Making place in virus-free space

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Abstract
As much a rapidly evolving cultural signifier as a viral materiality, COVID-19 has not biologically penetrated every national border. It is, however, transforming the interpretation, understanding, and experience of place in the absence of infection. One role for geographers is to analyse how the material absence of COVID-19 is manifesting spatially beyond closed borders. More specifically, how are particular places becoming meaningful as virus-free? On that basis, this article offers a commentary and cultural geographic analysis of a road called COVID-19 Road newly constructed on one of the islands of the Pacific nation, Tuvalu, and of migration during Tuvalu’s pandemic state of emergency. The idea of rural security is central to national government advice for urbanites living on the main island of Funafuti to voluntarily return to one of the eight other rural islands to which they claim kinship ties. Those outer islands of Tuvalu, long mythologised as the nation’s real heartland, are being constructed as secure, while the capital is insecure against COVID-19 risk. Rural place is thus constituted as nurturing and safe, particularly because of a renewed policy focus on customary practices of food security. The amplification of such practices is intended to limit the need for reliance on cargo supplies and humanitarian aid from the infected outside world. Rurality, isolation, islandness, subsistence, and remoteness are pivotal to an emerging national narrative of Tuvalu as resourceful and resilient during the pandemic.

1 | INTRODUCTION

A drone hovers above a newly cut road through the forest, the ocean on one side, and the lagoon on the other. Its camera captures a lush, long, bright green strip of coconut trees and thick bushes that have recently been dissected in two. It follows the pale road which is just wide enough for a vehicle, now running the length of the peninsula. People are walking on the road, but the birds-eye perspective on the scene makes their figures seem tiny, and they are easy to miss in the shadows. The drone imagery is cut with other footage of the islet’s tiny existing village, overlaid with a generic, upbeat piece of electronic music and posted on YouTube. There is no explanatory voiceover. The title and embedded text is brief, revealing location names only: COVID19 Road, Funafala Island, Funafuti, Tuvalu.

This is my description of a YouTube post that appeared on 28 April 2020. The post raises many...
questions: Why was a new road named after a virus? How did COVID-19 Road become a part of Tuvalu’s island landscape so quickly? And what might COVID-19 Road begin to reveal about pandemic-era patterns of spatial meaning and of place? As the pandemic unfolds, it is important to examine the ways in which places are becoming newly meaningful, as spatial changes occur (Harrison, Pile, & Thrift, 2004). Taking COVID-19 Road as a starting point, this article offers a commentary on pandemic place-making.

As COVID-19 Road’s material existence and appearance on social media suggests, the virus is transforming the interpretation and experience of space (Chung, Xu, & Zhang, 2020). Indeed, COVID-19 is as much a rapidly evolving spatial and cultural signifier as a viral materiality (Dom Kim, 2020). COVID-19 Road and other emergent places of the pandemic are arguably important for illuminating the spatial unevenness of what has already been named the Virocene: a “period in which viral activity has evolved as a dominant force shaping human-nature relations ... a historically unique moment of interaction between humans and ecosystems” (Fernando, 2020, 686–687). Of interest, particularly to geographers, is that vulnerability to COVID-19 follows some familiar patterns, often exacerbating long-existing racial, gender, socio-economic, and other inequities. But places are also changing in decidedly unfamiliar ways. To take one example, deserted cityscapes and largely empty airports, not long ago unfathomable, are now commonplace. Comprehending these unfamiliar changes in space, however, involves more than noting the absence of human bodies doing customary human things in cities and airports. Invisible viruses, for a start, are not well-conceptualized through binaries of absence/presence and so neither might pandemic place-making be best approached this way (Hinchliffe, 2004). As Dom Kim (2020) notes, representations in and of the pandemic are as much a part of the pandemic as the virus itself:

The virus cannot be seen with our bare eyes, and the disease manifests in such a way that its existence cannot be fully confirmed without testing. Our lack of ability to grasp its material presence clearly reveals that we must rely on names and representations to think and talk about it. In other words, its materiality cannot be separated from its linguistic constitution. And as a representation, what we know (and what we do not know) about the disease is inevitably mapped onto the political and historical world.

Analyses of the representation of space, as well as new material patterns in space, are therefore important for advancing pandemic-era geographic knowledge. In the case of COVID-19 Road, the patterning of space is uncanny—simultaneously and disconcertingly both familiar and unfamiliar (Hook, 2005). The YouTube clip made possible by the drone’s view of COVID-19 Road, 2:08 minutes long, has the vaguely familiar striking tropical scenery and upbeat electronic music of a promotional video for a private development in an island paradise but is accompanied by an unfamiliar dearth of corporate narrative, indeed, of any narrative at all. How can this new road begin to be interpreted?

