

# Calling War(m)wards

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In the understanding of the lalolagi—the world existing below the heavens—that Indigenous epistemologies from the central archipelagos of the Great Ocean teach me, everything is connected. Every being is connected along every when possible, to paraphrase Yamatji curator and scholar Dr. Stephen Gilchrist. Far from a romantic notion to be read with emotional and spiritual distance afforded by intergenerational wealth and theft hewn into comfort, this consciousness is core to surviving traditions of enmeshed philosophy, history telling and speculative futurity that are millenia young.

Understanding connections between every living being, it is important that I move back from my white supremacist miseducation in Bjelke-Peteren-shadowed regional Queensland, to an understanding of the totality of existence as having agency. I want to move beyond the obsession with humanity as kingmaker. Western and Western-impacted knowledge systems have revolved around human-centric epistemologies since the Renaissance severed Europeans from responsibilities to rivers, lakes, fields, mountains and deltas. Indigenous epistemologies of the Great Ocean remind me that soil and blood, like earth and placenta, are considered one and the same in many of our languages, toto and fanua respectively in gagana Sāmoa. According to Sāmoan architecture and material culture theorist Leali'ifano Dr Albert Refiti, "In this worldview, nothing is unrelated, everything has a relation. Mountains, rivers, rocks, celestial movements and people form a contiguous fabric, a network drawn in and out."<sup>1</sup> Everything is permanently in māvae, tension and spreading, and tōfiga, regathering and reordering.<sup>2</sup>

Such a foundational consciousness aligns all beings in kinship, in what many languages term vā or a variation of this term. Vā means the relational space between all things, a spatiality that is visual, emotional, spiritual, political, and in constant flux. Through this conception of space, the associated conception of time as circular takes form in tā, the beating or marking of the passage of moments through specific ceremonial-political gestures and actions such as sharing 'ava or kava. Indigenous societal structures of the Great Ocean's archipelagos, surviving as best they can the genocidal violences of evangelisation, plantation and mining usurpation of lands and waters, enslavement and

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<sup>1</sup> Leali'ifano Dr. Albert Refiti, "Vā Moana swells within a global sea of islands," in Janine Randerson, Charlotte Huddleston, Alexandra Chang (eds.), [2020 Global Asia/Pacific Art Exchange Aotearoa: Ngā Tai o te Ao: global tides](#), St Paul St Gallery AUT and Asian/Pacific/American Institute at NYU: 6

<sup>2</sup> Leali'ifano Dr. Albert Refiti, *ibid.*, 6

incarceration of peoples local and diasporic from elsewhere on this Planet, are yet strong enough to teach me that everyone has a role to play, to fill, to render full.

If I recognise that continents are fictions that have shifted over time originating from the same point where worldwide empires and wars were promulgated, then I can also recognise in this time of borderless information and pathogens, that all things are still connected. Archipelagos of the desired and the desiring, these continents are networked islands stretching and surpassing the faultlines of tectonic plates, tidal angers and the decadence of Western and Western-impacted societies living in what I term hydrodecadence. They too live under other forms of pathological depletion of living beings—bodies of water, bodies of land, bodies of sky chief among them. Human beings owe generations of debt from disregard and overuse, and as such, colossal corrections towards mutually beneficial relationality are critical if those beings will have us back.

Founded as a white supremacist colony bolstered by structures of exclusion based on unnatural social constructs of class/civilisation, race/colour, gender/sexuality and wealth/privilege, “Australia” is a poorly written work of fiction. In its current monolingual arrogance, “Australia” has never been conceived in relation to, let alone in humility of, the many hundreds of First Nations whose epistemologies, territories, politics and bodies it illegally occupies and suppresses. This stretches from Noongar Country to Meriam Mir Country, from Muwinina Country to Gulumirrgin Country, and through the mining, logging and concentration camp exploits of the deftly misnamed “Commonwealth”, to Nauru, Banaba, Manus, wider Papua New Guinea, West Papua and beyond. Not to mention the “Australian” tourist occupations of Bali, Viti and Vanuatu.

