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Abstract

In 2019, the Vā Moana–Pacific Spaces research group at Auckland University of Technology (AUT) began to investigate how core Moana and Māori values can be translated from onsite, embodied engagements into digital environments. This was prompted by our wish to provide access to all those who could not travel to attend a conference in late 2021 for our Marsden-funded research project, ‘Vā Moana: Space and relationality in Pacific thought and identity’ (2019–22). The onset of the COVID-19 pandemic fundamentally reframed this premise, as providing offsite access was no longer simply a ‘nice option’. The crisis challenged us to find out how virtual participation in events can uphold values of tikanga (correct procedure, custom) and *teu le vā* (nurturing relational space). In particular, our research examines practices foregrounding vā as the attachment to and feeling for place, as well as relatedness between people and other entities. We have observed an emerging conceptual deployment of vā as relational space and a mode of belonging, especially in diasporic constellations oriented by a cosmopolitan understanding of vā. Due to this focus, we noticed early on that simply moving meetings online is unlikely to create a supportive environment for Indigenous researchers in diaspora, who share principal values and a commitment to a kaupapa (agenda, initiative). This realization led us to interrogate how research collaboration and circulation are influenced by the distinct features of physical and online contexts, protocols and connectivity. To develop the alternative kind of vā we envisaged – together with strategies to sustain it through our online practices – thus became a much larger project in the times of rapid change under COVID-19. This is a very brief, initial report on our experiences.

In Aotearoa New Zealand, Māori and Moana (Pacific) urban diasporas go back to the 1950s, with waves of mass urbanization and migration peaking in the 1970s. For these commuting cultures (Clifford 2013), being away from home yet wanting to stay connected gave rise to many and varied new social and technical customs online. Among them, from the mid- to late 1990s, the adoption of the chatroom form saw the development of forums like Aotearoa Café, The KavaBowl and Polynesian Café, which helped to reconnect users primarily based in urban diaspora with a cultural community (Franklin 2004). These types of social spaces shifted in the early to mid-2000s to social media platforms. Such early and significant uptake of communications technology sometimes included the translation of traditional elements into contemporary ideas, practices, identities and relational spaces (Keegan and Sciascia 2018; Lopesi 2018; Salmond 2012; Wendt 1996).

Today, ‘cosmopolitan moments’ (Delanty 2006) arise in the intertwining of online and offline lives for Moana people (Po’e 2017), in which traditional understandings and practices of tikanga may need to be developed or broadened for the virtual world (Keegan and Sciascia 2018). Some important rituals in the shared occupancy of, for example, *te ao Māori* (the Māori world) or *fa’a Samoa* (the

Samoaan way), however, rely on sharing food, drink or breath. ‘Cosmopolitan moments’, as used throughout this report, borrows from Gerard Delanty and refers to the mediation of cultural modes in moments of world openness when the local and global meet (Delanty 2006: 27). Our research specifically examines those moments of openness in which local Māori and Pacific ways of being meet globalizing technologies, such as the online environment. Thus, researchers in the Vā Moana–Pacific Spaces cluster¹ at the Auckland University of Technology (AUT) began to investigate in 2019 how virtual participation in events can uphold central Māori and Moana traditional values of tikanga (correct procedure, custom) and *teu le vā* (nurturing relational space) – without shared physical presence. Aspects of our current research on *vā* (relational space) concern (a) practices that continue to emphasize *vā* as the attachment and feeling for place and relatedness between people and other entities; and (b) an emerging understanding of place as an ideological space of belonging, as can be traced in practices informed by a cosmopolitan-oriented conceptualization of *vā*. In our context, we found it particularly important to comprehend how different qualities of physical and online environments, protocols and connectivity may impact research collaboration and dissemination.

This general interest was given unexpected but sharp focus by the outbreak of COVID-19. The almost complete lockdown of Aotearoa prevented people from meeting anyone outside their immediate bubbles. Suddenly, all gatherings had to be held in non-contact format on online platforms. While the digital *vā* had always been an aspect of our main research project, ‘*Vā* Moana: Space and relationality in Pacific thought and identity’,² this different kind of *vā* – and the possibilities for nurturing it through our online activities – became unavoidable issues to consider carefully.

