

# COCONUT OIL REFLECTS

A COMPARATIVE COMMODITY ETHNOGRAPHY IN TWO SITES

BY

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## Abstract

Coconut oil is a product saturated with multifaceted meaning. *Coconut Oil Reflects* examines the meanings coconut oil conveys to its consumers and explores what these meanings reveal about the different political and sociocultural contexts in which these consumers live.

This comparative commodity ethnography investigates the spiritual, symbolic and material power coconut oil currently holds. In this thesis, I situate coconut oil in indigenous myths and rituals, and explore how it serves as a spiritual medium between diasporic Pacific Islander consumers now and the ancestors who came before us. I question the objectified value of the product in Pacific rituals and probe at intra-Pacific debates regarding what makes a ritual sacred. I explore how mythic representations of Pacific bodies are implicated in coconut oil marketing material and used to encourage majority non-Pacific consumers living in the industrialized West to reclaim their own senses of a ‘lost’ embodied indigenous self. This discussion prompts larger considerations of health, health authority, health autonomy, and symbolic anti-institutional capital. Finally, I explore how coconut oil acquisition binds Islanders to transregional indigenous systems of reciprocity, as well as how Western consumers use coconut oil as a way to acquire social status in alternative subcultural fields.

Coconut oil is a product with boundless social lives (Appadurai, 1986); this thesis explores several through a multisited, mixed-methods approach. I draw on data collected from coconut oil-related discourse analysis, over five hundred online survey responses, and forty-four in-person interviews with Pacific Islander, Māori and non-Pacific participants living in the San Francisco Bay Area, United States and the Wellington Region, Aotearoa New Zealand. By employing a Pacific studies approach, this research project guides readers through complex worlds in which coconut oil holds different forms of political, spiritual and sociocultural capital (Bourdieu, 1986). *Coconut Oil Reflects* gives the product a voice to share the abundance of stories it tells.

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## **Dedications**

Dedicated to my mother

Donna Maria Siguenza Bordallo Rigler Baker  
in her past, present and future selves of an unconquered life

And to my brother

Isaac Bernard Rigler Siguenza  
who holds up our home on the beams of his back

Neither ever losing a single drop of Pacific grace to sweat



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To those of the Bay Area, there's no way to say it more eloquently other than it really sucks to be away from you. I miss you all daily. The foundations of my soul are geographically and temporally fixed to my home in Santa Cruz and to the relationships that

have nurtured me there. Most of us have since left with and without our own agency to do so, but all of us remain bonded by our shared experiences in the community. To me, there'll always be a "there there" so long as we nurture it. To my family and friends specifically, I hope to be your anchor in a southern edge of the Pacific while you remain mine in the north. Visit me with corn husks lining your suitcases and I'll welcome you with good chocolate and better coffee.

To those of Wellington, how grateful I am to be taken in and provided community from such a fragile time in my teenage years. How grateful I am to be taken in once again half a decade later with the same warmth that welcomed me before. Each visit back to California reminds me how much my sense of place-based identity has shifted to a country I still have no visa security in. I envision myself here into old age, but only good fortune can guarantee that as a reality. I have spent a significant period of my life in this place and the dream to be able to permanently call Wellington home remains. I will continue on nurturing that hope. To my friends and colleagues of this place, especially of Va'aomanū Pasifika, your works are passionate, creative and courageous in that they dare to be honest reflections of who we actually are, not who we are 'supposed' to be. Everything you have done has inspired this project. Our collective works—whether based in music, visual arts, literature, design, political policy, education or environmentalism—serve as our generation's collective voice of change. I trust good will come of our efforts.

Prologue

## **The Ocean Finds Dry Land**

Before there was us, there was them

Fo'na and Pontan

Fo'na, the sister

Pontan, the brother

Fo'na, 'the first'

Pontan, the 'ripe coconut'

From Pontan's body, Fo'na created the Earth  
and when she finished, she threw her own body onto the land  
and turned to rock

We are children of her rock  
who traverse like coconuts across the ocean  
and sink our roots into earth when we find dry land

As we always have done

As we always will do

## Me, between We and You

I have never been unproblematically Pacific Islander. My name, Nathaniel Lennon Rigler, is of the first entirely Anglicized generation of my family's naming traditions. My mom's name, Donna Maria Siguenza Bordallo, carries the legacy of Hispanic-Guamanian naming customs similar to those before her. Throughout her life she accumulated more names as she married into white families and gradually shed the ones she was given at birth. America reconfigures what it doesn't know, but that history long precedes her. Her father was born Pedro Carlos Siguenza Mendiola and died Captain Peter Charles Siguenza, United States Marine Corps (Guam Legislature, 2007). My mom learned his birth name only years after his death. My name, with my mom's intent, interrupts hundreds of years of Hispanic naming conventions indigenized to "one of the oldest colonies in the modern world" (Fojas, 2014, p. viii). Before Spain came, our names carried Austronesian Chamorro meanings, but that was likely before 'Chamorro' itself became the name of our people (Rogers, 1995).<sup>1</sup>

In three generations, from my grandparents to mine, my family had entered and assimilated into a new phase of Chamorro history, one which has expanded the majority of our people outwards into the continental United States (Empowering Pacific Islander Communities [EPIC], 2014; M. Perez, 2002; Punzalan, 2019). My brother and I are second generation Chamorros, born and raised in Santa Cruz, California.<sup>2</sup> In 1990, the year of my brother's birth, Islanders comprised less than one twentieth of a percent of the total population of our medium-sized county (United States Census Bureau [USCB], 1993). Of this small number, only forty-three identified as "Guamanian"—presumably the bulk of whom were Chamorros. For my brother and me, the lack of access to a Pacific community

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<sup>1</sup> I maintain the Hispanicized spelling of 'Chamorro' as a marker of mestizo and diasporic cultural identity. I also include 'CHamoru' depending on a person's communicated preference. Throughout this thesis, specific spellings of indigenous terms and identities are used to reflect the authors', interview participants' and survey respondents' prose.

<sup>2</sup> We may also be considered third generation because our mom migrated to the continental United States as a child (Portes & Rumbaut, 2001). Some may avoid defining us as descendants of immigrants entirely because those born on Guam are United States citizens.

meant navigating a world in which we did not culturally exist. We normalized that invisibility as a fact of our identities.

But in the privacy of our home, we nurtured what traditions we had and what we had were things. We ate rice colored red with âchoti seeds. I learned to kamyu coconut into a fine powder for kelaguen. My brother and I fought whether to make it with chicken or shrimp. We scrambled to open care-packages sent from family on Guam filled with guyuria and potu that rarely lasted more than a few hours. When we were sick, our mom bought us mânha to soothe our stomachs. And, as a rule, we called all spicy chilies donne’.

My brother and I lived a double life, and in most respects continue to do so. It’s not a disingenuous way of being. The non-Pacific relationships we nurture are genuine, as are the non-Pacific communities we identify with. Our ability to navigate overlapping worlds is a foundation of our strength.

We are a new generation of Islanders unlike the generations before us. We look different than our grandparents and bare phenotypes and names of many non-Pacific lineages. We think and speak in a different language than the one created by our ancestors. We challenge definitions of cultural knowledge. And we call many places home.



## CHAPTER ONE

# Between Two Places

It wasn't too late at night, maybe seven o'clock or just past it. We were stuck in traffic that added an hour to an otherwise forty-five-minute drive back to my mom's house from the lake. I spent the extra time reacquainting myself with the rural California landscape outside my window. I noticed the ways it was drier than Wellington. The gold and burnt orange hues of the grasses and dirt contrasted with Wellington's deep green foliage and stable concrete gray. The outside air insistently creeping into the cab of my mom's husband's pickup truck smelled different too. There was less petroleum in it and a lot more dust. Things were different here. It was summer in the northern hemisphere and given that I had escaped a bitter southern winter only two months prior, the differences between the two places were that much more pronounced. On this long-weekend trip especially I couldn't help but notice how everything was so much more characteristically American. I hadn't paid much attention to it before, but after three years of living in Aotearoa New Zealand my sense of normal had gradually shifted. Since coming back home to California, I often found myself caught in moments of reverse culture shock. I was becoming aware of things I never thought to take notice of—things so culturally ingrained they were once invisible, but now, no longer.

I sat in the backseat of the truck behind my mom's husband. Joanna, my mom's best friend joining us on the trip, was to my right, sitting directly behind my mom. After an hour locked in bumper-to-bumper traffic, our sun-taxed energy had time to return to our bodies and we reattempted conversation. Joanna leaned over towards me and asked about my project. Her voice was only a few decibels louder than the 1970s rock blasting on the stereo, but I've always been good at reading lips. I came home for fieldwork, everyone knew that much, but no one quite understood *what* it was I was researching—something about coconut oil they were sure. Most people avoided asking me about it, which I was just

fine with. I tend to go to great lengths to separate my academic and personal lives, and given the topic of my research, I figured I was in luck. Since beginning this project two years prior, I had thought of coconut oil as something that I could maintain personal and cultural distance from. To me, and I figured to all Chamorros as well, coconut oil is just a thing. After all, I explained to Joanna, it's not like Chamorros actually use it.

'What do you mean?' Joanna mouthed over the music.

'Well, like I never saw coconut oil in our house before. We never had it.'

She paused as if contemplating if she had heard me correctly, 'But your mom does use it.'

I looked back at Joanna puzzled, 'No, she doesn't.'

Joanna cracked a smile, 'Yeah, she does. We both use it. We've talked about it.'

