

# SAMOAN GHOST STORIES

John Kneubuhl and oral history<sup>1</sup>

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Otto Heim

The University of Hong Kong <oheim@hku.hk>

**ABSTRACT:** Hailed as "the spiritual father of Pacific Island theatre" (Balme, 2007: 194), John Kneubuhl is best known as a playwright and a Hollywood scriptwriter. Less well known is that after his return to Samoa in 1968 he also devoted much of his time to the study and teaching of Polynesian culture and history. The sense of personal and cultural loss, which his plays often dramatise in stories of spirit possession, also guided his investment in oral history, in the form of extended series of radio talks and public lectures, as well as long life history interviews. Based on archival recordings of this oral history, this article considers Kneubuhl's sense of history and how it informs his most autobiographical play, *Think of a Garden* (1992).

**KEYWORDS:** John Kneubuhl; Samoan history; concept of the *va*; *fale aitua*

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John Kneubuhl is best remembered as a playwright, "the spiritual father of Pacific Island theatre," as Christopher Balme has called him (2007: 194), a forerunner who called for "Pacific plays by Pacific playwrights" as early as 1947 (Kneubuhl, 1947a). Also well known is that he was a successful scriptwriter for famous Hollywood television shows such as *Wild Wild West*, *The Fugitive*, and *Hawaii Five-O*. Less well-known, however, is that after he left Hollywood in 1968 and returned to Samoa, he devoted much of his time to the study and teaching of Polynesian and particularly Samoan history and culture and became a highly regarded authority in this field. Late in his life, he identified this return to his Samoan roots as a turning point, as he explained in a brief self-portrait included in Frederic Koehler Sutter's book, *The Samoans: A Global Family*:

*I have since been busy with teaching Samoan history and culture, examining the structure and development of the Samoan language, and advocating the need for our school system to recognize and use the Samoan student's language and culture in his learning process. I help students and teachers, as best I can, to work out approaches to a changing Samoa. I continue to write plays, but the*

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## Heim: Samoan Ghost Stories/ John Kneubuhl

*metaphors through which they find form and voice are changing from metaphors of alienation to metaphors of integration, of healing.* (1989: 211)

I am here particularly interested in this last point, what Kneubuhl describes as a change from alienation toward integration and healing, and the role that his interpretation of Samoan history played in this change.

The alienation that Kneubuhl said characterised his earlier plays owed quite a bit to his intellectual formation as a student at Yale from 1938 to 1942, where he learned to write plays under Thornton Wilder and Walter Prichard Eaton. This helped him find an early voice in a certain existentialist form of writing that allowed him to express himself as the outsider he felt himself to be on the American scene. This sense of alienation was to get much worse once he got to Hollywood. It was also deepened, however, by Kneubuhl's sense of belonging in a Polynesian society, as the son of a wealthy American trader and a Samoan mother descended from important chiefly families in Savai'i, Manono and A'ana, as well as from the famous (or notorious) missionary-consul George Pritchard, who was her great-grandfather. This made for a privileged upbringing, as Kneubuhl explained later in life, and a childhood elevated and excluded from other children due to his *ali'i* status, which instilled in him a lifelong sense of obligation to his people. Part of the privileged upbringing was that he was sent to Punahou School in Honolulu when he was thirteen, where he excelled and lived with the Judd family, already bound for Yale. An important aspect of his sense of alienation, then, was that he could blend with relative ease and success, but that he could not tolerate a fraud. And it was in his alienation that he found Hawai'i congenial to his playwriting, feeling at home, as he explained in a late life history interview with John Enright: "as an alien person, writing about Hawaiian alienation" (23 July 1989; JKP35/1). Most of his plays were in fact written in and about Hawai'i, from *Harp in the Willows* and *The City Is Haunted* in 1947, to *Hello Hello Hello* and *Mele Kanikau: A Pageant* in the 1970s and *A Play: A Play* in the late 1980s. And they are provocative plays, focusing on Hawaiians as "strangers in their own land" and on Hawaiianness defined by an acceptance of loss.<sup>2</sup>

Kneubuhl's dedication to the study and teaching of Samoan history and culture after his return from Hollywood in 1968 was a homecoming of a different kind, in which he had to deal with frustration more than alienation, as can be guessed from his itinerary throughout the 1970s and 1980s. In 1970 he was involved in the establishment of the American Samoa Community College, where he chaired the English Department. He left the college in frustration in 1972 and went to Tonga where he served as Director of the Tailulu Schools for a year. After that, he came back to Hawai'i and taught at the Leeward Community College on O'ahu for three years, during which he also wrote two new plays. In 1976 he was called back to American Samoa to head a new bilingual education program for the Department of Education and by 1980, he was back at the Community College, from which he retired in 1983. After that he and his wife Dotsy divided their time between Samoa and Hawai'i and John lectured on Polynesian history and culture, while also writing his last two plays. He had also begun collaborations in New Zealand, where plans to produce his last play, *Think of a Garden* were already underway when he died in 1992.