Vā, place and affect

Significant parts of our current research on *vā* actually look at practices that continue to cultivate the attachment and feeling for place associated with *vā*. Yet, we also register an emerging interpretation of place as a conceptual space of belonging, particularly in practices fuelled by a cosmopolitan understanding of *vā*. For instance, as in many other places in the world, the Sāmoan concept of *vā* originally relates to land and identity via cosmological connections to place that underpin relational values and personhood for Sāmoans.³ At the commencement of important gatherings, orators will begin their speeches with the words *Samoa o le i’a ua uma ona tofi* – the gathering is like a fish that has been apportioned (Leaupepe 1995: 11).⁴ They signal that the world is already divided for Sāmoans – and all that are in it, especially people – and that they are given their proper places in a relational system that could be called closed.

Yet, within this system of relations, mobility and movement occur via the *vā* network. During marriages, funerals and district ceremonies, the whole system comes alive through *alofa* (affection), a mobilizing force that brings large *aiga* (families) together in meetings where they reconnect over *fa’alavelave* (exchange rituals). Relatives come from far away to present *si’io le alofa* (gifts; lifting up of affection) to the wedding celebration or grieving family. Their obligations equate with *alofa*, in which feelings and affections in turn relate to one’s *vā* connections. These important events are called *fa’alavelave* because they involve exchange rituals based on the *vā* obligations constituting Sāmoan personhood, the word literally meaning ‘to be entangled’.

Across Aotearoa, Australia, Hawai’i and the United States, Sāmoans in diaspora also attend *fa’alavelave*, extending *vā* relations transnationally. Leali’ifano Albert Refiti’s being as an *ali’i tulafale* (S: orator chief) in the diaspora is associated with his status as a non-resident landowner in Sāmoa. Living and working in Auckland, he visits Sāmoa only every two years, but heregularly provides funds and resources to help his resident brother *ali’i tulafale* to manage and govern their lands and interests in the village. In his circumstances, the *vā* is predicated on an extended and elastic concept

of place and belonging within a network of relations. Irrespective of location, the obligation to tend to the *vā* persists, providing Albert's way of life with cosmopolitan moments, through 'a creative combination of different forces – centre and periphery, the local and global' (Delanty 2006: 38). Similar forms of cosmopolitanism arose from the exchanges and activities of Moana intellectuals in Suva, Honolulu and Auckland during the 1970s, and they are still influential and relevant today.

Bodies and code

While a transnational *vā*, in and across metropolises outside of Sāmoa, has been well established in the literature (Byrne 2005; Ka'ili 2005; Lilomaiava-Doktor 2004), and while the relationships between its actual and virtual components have been investigated for some time (Franklin 2004; O'Carroll 2013; Ngata 2017; Po'e 2017), the 2020 COVID-19 outbreak put the concept's elasticity to a further test.

In the last days of February 2020, just three weeks before COVID-19 hygiene practices became mandatory in Aotearoa New Zealand, the *Vā* Moana–Pacific Spaces cluster convened a *talanoa* (collective, explorative and open discussion of an issue) to consider Māori and Moana conceptions of Artificial Intelligence (AI) as both engineering methods (using algorithms and data) and as ways of imagining what the future might be.⁵ Participants sat on cushions and beanbags on the floor in a *kava* circle in a gallery space at AUT. Everyone could see everyone else; *kava* was prepared in a large wooden *tanoa* (kava bowl) and passed around the circle in coconut shell cups. Key concerns of the conversations were understandings of materiality, relationships and relatedness, and embodied vs. 'virtual' experiences. Those present shared drink and, often, drinking vessels – activities that would become impossible in institutional settings already in March.

Two years prior, at another *talanoa* in the same gallery space, our cluster had discussed Indigenous futurisms. Moana Nepia shared a photograph of Noelle Kahanu (University of Hawai'i) and Kamana'opono Crabbe, Ka Pouhana (CEO of the Office of Hawaiian Affairs) at Auckland Airport – one arriving and one departing the *motu* (island) and sharing a *honi* (greeting) by touching hands and pressing noses on either side of a glass panel (Kahanu et al. 2018). While their sharing of breath was precluded, surely the glass fogged up, and this thwarted exchange had a new presence and visibility?

When the COVID-19 lockdown presented all New Zealanders with the instant challenge of remaining physically separate yet connected, teachers and colleagues attempted to adapt and replicate 'physical' teaching and collaborating in virtual meetings or classrooms. Almost immediately dominating the daily schedule, these exchanges expected punctuality and a basic level of technological savvy of everyone (though the lack of material resources like computers and internet connections was soon recognized and addressed by the AUT COVID Response Team). Suddenly, a globally shared crisis brought to the fore a question we had been asking ourselves for some time: would it be possible to virtualize important aspects of our research kaupapa (agenda) during a conference event in 2021? The crisis actually highlighted and actualized a permanent challenge for Māori and other Indigenous communities: 'to ensure they remain connected to one another while upholding the integrity and potency of the culture and its values and practices' (Keegan and Sciascia 2018: 370).