In considering the making of space for contemporary ceremony wherein bodies are momentarily out of reach of the gaze that compulsorily bleaches and assumes cisheteropatriarchal control, gestures that make *vā* between living beings are supremely important. Such intimate commitments enable responsible viewing and making, and can lead to what Sāmoan and Tuvaluan artist and poet Rosanna Raymond sees as the goal: the non-cannibalistic cognitive consumption of the Other. Indeed, the unclothed body in many Indigenous cultures of the Great Ocean has only been considered taboo, from the root word *tapu/tabu* in our languages, because of recent centuries’ extremist missionaries evangelising cultures they did not understand or whose humanity they would not recognise. Raymond teaches that the body clothed in ceremony, in orature spoken and in literature tattooed, from another of our terms, *tatau*, is not nude at all, but considered layered in meaning and the latest manifestation of expansive genealogies.

Turning the gaze to language once more, my Sāmoan language provides some cues of shared purpose and of exceeding nefarious practices. *Taua* is the translation of both value and war; perhaps teaching me that the destruction of existence is also tied to its covetting. It is useful to consider widely held notions of statecraft, citizenship and

sovereignty arising out of Western Europe as expressions of the same warring desire for empire that has motivated monarchies and republics from that small region for some time. Many years ago when I visited Jean-Jacques Rousseau's house in Geneva, it wasn't yet clear to me just how exclusionary the conceptions of universal rights he and his peers held.

A way to understand how balance, generosity and reciprocity are key to global Indigenous conceptions of sovereignty and stewardship is to look at hospitality and feasting practices. Despite the ferocity of the cultural genocide waged against First Nations along the Great Ocean coasts and the interiors of North America by the Canadian and United States settler states, Tlingit curator and writer Candice Hopkins reminds me that practices of ceremonial reciprocity and interclan feasting demonstrate that Indigenous practices, informed by specific ethics, are not only thriving, but their "symbolic gesture[s] of support" remain platformed over the imperative to accumulate and compete in settler societies.<sup>3</sup>

To ground the thoughts offered so far, I want to turn to Bundjalung poet Evelyn Araluen's declaration that "the English language is a filter over Aboriginal Country" made on *Art Works* recently.<sup>4</sup> With this imported language comes the intersecting colonial violences of colourism, racism, ableism, cisheteropatriarchy, christianisation and neoliberal capitalism, rendered as compulsory in the current prevailing framework on this Planet, which in turn work against the long-justified restoration of epistemologies, peoples, beyond-human kinships, ecologies, and ways of seeing and imagining futures outside the grasp of despair. I feel this repetitive defeatism when considering the reticence of so-called Australia to address its performative, superficial relationships to Aboriginal Countries, to First Nations peoples, polities, languages, and epistemologies. The choice not to engage in making recent and current wrongs 'right' in the decades since 1975, is one echoed in the lacklustre and punitive 'provision' of intersectional, trauma-informed and culturally-resonant architecture, healthcare, education, and cultural production and dissemination.

My eardrums are overwhelmed with the call war(m)wards; the Great Ocean rises beyond its shores in gated allotments as in underserved suburbia and farmland. Whether more gas and coal-mongering occurs in halls of intergenerational privilege and mediocrity or not, climate traumas are all around human and beyond-human beings now. Reductionist economics that cannot fathom all existence as worthy, precisely because they exist outside the grip of accumulation and currency and covetting, will not save a protectionist settler colony. Neither will recurring fictions of racial purity that arrest a society's capacity to dream, to feel, to make space for. Since the first laws of these settler colonies were passed to contain First Nations peoples and territories from the

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<sup>3</sup> Candice Hopkins, "The Golden Potlatch : Study in Mimesis and Capitalist Desire," *Fillip 13 - Spring 2011*, <https://fillip.ca/content/the-golden-potlatch-study-in-mimesis-and-capitalist-desire> [Accessed 25 June 2021]

<sup>4</sup> Evelyn Araluen, "decolonial poetics (avant gubba)", *Art Works with Namila Benson*, Series 1, Episode 4, ABC iView, <https://iview.abc.net.au/video/AC2012H004S00> [Accessed 20 June 2021]

usurpers of lands and waters, and following on, the laws that segregated and marginalised diasporas of visitors rendered racialised, this has been an exploitative capitalist project catapulted by a searing plethora of hatred.

I see no futures for a vā restoration—again centring reciprocal responsibilities and relationships beyond anthropocentrism—without the drastic transformations that our age necessitates: abolition of incarceration, of punitive provision of services, of tiered rights to housing based on colourism, racism and ableism. Systems of injustice and surveilling bodies are systems wholly incapable of recognising, let alone restituting, agency and precedence to living First Nations governance systems millenia in the making. Everyone, everywhen, everywhere has a role of stewardship, reciprocity and responsibility to play.

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