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<sup>2</sup> The phrase, "strangers in their own land," first appears as a prophecy in *The Harp in the Willows* (Kneubuhl 1947b, 2-2-36) in 1947 and is echoed, as an accusation to "have made [Hawaiians] strangers in their own land", in *Hello Hello Hello* (Kneubuhl 1974, 3-1-10), and strikingly also appears as the title of one of the episodes Kneubuhl wrote for the first season of *Hawaii Five-o* in 1968, "Strangers In Our Own Land", which Stanley Orr has recently, and convincingly, argued "exemplifies the formal and thematic unity of Kneubuhl's literary oeuvre" (2015: 917).

As an educator, Kneubuhl was both frustrated and motivated by the cultural bias of the education system in American Samoa: the absence of any teaching of Samoan culture and history and the lack of support of teaching in the Samoan language. The community college he helped establish was instructed to be an American, not a Samoan, college, and his plans for bilingual education were stymied and opposed both by the government and by Samoans who equated education with the English language and considered Samoan an inferior language. The neglect of the Samoan language as a medium of instruction and of Samoan culture and history as a subject, in Kneubuhl's view, threatened to leave the young generation stranded in history and, also, strangers in their own land.

Kneubuhl's experiences with the education system in American Samoa bring to mind Epeli Hau'ofa's criticism of western concepts of history in 'Pasts to Remember,' according to which "Oceania has no history before imperialism, only what is called 'prehistory': before history" (2000: 455). In this view, history begins in the Pacific islands with the arrival of European languages and written records, which connect the islands to a larger narrative of development. The past of the centuries preceding contact with the west is thus relegated to the study of folklore, archaeology and linguistics (ibid: 456). That history thus defined can produce excellent work is borne out by the standard-setting histories of Samoa, Richard Gilson's *Samoa 1830 to 1900* (1970) and James Davidson's *Samoa mo Samoa* (1967), which both show an ethnographically informed understanding of Samoan society, even as they necessarily rely on written documents produced by the principal actors of the time, primarily in English and to a lesser extent in other European languages. In Gilson's and Davidson's cases, the specific delimitation of their historical accounts cannot be construed as a sign of ignorance or denial of the existence of pre-European history, but more likely indicates an awareness of the tension existing between academic history and Samoan-authored historical accounts, which resist not only, or even primarily, translation but more importantly conversion into and publication in written form as academic or general knowledge. This resistance was acknowledged, and jettisoned, by Augustin Krämer, whose publication of detailed genealogies and traditions in the first volume of *Die Samoa-Inseln* in 1902 represents both a rich scholarly resource and an evident breach of protocol, if not trust. Krämer indeed noted that one of the difficulties in collecting first-hand accounts was that "the imparting of traditions or even pedigrees unto others is frowned upon and often causes serious and unpleasant situations for the informer, indeed in certain families even involving mortal danger" (1994: 4). Interestingly, an English translation of Krämer's book was not circulated widely until University of Hawai'i Press published it in 1994.<sup>3</sup>

In Western societies, especially in Europe, oral history emerged and developed as an alternative and challenge to the elitism and cultural bias of academic historiography, intended to, as Alessandro Portelli put it, "give us information about... people or social groups whose written history is either missing or distorted" (1998a: 640). By focusing on blind spots of officially taught history, oral history, as Shaun Nethercott and Neil Leighton have noted, "ideally... offers a challenge to the accepted myths of the received culture and provides a means for the radical transformation of the social meaning of history" (1998: 463). As such, oral history, according to Gary Okihiro, writing about ethnic history, "is [also] a theory of history which maintains that the common folk and the dispossessed have

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<sup>3</sup> Gilson (1970) lists an earlier mimeographed English translation of Krämer's two-volume work by an unnamed translator, printed in Rarotonga and dated 1941, in his bibliography (ibid: 443). The Hamilton Library at the University of Hawai'i at Mānoa has a microfilm copy of a translation printed by the Department of Native Affairs in Apia, from around the same time.

a history and that this history must be written” (1996: 209). To achieve this, oral history must engage members of communities who may be reluctant to lay claim to their knowledge of the past as history and who do not take the right to speak about themselves in public for granted (Nethercott and Leighton, 1998: 459; Portelli, 1998b: 28). Kneubuhl’s work on Samoan history belongs to oral history thus conceived.