Like my dad, Joanna is Ashkenazi. My mom converted from Catholicism to Judaism when I was young, and many of her close friends, including Joanna, are connected to my childhood synagogue. The synagogue is similar to most in the San Francisco Bay Area—a mostly politically left-leaning community space that fosters a very California-esque new age health-conscious subculture. I knew that some congregation members even shopped exclusively at local organic supermarkets, too expensive for my own family to do the same. As I took in the information that both Joanna and my mom use coconut oil, my mind drifted to this space. I figured it was something they must have discovered together. It was an educated guess on my part. The increased trendiness of coconut oil in alternative Western markets in the past decade or so would make it a difficult product for them to ignore, especially given their social networks.

'Did you introduce it to her?' I asked Joanna, who often treats my mom to things out of our financial means.

'No, I didn't. She told me that she's used it a long time.'

I stared towards Joanna as I tried to make sense of what she was telling me, though she wasn't the best person to clarify. I broke conversation with her and leaned over the middle divider between the driver and passenger seats so that my voice was just a few inches away from my mom's left ear.

'Mom!'

'Yeah.'

‘Do you use coconut oil?’

‘Yeah,’ my mom responded in the same ordinary tone.

‘See?’ Joanna said, somewhat surprised this was something I didn’t know about her, especially given my research.

‘How long have you been using it?’ I asked.

‘I’ve always used it.’

‘Really?’

‘Yeah. I use it for lotion and in my hair. Even now the smell of coconut oil makes me think of my nāna [grandmother] putting it in her hair after showers.’

I paused and allowed this information to sink in. It challenged what I had previously known to be true: that coconut oil is something that *other* Islanders use. Specifically, Islanders who hadn’t been colonized as long as my people and Islanders less estranged from their homeland roots as my family.

I directed my conversation back to my mom. ‘Why didn’t you tell me you use coconut oil?’

‘I didn’t *not* tell you. You didn’t ask me.’

‘Could I interview you for my project?’

‘If you want.’

I interviewed my mom nearly one month after this brief discussion in the truck, when my brother and I drove up to her house to celebrate her sixty-third birthday. It was the third time I had seen her during my five-month long overseas fieldwork stint. As part of my project, I interviewed Bay Area Pacific Islanders about their uses of coconut oil and the meanings they draw from it. This was part of a larger comparative research design that interviewed Pacific Islander, Māori and non-Pacific coconut oil consumers living in the San Francisco Bay Area in California and the Wellington Region in Aotearoa New Zealand. Even though she was currently living outside the region, I included my mom as part of this Bay Area Pacific Islander group because she had lived in the Bay Area since 1974 and relocated only in 2018, less than a year before this discussion. She is the only participant in this research living outside the Bay Area or the Wellington Region at the time of her interview. Alongside anonymous online surveys and discourse analysis of



coconut oil-related material, these interviews sought to explore the political, spiritual and sociocultural contexts the product was currently embedded within as a means to understand its multifaceted and multisited social lives (Appadurai, 1986).

As both a material and symbolic commodity, coconut oil possesses the agency to embody and convey meaning (J. Bennett, 2004; 2010; Eden, 2010; Ouzman, 2006) and, for this reason, it's a product that holds strong affective power in its consumers' lives. This thesis is the presentation of my research findings on this topic and the theoretical frameworks that I have used to make sense of them (Crang, 2005). In this work, I ask what the social lives of coconut oil reflect about its consumers, and in turn, explore how these reflections are situated within and respond to the spiritual, political and sociocultural power structures that impact our lives. With this comparative commodity ethnography on coconut oil, I aim to enhance collective understandings of the relationships between power, agency, identity and knowledge. As the meanings consumers attribute to their coconut oil use are deeply embedded into the foundations of their identities, using interviews as means to know these consumers on a personal level offers insight into this ethnographic research. This is the reason why I came back to California. I wanted to get to know coconut oil consumers in my own home region in order to understand how their lives are intertwined with and contribute to the lives of the product.

Interviewing my mom was, of course, different to the other interviews I conducted for this project. This was because, unlike other interview participants, I already knew a lot about her upbringing. She was born on Guam in 1956 to the son of a rancher who became the Island's first marine captain and to the daughter of a prominent clan head heavily involved in the Island's politics and emerging commercial enterprises. I knew that her youth was unfairly spread too thin. She was brought up in the isolated orbit of too many military bases across too many towns throughout the continental United States. Though she returned to Guam periodically, she never stayed long enough to trust the Island's permanence in her life. It was hard for her to trust permanence in general. This was because until she was well into her late teens, the amount of homes she had lived in tended to exceed her age in number, and her constant relocation prevented her from establishing roots anywhere. Although she learned to say 'Guam' as an acceptable answer whenever asked where she was *really* from (another way of asking 'why are you not white?'), I knew that

the Bay Area was the closest she ever came to fostering a sense of home realistically. And now, nearly a decade after my parents' divorce, she had found someone new and relocated once again.

Like many Chamorros of her generation, transience has been a fact of her existence. Few places, people or things have offered her a sense of foundation or groundedness. Therefore, learning that coconut oil was a consistent presence throughout her life meant that it was a consumption practice that would have required a conscious effort for her to maintain. During our interview, I tried to figure out why this was. What made coconut oil an important product for her to hold onto? And why was this seemingly mundane fact about her life invisible to me for so long?

In our discussion, I found that there are parts of my mom's life that I didn't know that well or at all. These are the parts of her that coconut oil clung to—the pieces of her identity which belonged to her past. These are the memories of her youth on Guam marred with the geopolitical turbulence of the Vietnam War, its related on-Island heroin epidemic, and vicious intra-family tensions regarding her maternal family's push to 'modernize' Chamorro ways of being to reflect an American identity and her paternal family's commitment to the Island ways and indigenous sovereignty. Her complex relationship with coconut oil—linked with her complex relationship with Chamorro-ness in general—existed within this familial tension. Though her mother's family ultimately won over her soul with the promise of 'modernity,' during her interview she reflected on her regrets to so eagerly abandon the Island-centered indigenous values of her paternal side that she had dismissed as backward as a child. She explained, "I now know that they had a real richness that I didn't see and didn't get and didn't experience. I didn't learn. Language is only one of them." She discussed her yearning to have made stronger connections with her paternal grandmother, whom she most strongly associates coconut oil with:

DMSBRB	When I smell coconuts now, coconut oil now, I remember my grandmother's hair. They had an outdoor shower [...] And she would have her shower. She would come in with her wet, long, gray hair. And she would come and put coconut oil in it, and it would just smell like coconut.
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The affective relationship she has with coconut oil was established early in her childhood, from her roots as a Chamorro born in the Islands and from her memories of being cared for by her paternal grandmother. Neither of her paternal grandparents spoke English that well, and as a result of American hegemonic ideologies that sought to eradicate the Chamorro language from the mouths of Chamorro children (Faingold, 2018), my mom had difficulty communicating with either of them. But coconut oil used topically on my mom's skin and hair by her grandmother became a mutual language for them to maintain a connection as it symbolized a love that transcended verbal barriers. This association of coconut oil with familial love followed her migration from Guam to the Bay Area after her grandmother's death. It informed her vision into early adulthood, into motherhood, and remained with her on her sixty-third birthday. In her interview she added, "I remember when I would see coconut flavor or coconut anything, my eyes would just be so drawn to it because it was something that I identified with so much."

None of this was part of my vision of the product, however. This is because as a California-raised, mixed-race Chamorro man, my vision is different to my mom's. This has to do with our unique "situated knowledges"—or the different types of knowing and seeing informed by our respective embodied experiences (Haraway, 1988). It also has to do with the different "fields"—or the political and sociocultural contexts in which we were raised (Bourdieu, 1979). To me, coconut oil was a product that I, like many non-Pacific consumers I have talked to, associated with new age health movements and alternative subculture. I understood coconut oil as yet another food—specifically a food—caught up in superfood marketing (Loyer, 2016). But from my mom's interview it was clear that she doesn't conceptualize coconut oil primarily as a food. Like other Pacific Islander consumers in this research, she understands coconut oil mainly as a cosmetic product, as did her grandmother. This fundamental difference in understanding coconut oil is part of the reason why I didn't see the product in my childhood home even though it was always there. In my home, coconut oil lived in a place I didn't go to—my mom's makeup kit—and not in a place I did frequent—the kitchen. By using my misinformed perception of my mom's consumer habits as my entire guide for Chamorro culture (as many second generation children do [Gershon, 2007; Portes & Rumbaut, 2001]), I came to mistakenly believe that the absence of coconut oil in our kitchen meant that it was not a product

Chamorros use. But Chamorros *do* use coconut oil—my mom is proof of that. I was halfway through my fieldwork when I became aware of this. But as I have learned throughout my research, this elusiveness too, is part of the lives of the product. Coconut oil means different things to different people as it reflects specific times, places and experiences. Given my general ignorance of the affective power that coconut oil held in my own mom’s life though, it’s reasonable to ask how did *I* end up writing an entire thesis on the topic?

Unlike other postgraduate students whom I have come to know, the topic of coconut oil was not a familiar, nor impactful subject in my own day-to-day life. While I was aware that many consumers raved about it in my mostly non-Pacific subcultural community spaces, I didn’t find coconut oil particularly interesting and I certainly didn’t feel any cultural or personal connection to it. Only upon enrolling in Pacific studies and beginning this research did I come to appreciate the significance of the coconut oil “cargo cult” (Lindstrom, 1993). In Western fields, coconut oil is a product that ‘experts’ or ‘quacks’ (depending who you ask) claim can treat, sometimes even cure, so-called “diseases of civilization” (Knight, 2012). Coconut oil, held as a ‘miracle’ product, even receives religious fervor in some circles.<sup>3</sup> Those who can gain something from it, whether health or profit, demonstrate their significant investments in its validity as a health product. In this process, some coconut oil advocates use romanticized representations of indigenous Pacific bodies to delegitimize mainstream medical institutions’ truth claims that contradict their beliefs. The conscious consumption of coconut oil as a health food especially challenges the widely established truth claim that the ingestion of saturated fat—of which coconut oil is nearly ninety-two percent—increases the risk of developing cardiovascular disease and other noncommunicable diseases (Gunnarsson & Elam, 2012; Health Promotion Agency, 2019; Keys, 1970; Keys et al., 1986, Lima & Block, 2019; Sacks et al., 2017). In my research, I analyze how this dispute of scientific knowledge highlights the relationships between truth, power and trust. This leads into critical discussions of the “postmodern medical paradigm” in which the meaning of medical expertise is renegotiated, for better and for worse (Kata, 2012; Wilson, 2000).