1.1 Interpreting place-making practices: The past

Interpretation starts with noting that COVID-19 Road is on Indigenous ground, belonging to families of the Funafuti fenua, a Tuvaluan word roughly translating to island together with the island’s community. It runs through a forest of coconut trees that belong to the families of the land. The trees on Funafala, the islet where COVID-19 Road runs—like all coconut trees in Tuvalu’s coral atolls—are carefully planted, nurtured, protected, and used: They are the staple of Tuvaluan life (Falefou, 2017; Hedley, 1896). There needs to be a very good reason to cut them down.

Funafala has long been the site of a quiet village, walkable in size, a few kilometre across the lagoon from Tuvalu’s growing capital. Before the pandemic, Funafala had no roads at all. So COVID-19 Road is remarkable in being Funafala’s first. During the Second World War, Funafala was a place of relocation for the Indigenous people when American forces were stationed on Funafuti atoll. But going back much further, Funafala has long been an important site, likely inhabited seasonally (Edgeworth David, 1899). In 1873, the entire population of Funafuti was in Funafala to help build a church when...
a cyclone struck. The capital was badly damaged while Funafala, only a few nautical miles away, remained remarkably safe (Westbrook, 1935).

In pre-pandemic Funafala, in 2019, villagers had ideas about modest changes to their community that they would welcome. While migration to often overcrowded urban areas is often positioned as one of the Pacific Islands’ region most challenging trends (for example, ADB, 2016), the population of Funafala was in fact experiencing the opposite. Population was increasing just before the pandemic struck, albeit in very small absolute numbers (Thornton et al., 2020). With no school or shops, the villagers’ goal was growth in local employment opportunities and services, particularly a primary school, which they believed would attract more families to the village (Thornton et al., 2020). In the capital, additional people of the Funafuti fenua, who could claim customary access to the land in and around Funafala village, were keen to move to Funafala permanently for a quieter life. They wanted to grow food, go fishing, and find relief from the overcrowded conditions in the city. Many of these spent time in Funafala only on weekends and holidays, since their work and education needs could only be met in the capital (Thornton et al., 2020).

1.2 | Interpreting place-making practices: The present

In January 2020, the Tuvalu national government formed a COVID-19 Health Taskforce, introducing restrictions on incoming travel from abroad. On 20 March, following the first case of COVID-19 being confirmed in neighbouring Fiji (site of Tuvalu’s air and sea links), the Tuvalu national government declared a state of emergency. Borders were closed, with the last flight from Fiji arriving on 21 March. Cargo now enters the country under strict measures designed to prevent COVID-19 arriving with boats and their crews, who are not allowed ashore. The YouTube clip of COVID-19 Road was posted by Tuvalu’s foreign minister, the Honourable Simon Kofe, in late April 2020. By May, the national news service was reporting a bargeload of building materials arriving on Funafalua, suggesting significant enlargement of the village’s housing stock.

As of January 2021, Tuvalu remains one of the few nations to successfully keep the virus out entirely. In addition to fortifying the country’s health and food security systems, one of the swift measures taken by the National COVID-19 Taskforce when borders closed was to advise the population of the national capital to relocate to the islets off the capital or to the outer islands if they could (Falefou, 2020). This measure was to physically separate as many people as possible by sea from the international port and airport, the most likely entry points of COVID-19. The advice was well-heeded, and at least a quarter of the capital’s population moved to the outer islands from March 2020 (Kitara, Farbotko, Talia, Suliman, & Evans, 2020). Additional numbers have also moved to the almost entirely uninhabited islets off the capital, as well as adding to the tiny population on Funafala, although the numbers are not yet certain. COVID-19 Road was built, it seems, for these new arrivals. The YouTube clip may have played a role in demonstrating to urban dwellers that migration to rural areas was viable and that infrastructure was being built to support increased numbers. It was posted by an elected official of the national government, clearly with stakes in justifying its COVID-19 decision-making to its citizenry. However, the decision to build the road would ultimately have been made by the Indigenous families who own the land and have authority over it, not the national government.

Relocation was a voluntary measure, but large numbers of people did in fact move. The pre-pandemic aspirations of Funafala’s residents for population growth seem to be rapidly materializing, perhaps beyond the modest increase they desired. Like most of the global population, they could not have foreseen the pandemic nor could they have anticipated that large numbers of people would very quickly follow the national government advice and migrate away from the capital. But by July 2020, such was the normalisation in public discourse of the idea of a swift redistribution of the population that discussions about building bridges from the capital to its islets were being held.9