Let me briefly expand this definition of oral history before going on to consider Kneubuhl’s work in this vein. Oral history differs from more conventional academic history first of all – and most evidently – by its orality. Unlike history encoded in written records, oral history, as Portelli points out, is not emitted but transmitted (1998a: 70); it is not to be found in the dated depositories of archives but has to be sought in the memories and speech of living people. As such, it “always has the unfinished nature of a work in progress” (ibid: 71) and is to be “conceived as a process, not a product”, according to Nethercott and Leighton (1998: 459). Captured in progress, oral history emerges in dialogue, a conversation or interview, i.e. always in a performance for someone listening, an audience, which affects the what and the how of the transmission and is in turn intended to be affected by it (Ritchie, 2003: 38). It therefore does not permit the objectifying separation of the historical document from its historiographic representation that characterises the writing of history based on written records, but instead always exists in a certain relationship or tension with the written record, at once informed by it and in turn informing the writing of a history. Portelli even defines oral history “as the genre of discourse which orality and writing have developed jointly in order to speak to each other about the past” (1998b: 25). As a narrative genre, it begins with “the search for a connection between biography and history” (ibid) and ends in a publication of which one may rightly ask “to what extent [it] continue[s] or represent[s] the dialogue and the performance”, as Portelli also points out (ibid: 35). Oral history thus also tends to give rise to historiographical innovation and experimentation in multi-genre texts that dramatise the tension between the spoken word and textuality and which may even be published in dramatic performances or poetry (ibid: 36, 40).

All of these qualities also characterise John Kneubuhl’s practice of oral history, which was motivated by his sense of the neglect of history in Samoan schools and of the critical importance of its confrontation and transmission in a rapidly changing world. This work took shape in three forms. The first was a series of weekly radio talks on Samoan history, which were broadcast in American Samoa in both English and Samoan over a period of six months sometime in the early to mid-1980s. The second oral history project was an extensive life history interview of Kneubuhl recorded in eight sessions by a colleague and friend from the college, John Enright, from March to December 1989. And the third offering in oral history, clearly informed by and in some ways the culmination of these earlier projects, I would suggest, was Kneubuhl’s last play, *Think of a Garden*, first performed on the night of his death in Pago Pago and the year after to tremendous acclaim in Auckland, New Zealand. The radio talks and the life history interview were preserved on tape and are now accessible in digitised form in the rare book collection at the Hamilton library of the University of Hawai’i at Manoa, as the ‘John Kneubuhl Papers’.<sup>4</sup> The play was published in the trilogy *Think of a Garden and Other Plays*, by the University of Hawai’i Press in 1997.

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<sup>4</sup> In the following, all quotations from these audio sources will be cited with reference to the John Kneubuhl Papers, abbreviated as JKP, with item and box numbers identifying the particular source quoted.

Kneubuhl's radio talks on Samoan history are the work of a public historian, collecting, organising and presenting history on behalf of and for his community. Apart from the series of twenty-six talks, versions of this work were also presented to audiences at the American Samoa Community College and at the University of Hawai'i in Hilo and the talks formed the basis for an interpretive history of Samoa that was printed locally for use at the college. Kneubuhl's history changes the definition of pre-history as applied to Samoa, above all by emphasising the importance of Samoan oral sources *as* history (rather than mythology or folklore) and using written accounts and archaeological and linguistic evidence to back up inferences from oral traditions. Drawing on his own childhood memories of stories heard as well as stories more recently collected after his return to Samoa, his talks arrange the information in a single long narrative intended to provide his Samoan audience with a sense of a shared past and above all a sense of history. This was an innovative, and bold, departure from tradition with two implicit objectives. One was to extend the oral tradition, by stretching it at both ends, reaching further into the past and continuing its transmission into the future. The other objective was to democratise the tradition, making what originally belonged to aristocratic families the common history of all Samoans.