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<sup>3</sup> The most popular Christian Broadcasting Network (CBN) news story covered in 2012 was about medical uses of coconut oil, with over five million viewers on their website (CBN, 8 January 2013).

Through a Pacific studies approach as well, I have been able to situate coconut oil within indigenous Pacific worldviews. In these Pacific spaces, coconut oil holds symbolic meaning as a sacred product. Its visual and olfactory aesthetic can convey meanings of dignity, virtue, matrilineal power and relational identity. For those raised in the diaspora, consuming coconut oil provides a means to maintain a connection with their homelands, a relationship which is often otherwise strained. Coconut oil allows for some of these consumers to engage with their ancestral pasts and helps inform the rituals they use to decolonize their spiritual identities. Receiving coconut oil from family members living in the Islands also situates some diasporic Islanders within a greater Pacific network and binds them to transregional indigenous systems of reciprocity. For some Māori consumers, coconut oil is a reminder of their whakapapa to Hawaiki and provides a way to nurture relationships with tuākana (Pacific peoples with elder sibling status) living in the Islands and in Aotearoa.

Though I have come to know coconut oil in more personal ways since beginning this research, the way I originally came into this project had much more to do with place than it did with the product. In 2010, when I was sixteen, I moved to the Wellington Region for a secondary school exchange and established connections that drew me back six years later. In 2016, I enrolled at Te Herenga Waka Victoria University of Wellington as an undergraduate exchange student for my final semester at the University of California at Berkeley. I had already met the requirements of my anthropology major and forestry and natural resources minor, so I signed up for courses I found interesting. These included a Pacific studies course and a geography-environmental studies course which were taught, respectively, by my primary and secondary supervisors, Dr April Henderson and Dr Amanda Thomas.

I selected the course *Migration, Diaspora and Identity in the Pacific* as my entry into Pacific studies. This was the first time I saw the word ‘diaspora’ in a Pacific context—a term referenced quite a lot throughout this thesis. I was already familiar with the concept through my upbringing in synagogue, but in that context it had much less celebratory connotations (Ang, 2005; Clifford, 1997; Cohen, 2019; Hau‘ofa, 1994). In this course, Henderson presented Pacific identity in a metaphysical sense—a way of existing that moves and develops over time and place. Implicit in this framework is an articulated view

of culture which frames it as involving the ‘hooking’ and ‘unhooking’ of cultural elements (such as language, customs and beliefs). Combined elements present the illusion of a cohesive and static cultural identity, but an articulation framework asserts that these elements are not static, and culture is never permanently cohesive (Clifford, 2001, p. 478; see also Slack, 1996). Therefore, this articulation ethos identifies cultural ‘authenticity’ as problematic and illusory. This was an unexpectedly liberating way of thinking and is influential in the ways I make sense of my research findings.

I previously critiqued the concept of authenticity in a paper I wrote on Chamorro cuisine for the UC Berkeley course, *Anthropology of Food*. For that project, I interviewed an owner of a Bay Area Chamorro restaurant, surveyed Chamorro women about their food preferences, and situated different ingredients common in Chamorro cuisine within our Islands’ complex history with the outside world. From that experience I came to appreciate food—and commodities in general—as a means to understand the material power of culture. Commodities embody values and convey meaning because they make intangible things tangible. This is something so normal that it’s often invisible. Drawing attention to the meanings we attribute to commodities—as I do with coconut oil in this thesis—reflects the values that define us and our cultures. In my earlier Chamorro cuisine project, I skimmed the surface of multidisciplinary writings, theory and a minefield of political feuds over the concept of ‘authenticity.’ In this project, I delve deeper into related concerns, especially contending with ongoing debates over indigenous ethno-nationalism (Fujikane & Okamura, 2008; Sharma, 2020; Sharma & Wright, 2008; Teaiwa, 2010) and cultural constructivism (Handler & Linnekin, 1984; Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983; Keesing, 1989; 1991; Linnekin, 1983; Trask, 1991).

Because of my demonstrated interest in Pacific commodity culture, as well as my desire to remain in Wellington long-term, Henderson encouraged me to apply for postgraduate studies tied to her Royal Society of New Zealand Marsden-funded project on coconut oil. While her funding was originally intended to sponsor a domestic master’s student, a year-long period of challenges, tragic loss and eventual charitable luck led to the restructuring of my position as a PhD student. The loss I am referring to was of beloved program director, Dr Teresia Teaiwa who I was fortunate to meet before her passing, but who I have come to know better through her influential writing and the loving testimonials

of her close friends, colleagues and students. In a poem titled, “Essential Oils for the Dying” Selina Tusitala Marsh eulogizes Teaiwa’s friendship, personality and work, lamenting, “your coconut oil voice, a gentle thrum / so everyone had to lean in” (cited in *E-Tangata*, 8 April 2017). Marsh’s poem is one of several works that invoke coconut oil as a means to symbolically convey respect to such earthshaking Pacific women (Kaeppler, 1993). Henderson and Teaiwa were very close, and it is in Teaiwa’s memory that I also dedicate this research, hoping it stands up to her standards of a Pacific studies approach (Teaiwa, 2010).

Prior to COVID-19 disruptions, Henderson’s Marsden project was intended to be a ‘follow-the-thing’ commodity ethnography, examining Pacific-produced virgin coconut oil as it travels to its destined locations in Western countries. My ethnographic project is more limited in geographic scope while also more broadly inclusive of coconut oil’s forms. Rather than beginning in the Islands, its focus attentively examines two endpoints of coconut oil. Specifically, I focus on its consumption and consumers in the San Francisco Bay Area in California and the Wellington Region in Aotearoa New Zealand. These are two places with established populations of Pacific peoples, but comparably different political and sociocultural fields. Geographically positioning my project is a challenge because depending on which theories I adopt, it’s debatable whether my Pacific studies project actually takes place ‘in’ the Pacific (Halualani, 2008; Hau‘ofa, 1994; Te Punga Somerville, 2012). For the purposes of my thesis however, I am less concerned with where the Pacific actually ‘is’ than I am with who the Pacific is, as challenging as answering that question has revealed itself to be. My research also engages with any type of coconut oil (rather than only virgin) produced in any region (rather than only the Islands). This enables me to examine broader social lives of the product as it’s used and understood by consumers in my two selected fieldwork sites.

Though this is a Pacific studies project, this is not a Pacific-focused project exclusively. The focus is the social lives of coconut oil itself. While I do give greater attention to Pacific Islander consumers, they are not the only community I engage with. And despite some Islanders’ understandable claims of exclusive cultural ownership (often linked to concerns over cultural appropriation), at times, I incorporate a posthumanist framework which attributes agency to coconut oil as a thing which has the right to

geographically expand, build new relationships and construct new meanings (J. Bennett, 2004; 2010). Therefore, while Islanders are encouraged to express their relationships to coconut oil, we have no right to claim it for ourselves exclusively. Non-Pacific consumers, including those descended from places where coconuts cannot grow, are encouraged to express their relationships with coconut oil as well. These consumption-related practices are equally informative about cultural values, even if these practices are comparatively much younger.

The following chapter, “Methodological Approaches,” discusses in greater detail the overall structure of this research project and the different approaches I used to collect, interpret, and present my findings. This chapter also addresses the ontological considerations that have impacted my research, as well as how I respond to and qualify Teaiwa’s (2010) three tenets of a Pacific studies approach. Additionally, I provide interview participant information tables and survey respondents’ demographic information to situate whose voices represent coconut oil consumption in this research.

While different theoretical frameworks are introduced and discussed throughout multiple chapters of this thesis, in chapter three, “Situating the Research,” I engage in a theoretically informed discussion of several key concepts and themes that underpin the thesis as a whole. Section one discusses distinct cultural perceptions of coconut oil itself, and how it’s defined for this research. Section two focuses on diasporic knowledges and discusses how I use this concept to decentralize Island-centric cultural authority. Section three discusses how I define Pacific Islanders for this project, situating them in relation to Māori and non-indigenous arrivant communities of the Pacific, and addresses the political implications of that decision. Finally, section four compares Pacific lives in Aotearoa New Zealand and the continental United States, with a focus on the Wellington Region and the Bay Area. I discuss how each place requires different forms of cultural knowledge, including different forms of code-switching, which impacts Pacific Islander consumers’ relationships to coconut oil.

Chapter four, “Spiritual Origins, Sacred Kinships,” situates coconut oil within indigenous Pacific worldviews. Section one addresses different theories that inform how indigenous myths can be understood in the present day. Section two analyzes how Pacific myth narratives and Austronesian etymology promote a relational epistemology with the



ecological world. I discuss how this affects consumers' relationships to coconut oil, coconuts and other Pacific products. Section three addresses how these relational spiritual meanings are conveyed through several contemporary Pacific rituals that incorporate coconut oil in some way. Finally, through an in-depth case study on one interview participant's practice of "ancestral lineage healing," section four explores what it means to be "ancestors in training," and contemplates the responsibilities that come with that role.

