



Activating Sacred Vā Relationality in Higher Education

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Abstract

This reflective commentary explores the tensions and possibilities of navigating higher education in Aotearoa as a Samoan educator grounded in Indigenous relational ethics. Written through Wayfinding and Critical Autoethnography, it draws on Samoan Indigenous Reference—Fa’aSamoa (SIR–FS)—to illuminate how globalised academic expectations intersect with the lived realities of *aiga* (family), *vā* (relational space), and *tapu* (sacredness). As a practitioner within a university context undergoing structural and epistemological shifts, I reflect on the ethical labour of holding space for Pasifika learners within a transnational, neoliberal, and outcomes-driven sector. Wayfinding and Critical Autoethnography enable a layered methodological approach that weaves ancestral wisdom, poetic storytelling, and personal reflection. This piece shares how I navigate the demands of institutional research and teaching while staying anchored to Indigenous principles of collective wellbeing, intergenerational continuity, and spiritual responsibility. Rather than offering a singular solution, this commentary invites readers into the *vā*: a sacred space between epistemologies, pedagogies, and futures. It asks how educators might honour Indigenous ethical frameworks while negotiating the border-crossing landscapes of higher education. In doing so, it contributes a grounded Pasifika voice to broader dialogues on reflexivity, inclusion, and the decolonial reimaging of education in Aotearoa.

Gafa Tala: the Brown Body and the Vā of Knowing

“Introduce yourself to your group,” I say, smiling as the students scatter their chairs into small circles. “*Vā o tagata*—the space between people—is where learning begins.”

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I walk among them, the sound of shifting desks and laughter mixing with the hum of the air conditioner. In one group, a young Pākehā boy catches my eye, then quickly turns his back. I hear him whisper something—the kind of whisper that makes you feel like you’re not supposed to hear. I breathe through the sting. I understand. My brown body doesn’t always look like what *lecturer* means here.

I move to another group; they talk freely, easily. I return to the first group and ask the boy what he’d like to share. He doesn’t look at me. His friends answer for him—“He plays underwater hockey.” He smirks and says, “Yeah, but you wouldn’t know anything about that.”

There’s a silence. Not the silence of shame or anger, but the kind that opens into *vā tapuia*. “Actually,” I say softly, “I taught a girl who played for the national team. Her name’s—do you know her?” His face shifts, the confidence cracking open. “Yes,” he says, startled. “She’s my coach.”

“Next time you see her,” I reply, “tell her Fetaui sends her love.”

I continue walking, circling the classroom, still half-holding that moment. Then I hear him call out across the room, his voice changed now—“HEY! She said you were her favourite lecturer at uni!” I turn, smile, and say, “She was an amazing student. Her family are beautiful.” His confusion lingers in his eyes—the quiet undoing of an assumption.

What I don’t tell him is that I taught her from the foundation course through her Bachelor’s degree. I still remember her father standing during the certificate ceremony, voice trembling as he thanked us—said we were miracle workers, that something had changed in his daughter. That change wasn’t magic. It was *vā*. It was the slow, patient work of being seen, of believing, of tending sacred space.

That day, in that classroom, *vā* lived and breathed through silence, recognition, and connection. It reminded me that *vā tapuia*—the sacred relational space—is never theoretical. It’s a lived ethic that moves through the smallest gestures, the quietest acknowledgements. In that moment, I understood again what it means to teach as a Samoan woman in a system that often forgets that knowledge begins, and ends, with relationship.

Talanoa–Reflection: Wayfinding the Institutional Vā

That classroom moment stays with me. It lives in my bones as a quiet reminder that being a Samoan woman in academia means moving through layers of translation—cultural, linguistic, and ontological. My body speaks before my words do. In a space where authority is often coded in whiteness, my presence becomes both a question and a disruption.

Teaching, for me, is a form of wayfinding. I navigate unseen tides between expectation and belonging, adjusting my sails in response to institutional winds that were never designed for our *va’a/waka*. Metrics, policies, and performance indicators have become the mapped stars of academia. But my compass has always been *vā tapuia*—the sacred relational space that demands care before content, people before publication.

In these spaces, the brown body becomes both vessel and witness. It carries the histories of exclusion and the quiet strength of ancestors who worked three jobs so their children could sit in lecture rooms built on someone else's authority. Yet it also carries the possibility of re-mapping what learning can feel like.

When that student turned his back, I recognised more than resistance. I recognised inheritance—the legacy of an education system that rarely sees teachers who look like me as holders of knowledge. His dismissal was not personal; it was structural, shaped by what Aotearoa's universities still imagine expertise to look like. To respond through *vā tapuia*—rather than defensiveness—is to enact what Tui Atua (2003, 2017) describes as the sacred obligations of relationship. It is to resist the colonial impulse to prove worth and instead dwell in the quiet power of connection. That moment of recognition between teacher and student became a small act of decolonial repair. It reminded me that transformation in education rarely arrives through policy; it happens in the subtle, embodied gestures of trust and surprise, where relationality eclipses assumption.