Kneubuhl covers what he sees as the prehistory of Samoa briskly in the first few talks, leading up to the arrival of the ancestors of the Polynesians in the Tongan and Samoan islands around 3,300 to 3,200 years ago and the slow formation and dispersal of Polynesian culture over the following two thousand years. Samoan history proper for Kneubuhl begins with the names of people from whom the emergence of contemporary social organisation can be traced, as he notes at the start of the ninth talk:

*I think it is a matter of record that the Samoan history of Samoa begins, with names named, with Pili. That record is our so-called Oral Tradition. Pili and it have a shared beginning, and I think that beginning was around 900 A.D. (Talk 9; JKP3/1).<sup>5</sup>*

This assertion seems to directly challenge and answer the prevailing view established by Krämer "that the actual historic tradition does not reach very far back, that it might span 700 years at the very most, indeed that it can be traced back with absolute certainty only over a period of 500 years" (1994: 642). Writing around 1900, Krämer nevertheless expressed a hope that future research might extend this up to a 1000 years (*ibid*). And this is precisely what Kneubuhl does.

Kneubuhl is able to extend Samoan history by three hundred years by bringing Samoan oral traditions into a dialogue with Tongan traditions to arrive at a bold new account of the so-called 'Tongan wars', which, ending with the establishment of the Malietoa title, are commonly assumed to mark the beginning of Samoan history. Whereas Krämer confidently claims that "no doubt can exist about this first historic event of Samoa, although it lies back 700 years" (1994: 336), Kneubuhl rejects the whole scenario of a Tongan invasion that had left Samoa, in Krämer's words, "prostrate for a long time under foreign rule" (1994: 338). Kneubuhl points out the anachronism of thinking of Samoa and Tonga at that time as separate countries and emphasises the close and enduring connections between the island

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<sup>5</sup> According to Samoan oral traditions, Pili was of divine origin and came to Upolu from Manu'a. It is to his sons, Tua, Ana and Tuamasaga, that the political division of Upolu into the three districts Atua, A'ana, and Tuamasaga, is dated back, with the island Manono going to Pili's fourth son, Tolufale. Kneubuhl tells the story of Pili and his sons in Talk 9 (JKP3/1).

groups over many centuries. Noting that “the Samoan tradition nowhere refers to an invasion or conquest of Samoa by Tongans” (Talk 10; JKP<sub>3</sub>/1), he identifies not the expulsion of the last Tongan ruler (or Tu’i Tonga) Talakaifaiki from Samoa as the decisive event, but the establishment of the Tu’i Tonga line itself three hundred years earlier:

*My notion, then, is that a Samoan ali’i, with his men, invaded Tonga (not the other way round), set himself up as the first Tu’i Tonga, and started that line of Tongan rulers. His name was ‘Ahoaitu in Tongan, Asoaitu in Samoan, which we might translate as the Days of the Spirits, the Time of the Ghosts. When ‘Ahoaitu came back to Samoa, he returned as a local ali’i now greatly elevated. Naturally, great and greater prestige came to the family; their power grew. The family continued the Tu’i Tonga line in Tonga, and as often as not, the Tu’i Tonga, for the next fifteen generations, visited Samoa. Their power spread over Samoa as the Tu’i Tonga. Tradition suggests that, from the beginning, their rule was peaceful; one gets no feeling, anywhere, of foreigners ruling us. (Talk 10; JKP<sub>3</sub>/1)*

I will not go into the details of the evidence Kneubuhl adduces to support this theory and all the implications he teases out of it, but as far as the concept of history is concerned, the most important insight to be gained from this extension of the oral tradition, I think, is an articulation of history on the geography of islands, linking the Samoan and Tongan spheres, which is designed to allow Samoans to see and claim their place in history in relation to a far-reaching island world.<sup>6</sup> Kneubuhl emphasises this literal articulation of history and geography, pointing out the historical connections between the Samoan islands and Vava’u, the northernmost island group of Tonga: “We still speak... of our most ancient history as being based on *tala o le Vava’u*—stories of the Vava’u, the ancient place in the ancient time” (Talk 10; JKP<sub>3</sub>/1). The Samoan past is thus literally inscribed on Tongan land, just as in an earlier talk Kneubuhl identified specific Tongan words as memory traces of Fijian landscapes (Talk 3; JKP<sub>1</sub>/1).