Chapter five, "Cultural Capital," frames coconut oil consumption through Pierre Bourdieu's (1986) three states of cultural capital: embodied, institutionalized and objectified. Section one addresses how Pacific bodies are implicated in coconut oil marketing material as embodied models of health. This marketing strategy evokes discourses of nature, natives, health and power. Section two draws on survey data to discuss how the ingestion of coconut oil signifies subversive, anti-institutional meaning for some of its consumers. Finally, section three examines a debate over the objectified cultural capital of coconut oil itself and asks whether it's a product or the knowledge of a product's use that matters most for cultural continuity. In this final section, I address an interview participant's theory that the experience of diaspora impacts a consumer's affective relationship to cultural products.

Drawing further on Bourdieu, chapter six, "Social Capital," examines different social meanings coconut oil signifies for its consumers. Section one draws on survey data collected from Pacific Islander, Māori and non-Pacific respondents to show how different relationships with coconut oil reflect these demographic groups' respective fields. Section two discusses how coconut oil is implicated in "consumer fetishist" practices to convey meanings of alternative subcultural identity (Eden, 2010). Finally, section three discusses how for many diasporic Islander consumers, the acquisition of coconut oil demonstrates their transnational social capital. I address how these transnational networks bind Islanders to indigenous systems of reciprocity. I emphasize how these systems challenge reductionist economic models by recognizing wealth in relationships.

Finally, chapter seven, "The Social Lives of Coconut Oil," concludes this thesis with a discussion of my key research findings and revisits how these findings reflect and respond to the spiritual, political and sociocultural fields that structure consumers' lives. Section one focuses on my own process of doing a Pacific studies ethnography based in

the Pacific diaspora. I discuss how I reconceptualized contemporary representations of Pacific peoples in my work. This section also draws attention to the ways migrant agency and trans-indigenous identity problematizes Epeli Hau'ofa's (1994) vision of Pacific cultural expansion. Section two returns to the sacred symbolism of coconuts situated within Pacific worldviews. I discuss how I engaged with cultural constructivism and revisit Pacific Islander interview participants' debates over their understandings of sacredness in general. This section re-emphasizes the value of accounting for social capital in Pacific market research. Section three addresses how Pacific peoples are implicated in naturopathic coconut oil marketing material and how romantic depictions of Islanders' health draws on problematic tropes of indigenous peoples' 'innate' connections with nature. Finally, section four addresses counter-hegemonic ideologies that some coconut oil consumers convey through their coconut oil consumption practices. I urge caution over these consumers' sentiments and naturopathic advocates' work to delegitimize mainstream medical institutions' recommendations in the name of 'natural' health. However, this section also discusses how constructivist approaches to health offer helpful ways to engage with misinformation and how incorporating broader understandings of health provides meaningful spaces for dialogue.

The main objective of this project is to explore the multifaceted social lives of coconut oil and to draw attention to how commodities reflect power, cultural identities, thing-agency, and the sociality of knowledge. I aim to challenge how commodities are viewed as passive things and seek to reposition coconut oil as a product which holds intrinsic—albeit contested—meaning. Additionally, I don't want to portray Pacific identity romantically. Rather, I work to portray Pacific identity as contested, resilient and multifarious. To do this, I aim to give equal attention to Islanders who struggle with their Pacific cultural identities or senses of belonging just as much as I include those who confidently claim their roots. I have learned through my own experiences in Pacific spaces that many nonconforming voices are often steamrolled in the name of Pacific empowerment. As such, I have found it necessary to challenge overly simplistic representations of Pacific identity and to remain critically vigilant to the evocation and manipulation of any collective 'we.' With that said, this work is still dedicated to 'us'—the contested, dynamic, decentralized and ever-expanding Pacific.



## CHAPTER TWO

# Methodological Approaches

This research attempts to capture a complex range of subjects, things, relationships and people. Though my methods appeal to an ontologically constructivist epistemology, various topics I address contend with both constructivist and naturalist-realist ontological frameworks. Specifically, I examine the discourses that coconut oil consumption marketing draws from, and through my analysis of participants' interviews and survey respondents' data, I relate how these marketing strategies inform consumers' understandings of the product. In my research, I have found how coconut oil is constructed as a health product in promotional marketing material and by consumers often conflicts with mainstream medical institutions' epistemologically positivist dietary recommendations to restrict saturated fat intake. Section one of this chapter focuses on this ontological tension and draws attention to the relationship between 'truth' and 'trust.'

In section two, I discuss how my project responds to Teresia Teaiwa's (2010) three tenets of a Pacific studies approach. This means that my research strives to be interdisciplinary, involve comparative analysis, and account for indigenous ways of knowing. The interdisciplinary aspect blends together theoretical approaches from anthropology, sociology, political science, geography and natural resource management. I also incorporate creative writing to push at the constraints of contemporary academic structure (Hau'ofa, 1990; Raikin, 2008; Trask, 1997; Wendt, 1978; 1987). The comparative aspect of this research is provided by interview contributions and survey data collected from Pacific Islander, Māori and non-Pacific coconut oil consumers living in the Wellington Region and the San Francisco Bay Area. When applicable, I also use survey data to make national comparisons. In this section as well, I discuss three different approaches to understanding what 'indigenous ways of knowing' can mean: (1) an understanding of it as intergenerationally inherited 'traditional' knowledge; (2) an understanding of it as the contemporary knowledge of indigenous communities; and (3) an

understanding of it as the diverse knowledges of contemporary individuals of indigenous ancestry, whatever those knowledges may be. Throughout this thesis, I oscillate between these different ways of knowing, and address the insights each offers.

Section three gives an overview of the collaborative methodological approaches that informed my research process. Here, I discuss the coconut wireless method I used to network with participants; the inafa'maolek (relationship building) method I used as a recruitment technique; the talanoa method I used to conduct interviews as a reciprocal dialogue; and the feminist approach I used to account for multiple ways of experiencing coconut oil consumption. Next, I include information tables for the forty-four interview participants to situate their positionalities for reader consideration. Section four addresses the quantitative aspect of this research which is represented by anonymous online surveys. I focus on survey respondents' demographic data which I correlate with broader understandings of coconut oil throughout this thesis. Section five describes the iterative ways I made sense of all this material and focuses on how I wrote-in theory to frame my findings. Here, I note that in this project the word 'participant' refers to those I interviewed; 'respondent' refers to those represented in survey data; and 'consumer' refers to anyone who uses coconut oil.



## Section 2.1

# **Ontological Considerations**

As my thesis portrays coconut oil as an inherently social-symbolic commodity, and consumers' knowledge of coconut oil as representative of situated information networks, most topics I address innately fall within a constructivist ontology. Likewise, the methods I use—discourse analysis, qualitative interviews and online surveys—appeal mainly to a constructivist epistemology. This means, for the most part, I recognize that “truth lies in the eyes of the observer and in the constellation of power and forces that support that truth” (Moses, 2011, p. 795). As aspects of Pacific studies are informed by poststructuralist theory (Wesley-Smith, 1995), this academic field also seeks to recognize all knowledge as situated within specific political and sociocultural contexts (Aluli-Meyer, 2003; Gegeo & Watson-Gegeo, 2001; Huffer & Qalo, 2004; L. Smith, 1999). Influenced by feminist theorists like

Donna Haraway (1988), *Pacific studies* advocates for the collection of “webbed accounts” of knowledge to mitigate the limitations of singular narratives. This informs my research approach as I explore the social lives of coconut oil and the meanings its consumers construct of their product use.

Coconut oil is a product that evokes ontological debate, however. As such, part of this research examines a dispute between mainstream medical institutions and naturopathic coconut oil advocates over truth claims about the ‘real’ health validity of the product. For nearly seven decades, the ingestion of saturated fat—of which coconut oil is nearly ninety-two percent (Lima & Block, 2019)—has been correlated by mainstream medical institutions with an increased risk of developing cardiovascular disease and other noncommunicable diseases (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 24 October, 2019; Gunnarsson & Elam, 2012; Health Promotion Agency, 2019; Heart Research Institute New Zealand, n.d.; Keys, 1970; Keys et al., 1986; Lima & Block, 2019; Ministry of Health, 2003; 16 December 2021; Radio New Zealand [RNZ], 30 July 2014; Sacks et al., 2017). Despite this, recent naturopathic literature has claimed dietary consumption of coconut oil to be an effective treatment, even panacea, for these same noncommunicable diseases and other so-called “diseases of civilization,” which contentiously includes autism (CNB, 2013; Fife, 1999; 2005; 2012; Knight, 2012, Tate, 2017). Most claims made in naturopathic literature have little-to-no mainstream medical institutional corroboration, and the claims that have been researched have been found to be either inconclusive or unconvincing (Lima & Block, 2019; Lockyer & Stanner, 2016; Sacks et al., 2017). Still, both sides of this debate claim to be supported by medical science and, when challenged, accuse the other side of being misinformed or corrupt.

Because my research methods are constructivist, I am unable to make any conclusive statements about the health validity of coconut oil in positivist medical terms. Instead, my methodological approach examines how each side of this debate constructs their truth claims. This requires examining ‘truth’ in a philosophical sense. From my research, I have found that the way that ‘truth’ about coconut oil is understood and enacted by consumers relates primarily to their trust—or lack of trust—in mainstream medical institutions’ authority. This relationship between truth and trust is no coincidence:

Unlike so many theological and philosophical terms, our English word, “truth,” is set wholly within a Germanic and Anglo-Saxon provenance. In its roots, it is a botanical noun denoting trees and products made from wood. This xyloid meaning is extended to connote solidity, durability, and, therefore, steadfastness and trustworthiness. It is a semantic movement from “tree” to “troth” and “trust,” and, then, to “truth” (J. Smith, 2001, p. xi).

