12 Rosanna Raymond on Conser.Vā.Tion

A conversation with Hanna B. Hölling, Jules Pelta Feldman, and Emilie Magnin

Following her presentation at the colloquium "Performance Conservation: Artists Speak" (May 16, 2023), artist, performer, and educator Rosanna Raymond (Figure 12.1) discusses preserving Pacific heritage through performance. As a member of the Pacific Sisters collective and founder of the SaVĀge K'lub, Raymond aims to engage Pacific traditions through contemporary practices, using her body as a link between past and present. In this conversation, Raymond speaks about her artistic path and the concept of the *Vā* Body as a relational space that binds people and things to create a tangible experience of intangible cultural heritage. Raymond also reveals the challenges of her work in and with Western museums, and discusses how cultural health and safety, including setting out intentions and asking for permission from ancestors, is essential in preserving and sharing cultural heritage through performances.

Hanna B. Hölling: Rosanna, as a member of both the Pacific Sisters and SaVĀge K'lub, which are renowned within the Pacific art scene, you actively engage with performance rooted in a longstanding heritage. Your performance practice consistently challenges conventional systems, beliefs, and norms associated with museums and traditional conservation. Could you share where your interest originated and what motivates you?

Rosanna Raymond: The Pacific Sisters collective has been going for thirty years now. So definitely my art practice started with the Pacific Sisters and with us wanting to tell our stories from the Pacific, the stories that were starting to fade away. By telling the stories, we started to visualize what our gods and goddesses would look like, because a lot of them are in the carvings and the buildings and the houses. We've grown up with a lot of visual storytelling, but we were taking it onto the body. So we started to make these beautiful . . . I'm going to use the word 'costume,' but it's really problematic because

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> when you say 'costume,' you have associations with something like costume jewelry, something not real, just fake. All these terminologies that we started to find problematic. We didn't make costumes. We made beautiful *taonga* treasures, cultural treasures—cultural belongings that helped tell the story. Everything that we made was like another visual cue to telling the story, but definitely in a modern way, in an urban setting that made sense to us.

A lot of 'performance' in the way we experienced it growing up was usually at cultural festivals. There was a particular time and place that you did your 'performance' and then you took your costume off and put it away as you put your culture away. We were interested in finding ways that we could make our cultural practice everyday. Something that fitted in our urban environment. Looking at our own culture, there's a lot of personification, like the personification of rain, and this would be a goddess. The personification of a rock, and this would be another goddess. We were looking at all the women that were missing in the stories, and we started to personify these beautiful goddesses through our bodies.

As I kept working with these beautiful storytelling notions, I realized that I'm not really personifying them. So I started to look at the body as a

Figure 12.1 Artist Rosanna Raymond photographed by Rebecca Zephyr Thomas. Courtesy Rosanna Raymond.

way of sharing space, the same space, with these goddesses. I wasn't being Hine-nui-te-pō, who's one of our great goddesses of the night, but I was sharing a space with her through my body. I was bringing her into the now rather than just her being in the past. I was working with her, alongside her. And by doing that, I started to look at what a Polynesian body is and what it does. Because through that lens, we realize that it's very different to a Western body in the way it looks and how it inhabits space, and the expectations placed on it. We had to deconstruct our own bodies to reconstruct them into something that we felt was appropriate for twenty-first-century Pacific Sistering.

At the end of 1999, I moved to England, which has a great performance and theatrical history, where I had to find my place. I did this through storytelling, through the sharing of stories—old stories, you know, not just new stories—but then by retelling them we made them new. Living in England taught me a lot, especially being outside a particular cultural context, but then finding histories that we shared. In England, a lot of body movements are different. The way we adorn our bodies is different, and I found there was a sort of exoticism (left over from Orientalism). I noticed that Western audiences really couldn't tell the difference between entertainment and ceremony because of the language barriers. This was another really big issue that I started to ponder, as this puts our performance in the past or in some kind of quaint cultural arena that has remained unchanged.