Since March 2020, our encounters in our cluster have been conducted on various online platforms, mediated by screens, microphones and speakers. Depending on the platform, one can or cannot see all participants; the current speaker's enhanced visibility is or is not voice-activated; and virtual backgrounds may or may not be employed to preserve the *vā* of homes and families, or to signal

affiliation with a particular space or group. Some of the most generous participants at our *talanoa* and other face-to-face meetings decline to participate online, while others invite us, via curated virtual *vā*, into the carved *whare kai* (dining hall) of their *marae* (ceremonial gathering space), onto a Moana beach, or place us in front of a photograph of their ancestors. Stable or unstable internet connections make participants freeze and unfreeze on-screen, thereby impacting everybody's sense of synchronous engagement. In these small but significant ways, the potential of virtual relational space, or digital *vā* relations, is being tested and teased out, with tantalizing threads for the weaving of Indigenous futurisms emerging.

Similarly, participants of the daily e-Inoi (e-prayers) for staff during the lockdown, led by Valance Smith on behalf of AUT's Office of Māori Advancement, used background images of their *wharenui* (meeting house) or of their *awa* (river). In this unconventional context, the responses to the customary invitation to participants in a *hui* (Māori meeting) to bring along their *maunga* (mountains), *awa*, *marae* and *whānau* (family) manifested in new ways. Between 12 and 35 people participated on any given day – many, but not all of them, Māori. Inoi and *kōrero* (talking) worked well, but the communal singing of *waiata* (songs) did suffer challenges of latency due to varying internet speed connections. Despite occasional glitches, feedback from participants indicates that e-Inoi helped them connect with other members of the AUT *whānau*, nurturing a sense of community and belonging. It also helped participants to centre themselves before launching into their day. Even though we cannot know how much inoi contributed to *whakawhanaungatanga* (building relationships), this *kaupapa* (initiative) highlighted the need for people to connect irrespective of the medium. Its functioning relied on values and practices shared before, outside and beyond the daily fifteen-minute e-Inoi sessions.

The translation of core values into virtual forms of vā

Developing technologies, social media sites and video conferencing have allowed Māori and Moana people for some time now to practise virtual forms of *tikanga* – from *karakia* (prayers) at the outset of meetings to the attendance at *tangihanga* and *sauniga o maliu* (funerals). If these new opportunities offer additional potential – such as bridging long distance gaps or connecting people who have to remain in different physical locations of various reasons – they also fall short in other respects.

For instance, in 2013, *kaumātua* (elders) involved in research concerning *tangihanga* on Facebook 'questioned the application of *tapu* being applied to virtual spaces'; they 'had some concern over how this could be done appropriately' and whether it needed the guidance of suitable experts (O'Carroll 2013: 268). It also seems important, if *kanohi ki te kanohi* (face-to-face encounters) is to be practised on virtual platforms (social media sites, chat rooms and video conferencing), where time and space are immediate and flattened, that participants balance and carefully manage time and communication.

Nevertheless, Te Kara Keegan and Acushla Sciascia argue that the practice of being face-to-face, even when mediated through a computer screen, can be understood as a way to nurture and facilitate connections between participants:

Broadening *kanohi ki te kanohi* as a values-based practice to include virtual forms could be more inclusive of Māori living away from their ancestral lands, allowing them to continue to maintain meaningful connections to their *hau kāinga* [local people of a *marae*]. (Keegan and Sciascia 2018: 370–71)

While it is possible for *tikanga* to be practised and maintained both in real and virtual spaces, and while virtual spaces can sustain connections in preparation for visits to the actual marae, it seems wise not to take this for granted. Deliberately crafting and reinforcing links from the virtual to the material marae may be crucial otherwise, as some kaumātua have feared, the ‘virtualising of these practices [...] could isolate the marae space from these tikanga, particularly if more Māori begin to use technology in these ways’ (O’Carroll 2013: 269–70).

Today’s research and education environments have incorporated metropolitan and global aspects into their structure that most marae do not have. Using virtual platforms to sustain and even build communities of learning and questioning may fall within a different category. Further, Valance Smith stresses that tikanga is doing the right thing for the people at that time and while lacking in many ways, this coming together online, even for tangihanga, nevertheless serves the purpose of hiki wairua – lifting the spirits. However, this may only be possible when a shared space and time existed before the separation, which participants can invoke to navigate their shared world in a virtual way – albeit not with all their senses engaged (Tupu 2020).