In a Western Anglophonic tradition, ‘truth’ tends to be understood as something that is fixed, ‘real’ and ‘out there’ waiting to be discovered through observation. This understanding of truth is a foundation of a natural-realist ontology, which believes an objective “Real World” exists, and that phenomena observed within it are “independent of the observer” (Moses, 2011, p. 792). However, this understanding conflicts with hard constructivist or poststructuralist ontological frameworks which hold that “reality exists only insofar as it is represented” (Sikora, 2012, p. 132). In other words, “Knowledge does not [...] exist independently of the people who created it—knowledges are partial and geographically and temporally located” (Mansvelt & Berg, 2010, p. 343). This conflicting understanding is structured by language as well:

Latour and Woolgar [1979] emphasize the etymology of the word “fact”, stating that it comes from the Latin noun *factum* derived from the past participle of *facere*, meaning “to do”, or “to make”. Facts, as the two authors claim, are made (Sikora, 2012, p. 126).

This conceptual understanding of ‘facts’—often used synonymously with ‘truth’—supports an overall constructivist ontological framework, which positions researchers as co-manufacturers of knowledge rather than value-neutral receivers of it. The central ontological differences between constructivism and naturalism-realism I focus on here are the foundational assumptions each posits about the nature of reality and about knowledge itself. In essence, naturalism-realism positions researchers as value-neutral observers of truth through their methods. Constructivism recognizes researchers as value-laden co-producers of truth and argues that no methods can entirely remove situated biases.

In this thesis, I take the position that what coconut oil actually does to the body and what coconut oil is believed to do to the body are two distinct issues and that addressing these issues require different theoretical and methodological approaches. Specifically, the

former requires critically examining work that appeals to a naturalist-realist ontological framework; the latter requires critically examining work that appeals to a constructivist ontological framework. My methods remain constructivist, and therefore my project does not produce ontologically natural-realist work. Still, I take both constructivist and naturalist-realist ontological frameworks into consideration and oscillate or ‘tack’ between the two for nuanced insight (Clifford & Sanches, 2000). This tacking approach resists any ontological absolutism, as well as promotes a Pacific studies interdisciplinary approach.



## Section 2.2

# **A Pacific Studies Approach**

In 1995, Terence Wesley-Smith illuminated three rationales for Pacific-related studies in academic institutions: a laboratory rationale, a pragmatic rationale, and an empowerment rationale. A laboratory rationale frames the Pacific Islands and Pacific peoples as small, isolated sites and communities ideal for comparative biological and anthropological research. In this thesis, a laboratory rationale is identified in the ways Islanders are implicated in naturopathic dietary literature as points of counterevidence to mainstream medical institutions’ recommendations against saturated fat ingestion. I address this dynamic in greater detail in chapter five. A pragmatic rationale is concerned with understanding the Pacific for strategic political objectives and is frequently entangled in development, security and aid. A pragmatic rationale is identified in the economic models used to frame transregional Pacific exchange. I address this in more detail in chapter six. An empowerment rationale is concerned with decolonization of Pacific scholarship and self-determination through self-representation. As this thesis is a Pacific studies project, it’s concerned with an empowerment rationale primarily.

An empowerment rationale is divided into three phases. First, Wesley-Smith (1995) hypothesized that researchers will master Western methodologies and attempt to frame the Pacific in theoretically misfitting ways (see Meleisea, 1987). Next, scholars will grow disillusioned by the inability of Western methodologies to adequately represent the Pacific, leading some researchers to categorically reject all theory considered essentially Western for theory considered essentially indigenous (see Trask, 1991). Finally, having

demonstrated the merits of indigenous methods, and having recognized both the advantages and limitations of different theoretical perspectives, researchers will endeavor to hybridize Western and indigenous theory. Teresia Teaiwa (2010) writes that in order to achieve this third phase “healthy cross-pollination” ideal, Pacific studies should hold itself to be interdisciplinary, involve comparative analysis, and account for indigenous ways of knowing. These recommendations have become informally known as the “three tenets” of a Pacific studies approach at Te Herenga Waka Victoria University of Wellington (Case, 2021) and are the focus of the following three subsections.

#### Subsection 2.2.1

### **Interdisciplinarity**

Teaiwa’s (2010) call for interdisciplinarity in Pacific research wasn’t the first (Hviding, 2003; Wesley-Smith, 1995; Whimp, 2008). Its slow incorporation, though, demonstrates the complexity of the request. There are different interpretations of what interdisciplinarity means and how to best implement it. To Edvard Hviding, “a successful interdisciplinary approach should cause the epistemological, methodological, and institutional boundaries between disciplines to be disturbed, even remade” (2003, p. 43). Hviding argues that interdisciplinarity is intrinsically political, and that “calls for ‘interdisciplinarity’ in Pacific studies are hardly to be separated from calls for ‘decolonization’ of Pacific studies” (p. 44). For Graeme Whimp, the main objective of interdisciplinarity is to create something new, “owned by no one,” and for all to use (2008, p. 406). Whimp (2008) proposes that Pacific studies should aim to exist in the *vā*—a pan-Polynesian concept that Suaalii-Sauni describes as the social, relational and sacred space “imbued with spiritual forces and energies” (2017, p. 164)—between other academic disciplines. As part of this *vā* focus, Whimp (2008) writes that it’s necessary to know the relational space that any academic discipline or research project is currently situated within.

The main disciplines that have influenced Pacific studies have been history, anthropology, political science and sociology (Teaiwa & Henderson, 2009; Wesley-Smith, 1995). Similarly, my thesis draws from anthropology, political science and sociology, as well as my interest in natural resource management, geography and creative writing. These contributing disciplines guide my research to examine coconut oil through multiple—often



overlapping, sometimes conflicting—ontological frameworks and theory. These include posthumanist considerations, which portray coconut oil as a thing which possesses agency, as well as commodity and “consumer fetishism,” which accounts for the sociocultural capital coconut oil is imbued with and conveys as signs (Eden, 2011). Throughout this thesis, I blend multiple frameworks in order to promote an interdisciplinary approach. This, I hope, will produce new perspectives on commodity culture that incorporate thing-agency, alternative forms of voice, and semiotic power.

#### Subsection 2.2.2

### **Comparative Analysis**

According to Judith Huntsman (1995), two justifications for incorporating comparative analysis into research are to identify correlations and social norms. She writes that to achieve this, generalizations must be made to establish points of comparison. There are two central points of comparison in this project and several generalizations that accompany each. The first is structured by location: survey respondents and interview participants are divided between their places of residence on national (Aotearoa New Zealand/United States) and regional (Wellington Region/San Francisco Bay Area) scopes. As my fieldwork took place in the Wellington Region and Bay Area, the majority of discussion focuses on a regional scope.

Interview participants and survey respondents are locationally grouped based on where they were living at the time of their interviews or survey completion, not where they were born or where they were raised. As such, many participants are originally from places outside the Wellington Region or Bay Area. As I did not ask respondents where they were born or raised, I am unable to provide any demographic data beyond what was reported. The foundational generalization I have made to categorize these consumers into location-based groups is the assumption that they were part of their location-based community in some way and impacted by the various “scapes” of those places (Appadurai, 1996). Although there are countless ways to exist in one place, this division captures a snapshot of unique site-specific life and offers insight into the transnational social lives of coconut oil.

The second point of comparison is structured by cultural identities. Participants were divided into the cultural groups: Pacific Islanders, Māori and non-Pacific peoples. Consumers included in this research are categorized with a hierarchical structure. If someone is of Pacific Islander, Māori and non-Pacific ancestry, they are included in the Pacific Islander group. If they are of Māori and non-Pacific ancestry, they are included in the Māori group. Participants who do not have Pacific Islander or Māori ancestry are included in the non-Pacific group. As this is a Pacific studies project, there is more focus on the experiences of Pacific Islanders than there is on Māori and non-Pacific peoples. The generalization required to distinguish Pacific Islanders from the other two groups assumes that those with immediate indigenous ancestry to the tropical Pacific Islands possess cultural qualities that are unique, and that these qualities are not possessed by Māori and non-Pacific peoples in the same way.

This categorical structure is harder to define universally however and there are a few issues to address relating to this generalization. First, non-Pacific peoples are not a pan-cultural identity but a default category. Second, Māori are a Pacific people who share cultural qualities with Pacific Islanders. However, they do not have immediate ancestry to the tropical Pacific Islands and therefore tend to have different relationships to coconut oil. Third, grouping any set of individuals together as Pacific Islanders is a challenge when working with those descended from one of the most diverse regions on Earth (Pawley, 1999). As such, there is no single Pacific framework which can be applied universally (Farrelly & Nabobo-Baba, 2014; Whimp, 2008). And finally, the categories that I have imposed on consumers included in this research are not necessarily how these individuals primarily identify themselves. Rather, for the purposes of my research, I have created these distinct groups to establish points of comparison. This comparative analysis method remains a useful way to explore how coconut oil consumption correlates with the sociocultural values of a person's field; how an individual identifies with and normalizes the values of their group; and how specific experiences or contextual differences amongst consumers may affect their understandings or uses of the product.