Through that experience in England, I started to look at performance very differently, to look at some of our own cultural concepts and how they affected my body. I started to think about this body and what I'm doing with it, sharing space with the ancestral past rather than just reenacting it. Seeing the body as the space that cohabitates with the past, present, and future, so the same space could be in different times with those stories, bringing them into the now, effecting the future. That's when I started to understand the *vā* and developed the term 'acti.VĀ.tion.'[1] My experience of the *vā* comes through the Sāmoan lens, but you will find this concept all through the Pacific. Japan and other places, too, have a term for this relational space that you develop and that must be sustained and maintained. For such a little word, *vā* has so many dimensions and forms. There's the social *vā*, there's the *vā* between the creator and the created . . . And the concept started to be used in an urban environment, so it has a different form than in the village. But some concepts transcend their places of origin, especially within an active community.

I started to ask, what would a *Vā* Body look like? Because *vā* was a bodyless concept, and since I do a lot of performance-based body art, I felt the need to bring a body to the *vā*, which surprised a lot of my contemporaries. But for me, it really solidifies the difference between a performance and the moments when I'm acti.VĀ.ting a space: one is entertainment; the other is connecting to the ancestral past. I do great performances, and I can be incredibly entertaining, but when I'm activating a space, entertainment is not what I'm doing. When I'm doing spoken word, it's more relaxed and urban. But

when I'm creating these spaces to be close to my ancestral past, it's a very different side of the performative experience.

Jules Pelta Feldman: Could you tell us more about the *Vā* Body?

Raymond: The *Vā* Body has come about through my being exposed to some of the great thinkers back in Aotearoa, especially Albert Wendt [born 1939], who's known in Aotearoa as a writer, poet, and a great intellect. He's one of our great granddaddies of urban Pacific thinking. Wendt wrote a paper in the 1990s on the decolonized body.[2] It's the most pertinent paper that we've read, in terms of my practice—all roads lead back to this paper. I read this at a time when the *tatau* [the Sāmoan word for 'tattoo'] was starting to go through a renaissance; it lost its shame. People, especially New Zealand-born Pacific Islanders, were reaching back to the past as a way of expressing their Pacific bodies, and the *tatau* was part of this. Wendt was thinking through what a decolonized body would look like, and he started to paint a picture of this body. He explained the *vā* in this paper for the first time outside the village setting. In the village, you just know it's there. You don't say it. Wendt framed it for us in terms of a relational space that binds together people and things, and that just stuck inside me. A lot of my own behavior started to make sense in terms of how I act when elders are in the room: where to sit and even just how you host people—these responsibilities that come with relationships. Wendt also talked about the body, but he didn't actually say the words '*Vā* Body.'

Then there is an incredible Sāmoan performer, Lemi Ponifasio [born 1962], who has worked a lot in Germany and has a company called 'MAU.' Lemi is a great philosopher as well as choreographer, and he has talked about his performers working in the *vā* as ceremonial bodies. The third piece of the puzzle is Albert Refiti, who's another of our great Sāmoan thinkers. He has talked about the body as a gene-archaeological, enacted body.[3] He explains the body as the gene-archaeological matter of the past. I thought: like a *Vā* Body. I started to see the *vā* as the central pillar of my practice . . . literally. I put the *vā* in 'conser.VĀ.tion,' I put the *vā* in 'acti.VĀ.tion,' and I found the *vā* in the 'sa.VĀ.ge.'[4] By putting the *vā* at the center of these words, I put the actual relationship first, rather than the spectacle. People forget a lot of the work that goes into creating these visual performative works. They forget that there's a lot of people and relationships you have to deal with, and then your responsibility to them afterwards as well.