This view of history as inscribed in geography agrees with Epeli Hau’ofa’s observation that Polynesian languages place the past in front (and not behind) and quite literally “on our landscapes in front of our very eyes” (2000: 466). According to Hau’ofa, “natural landscapes then are maps of movements, pauses, and more movements [and] [s]ea routes were

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<sup>6</sup> Among the evidence Kneubuhl cites in support of his theory is Ahoaitu’s divine origin in Tongan tradition, which has him arrive in Tonga from outside, defeat the then ruler of Tonga and establish himself as the first Tu’i Tonga and his five brothers as the first *fale lima* (five subordinate houses), a Samoan institution designated by a Samoan name. With regard to Samoan tradition, Kneubuhl points out that it nowhere mentions an invasion of Samoa by Tongans and asks how “a people whose oral tradition preserves a wealth of details with uncanny accuracy [could] have no memory of this great event: the initial conquest and occupation of Samoa” (Talk 10; JKP<sub>3</sub>/1). Noting the continuing presence and influence of the Tu’i Tonga line in the genealogies of leading and aspiring Samoan families from the first Malietoa, he suggests “that the so-called Tongan wars never really kicked the Tongans out and have been greatly exaggerated. Perhaps one chief was kicked out. But the Tongans remained in Samoa” (Talk 16; JKP<sub>6</sub>/1). The combination of marriage and war as political instruments was of course common in relations among Samoan chiefly families too. As perhaps the most important implication of the continuing connections between Tonga and Samoa through the Tu’i Tonga line, Kneubuhl emphasises the centuries long dominance of Samoan political affairs by women, beyond the establishment of Salamasina as the first *tafa’ifa* in the early 17th Century, which he sees as evidence of the Samoanisation of the Tongan custom of *fahu*, whereby a sister outranks her brother, no matter his rank (Talk 20; JKP<sub>7</sub>/1).

mapped on chants” (ibid). Kneubuhl’s radio talks on Samoan history, drawing on oral tradition, were intended to ensure the continuing transmission of such a sense of history connecting Samoans to their Polynesian island world (and beyond). History in this view is above all an awareness of distance, an informed sense of how far one has come in both space and time, and for Kneubuhl such an awareness of distance was crucial to dealing with the accelerated pace of change that had taken hold in Samoa, as elsewhere, since the early 19th Century. The “worst mistake” Samoans had made in reacting to that change, he felt, “was neglecting to teach [their] own history” (Talk 26; JKP8/1), for as he points out in his final talk: “A people that does not teach its culture to the next generation is doomed to extinction. And whatever else history may be, it is at the very least a culture moving through time. It changes” (Talk 26; JKP8/1).

Kneubuhl was therefore concerned to extend the oral history of Samoa into the future as much as into the past and I think it is significant that he never turned his research and studies into a book, whether for an academic or a general readership, but chose instead to present it in oral forms to audiences he could engage in a dialogue. The medium of the radio broadcast in particular, in English and Samoan, represents an extension of the transmission beyond the traditional family lines but within a democratically conceived Samoan community. This could still be seen as a transgression and it is interesting that Kneubuhl does not identify any of his sources individually but always refers to the oral tradition as such. I think it is certain that he drew on first-hand accounts he collected as well as on written records such as Krämer’s, but the real political import of his detailed telling of the rise to prominence of the preeminent families of Samoa and their rivalries and schemes in pursuit of the paramount title, the *tafa’ifa*, up to 1830, was to enable every Samoan to lay claim to it equally.<sup>7</sup> Kneubuhl saw the reluctance to teach history as the mark of a society that had become stuck in an aristocratic mind-set, too concerned with chiefly rank and title, in which the heads of families guarded their knowledge as a privilege. As a public historian, he deliberately meant to challenge this reservation and explicitly encouraged his radio audience to share their stories and add to his narrative (Talk 22; JKP7/1). Yet concluding his talks, he also noted that the history he had told was almost exclusively the history of chiefs in which “[c]ommoner[s] served as fuel and fodder for the title; they had no other life, no other identity, or meaning. There is almost no mention of the common man in Samoan history. It is an *ali’i* history” (Talk 26; JKP8/1).

This raises the question what claim ordinary Samoans might lay to such a history. What might be a history of the Samoan “common man”? Kneubuhl’s provocative suggestion seems to be: ghost stories. As he explains in his life history interview with John Enright: “we were, a ghost dominated society and a ghost dominated people. Ghosts were everywhere, everybody believed in *aitu*, everybody saw *aitu*” (5th March 1989; JKP31/1). And at the end of this long interview, he returns to this, asking “what is the one thing that is quintessentially Samoan, quintessentially Polynesian? I would say, ghosts, write a ghost story” (26th December 1989; JKP38/1). In the short interpretive history he wrote based on his radio talks, Kneubuhl suggested that in early Polynesian societies the common people “lived in daily and especially nightly fear of *aitu* and *ariki*” because according to the