1.3 | Rurality, COVID-19, and security

The idea of rural security has been central to the success of national government advice for the population to move away from the capital. Not only Funafala, which is close to the capital, but also Funafuti’s other largely uninhabited islets and all eight of more distant Tuvalu’s outer islands are experiencing a surge in population (Kitara, Farbotko, Talia, Suliman, & Evans, 2020). Much of Funafuti’s population prior to the pandemic comprised internal migrants, or children or grandchildren of migrants, from the outer islands. Despite multiple generations in the capital, Tuvaluan families can return to their “home island” and claim a share in access to clan land and support, such as being accommodated in existing housing. This situation is unlike some other parts of the Pacific Islands, where such ties are eroding (for example, Petrou, 2020).10 Ties to fenua remain strong
(Marino & Lazrus, 2015; Stratford, Farbotko, & Lazrus, 2013). Indeed, the outer islands have long been imagined by Tuvaluans as the heartland—indeed, the *fenua* is “the source of life” in Tuvalu (Falefou, 2017, p. 217). One’s home island is where retirement beckons, where holidays are spent, where fishing and growing food are enjoyable (Farbotko, Stratford, & Lazrus, 2016; Marino & Lazrus, 2015). The concept of *fenua* explains the deep connection of the people to the land and the land to the people, and, as in many Pacific cultures, there is a similar word for placenta (*fanua*):

The function of the land is equivalent to that of the placenta, hence the use of the same word. The placenta is an organ that plays a crucial role during pregnancy in keeping the baby alive and well. Its main function is to supply the unborn baby in the mother’s womb with adequate nutritional substances and oxygen. The placenta is the ultimate source of life for the unborn baby. In the same vein, land is the source of life for the Pacific people. (Falefou, 2017, p. 144)

In contrast, the capital is generally experienced and imagined by many as a merely functional urban enclave, a place for medical services and employment. This is because apart from the Indigenous Funafuti *fenua*, those in the capital do not have customary access to land (McCubbin, Smit, & Pearce, 2015). Similarly, for the Funafuti *fenua*, only the islets off the capital offer the possibility of customary access to land for growing food. This is because much of the customary land in the capital is given over to housing, a government building, roads, sports ground, waste disposal facility, and the international airstrip and port.

Tuvalu’s rural space has long been constituted as nurturing, because it is the location of much customary land, and its importance is becoming newly clear in the pandemic. Physically, separation from a possible source of infection is providing a sense of security in Tuvalu’s outer islands and islets, but the security of being able to access *fenua* land on which to grow food is equally important. The idea of rural security is evident in the national Governance Structures and Systems Contingency Plan for Funafuti or Talaaliki Plan, which outlines measures to be implemented in Tuvalu’s identified worst case scenario (Government of Tuvalu, 2020). This scenario is defined as an outbreak of COVID-19 in the country and/or when food, fuel, and other essential imported goods are unavailable. The plan pays considerable attention to the relocation of the national government and the Falekaupule and Kaupule (council of elders and island council of Funafuti respectively) in the case of an outbreak. Funafala is mentioned as the likely location for the Falekaupule and Kaupule to move and another (as yet unnamed) islet for the national government. The Talaaliki Plan also demands that elected officials “set the example” in relation to food and fuel security by reducing their own consumption of imports and promoting local foods, fuel, transport, and agriculture. Read in conjunction with national government advice for general population movement to the islets and outer islands, the plan conveys a strong message about rural security that implies that government and population alike are safer in rural areas during the pandemic.

The Talaaliki Plan also includes an emphasis on customary practices of food security. An intensification of customary food production, preservation, and distribution activities is outlined in the plan, and is intended to limit the need for reliance on external cargo supplies or humanitarian aid from the COVID-19 infected outside world. The emergency plan for food security includes consideration of large numbers of people continuing to relocate from the capital, particularly if food supplies there run low. The outer islands meanwhile are forecast to become self-sufficient, non-cash economies as a final step to achieve security if the virus arrives in the capital. To achieve this outcome, island communities would be supported by Island council-based organisation of food security practices. This governance arrangement would include directing all families to tend their *pulaka* (swamp taro) pits, to engage in household food gardening activities, to go fishing using methods not requiring fuel, and to ensure equipment for food production is available for relocated families. The Department of Agriculture would provide resources such as training in subsistence food production, which indeed has started (Kitara & Farbotko, 2020).

2 | DISCUSSION

An interpretation of virus-free space commencing with COVID-19 Road reveals rurality to be central to the spatial construction of health security in Tuvalu. The Tuvalu national government very early in the pandemic fashioned its response to the virus according to an idea of the rural as *safe* space. There was recognition that the geographic distribution of the pandemic was more urban than rural globally, but the legitimacy of the rural security discourse ultimately depended on the existing customary significance of the *fenua*. Funafala in particular has long been perceived and experienced as a place of rural security, a protective space that contrasts with the
capital's exposure to risks of war, disaster, and now disease. The more distant outer islands fulfill a similar role for Tuvalu's seven other Indigenous groups.

