum—a reminder of who we are, where we come from, and the stories written into our bones.

Under the *au*, Joshua was not alone. His ancestors stood with him, breathing with him. With each strike, he remained still, surrendering to the lessons carried by the *au*, allowing the pain to shape not just his skin but his knowing. The pain rippled through him, echoing the endurance our people have carried for generations.

Like the trauma of navigating academic and national borders where we are not always seen or accepted, the pain of the tatau whispered stories of survival, of homecoming. *Tap, tap, tap*. Each mark said: *You are here. You belong*.

As I watched Joshua receive his markings, I couldn't help but think of ICQI and the marks it had left on us. Like the bruises and sacred scars left by the *au*, the conference had imprinted itself into our intellectual and spiritual skin. It had connected us with scholars who recognized our stories, who saw us not as anomalies, but as essential. Just as Joshua's *pe'a* etched his genealogical connection through *vā-relationality* (Iosefo, 2019; Tui Atua, 2003), ICQI became part of our intergenerational wayfinding—a constellation of belonging and becoming.

The stars in Chicago were not those of the southern skies, just as no journey of wayfinding is ever exactly the same. Yet the stars, the people, the *vā* we encountered—they left their marks. Inked not only on the skin, but on the soul. ICQI, like the *pe'a*, became an embodied map, reminding us that even as we navigate unfamiliar academic and cultural terrain, we are never truly alone.

In the end, it is not only the stars that guide us, but the sacred marks left upon our bodies, hearts, and minds. These markings are stories. They are relationships. They are responsibilities. They connect us to a community, a past, and a future we continue to carve with every step, every breath, and every strike of the *au*.

Tap, tap, tap.

Wayfinding Under Stars and Skin

We travel from island to island,
beneath a sky of scattered light,
wondering if northern stars
will mirror those from home—
if the people we meet
will carry the warmth
of our kin,
or trace new constellations
across our hearts.

ICQI calls us:
a conference of stars and stories,
where autoethnography stands
like a guiding light—
and we are drawn in,
pulled by names
that see us,
names that hold us:
Norman. Dan. Stacy.
Each a flicker,
each a familiar presence
in a foreign sky.
Yet we walk in a world
where skin is seen before soul,
where our journey to America
is an act of quiet defiance—
two bodies of colour,
a woman, a queer son,
crossing borders that whisper,
Don't go.
At the airport,
our hands hold money
that gleams under scrutiny,
while others pass untouched—
a reminder that our existence
is a question,
our passage, unwelcome.
But still, we arrive,
in this sacred space,

where autoethnography tattoos us
with belonging.

Where stories of our people
mark us deeper than skin,
etched into each conversation,
each breath,
each shared moment of becoming.

Tap, tap, tap.

Joshua lies under the au,
as time fractures into memory.

Each strike a reminder
of who we are,
where we come from—
an imprint carried in flesh,
a song heard in bone.

Tap, tap, tap.

The ancestors sit beside him,
whispering stories of survival,
of bruises borne in quiet strength.

The pe'a rises with each breath,
marking his body
with the weight of our past,
and the promise of our future.

And as I watch him,

I think of ICQI—
how it, too, has marked us.

Like the au,
it leaves bruises:
of recognition,

of courage,
of sacred return.
The stars in Chicago are not ours,
but the marks they leave
are lasting.
Each conference,
each conversation,
each story—
an imprint.
An indelible mark
that guides us home.

Wayfinding Through Academia: A Talanoa *vā*' (Speaking Through to Spaces-In-Between)

The reflections that follow emerged after our time at ICQI—not as a transcript of a presentation, but as a creative and relational response to what the conference stirred in us. This is not merely a poem, nor a prose piece. It is a *vā talanoa*—a spoken-word duet composed in the sacred aftermath of encounter. Like the *tap, tap* of the *au* during tatau, this piece is offered with rhythm, breath, and intention. Each line beats like a heart—marking time, memory, and belonging. Spoken between mother and son, scholar and artist, this exchange honors our *aiga*, our teachers, and those navigating similar journeys through academia and life. It weaves *vā* between generations, disciplines, and diasporas—not from a stage, but from the quiet knowing that pulses beneath the skin long after the stars have dimmed. In speaking together across bodies marked [Alexander \(2014\)](#) by culture and calling, we offer this duet as both tribute and torch.

Fetaui

The conference,⁶ for us, is more than words exchanged, It's a sacred duty, A call to honor our place, As Pacific, Pasifika diaspora bodies Walking in spaces not built for us—Yet we know we're here to transform them. We carry stories rich with ancestral wisdom, The strength of our people etched in every syllable, And these stories, our most sacred offerings, Challenge the narratives that have long sought to silence us. We are here to ensure that Pasifika voices echo, To make space where others may belong, Where their stories, too, are woven Into the intellectual fabric of this world.

Joshua

ICQI was never just a conference—It was sanctuary. In that space, I became whole. Now, I know it's part of our duty To build spaces like this, Where Pasifika and Indigenous scholars No longer feel invisible or erased, Where they can bring their entire selves—Their minds, hearts, and spirits—Without fear of judgment. We are here to foster this belonging, Through mentoring, through support, Through creating networks that center our ways of being, Reshaping the structures That have long ignored Indigenous knowledge.

Fetaui

It's about centering our ways of knowing, Fa'aSāmoa, vā, Wayfinding Weaving them into the very fabric of research and teaching. For too long, Eurocentric thought has dominated these halls—But now, we carry the responsibility To weave our frameworks into the classroom, Where they offer new perspectives, Cultivate critical thought, And make room for the multiplicity of worldviews That have always existed, Though often cast aside.