In planning for the online *talanoa* and wānanga (collective knowledge construction and transmission) lying ahead of us, partially because COVID-19 induced travel restrictions over the course of our project, we will spend more time than anticipated exploring a variety of questions such as. How can the *vā* best be nurtured under conditions of physical separation? How inclusive can it be? Can new members join and, if so, is there an upper limit to the group’s ability to integrate them? What are the grounds for the continued existence of *vā*? Do there have to be shared principal values and a commitment to a kaupapa? If so, do these values need to be realized in particular ways? How do analogue and virtual encounters, imagination and tradition, impact each other in the *vā*? Additional, specific questions arise in the context of our projected blended conference: do online events across different locations in different time zones need a particular spatio-temporal format? How can we respond equally to local rhythms and to global connections? How could a blended event accommodate and foster reciprocal influences that may even change customary material and spatial practices? These are urgent and important questions, and our research group is determined to invest time and energy over the next two years with colleagues in Australia, the Pacific, the United States and Europe to develop a non-hierarchical, blended collaboration platform that supports research exploring these issues. Something much more aspirational than the currently available digital platforms is required to nurture Pacific Indigenous research agendas and the *vā* of cosmopolitan openness.

Notes

1. <https://www.vamoana.org>.
2. See, for instance, Serge Tcherkézoff’s discussion of the ‘life giving cosmology’ of *sau* in the Sāmoan system of gift giving (2012).
3. The full saying is: ‘O Samoa e le o se nuu tali ola, a e o le nuu tofi’ (Samoa is not just a place to live, it is a place already fully apportioned).
4. With Alan Blackwell, professor of interdisciplinary design at the University of Cambridge. Forthcoming outputs will contribute to the research of both the *Vā Moana*–Pacific Spaces group and the Global AI Narratives Project, Leverhulme Centre for the Future of Intelligence at the University of Cambridge.

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Contributor details

Leali'ifano Albert L Refiti is associate professor in spatial design at Auckland University of Technology (AUT). With Tina Engels-Schwarzpaul, he leads the Vā Moana–Pacific Spaces research cluster at AUT's School of Art and Design, which explores space from Pacific/Moana perspectives. An architect and a research leader in Pacific spatial and architectural environment, he has extensively published about

Indigenous spatial and environmental knowledge relating to identity formation in the Asia-Pacific region. albert.refiti@aut.ac.nz

Anna-Christina (Tina) Engels-Schwarzpaul is professor in spatial design at AUT's School of Art and Design, and co-leader of the *Vā Moana*–Pacific Spaces cluster. She researches in Europe and Aotearoa for 'Vā Moana: Space and relationality in Pacific thought and identity', a project conducted in the cluster and funded by the Royal Society's Marsden Fund. tina.engels@aut.ac.nz

Lana Lopesi is an art critic and author of *False Divides* (2018). Lana was editor-in-chief at *The Pantograph Punch*, after serving as founding editor of *#500words* (2012–17). Lana's writing has featured in a number of magazines, journals and publications, in print and online, as well as in numerous artist and exhibition catalogues. She is currently a Ph.D. candidate at AUT, where she is also a researcher in the *Vā Moana* – Pacific Spaces research cluster. lana.lopesi@aut.ac.nz

Billie Lythberg is a senior lecturer at the University of Auckland Business School, working across economics, anthropology and art history. She is co-author of *Artefacts of Encounter* (2016), *Collecting in the South Sea: The Voyage of Bruni d'Entrecasteaux 1791–1794* (2018), and two series of *ARTEFACT* for Māori TV (2018, 2020). b.lythberg@auckland.ac.nz

Layne Waerea (Ngāti Wāhiao, Ngāti Kahungunu) is an Auckland-based artist who carries out performance art interventions in public spaces that question socio-legal rules related to te Tiriti o Waitangi (1840) and Aotearoa's natural resources. She is a researcher with the *Vā Moana* – Pacific Spaces cluster at AUT. layne.waerea@aut.ac.nz

Valance Smith (Ngāpuhi, Waikato, Ngāti Mahuta) is assistant pro vice chancellor for Māori Advancement at AUT. He teaches Te Reo Māori and Tikanga Māori papers within Te Ara Poutama, The Faculty of Māori and Indigenous Development at AUT. His services to AUT include cultural advisor and Kaikōrero (orator). The primary focus of Valance's doctoral thesis is the role of contemporary Māori music in promoting te reo Māori. valance.smith@aut.ac.nz