I was working in museums at the time, and, in that situation, there are some people you meet and then you never meet them again. For us in the Pacific, that's rude. At the same time, I was thinking about how museums conserve the physicality of the 'objects' they house. Meeting these cultural treasures, I remember my whole ancestral past opened up. I felt the presence of my ancestors; they were standing there with me through the shared time and space—this *vā* is called the *vā tapuia*, which connects us to the creator (Tagaloa) and all things created. Through this body of time, space, and genealogical matter, the past is in the present. I had one of those eureka moments.

When I work within the museum space, it's different than if I'm creating a work in a theater or gallery space. Our ancestors created certain rituals or ceremonies—I call it 'cultural health and safety'—to ensure that the past remains in the past and that your life here is for the present. If you have a *Vā* Body that is sensitive to this genealogical past, you (and your ancestral past) take that shared experience—the time/space you spend together—into the future. We would ask for certain things to happen, like to say *karakia*, which a lot of people have mistaken for prayer, but it is about formally setting out intentions and acknowledging the *atua*—the gods and goddesses associated with the activity at large. In the setting of the museum, we are asking permission from the ancestors to ensure that you're culturally safe. But, of course, I've experienced a lot of eye rolling in terms of institutions trying to cope with these 'demands' of Indigenous peoples. I found that sharing Moana Indigenous epistemologies has helped institutions understand that these weren't just performances. For sure there is performativity—they might have encountered song or movement—but it wasn't a performance of the culture in the Western sense.

The museum space hugely impacted the work I was doing with my body. When I was working in the back of the museums' storerooms, I would play music for the ancestors and talk to them. They were, for lack of a better word, my audience; I was really redefining my audience. I realized that's what the museum staff were missing when we were rendering ceremonies in these spaces. We were creating safe spaces to connect with the ancestral past. They were thinking we were performing for them or their chosen audience, often the public, but actually the main audience was all our cultural belongings. The *Vā* Body is mediating the activation of the *mauli*—a cosmological life force or essence found in all things created. Often it is felt as an emotion, or maybe the prickling of the skin, thus rendering tangible what is not seen, only felt. The so-called inanimate objects' *mauli* is acti.VĀ.ted through the *Vā* Body and the ceremony that creates the space as *vā*, as we share both time and space.

The other part of my upbringing is urban street culture. I've come from the streets; a lot of my knowledge base has not come through Western higher education institutions. It's come from sitting at the feet of a tattoo practitioner. It's come from listening to the aunties while we're all sitting there making things. It's come from hip-hop gigs; it's come from drum and bass,

jungle, from spoken word, slam poetry. I was marrying up my lived experience of an urban kid that's traveled the world to finding a way to make the past present for me, so my cultural heritage is not something that you just visit in a museum then walk away, or where you put it on show then you put it away. That really changed the way that I thought: What is a performance, and who am I performing for?

Pelta Feldman: You mentioned that you use the word 'costume' reluctantly, as it is associated with artificiality and theater—something you put on and then you put away.

Raymond: It's like cultural drag.

Pelta Feldman: I'd like to ask you about your relationship to fashion. Fashion is something you put on, but you might put it on to become your authentic self rather than to put on a false identity. I wonder if fashion has been a tool for you to bring tradition and the past meaningfully into the present, so that it isn't just an artificial layer?

Raymond: Well, it's interesting that you mention fashion. This body of mine has often been mediated by a lens of how others have seen me, not how I've expressed myself. I was a very young fashion model in New Zealand in the 1980s, and I traveled to Italy and Germany and did a little bit in London, a little bit in Australia. But that particular body was really uncomfortable in that experience. I think this is because of my Pacific upbringing, where respect for elders was a big thing, and big bodies were seen in a really different light. To my Sāmoan family, I was way too skinny. I wasn't considered beautiful to them. And yet, in this Western sense, I measured up. I was fine-featured, with lighter skin, just dusky enough. I became the coat hanger. It didn't matter what I thought. There's quite a bit of performativity in modeling, but I was really young and still finding my own body. I had a distinct uncomfortableness with that industry.