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<sup>7</sup> Kneubuhl occasionally uses variants such as “I am told” to refer to the oral tradition, but never names any of his Samoan sources. Krämer is referred to in Talk 20 (JKP7/1) as the only source for the story of Salamasina, the first *tafa’ifa*, which was published in German in 1923 and available in English by 1949 (translator and place of publication unidentified). It is worth noting that the English translator of Krämer’s *Die Samoa-Inseln*, Theodore Verhaaren, in 1979 acknowledged the help of John Kneubuhl in his “Translator’s Notes” to the first volume of *The Samoa Islands* (1994: vi).

aristocratic worldview, only the chiefs, or *ariki*, had a spirit that would turn into an *aitu* after death (n.d.: IV-19). But the difference between chiefs and commoners should perhaps not be generalised too far or seen as immutable, especially in Samoa, where the relatively rigid division of society into *ali'i* (or *ariki*) and commoners found elsewhere in Polynesia was loosened and replaced by a social organisation centered on *matai*, family holders of chiefly titles, and their council at the village level, the *fono*.<sup>8</sup> Ordinary people, therefore, need not have believed in their lack of a spirit and indeed the sense of the presence of the dead in the world of the living appears to have been not only a prerogative of chiefs and not only a cause of fear. As Epeli Hau'ofa points out, such a sense of the coexistence of the living with the dead is implied in the view of the past as embodied in the physical world around us: "The past is alive in us, so in more than a metaphorical sense the dead are alive—we are our history" (2000: 460). This awareness of the past calls for poetic expression, as the Samoan poet and novelist Albert Wendt, for instance, expresses it: "The dead are woven into our souls like the hypnotic music of bone flutes: we can never escape them" (1976: 50). Or, as the author in Kneubuhl's play *Mele Kanikau: A Pageant*, says: "it is only in our remembering that we can make our *mele*, like houses of words into which our dead can move and live again and speak to us" (1997: 175). In this play, the (Hawaiian) history lesson takes the form of an apparition of ghosts confronting the living on stage, and the play ends with Carl, the main recipient of the lesson, declaring, "My dead are all around me now. There is no hiding from them. I know my loss now" (ibid: 172).

Seen in this light, oral history also serves to accommodate the dead among the living in poetic or dramatic performance. This can be related to the sense of history as an awareness of distance, because history here involves maintaining the proper relationship between the living and the dead. The Samoan concept of the *va*, the distance between (all things), encompasses such relationships, as well as relationships among the living and between people and things that acknowledge seniority, authority, and indebtedness through spatial positions and orientations. Albert Wendt therefore relates the concept of the *va* to the importance of genealogies: "Va and Gafa [genealogies] express the same connections: people and space and time... The space between us is not empty; it forms relationships. Genealogies, gafa, convey the same thing" (Ellis, 2000: 55). This echoes Kneubuhl's explanation in his interview with Enright: "The physical awareness among Samoans seems to be one of distances between things, distances between people, various distances, depending on the amount of emotion or energy invested in that distance. And that, the word for distance between, is *va*" (23 April 1989; JKP34/1). This value of spatial awareness is expressed in the Samoan injunction, *teu le va*, which Kneubuhl translates thus: "*teu* was a difficult word to translate, it means to take care of, to tend, nurture, even to put it aside, and *va* is the distance between any two people or a person and another thing or any two objects" (ibid). In the notes for a brief talk on "The Samoan Identity," Kneubuhl, addressing a Samoan audience, elaborates on this spatial and living relationship to the past in terms that draw at once on his personal experience of alienation and on his aesthetic sensibility as a dramatist:

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<sup>8</sup> Kneubuhl indeed identifies the replacement of the *ali'i* system by the *matai* system as the foundation of Samoan society in Talk 6 and notes three "things [that] make the *matai* system unique and uniquely Samoan. One is the introduction of the *tulafale*, the so-called talking chief; the second is the introduction of the *fono*, or council meeting; and the third is the introduction of the '*ava* ceremony'" (Talk 6/JKP2/1). There is thus, strictly speaking, no such person as a "Samoan commoner" and all Samoans are heirs of *matai*. See also Gilson's discussion of the Samoan village organisation in *Samoa 1830 to 1900*, where he notes "the absence of a prescriptive rule of title succession" (1970: 24).