## **Indigenous Ways of Knowing**

Accounting for indigenous ways of knowing ensures that indigenous knowledge and indigenous voice are appropriately incorporated into Pacific studies research. However, this tenet is complicated by the multiple ways in which it can be interpreted. As it relates to the topics addressed throughout this thesis, I ask, how do indigenous ways of knowing differ from, simply, *just* ways of knowing? Teaiwa's (2010) prescription implies that there are unique qualities of indigenous Pacific knowledge and that these qualities are distinct from those of non-indigenous Pacific cultures. For the purposes of this thesis, which by its design must account for the impacts of diaspora, I have qualified the three possible ways to understand 'indigenous ways of knowing:' first, as 'tradition' or the generational inheritance of certain knowledges; second, as the contemporary knowledges of indigenous communities; and third as the diverse contemporary knowledges of individuals of indigenous ancestry, whatever those knowledges may be. Each approach should be recognized as both a whole and co-constitutive part of indigenous ways of knowing, as they intersect in different ways. None are permanently fixed but lend themselves to varying degrees of change over time and context. The following discussion explores these approaches with attention to each one's advantages and limitations.

Derived from the Latin 'tradere' meaning "to hand over or deliver," 'tradition' has historically implied a generational inheritance of specific cultural elements as well as an obligation of younger generations to receive them (Williams, 1985, p. 224). Whether explicitly referred to as tradition or not, there are certain elements which are commonly discussed in popular discourse in this inheritance-related way. These include broad concepts like fa'asāmoa, vā, kastom and inafa'maolek, as well as clothing, cuisine and other material cultural practices (Addo & Besnier, 2008; Alexeyeff, 2004; Aporosa, 2015; Gegeo & Watson-Gegeo, 2001; Hattori, 2011; Lilomaiaava-Doktor, 2004; Suaalii-Sauni, 2017; Underhill-Sem, 2001). This also includes language which Michael Perez (2002) describes as an "umbilical cord" of indigenous knowledge. To Perez, "the ability to think from an indigenous point of view emanates from the ability to communicate in the native tongue" (p. 465). Examining traditional elements like these in Pacific studies research

provides an access point for both indigenous and non-indigenous researchers to ‘know’ and account for indigenous ways of knowing in their work, albeit with some positionality-based constraints (Gegeo & Watson-Gegeo, 2001; Hau‘ofa, 1990).

I use the term ‘tradition’ cautiously, however. For several decades at least, indigenous scholars and creatives have critiqued the concept of tradition for its essentialist connotations which, they argue, portray indigenous culture as static, caught in the past, and without the right to change (Case, 2021; Hereniko, 1999; Mallon, 2010; Orange, 2018; L. Smith, 2005; Wendt, 1982). In some cases, use of the word is avoided altogether to prevent fostering such problematic implications (Mallon, 2010). Despite these problems however, there are deeply rooted power structures to consider before dismissing its utility in ethnographic research entirely (Williams, 1985). Tradition is frequently invoked in popular discourse and, for better or worse, it remains a powerful concept that impacts indigenous peoples’ lives. For this reason, I acknowledge the existence of traditions as a social fact in my research, meaning that I understand traditions as ‘truths’ that are enacted through power (Gilbert, 1989).

Other writers critically incorporate tradition into their work too. For example, in his novel *There There*, Tommy Orange conveys through the fictional character Edwin Black how indigenous peoples are obligated to appeal to tradition in order to be validated as ‘adequately’ indigenous:

The problem with Indigenous art in general is that it’s stuck in the past. The catch, or the double bind, about the whole thing is this: If it isn’t pulling from tradition, how is it Indigenous? And if it is stuck in tradition, in the past, how can it be relevant to other Indigenous people living now, how can it be modern? (2018, p. 77).

As Orange’s writing addresses, there is an undue expectation for indigenous peoples to appeal to tradition in their work. At the same time, it’s impossible to reduce indigenous lives, and by extension, indigenous ways of knowing to tradition alone. As Ilana Gershon writes, “People who possess only theoretical knowledge of a culture are prone to treat rules solely as prescriptive. In contrast, people with practical knowledge will often engage with social rules as discursive resources for convincing others to adopt particular

strategies” (2009, p. 398). This means that while tradition may prescribe certain expectations, it does not guarantee that an indigenous community or an indigenous person will structure their lives according to their cultural traditions entirely. Therefore, to adequately account for indigenous ways of knowing, alternative forms of indigenous knowledge must be considered, especially knowledge produced through community and individual experience.

Few peoples are held to as much scrutiny over cultural change as indigenous peoples. Propelled by an economy of research, as well as a fetishization of indigeneity in general, supposed shifts ‘away’ from traditional lifestyle garner disproportionate attention in academic and literary works (Case, 2021; Figiel, 1996; Orange, 2018; Wendt, 1973; 1978; 1987). But this narrative of cultural ‘loss’ is contested—one way is by community and the knowledge produced by collectives. Belinda Borell (2005), for example, discusses how collective experiences of urban rangatahi (Māori youth) produce avant-garde knowledge of Māori identity that challenges ‘received wisdom’ narratives of tikanga Māori (Māori traditional customs). Borell bases her understanding of indigenous knowledge as something that is produced by the collective experiences of an indigenous group. This community-based understanding moves away from essentialized traditions and encourages researchers to focus on people, rather than prescriptive structures, as the foundation of indigenous voice.

James Clifford best explains how articulation is both theoretically and methodologically applied in this community-based context:

Articulation offers a non reductive way to think about cultural transformation and the apparent coming and going of ‘traditional’ forms. All-or-nothing, fatal-impact notions of change tend to assume that cultures are living bodies with organic structures. So, for example, indigenous languages, traditional religions, or kinship arrangements, may appear to be critical organs, which if lost, transformed or combined in novel structures should logically imply the organism’s death. You can’t live without a heart or lungs. But indigenous societies have persisted with few, or no, native-language speakers, as fervent Christians, and with ‘modern’ family structures, involvement in capitalist economies, and new social roles for women and men. ‘Inner’ elements have, historically, been connected with ‘exterior’ forms, in processes of selective, syncretic transformation (2001, p. 478).

Articulation theory incorporated into ethnographic research celebrates the present in ways that a focus on presumably static ‘tradition’ does not. This way of thinking moves away from an emphasis of what the past was (or imagined to be) to a focus on contemporary cultural forms that look towards the future.

While a community-based representation of indigenous ways of knowing moves beyond the limitations of traditional essentialism, its socially dependent structure is still limited in its ability to encompass the life experiences and knowledges of many participants in my research. Islanders, raised in majority non-Pacific places and with majority non-Pacific social networks, like me, often deviate not only from prescriptive traditional expectations, but our lived experiences also tend to deviate from others in our own cultural groups. Nine Pacific participants in this research—two from the Wellington Region and seven from the Bay Area—discussed how they were raised knowing few-to-no Islanders who weren’t their relatives. They also discussed how their experiences, voices and knowledges are dismissed as ‘non-Pacific’ due to their lack of traditional knowledge or community engagement. This exclusion is internalized and contributes to deep senses of shame. To account for indigenous ways of knowing more broadly, as well as to validate these Pacific Islander participants’ experiences and expand the discourse about us, I have added individualism as a third consideration.

The need to attend to individual experiences of indigeneity emerged during fieldwork in the San Francisco Bay Area when I attended a public discussion with indigenous poets Billy-Ray Belcourt and Lehua Taitano.<sup>4</sup> At the time I was struggling with how I could situate my voice as someone who is often qualified as indigenous in academic spaces despite possessing little traditional cultural literacy and having been raised in majority non-Pacific spaces with non-Pacific people. I found solace in interview discussions with other Islander participants who were raised in similar ways. Through our conversations, I realized that to validate our own experiences, common understandings of indigenous ways of knowing needed to be expanded in Pacific-related discourse. As Tommy Orange’s (2018) discussion of the indigenous “double bind” addresses, what

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<sup>4</sup> Event titled, “Indigiqueer Futures” (Center for Race & Gender, 6 November 2019)  
<https://www.crg.berkeley.edu/podcasts/indigiqueer-futures/>

obligations do we, as indigenous individuals, have to represent our traditions and our people in our work? I posed this question to both poets.

Belcourt answered that the Cree nation is much too large to ever adequately encompass its totality in any work. He explained that he can write about Cree topics if he wants to, but he's not responsible for getting an imagined homogeneous representation of Cree-ness 'right.' Taitano answered that although she does often write about traditional CHamoru topics, she doesn't need to in order to qualify her work as indigenous. Her work is CHamoru because she is CHamoru and she is a producer of indigenous voice. Both these poets recognized their own experiences as production sites of indigenous ways of knowing. Inspired by their responses, I have decided to position individual Pacific coconut oil consumers as producers of indigenous ways of knowing in my research. This means that a participant can appeal to tradition or community to structure their coconut oil use if they want to, but they are not obligated to in order to be validated as representative of indigenous voice.

This focus on individualism will likely challenge common tropes found in Pacific-related discourse which tends to emphasize co-constitutive identity or "dividualism" as a central trait of Pacific cultures (Morgan, 2017; Wendt, 1978). For example, David Welchman Gegeo and Karen Ann Watson-Gegeo write "knowledge is constructed by communities—epistemological communities—rather than collections of independently knowing individuals" (2001, p. 58). Here, Gegeo and Watson-Gegeo dismiss the idea that knowledge can be independently produced. I can't help but wonder, though, whether these authors would make the same argument had they grown up removed from their communities in diaspora as I had or as the nine Pacific Islander participants referenced earlier? Would they dismiss our claim to Pacific identity? Or would they say that our knowledge needed to be a specific type in order to count as part of a Pacific 'epistemological community'? David Welchman Gegeo (2001) addresses the issue of diaspora in another work in which he argues that a Kwara'ae person can remain indigenous—or native, which he defines separately—anywhere they live as long as they are able to meet his nine-part cultural-knowledge criteria. While this may work for him, I am dubious of imposing any litmus test on participants as it tends to reify traditional essentialisms that too often disempower Pacific Islanders for who they are now. His work

and my work are situated in different ways, and neither of us have the exclusive right to claim to represent *the* Pacific in its totality. Rather, both our approaches provide different accounts of what it means to ‘be’ Pacific, and both contribute to larger “webbed accounts” that structure this discourse (Haraway, 1988).