When I went back to New Zealand, after I got told that I was too old—I was nineteen—I started to look at all these amazing Pacific bodies on the streets, which weren't being reflected in the magazines. That made me create our own platforms through creating fashion shows with the Pacific Sisters and through a magazine called *Planet Magazine*, which was an urban street magazine that I was a part of, started by two young guys [Phillip Campbell and David Teehan] that had an office next door to where I lived. We walked the streets with a Polaroid camera, taking pictures of people, as these bodies were not to be found in mainstream modeling agencies. We did fashion shoots with diverse bodies. We used to do crazy fashion shows—part art, part performance, and part cultural, and usually late at night at warehouse parties put on by our friends.

Culturally, our dance and our storytelling are connected through the body. These stories can be sung, danced, lamented, chanted. Hula used to be the original form of prayer—it wasn't entertainment. As Moana Pacific bodies, we're used to moving to tell a story. It was natural to us to use certain movements even while walking down a catwalk, which became a much more theatrical space. First, we were doing shows in nightclubs, then we started to get invited to cultural festivals. At the time there was only one platform, where only traditional moves were allowed, so there was a totally separate stage for these contemporary forms.

In those early performance days, that's where I cut my teeth on how to merge the two together, so that it could be both street culture and 'traditional' culture. It didn't have to be put away in a little box. But as a performer, I still find myself falling into that trap of thinking that I'm too old to perform now. The Western construct is telling me that. I still have to fight it in my head, telling myself that I've still got some stories to tell. And this is how I tell them, through the body, through movement. But then people ask: Are you a dancer? I've never quite found the right box to sit in, in terms of the Western concept of performance, even live art.

Hölling: Can we discuss the concept of attire and body decoration? Your studio's photographs display a captivating array of textiles and colors. While considering the conservability of events, performances, and intangible traditions, physical elements still hold significance. I'm curious about your approach to costumes (again, for the lack of a better word), whether they are retained or remade for each performance or festival. How do you handle the physicality of the stuff that you wear?

Raymond: Originally, when you're using natural fibers—and this runs throughout the Moana and a lot of Indigenous cultures—when you're bringing onto your body these aspects from the natural world, you're not just embodying them, but becoming one with them. If I'm wearing a tusk, that's bringing on the power and the *mana* of the boar. Or if I'm wearing flowers, I'm bringing on their scent and acknowledging the forests and the natural world. The natural world was a very important part of how we communicated with our surroundings. Once you are finished with the natural materials, they can just go back into the earth and continue that cycle. But in an urban situation, when we don't have access to a lot of the natural materials, they become more precious. Some of the materials are long-lasting, that you will hand down over generations, like the pigs' tusks and shark teeth, and some, like the flowers and hibiscus fibers, are disposable. In New Zealand, where we're starting to use a lot of materials that are not going to biodegrade, we need to face our responsibilities with plastics and other materials.

In the images of my studio, you might have seen a big shark's jaw. The shark is an important ancestor, so there's a special connection in wearing the—well, that's where I came up with the *niu aitu*, because you can't say, 'costume.' His name is I Malie I Uta, Shark of the Land. They've all got names; they really have their own charisma, their own persona, and when I wear them, I'm sharing space with our ancestral past. We descended from sharks. And now through overfishing, it's getting harder and harder to find the resources we once used to honor, and it makes me so sad.

To come back to materiality: over the years I've developed all these *niu aitu*, and they do show wear and tear. Back in the day they would dissolve back into the earth. But now I don't want to chuck them out. That's when I started to look at the museum as a really useful space—a retirement home for my *niu aitu*. But I won't let a museum purchase them. Instead, we have an arrangement where the museum becomes the *kaitiaki*, the guardian of them. There's definitely a commodity exchange which helps me as an artist. When I retire the *niu aitu* into the museum space, I would make a replacement. I started to think of the concept of the avatar. I realized that I created avatars for my *niu aitu* because they are reincarnations of the same stories I embedded in them; they're holding that same space, just in a different time.