*if your view of Reality—the World as it is—is one in which the living and the dead intermingle, then they intermingle in you as you identify and describe yourself. May I suggest that this view, to put it very, very mildly, is highly neurotic. If it is allowed to continue unchecked, the hospital is just around the corner. Checking it, however, puts the ghosts—the neuroses—in balance. Teu le va. You tend to your ghosts not by exorcising them but by distancing them, putting them in that balancing act of Pity and Fear, as we tend to the living. We do not cure ourselves of our dead; we do not cure ourselves of our neuroses; we live with both. It is part of the Samoan identity, then, to live at the proper distance—the socially proper distance—with the dead. It is at once an act of respect and worship, and an act of mental health.*

The idea and value of the *va* as the proper distance to be cared for links an awareness of history with a Samoan sense of reality and a state of mental health, which Kneubuhl describes as a “healthy *va*”: “I’m quite convinced, personally, that the Samoan sense of reality was the healthy *va*; the healthy distance between two people, or a person and a *mana* charged object, social decorum, psychic distances, a perfect balance, were health, and that any force that br[oke] through to upset that was made for ill health, like *aitu* breaking through” (Enright, 24 March 1989; JKP33/1). Just as one of the main purposes of narrative history is to make sense of crises and often violent conflict, then, ghost stories could thus be considered as a form of oral history that serves to restore a proper relationship with the past, keeping the *aitu* at the proper distance and maintaining a sense of reality. Similarly, the Samoan “comic theatre” *fale aitu*, or “house of spirits”, traditionally served to ritually break the *va* and bring forth the spirits under the direction (and protection) of a shapeshifting clown, himself apparently possessed, involving the community in a curative spectacle of laughter.

Recalling that he had seen “innumerable performances” of *fale aitu* as a child (24 March 1989; JKP33/1), Kneubuhl at the time of his interview with Enright deplored their disappearance, which, like the disappearance of ghost stories, he saw as a corollary of the neglect of history:

*I’m always saddened when something that has some depth and relevance for our people is lost. Because *fale aitu* now has no more relevance to a Samoan, for a Samoan, than a Red Skelton skit has. Laughter may have a universal relevance, you laugh at pratfalls, but it’s only that now, the deeper notion, the fear and trembling that translates itself into laughter is gone and I’m sorry for that... something terribly important has been lost from the Samoan personality and Samoan society, culture (24 March 1989; JKP33/1).*

And yet, as a playwright, Kneubuhl seems to have meant to prove himself wrong, because his late plays evidently draw heavily on the tradition of *fale aitu*, not in a nostalgic attempt to restore a disappearing form, but in relying on its continued power to move an audience.<sup>9</sup> This brings me, finally, to Kneubuhl’s last play, *Think of a Garden*, which in conclusion I would like to consider briefly as the culmination of his work in oral history. *Garden* is

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<sup>9</sup> In an essay based on his comprehensive PhD thesis on Polynesian clowns, Vilsoni Hereniko also concludes that “ritual clowning has lost its link with ancestral spirits in most of Polynesia” but suggests that this “need not be seen as a loss in potency. Rather, its convergence with secular clowning... could bring about the conscious use of this form as a site for political commentary” (1994: 21).

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Kneubuhl's most explicitly historical play, as well as his most overtly autobiographical one, as he acknowledges in a note to the text:

*Although based on historical fact, this play is guilty of many sins of omission; heroes and martyrs in Western Samoa's struggle for independence are not mentioned. I hope that the love and admiration I have for them are, even in my silence about their names, clamorous... The play also flirts with autobiography and, I'm afraid, flirts outrageously at times. For the reader and for the actor, let it remain a flirtation only. (1997: 2)*

The omission of names, although presented as a "sin", is clearly deliberate and shows Kneubuhl's awareness of the continuing sensitivity of disclosing other people's past, something that New Zealand Samoan actor and director, Nathaniel Lees, learned when he was about to direct the play in Auckland in 1993, as he has explained:

*The story itself got quite a bit of flak from Samoans... The story itself and the shooting of Tamasese. A lot of the older ones just wanted it forgotten. Some quite serious people in Samoan society called me up or got word to me that I should think about either changing the play or maybe not doing it. (O'Donnell, 2007: 336)*

The historical event that *Garden* focuses on is the assassination of the leader of the Samoan independence movement, the *Mau*, Tupua Tamasese Lealofi III, by New Zealand police during a peaceful rally in Apia on December 28th 1929. Before proceeding, Lees consulted the current holder of the Tupua title, Lealofi's nephew, Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Efi, Samoa's third Prime Minister and until recently Head of State, who, as a historian himself, shared Kneubuhl's conviction that history must be transmitted (Lees, personal communication, 2017). That the story of Tamasese's murder is also not well enough remembered in New Zealand is suggested by a recent book by Michael Field, published in 2014.