I am not the first to critique the emphasis on sociocentrism in Pacific cultures. In her novel, *Where We Once Belonged* (1996), in a chapter titled “We,” Sia Figiel illustrates a scene in which Miss Cunningham, a fictional American Peace Corps teacher, asks her Samoan students to write about what they individually saw on their way to school. Alofa, the protagonist of the novel, is troubled by the instruction. She responds, “‘I’ does not exist, Miss Cunningham. ‘I’ is ‘we’ ... *always*” (p. 133). On the next page, Figiel follows with a poem that opens with the lines:

‘I’ does not exist.  
I am not.  
My self belongs not to me because ‘I’ does not exist.  
‘I’ is always ‘we’....  
(p. 135).

This excerpt has been interpreted as a celebration of Pacific sociocentrism as well as a critique of the encroachment of Western individualism. But a deeper reading of Figiel’s (1996) work reveals a critique of this value system as not only an ideal that falls short, but also as a potentially harmful technique used to dismiss individual suffering in the name of the collective ‘we’ (Keown, 2005; Raikin, 2008). Henderson explains:

While I’ve often heard the line “‘I’ is ‘we’ ...always” popularly quoted as explanation, or even support, of Samoan culture’s apparent sociocentrism, critical discussions of the book suggest a more nuanced reading—one that recognizes Figiel’s critique of the ways that Samoan understandings of communalism are deployed (2016, p. 325).

Henderson also writes, “the ontological premise of being-for-the collective is not a transparent reflection of how Samoans always actually *are*; it is rather the story that



Samoans tell themselves (and others) about themselves” (p. 323). Although sociocentrism may be a common representation of Pacific culture, it’s not a universal truth.

This third individual-based consideration for indigenous ways of knowing recognizes that Pacific cultures are too dynamic to be bound by traditions or ideals of communal knowledge alone. This third consideration holds individuals as producers of indigenous knowledge and recognizes their experiences as part of a greater “webbed account” of Pacific realities (Haraway, 1988). I am including this qualification to advocate for myself and others whose lived experiences are situated in similar ways. We are the Pacific too; our knowledge is Pacific knowledge and our voices are Pacific voices worthy of recognition in Pacific-related discourse. This understanding of indigenous knowledge was valuable for my interview method which met with consumers individually to discuss their understandings of coconut oil. The following section elaborates more on the methodological approaches that informed my interview process.



### Section 2.3

## **Interviews**

Interviews were conducted between April and November 2019. The first series took place in the Wellington Region between April and June and the second series took place in the Bay Area between June and November. Forty-four interviews were conducted in total. The median age of participants at the time of interview was twenty-five years old, with the minimum age of participation set at eighteen years old. Thirty participants are women, twelve are men, and two are gender neutral and use the pronouns they/them. Other relevant background information about these participants is provided in information tables at the end of this section. Interview participants are divided into five groups based on their places of residence at the time of their interview (the Wellington Region and the San Francisco Bay Area), and their cultural backgrounds (Pacific Islander, Māori and non-Pacific). In total, eleven participants are Bay Area Pacific Islanders; eleven are Bay Area non-Pacific peoples; eleven are Wellington Region Pacific Islanders; nine are Wellington Region non-Pacific peoples; and two are Wellington Region Māori.

All interviews were pre-scheduled and conducted in-person, and all but two were conducted through one-on-one meetings. Discussion was semi-structured with only three standard questions asked: (1) how old are you?; (2) can you describe your cultural or ethnic background?; and (3) do you think your cultural or ethnic background influences how you use coconut oil in any way? The third question usually prompted participant-led conversation, and when applicable I drew on questions from the online survey (see Appendix). Most interviews lasted between forty-five minutes and an hour. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed by me afterwards. Participants received grocery store vouchers as a gesture of appreciation for their time.

Participants chose their degree of post-interview engagement with their contribution by selecting different preferences in their information and consent sheets. This selection included the option to have their names replaced with a pseudonym. If requested, participants received a copy of their interview audio recording and/or interview transcript.<sup>5</sup> Transcripts were sent as a Google document which participants were able to comment on but not directly edit. Participants could take anything they shared off the record completely—no explanation needed, and no questions asked. If something was stricken from the record, it was removed entirely, even if a pseudonym is used. As English is a second language for five participants, I made minor edits to several transcriptions for clearer readability but left most text in its original form if the meaning was sufficiently conveyed.

Participants could request preliminary chapter drafts that incorporated their contributions.<sup>6</sup> These drafts provided an example of how I was intending to use their contribution, as well as how their contribution related to those in their demographic groups. These drafts were emailed as a PDF document, so participants were unable to comment directly but were encouraged to email me with questions or comments. Participants were also reminded that they could change their preferences or withdraw from the project entirely before the dissertation was submitted. The main intention of encouraging participants to remain engaged throughout the interview process was to promote a collaborative research approach (Farrelly & Nabobo-Baba, 2014; Vairoletti, 2006). This

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<sup>5</sup> Sixteen participants requested their audio recording. Twenty-five requested their interview transcripts.

<sup>6</sup> Twenty-six participants requested preliminary chapter drafts.

collaborative approach is further structured by the coconut wireless, inafa'maolek, talanoa and feminist methodologies discussed in the subsections below.

#### Subsection 2.3.1

### **The Coconut Wireless**

Fieldwork notes, July 2019:

I met Tiffany through Sadie. I met Sadie through Serina. I met Serina through university and after years of living together, I learned that Serina was my cousin while talking to her cousin who I learned was my cousin also. After meeting Tiffany, she introduced me to other Islanders in the Bay who introduced me to more, who introduced me to more.

The coconut wireless is vast.

After learning we were cousins, Serina told me she wanted nothing to do with being Chamorro. She said she had no cultural knowledge, and I never pushed an identity on her that she did not want to cultivate in herself.

Two years later though, Serina had a change in heart and moved to the Islands for work. She got a job as a reporter and reached out to the few diasporic Chamorros she knew for a story. She asked what makes us different from our relatives in the Islands. I answered that I am not patriotic, not Catholic, and am critical of the military.

An auntie read the story in the Islands and called an auntie. That auntie called an auntie who called an auntie who called an uncle who talked to an uncle who messaged an auntie whose boy heard from a dog who the dog claims was heard first from an auntie's fake-but-still-somehow-dying houseplants that an uncle told them that his cousin heard about it who called another cousin who then called my auntie and my auntie told me, "What are you doing going around saying things as confrontational as you hate God, hate our veterans and despise our nation's freedom? You're embarrassing our family and now I have to do a lot of damage control! Don't say *anything* without asking first, got it?"

The coconut wireless is omniscient.

The main method of recruitment in both sites depended on a coconut wireless approach. As the excerpt above references, the term 'coconut wireless' connotes both inter-regional connection between Pacific Islanders as well as a tendency to gossip about one another in the community. In my research, I use this method as it relates primarily to community networking. This means that I primarily relied on individuals to offer their contacts and for those contacts to offer theirs. For this reason, several participants are relatives, friends or have friends in common. As non-Pacific peoples are the majority demographic group in both sites, their participation required less targeted recruitment

strategies, and all but two non-Pacific participants were contacted through informal social networks I am part of. In the Wellington Region, nine Pacific Islander participants were recruited through their enrollment or employment at Te Herenga Waka Victoria University of Wellington or through their relationship with a staff member. In the San Francisco Bay Area, I used my connections with the Berkeley Student Cooperative (BSC) housing system—an institution that I had lived in and worked for throughout the majority of my undergraduate years—as a means to recruit participants. A more detailed description of this housing cooperative is discussed in chapter six. In total, seven participants—three Islanders and four non-Pacific persons—were recruited through their connections with the BSC.

Given my lack of pre-established Pacific community contacts in the Bay Area, recruiting Pacific Islander participants was a source of time-pressured anxiety for me in the months leading up to my overseas fieldwork. This is because my social networks in the Bay Area were largely limited to UC Berkeley—an institution with few Islanders enrolled (College Factual, 2021)—and my hometown of Santa Cruz—also a place with few Islanders (USCB, 2019). Not including my mom, I only previously knew one of the Pacific Islander participants in the Bay Area before arriving to conduct interviews. She was also one of only three non-relative Islanders I knew at all before moving to Wellington. For this reason, a five-month period doing fieldwork in the Bay Area was needed to build relationships. Building relationships was an integral part of my *inafa'maolek*, *talanoa*, and feminist methodological approaches, all of which respond to the questions, “How do we seek knowledge? What are the appropriate protocols, structures and processes that are in place that determine the way knowledge seekers ask their questions?” (Farrelly & Nabobo-Baba, 2014, p. 325).

To tap into pre-established communities and to speed up the recruitment process, I was advised to network through Bay Area Pacific churches, but I was resistant to this suggestion for two reasons. First, as a Jew, any attempts to network through church would have felt extractive because church congregations are not communities I could ever truly become part of. I’m not saying that because I am a Jew it would have been inappropriate to network through churches, only that it had been my intention from the beginning to minimize an outsider observer position. Therefore, operating through churches would have

largely negated that approach. Secondly, and more importantly, I wanted to challenge the representation of Christianity as intrinsically definitive of Pacific identity (see Carroll, 2004; Gershon, 2007; Meleisea, 1987; Mila-Schaaf & Robinson, 2010; Tomlinson & Kāwika Tengan, 2016). These Christian-dependent representations isolate me from a sense of Pacific belonging, and as will be discussed more in chapter four, it isolates other Pacific Islanders as well. Had I networked primarily through church groups, I likely would not have discussed how some Pacific Islander participants situate their coconut oil use in their practices of alternative indigenous spirituality, recreational drug use and casual sex, particularly for those who identify as queer. It's my hope that future Pacific research will make more space for non-Christian representation. This will ultimately expand how we know ourselves and how others will know us as well.