I will sell museums remains or residues of my performances. But I will not sell them the *mauli* [life essence]—that can't be bought. I created a handover ceremony for my *niu aitu* so that the intangible *mauli* can be exchanged. *Mauli* is contained in the avatars I create: it is the same *niu aitu* but in a different time and space. To me, by creating the *niu aitu* avatar I can conserve the story and the *mauli*. The museum can conserve the physicality of the remains, and hopefully one day they may come into contact with another body again, and the *mauli* can be reactivated because there's a bit of residue in there.

Emilie Magnin: Can we come back to this notion of conser.VĀ.tion? Could you explain to us what puts the *vā* in the conservation?

Raymond: The concept started to develop when I was looking at the responsibilities that come with relationships, and how some relationships come and go in your life. For me, the museum space (and the whole GLAM system: galleries, libraries, archives, and museums), is so focused on the physical materiality that they forget about the actual living essence and relationships that are embedded with the living descendants of their collections. Often they're dealing with cultural belongings that don't have living connections anymore—maybe the artist has passed—and the relationship just stops. They don't have a relationship with their families, with the living descendants. We need to start acknowledging that these relationships are central to the collections. You can't pull them apart from the actual physical thing.

> The physical thing is attached to a human body, a *Vā* Body that has all these ancestral ties, and ties that you develop as you're working with an artist or a performer.

For me, putting the *vā* in the conser.VĀ.tion means ensuring that the relationship is at the center of what you're trying to conserve. I think museums and archives hold responsibilities to living communities. It should be something that's naturally there, and until it's acknowledged as a vital part of conservation, we're not going to move forward. I've seen things change dramatically in the last fifteen years; you'll find a really good example of practice in one museum and in the same city, two museums down the road, nothing. This is an uneven platform that we're constantly working with, and the artists or the communities are doing a lot of the legwork and emotional work; they're creating the frameworks. And yet the power base is still in the institution.

We need to have ways of measuring and qualifying Indigenous ways of knowing and doing inside the institution. People like yourselves, when you go into other places, you're taking these ideas and you're being able to manifest them inside the structure of the institution. And that's hard work, right?

Magnin: You mentioned the disappearance of natural resources, and in the Western sense, even if we use the same word, nature conservation and art conservation are still two very separate realms. So I wonder if your notion of conser.VĀ.tion is something that can link them both together instead of seeing them as separate problems?

Raymond: I would love that to happen. It's interesting that there's this other way to look into conservation and that, just by highlighting these two little alphabet letters in it, we start to see the value in sharing the time and space together. That's just starting to happen at an institutional level. But when we're talking about natural resources, we're fighting multimillion-dollar companies that have no desire or need to listen to the small fry like us at the moment. The Cook Islands have just sold a whole lot of licenses for under-seabed mining, and apparently four are being sold around Aotearoa. I think the world's starting to understand we are in a climate emergency, not just a climate change. Indigenous people have been trying to let the world know how the natural environment has been suffering, fighting for their land rights for generations and generations and generations.

Pelta Feldman: Can I pull on some threads about your use of natural and traditional materials as part of your coming into yourself as a young person and a young artist? My sense is that these

Figure 12.2 Rosanna Raymond, *Backhand Maiden*, 2017 (performance still), Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Photograph: Richard Wade. Courtesy Rosanna Raymond.

materials and traditions helped you get a new relationship to fashion, costume, garments, things that are put onto the body. But how might that fit or not fit into the museum? *G'nang G'near* (1995–97; Figure 12.3), for example—an outfit that you made by combining denim jeans and jacket