In the spirit of oral history, Kneubuhl's play deals with the historical event at a remove, focusing on its impact on a family not unlike his own in Tutuila, where the news of Tamasese's death coincides with the eruption of a crisis of identity that threatens to tear the family apart. The play is presented as the memory of a Writer, who appears on stage and accompanies the action as a narrator. This story is centred on the writer's young self, David, nine years old as Kneubuhl was in 1929, and suffering under the isolation of his family in the village due to his mixed heritage and his mother's aristocratic lineage, through which she is related to Tamasese. In his loneliness, David finds a seemingly imaginary friend whom alarmed villagers identify as the ghost of a boy who died many years before and "they blame [him] for disturbing their dead" and attack him (Kneubuhl, 1997:65). When David later in a desperate attempt to belong paints his skin brown, his mother cannot control her anger and punishes him violently, prompting a no less vicious and shocking attack on herself by her brother, while the father tries in vain to separate them. The scene illustrates painfully what Kneubuhl meant by "*aitu* breaking through" when the *va* collapses, and in the end the family seems undone, never to come together again.

In conversation with Jackie Pualani Johnson, Kneubuhl described *Garden* as "a relentlessly sad play" (Johnson, 1997: 258), yet its most powerful effect is healing, a movement to restore balance, a healthy *va*, which is to be achieved in performance, as the productions

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directed by Nathaniel Lees in Auckland (1993) and Wellington (1995) demonstrated. Part of the restorative frame of the play is the presence of a Samoan character, the family's old nursemaid Pito, who, as Johnson has observed, "is David's link to his Samoan past, often spending time with the young boy, relating stories of his heritage, and imparting cultural wisdom. She is the epitome of tradition, wrapped in the visage of an even older Samoan tradition, the clown of the *faleaitu*" (1997: 259). The Auckland production of *Garden* brought this figure alive, as Lees was able to witness:

*I remember sitting in the audience and one character only speaks Samoan and she was funny. She started speaking and the Samoans started falling over themselves laughing. There were quite a few Palagi people there but they were infected by the laughter of the Polynesians and I could see big smiles on their faces. (O'Donnell, 2007: 335)*

If Pito represents the leading clown of the *fale aitu* who comically guides and protects the characters in their moment of self-revelatory crisis, the presence of the Writer on the scene can be seen to embody the agency of the ghost, the *aitu*, who stirs them into potentially self-destructive exposure. Lees's production emphasised this ghostly relationship between the Writer and the other characters of the play by keeping the Writer on the stage throughout the play, moving through the action like a ghost. In Kneubuhl's script itself, this relationship is frighteningly evoked in a scene where the Writer suddenly plays the part of David's ghostly playmate (Kneubuhl, 1997: 51-52), a scene that drew a gasp from the Wellington audience, as Lees, who played the Writer in this production, recalls (personal communication, 2017).

Yet in the play's autobiographical dimension as a memory play, the intermingling of the living and the dead also places the Writer on stage among his own ghosts and places the task of restoring the *va* on him. Lees's recognition of the restoration of a healthy *va* as the play's central concern inspired his staging of it, in Wellington's Taki Rua production, in traverse, with the audience positioned close to the stage on two sides. As he has explained in conversation, his intention was to recreate a *fale fonu*, a Samoan house for meetings of the village council of titled men (*fonu*), with actors not playing taking their place in assigned positions on the edge of the stage and the audience behind them watching and listening, the way Kneubuhl too described witnessing the proceedings of the *fonu* from the outside as a child (Lees, personal communication, 2017; see also Enright, 23 April 1989; JKP<sub>34/1</sub>). The play's storytelling accordingly became visible as a communal matter, with the audience first made to witness the traumatic destruction of the *va* and then quite literally assisting in its repairing, holding the space in which the Writer moves among his ghosts and restores the proper distance in relation to them in a series of moments of parting. The play's title, *Think of a Garden*, thus finally appears as a poetically apt rendering of the admonition to tend the *va*, *teu le va*, a task to which Kneubuhl's work in oral history as a whole was steadfastly committed throughout.<sup>10</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> The continuing appeal and relevance of Kneubuhl's vision of cultural and mental well-being was evident in a new production of *Think of a Garden* at Nathan Homestead in Manurewa, South Auckland, in January 2018, directed by Anapela Polata'ivao, with all four performances sold out and attended by a predominantly young Polynesian audience. Like Lees in 1995, Polata'ivao's outdoor production staged the play in traverse, with the historic homestead providing an ideal backdrop as the family home.

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