COVID-19 Road is an early sign that Tuvalu's space is changing significantly in the Virocenes, and these changes are not likely to be temporary. Funafala's first road demonstrates that, even in a non-infected place, the pandemic is reshaping space in significant ways, and both the materiality and the meaning of the changes are still unfolding. Rural and urban spaces (never clear cut binaries in any case) are likely to become less distinct, in Tuvalu's capital primarily but also in the outer islands. Repatriation of Tuvaluan citizens from abroad is occurring,11 with incoming international flights arranged for that purpose only. The Tuvalu national government had also scheduled boat travel to the outer islands specifically to accommodate those still in the capital who may have wished to leave before the repatriates arrived in the country, potentially bringing COVID-19 with them. Given that the global pandemic is not waning and that some passenger movement into the country is likely to continue, Tuvalu's outer islands and islets seem to be likely to continue to remain important sites of health security. The likely rapid development of Funafuti's islets, Funafala in particular, will be irreversible. COVID-19 Road will not be unbuilt.

3 | CONCLUSION

An interpretation of biologically uninfect ed space in the pandemic that starts with COVID-19 Road's appearance on YouTube, and traces its materiality back to longstanding customary practices around land use, in tandem with observations about new practices of urban–rural migration that triggered the building of the road, show that pandemic-era space is manifesting in specific ways. This commentary has offered insights into how the Pacific Island nation of Tuvalu is becoming meaningful as virus-free.

To finish, it is worth noting that external predictions prior to the COVID-19 global outbreak posited that Tuvalu would be among the most vulnerable nations to a pandemic (GHS Index, 2019), and yet it is one of the few to successfully defend its borders against the virus. Meanwhile, “isolation,” “smallness,” and “remoteness” of Tuvalu’s geographies have long bolstered meaning-making about this nation by some outsiders (Farbotko, 2010). It has, for example, been one of the representational epicenters of climate change vulnerability, with narratives that at times—abhorrently—even go so far as to suggest its expendability. Thus, the very characteristics that have long been used by outsiders to classify Tuvalu as vulnerable— isolation, (small) islandness, subsistence, and remoteness—are now pivotal to Tuvalu's pandemic national narrative as resourceful and resilient.

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ENDNOTES

1. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4TQyPum_pUA&fbclid=IwAR2_ERM7Nhlm_ZIohmqHBgtFpdyYjJ54-5N0wq9sn5vxdLPoHDJNySINoK

2. Tuvalu is a nation-state of approximately 11,000 people in the Pacific Islands.

3. COVID19 requires flexibility with research methods, which above all else, should be informed by ethical practice, as always, balancing the burden on participants with the likely outcomes of the research. Secondary sources were considered appropriate for this paper. It was decided that contacts in Tuvalu need not be burdened with further requests for information, as they had already made valuable contributions to other recent work, documenting the occurrence of migration to rural areas as a result of the pandemic (Kitara, Farbotko, Talia, Suliman, & Evans, 2020). The key document analyzed for this paper was the Government of Tuvalu’s “Talaaliki Plan,” a product of the National COVID-19 Taskforce. Analysis in this paper attempted to understand the public cultural narratives in which the new urban–rural migration was embedded, so additional key “texts” were identified through which to culturally locate the Talaaliki Plan, including the YouTube clip of COVID19 Road, and existing interpretations of Funafala and fenua in research, including observations of Funafala and interviews with its residents that I undertook in 2019 (Farbotko, 2019; Thornton et al., 2020)

4. Space is affective as well, although this is beyond the scope of this paper.

5. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4TQyPum_pUA&fbclid=IwAR2_ERM7Nhlm_ZIohmqHBgtFpdyYjJ54-5N0wq9sn5vxdLPoHDJNySINoK

6. Of course, attempt at interpretation of COVID19 Road necessarily occurs through particular cultural, social, political, and economic lenses so there exist multiple possibilities for interpreting this place. I am a distant external observer, albeit one who has spent considerable time in Tuvalu, the latest trip involving several days in the village of Funafala in February 2019. I have directly observed the ground on which COVID19 Road would be built and discussed the future with the people who live in the village, which has shaped my strong interest in it (Farbotko, 2019; Thornton et al., 2020).

7. Tuvalu’s eight largest islands (Namumea, Namumaga, Niutao, Nui, Funafuti, Nukulaelae, Vaitupu, and Nukufetau) are each
home to one of eight Indigenous groups, each is one of Tuvalu’s eight fenua.

https://www.facebook.com/117058323067566/videos/604722263484713/ (translation to author provided by T. Kitara)

Indigenous communities in Australia also returned to country as a pandemic response: https://www.abc.net.au/news/2020-05-17/coronavirus-indigenous-health-safe-homeland-june-oscar/12245728?fbclid=IwAR0bRJSWWR09kOtyCtXm14FpbBDc32pN8InkkT6mgM3zxx_ZMdK13oL1k

https://www.facebook.com/USAmbSuva/videos/282065696364525/

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