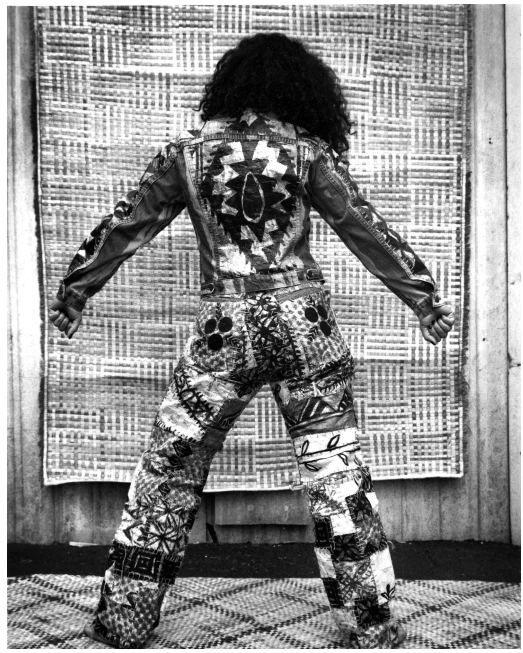

Figure 12.3 Rosanna Raymond, *G'nang G'near* (1995–97). Photograph: Greg Semu. Courtesy Rosanna Raymond.

with scraps of traditional barkcloth. I read that *G'nang G'near* did enter an institution, it does live in a box, but also that you were able to visit the museum with a sister of yours, who was able to wear it?

Raymond: Oh, that was because I don't fit in it anymore! It was interesting because it was the first time I sold something to anybody. There's a lot going on in *G'nang G'near*. The word is part of the queer talk of the 1950s and 1960s, which some of our sisters—some of our *g'nirls*—passed down to the Pacific Sisters. We didn't realize it was a real coded queer slang, even though the people that were passing it down to us were queer. Also, at the time, gangs like the Mongrel Mob had a huge presence at home, amidst this marginalized loss of culture, loss of land, loss of language. The gangs really became families for a lot of our people.

According to legend, the Mongrel Mob got their name back in the 1960s when a judge dismissed them as nothing but mongrels. I was brought up being called a mongrel, too, so that resonated with me. Wearing patches was an important part of their identity, and I noticed especially how they'd patch

up all their jeans, because they couldn't afford to buy another pair. Barkcloth is a precious commodity that was hard to get in New Zealand; when it became worn or damaged, the Pacific Islanders would throw it out. Back then the council would have organic collections three times a year. We used to find big tapa cloths out on the street, and I started to cut out all the good pieces and sew them together on these jeans. Patchwork is something that the missionaries taught the island ladies, to show them how civil and how industrious they could be. So I started to patchwork a pair of jeans with some of the tapa scraps I had found. They really were quite a statement; it was my way of forming my own gang, but it wasn't a scary gang. I was playing with ideas about my own identity as a mongrel, exploring what happens when you create something whole out of a lot of different scraps of material. It may be all mismatched and patched, but it makes a complete garment.

They've had their whole adventure, those jeans. In fact, they even went missing for two years. They just went off in the nightclub one night and never came back. When they came back, they had a few more outings. I would repatch them as they wore and tore; they're so heavy, in the end I could hardly wear them. The National Gallery of Victoria in Melbourne was interested in purchasing them after they saw them in an exhibition. They'd done their time, and I was ready to release them. This was the genesis of my thinking about how to engage with institutions, because I couldn't just sell them to the museum. I made a little handwritten piece of paper saying that they could now come and live at this museum, that I expected visitation rights, and that bodies needed to be in them every now and again. It got forgotten for years until one year I was in Melbourne with two of my friends, Léuli Eshrāghi and Angela Tiatia, and I asked the gallery if we could see them, and the next minute they were on bodies. It was like a coup. I had asked before, and they'd said, "Oh, no, no, no, you can't do that!" But when you're actually standing there, again, that's when relationship comes in. By then, I had developed a good relationship with the curators, and the conservator finally understood that I was not going to harm something that I had made.

It was wonderful. The museum people gasped when they saw *G'nang G'near* on a body. I said, that is what you're missing. The question is, what are you trying to conserve? Are you trying to conserve the physicality of the garment or a moving, breathing embodied experience, seeing it move and seeing how it rounds around the body and how the oils from your body relax it? It really changed the curator's way of looking at care—what is care and what is condition.