In the classroom, *vā* is not merely an ethical principle (Anae, 2016)—it is method, ontology, and compass. When I speak of activating sacred *vā* relationality, I am describing an Indigenous methodology for navigating the borderlands of higher education. This approach—*Vā Wayfinding Critical Autoethnography (VWCA)*—draws from *Samoan Indigenous Reference (Tui Atua 2003, 2017)–Fa'aSāmoa (SIR–FS)*: the triadic wisdom of *vā*, *tapu*, and *tofa sa'ili*. Together they form a living philosophical system grounding my work as teacher and researcher.

Through the triadic wisdom of *aiga*, *vā*, and *tapu*, I navigate these crossings—each holding its own sacred responsibility in the work of education. *Vā* holds the relational space between self, others, and environment—not as distance, but as sacred balance. *Tapu* reminds us that every relationship carries spiritual and ethical weight—a responsibility to act with reverence. *Tofa sa'ili* calls us toward collective reflection, a seeking of wisdom through dialogue and humility. These *pou* are not metaphorical. They are enacted daily through interactions with students, colleagues, and institutions still shaped by colonial logics. VWCA emerges as a counter-current—a methodology that refuses the disembodied neutrality of Western research traditions and instead roots inquiry in lived genealogical experience.

As a Samoan scholar, my body becomes the site of this crossing—carrying ancestral frameworks into globalised academic spaces and watching them shift, resist, and reform in dialogue with Māori, Pasifika, and international learners. VWCA is a reflexive act—one that asks not just how I teach, but who I become in the process. Through VWCA, autoethnography becomes less about the “auto”—the individual self—and more about the *aiga*: the relational networks that make knowledge possible. It is a collective witnessing that honours the sacredness of interconnection. The earlier classroom story is not anecdote but *data of the sacred*—evidence of how the spiritual and educational dimensions of *vā* are activated through relationship.

In this sense, the classroom becomes a *vā moana*—an oceanic space of navigation—where knowledge is not transferred but travelled. We move together between worlds, between epistemologies, between inherited and imagined futures. My task as wayfinder is not to control the current, but to listen: to the tides of silence, the winds of discomfort, and the stars of relational ethics guiding us toward understanding. As

Wilson (2008) reminds us, research is ceremony—a process of maintaining relational accountability. For Pasifika educators in Aotearoa, ceremony happens not only in the *fale* or the village, but also in corridors and classrooms where we enact care and reciprocity under the fluorescent lights of institutional policy. To hold *vā tapuia* in these spaces is to practice what hooks (2000) calls *love as a practice of freedom*—a pedagogy that reclaims humanity within systems that often forget what learning is for.

To be a Pasifika educator in Aotearoa's universities is to live in constant translation. The institution speaks in outcomes and key performance indicators, while my language is one of relational presence and collective care. I often find myself wayfinding between two currents—the current of compliance and the current of compassion. Both are real; both shape the tides of our labour. The word *wellbeing* is spoken easily but seldom practiced. Inclusion is written in policy, yet the brown and Indigenous bodies who hold the cultural work are stretched thin—expected to embody the institution's diversity while healing its silences. I think of this as the labour of holding *vā*—the unseen work of maintaining harmony across the fractures of colonial architecture.

To hold *vā* in neoliberal spaces is not to capitulate; it is to protect. Within every bureaucratic process there are still people, stories, and sacred responsibilities. The work is exhausting, yes—but it is also a practice of love. As hooks (2000) writes, love is a practice of freedom. For us, that freedom is collective; it arrives through reciprocity, not rank.

Each staff meeting, each *talanoa* with students, becomes an opportunity to practice what Tui Atua (2003, 2017) calls “the ethics of belonging to one another.” For those of us navigating these waters, holding *vā* is not supplementary work; it is survival work. It is how we keep our integrity intact amidst shifting institutional tides, and how we model to students—especially those from migrant, Indigenous, or minoritised backgrounds—that education can still be a space of sacred connection.

As I leave the classroom, the late-afternoon sun spills through the glass corridor, and I catch my reflection—brown skin, tired eyes, a quiet smile. I think again of the student who turned his back, and of the long line of ancestors who never could. Their labour built the worlds that now question our belonging. Wayfinding home through academia is never linear; it is a constant recalibration of spirit and structure, love and labour. Each lecture, each conversation, becomes a small ceremony of remembrance. To teach here is to bring the ocean with me—to let its rhythm shape the tempo of my pedagogy.

When I speak of activating *vā*, I mean this: to hold stillness inside motion, to weave connection across difference, to breathe Indigenous ethics into the architecture (Refiti 2023) of a Western institution until the walls themselves begin to listen. This is the work of sacred crossing—the practice of living ceremony in a world that measures everything but meaning. Teaching in this way honours the intergenerational labour of our families and the collective wellbeing that binds learning to life. I am left asking: how might we, as educators, hold such Indigenous ethics of relationship within institutions still learning how to listen? In moments like these I return to my mother's words:

“*Tausi le vā; e lē o le galuega e tāua, ae o le tagata.*”

Care for and protect the relational space; it is not the task but the person that matters.

Or, as she often said with love:

“Ia tauisi ma le loto alofa le vā; e sili le tagata i lo le galuega.”

Tend the vā with a loving heart; the person is always greater than the task.

And as I walk out into the fading light, I whisper to the horizon: *May the vā remain open, sacred, and kind.*

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