Joshua

Our presence is political. As Pacific diaspora bodies, We carry with us the need for justice, For recognition. Our identities are bound with the land, With climate change, sovereignty, and education. Our role is to speak for those silenced, To push for equity and change In both our research and the world around us, Because our scholarship cannot exist in isolation—It must drive justice forward.

Fetaui

We are bridges, Between those who came before and those who will follow. What we've learned from our ancestors, From the land, from the wisdom of our elders, Must be passed on, Not held tightly within us, But shared. We must guide the next generation, Help them find their way through the complexities of academia, Encouraging them to root themselves in their identities, Even in places where those identities may not be valued.

Joshua

Collaboration across generations is key. Bringing the wisdom of the past Into conversation with today's challenges—Migration, climate, the Pacific diaspora—This is our responsibility, A duty to ensure our ancestral knowledge Continues to shape the present and the future.

Fetaui

But we can't forget the healing. Academia has been a site of colonization, Of harm to our people. We are here to heal, Not only ourselves, but our communities. Through our research, we reclaim what's been lost—Our histories, our lands, our knowledge systems. We create spaces of justice, Spaces where reciprocity and care define how we work, Offering a model for what academia can become: A place where all knowledge is valued, A place of true inclusivity.

Joshua

The tatau on my skin is a marker—A reminder of our duty. Our presence, like the pe'a, is sacred, a deliberate mark of who we are. We stand in the vā, The relational space between worlds, Between cultures and knowledge systems. It takes courage, to stand firm in who we are, To resist the systems that try to diminish our identity. But we are here, Not just for ourselves, But for all those who navigate similar journeys.

Fetaui

This duty is a lifelong journey. It's about continuing to tell our stories, Honoring who we are, Creating spaces of inclusion, Fighting for justice, Nurturing knowledge across generations, And transforming every space we enter. By living out this duty, We carve a path, Not just for us, But for the Pasifika scholars who will come after. This is the legacy of our people—A legacy of resilience, knowledge, and wayfinding, A light that guides those who follow.

Joshua

Our work is more than academic—It is profoundly spiritual, A continuation of the wayfinding That sustained our ancestors, And will sustain those who come after. This is how we honor them, By ensuring that this journey continues.

Conclusion: Wayfinding and Presence, a Collective Journey

As we reflect on our journey to ICQI, it feels like a continuation of the wayfinding tradition that has guided our ancestors across vast oceans, under skies illuminated by stars both familiar and distant. Our time at ICQI, much like those stars, has left imprints that echo the markings of our cultural practices, much like the tatau that adorns Joshua's skin. Just as the **au** strikes to inscribe belonging and connection, ICQI and the community of scholars within it have etched themselves into our academic and personal journeys, guiding us through spaces that can sometimes feel both unfamiliar and challenging.

The invitation to participate in *Presence Tense: Moving Collectively into a New History* mirrors the essence of our experience. It calls us to reflect critically on the past while collectively imagining and crafting new futures. Our wayfinding under the stars has brought us to moments of deep introspection, where past, present, and future converge—where the marks left by our experiences in academia transform into a sacred responsibility to ensure that our stories, and the stories of our ancestors, continue to be shared and amplified.

ICQI, much like the rhythmic tap of the **au**, reminds us of who we are, where we come from, and where we are headed. It is more than a conference; it is a gathering of voices that offers the space for creation, reflection, and the shaping of a future where our Pacific and Indigenous stories are not just acknowledged, but central to the intellectual landscape. In these moments, we find the courage to honor the past while imagining new constellations of knowledge, where our narratives guide us toward a more inclusive and just academic future.

As we continue forward, we carry with us the marks of both ICQI and our cultural heritage, knowing that our presence—our work—is an extension of the wayfinding that has sustained our people across time. Just as the stars guided our ancestors, the imprints left by ICQI, by autoethnography, and by those who have come before us, will continue to illuminate the path ahead. We are paving the way for future generations of Pacific scholars to find their voices, their place, and their power within academia. Together, we move collectively into a new history—one that honors the legacy of our past while boldly shaping the future that is yet to come.

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Notes

1. Va refers to the relational space in-between.
2. Samoan traditional Tattoo.
3. Samoan traditional marks for males pe'a is also known as the bat.
4. The au is the Samoan traditional tool used by the sacred Tattooist.
5. Fale is a Samoan word for house/home.
6. Note: This piece was not performed at ICQI but written in its sacred aftermath.

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Author Biography

Fetaui Iosefo and Joshua Iosefo are Sāmoan mother and son, researchers and storytellers born and raised in Aotearoa New Zealand, carrying Sāmoan ancestral lineages, with Joshua also inheriting Niuean whakapapa (genealogy). Their work is grounded in vā tapuia (sacred relational space), Indigenous resurgence, and intergenerational knowledge. Fetaui's scholarship foregrounds Sāmoan Indigenous methodologies, vā-led inquiry (research guided by relational and ethical space), and decolonizing approaches centered on 'āiga (family). Joshua's creative and research practice explores intergenerational queerness, Pacific identity, and community arts praxis through talanoa (relational dialogue) and poetic expression. Together, they enact Vā Wayfinding Critical Autoethnography, a methodology shaped collectively with their family through Tapasā mo 'Āiga (the family compass), their intergenerational ethics committee. Their collaborative writing follows the principle that research is lived within relationship—where story becomes method and ancestral memory lights pathways toward Moana futures (Pacific futures).