But at the end of the day, as performers, we've got to make a living, and a lot of times, performance is a very hard commodity to buy. I've got photographs or video or garments, those sorts of performance residue. The remains are interesting for me, this physical residue that could be the commodity. It's about a basic level of survival as an art practitioner, conserving my longevity as a performer.

It's important to talk about how we conserve performance. A lot of the performers are either trying to survive or we're developing or making a work. And then you're expected to think about what's going to happen to the work afterwards. Do we have to think of everything? I can reflect back because I've had a thirty-year practice now, and I'm glad I kept a lot of those tangible things. But it's not the actual experience, that particular time and space. There is this essence that can't be purchased, even if we've developed clever ways of reenacting and reviving performances.

Performance has been around for centuries, thousands of years. But in terms of Western art, we're still quite young. Museums know what to do with photography; they know what to do with painting. They even know what to do with costumes. But how do we actually capture the essence of a performance? For me, it was through developing avatars of my *niu aitu*. I did *G'nang G'near* in the 1990s, when they got retired, and I missed him so much that I started to make another pair; then another museum wanted to commission another pair, so I sold the second pair, *Genealogy*. In hindsight I realized it was too early.[5] It was like taking a baby off the breast too soon. I had weaned them too early. They weren't charged with all that *mauli* and the *mana*. Materials and techniques have their own *fāgogo* (stories), their own *gafa* (genealogical histories) linking all life to the gods, their own *mana* (power, authority), which surge through my hands in the act of making. When I've seen them exhibited, I can see that they're not quite charged enough. I profusely apologized to *Genealogy* and promised I'd be back later. Then I made a third pair, and the third pair is now living in a museum as well. When I wrote my thesis, I realized what I'd been doing, creating these avatars charged up with the *mauli* (life force or life essence). And the *mauli* is something that can't be sold.

To me, when my creations are housed in the museum, it's like they enter into a state of suspended animation. They're not fully deceased because the next time a body—and it doesn't even have to be my body—gets inside it, that relationship and the conser.VĀ.tion process is acti.VĀ.ted, because we're conserving the *mauli* and the *mana* of the garment, not just its physicality. Now it's become a real methodology that I can write about, and I hope that it will be helpful in some form.

Pelta Feldman: How do you decide which aspects of your heritage to take with you, and which aspects to change?

Raymond: For my father's generation, my grandmother's generation, my great-grandmother's generation, and my great-great-grandmother's generation, maybe even one more, they did not have the ability to make educated choices about what they could bring on board in terms of their cultural practices. They got told. They got beaten. They had their natural environment changed. My father and I were born in New Zealand; we are uninvited guests on Māori land that was

never ceded. I'm part of the Sāmoan diaspora, part of an urban Moana (my preferred term for 'Pacific') transnational experience. I was the one that kept asking questions, the one that kept not being satisfied with the answers from my elders. I was part of the protest movements, inspired by the generation of Māori and Pacific activists who challenged us to question what we took on board, what we bought, what we put on our bodies—questioning the way we were educated. And so I asked myself, where could I find the answers to these questions? I asked my Sāmoan grandmother, and she said: What do you want to know that for? It's not going to be of any use to you. Some of my family are so indoctrinated into the Christian world that they used to call me 'the Pagan.' My grandmother wouldn't even tell us our Sāmoan surname, until she realized that I was really working in a Pacific community. I remember the day she just looked at me and told me, our Sāmoan surname was Alai'asā,' from the village of Falefa; our mountain was Vailima. That was so big for me. Until I had that information, I couldn't fully

Figure 12.4 Rosanna Raymond and Dan Taulapapa McMullin, *acti.V.Ā.tion of Aue Away*, 2017, Metropolitan Museum of Art, New York. Courtesy Rosanna Raymond and Dan Taulapapa McMullin.

> partake in my Pacific cultural heritage, because Pacific people place you by your mountain, by your waters, your village; they do this so they can make connections.

When my family couldn't or wouldn't share my cultural heritage with me, I went looking, and found many answers in the deep past. The Western canon calls them 'mythologies,' implying that they're not real, that they're fantasies and fairy tales. But they hold immense truths. That's where I got insight into pre-contact minds, especially those of women. Most people think of a Pacific Island woman as a dusky maiden with long hair, who's perhaps selling you a holiday to Hawaii and shaking her hips. Passive, yet sexually available. But when I started looking into our mythologies, I found Nafanua, a warrior born of a blood clot. She developed her own weapons, which are still important today. I found Taema and Tilafaiga. They were men killers; they had several husbands with multiple children. They also brought the art of the *tatau* to Sāmoa. And Sina, she slept with gods. She discovered new lands. Her friends were the sharks. She was industrious, well educated, and powerful. In these tales, I found insights into my deep past, helping me to understand my past self, in the world I live in.

I'm grateful that those stories were conserved, some of them orally, but a lot of them mediated through the missionaries. You learn how to unpack them, like the tale of Sina and the eel. Sina and the eel, they were 'friends,' and in a young mind you can relate to that, but as you get older you realize, "Oh, they were friends, but friends with benefits!" It was like that with the aunties; sometimes they'd let their guard down and they would tell you some of the more intimate details, like that he tickled her with his tail. Their laughter gave me an idea of how!

Now it's our responsibility to keep these stories alive in the imagination of the next generations. I've done this successfully with my son, transmitted to him the love of his cultural heritage. It's funny; sometimes I hear my own stories coming out of his mouth, and to me that's conservation at its best because the next generation is solid and has grounding—that's one of my best conservation projects.

But that's such a valid question—how do you know what to keep? There are aspects of our culture that we did not need to keep. We did not need to keep public defloration of high-born women. But we maybe needed to keep the technique of the special mat that they wore. This information at least has been stored in books by anthropologists. It's a delicate dance, but I think when they're fully acti.VĀ.ted, they can come off the page or out of those archives and into the hands of artists who then reimagine them. That's some beautiful conservation. It might not have any relationship to what the actual archive looked like. And that, to me, is exciting.

This is an abbreviated transcript of a conversation that took place on May 20, 2023, in Basel.

Notes

1 On this concept, see Tevita O. Ka'ili, 'Ōkusitino Māhina, and Ping-Ann Addo, eds., *Pacific Studies*, special issue on "Tā-Vā (Time-Space) Theory of Reality," 40, no. 1–2 (2017); and I'uogafa Tuagalu, "Heuristics of the Vā," *AlterNative: An International Journal of Indigenous Peoples* 4, no. 1 (2008), https://doi.org/10.1177/117718010800400110.
2 Albert Wendt, "Tatauing the Post-Colonial Body," in *Inside Out: Literature, Cultural Politics, and Identity in the New Pacific*, ed. Rob Wilson and Vilsoni Hereniko (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999), 399–412.
3 Albert Refiti, "Being Social," Critiquing Pasifika Education in the University Inaugural Conference, University AUT Ngawai o Horotiu Marae, Auckland, 2007.
4 'Conser.VĀ.tion,' 'acti.VĀ.tion,' and 'sa.VĀ.ge' belong to Raymond's intrinsic vocabulary, considering the continuity of ancestral culture. See Rosanna Raymond, "Conser.VĀ.Tion | Acti.VĀ.Tion: Museums, the Body and Indigenous Moana Art Practice" (MA thesis, Auckland University of Technology, School of Design, 2021).
5 Tony Eccles, "Rosanna Raymond's *Genealogy* (2007): Notes on a New Addition to the World Cultures Collection at the Royal Albert Memorial Museum, Exeter," *Journal of Museum Ethnography*, no. 20 (2008): 120–27.

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