#### Subsection 2.3.2

### **Inafa'maolek**

Inafa'maolek, meaning “making it good for each other,” is a Chamorro way of being that promotes interdependence through striving for mutual benefit between two or more parties (Hattori, 2011, p. 221). It's a concept similar to Samoan fa'alavelave or Tongan feveitokai'aki which I discuss more in chapter six. Inafa'maolek is enacted through the reciprocal exchange of chenchule' (also called ika depending on the context). Chenchule' implies both a verb and a noun. It's a concept enacted through providing time, labor, money, resources or connections to assist others. It's trusted that in time help given will be help received. It's also inversely conceptualized as help given is help returned, as these reciprocal relationships often span generations.

Inafa'maolek is a concept I knew long before I learned the Chamorro word for it. It's had a major impact on me throughout my life and continues to habitually govern my relationships. Despite the absence of a Pacific community in my upbringing, the few Chamorro family members I was raised with taught me that an inafa'maolek approach is a culturally appropriate way to interact with Pacific people. As part of an inafa'maolek mindset, I was taught through example never to ask for anything seemingly self-serving (such as interview requests) without first providing chenchule' and allowing time for a

relationship to be established. Through example, I was taught that an inafa'maolek approach can be extended to non-Pacific peoples as well.

The foundation of inafa'maolek as a methodology is to find ways that I can serve others, and to use my service as a means to establish reciprocal, equal, transparent, mutually beneficial and enduring relationships. Therefore, an inafa'maolek approach cannot be practiced through providing grocery store vouchers in exchange for doing an interview only. Inafa'maolek requires time, face-to-face contact (before COVID-19 of course!), trust, and a record and reputation of responsible behavior within the vast and omniscient coconut wireless.

Although I strived to hold myself to an inafa'maolek ideal while conducting research, admittedly, given the number of participants and time pressures (even with an extended overseas fieldwork stint), I didn't always reach that ideal with everyone. Still, I incorporated an inafa'maolek approach with as many participants as I could. I measure the success of this methodology by my sustained contact after the interviews were conducted. It's impossible to successfully incorporate an inafa'maolek approach without becoming implicated as an agent within the social networks sought out for ethnographic research. Therefore, inafa'maolek is a methodology that safeguards participants from extractive ethnographic work.

### Subsection 2.3.3

## **Talanoa**

The talanoa method I employed in this research was intended to be a method that would be “natural for most Pacific peoples” (Vaiotei, 2006, p. 25). Talanoa, a concept which implies informal empathetic conversation in Tongan, highlights the importance for reciprocal exchange between people. It's a way of conducting research in which a researcher is not viewed as a removed ‘objective’ observer but rather an active participant in knowledge production through dialogue (Farrelly & Nabobo-Baba, 2014; Vaiotei, 2006). Timote Vaiotei adds, “Talanoa, then, is subjective, mostly oral and collaborative, and is resistant to rigid, institutional, hegemonic control” (2006, p. 24). The recognition of a researcher's positionality as part of a talanoa approach is the reason why throughout this thesis my voice is frequently included both in participant interviews and in my analysis of

their contributions. This reflects my agency in knowledge production and is complementary to the other constructivist methods I employ in this research (Mansvelt & Berg, 2010).

As a methodology that strives for informed reciprocal dialogue, talanoa demands transparency. Therefore, when participants asked me questions about my knowledge of coconut oil or what other participants had shared, I did not withhold information from them, even if it likely meant that it would influence their responses. In fact, often it was conversations I had with prior interview participants that structured later interviews. (I kept participants' identities confidential, of course.) This approach incorporated more participants' contributions into a conversation than what would have been possible had I limited conversation topics between myself and one other participant. Additionally, when participants asked me my opinions on the topics we discussed, I shared my opinions honestly even if there was disagreement. Doing so acknowledged participants' agency—as well as mine—to think critically about our assumptions. This led to greater meta-conscious discussion, in which participants often led interviews through questioning their own beliefs and sentiments.

By traditional ethnographic research conventions, concealing and rejecting pre-established relationships is held as a 'neutral' approach which theoretically should lead to 'objective' research (Vaiotei, 2006). Arguably though, 'neutral' ethnographic research is impossible (Haraway, 1988; Moses, 2011; Teaiwa & Henderson, 2009). Further, by denying the existence of relationships (or worse yet, refusing to cultivate them), research loses its transparency, personal meaning, and overall effectiveness as empowering work. As Vaiotei writes, "Because of the relationship that has been developed, quality will be added to the research. The researchers will not want to let down participants with whom he or she has developed a relationship" (2006, p. 26). By recognizing and engaging with the relationality of this research, this project speaks to the sociality of knowledge and not solely my 'removed' interpretations as a researcher.

## **Feminist Approach**

The feminist approach I employ challenges how research has historically been recorded through a singular perspective (Anderson et al., 1987). While feminist research works are vast and diverse, in my research, I specifically use this approach to incorporate consumers' emotive responses. As Kathryn Anderson explains, "Traditional historical sources tell us more about what happened and how it happened than how people felt about it and what it meant to them" (Anderson et al., 1987, p. 109). During interviews, I asked participants how something 'felt' (intentionally using that term) in order to expand discussion and investigate how coconut oil consumption is experienced in multiple ways. The purpose of focusing on feelings, as Trisia Farrelly and Unaisi Nabobo-Baba discuss, is "to find out why the person feels and acts the way he/she does at the present time. In other words, we should not only be listening for 'feelings'; we need to take this further to opening up an awareness of underlying cultural 'meanings' (Green, 1982) causing those feelings" (2014, p. 324). This way of engaging with participants' feelings provides greater insight into how coconut oil is affectively implicated in identity maintenance and construction.

Another aspect of a feminist approach that I consider in my research is outlined by Dana Jack, who writes "when the woman, instead of the researcher, is considered the expert on her own psychological experience, women's stories challenge existing standards and concepts" (Anderson et al., 1987, p. 113). This methodological approach recognizes a person as the expert of their own experience which is important for the purposes of my ethnographic research. However, this approach occasionally conflicts with the naturalist-realist ontological frameworks that address the 'real' health validity of coconut oil. Specifically, when taken to its extreme, the person-as-expert takes the form of what Anna Kata (2012) has referred to as the "postmodern medical paradigm" in which authoritative medical 'expertise' shifts away from entrusted health professionals to a populist ethic of consumers' expertise via embodied experiences and information sources. Though consumers claiming expertise on their own life experiences is not the same as claiming



expertise on medical science, frequently this becomes entangled when consumers assess the health validity of coconut oil by using their bodies as empirical ‘case studies.’ Ultimately, there are times when I do place limitations on ‘expertise.’ I engage with these dynamics more in chapter five.

#### Subsection 2.3.5

### **Participant Information Tables and Figures**

The five participant information tables below provide a sense of participants’ backgrounds, while the two maps that accompany these tables reflect the geographic spread of where interviews took place. The cultural or ethnic identities listed here use the terms that participants described themselves as. Therefore, some terms like European, pākehā and white, are used in substitution for, or in conjunction with, specific ethnic, national or cultural identities. In text, Pacific Islander and Māori participants are referred to by their specific Pacific cultural or ethnic identity, non-Pacific participants are referred to as ‘non-Pacific’ generally, and all participants are referred to by their places of residence at the time of interview with only my mother as an exception to this location-based referencing system. The following participant information tables list the those generous enough to participate in my research and to whom I am immensely grateful:<sup>7</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> A number of interview participants’ names are pseudonyms.

Table 2.1

**Wellington Region—Pacific Islander Participants**

<b>Anntonina Savelio</b>	20 year old woman / Samoan Raised in Aotearoa New Zealand
<b>Beau Lu</b>	20 year old man / French Polynesian, French Raised in New Caledonia (Co-interviewed with Harriette Ahoa)
<b>Hannah Kette</b>	18 year old woman / Tongan, English, Scottish, French, Belgian Raised in Aotearoa New Zealand
<b>Harriette Ahoa</b>	20 year old woman / Wallisian, Futunan Raised in New Caledonia (Co-interviewed with Beau Lu)
<b>Jamie Webster</b>	26 year old person / Fijian, Scottish-pākehā Raised in Aotearoa New Zealand and Australia
<b>Justine Jane Taito Matamua</b>	18 year old woman / Samoan Raised in Aotearoa New Zealand
<b>Kalo Afeaki</b>	24 year old woman / Tongan, Māori, Irish, English Raised in Tonga (Younger sister of Sarah Finau)
<b>Kahawai Alana</b>	32 year old man / Hawaiian, Chinese, Japanese, European Raised in Hawai‘i
<b>Maggie-May Maybir</b>	23 year old woman / Samoan, Māori Raised in Aotearoa New Zealand
<b>Sarah Finau</b>	29 year old woman / Tongan, Māori, Irish, English Raised in Tonga (Older sister of Kalo Afeaki)
<b>Teuila Faaleo</b>	30 year old woman / Samoan Raised in Sāmoa

Table 2.2

**Wellington Region—Māori Participants**

<b>Taare Shanean</b>	26 year old man / Māori, British Raised in Aotearoa New Zealand
<b>Tim Worth</b>	29 year old man / Māori (Ngāti Pūkenga), pākehā Raised in Aotearoa New Zealand

Table 2.3

**Wellington Region—Non-Pacific Participants**

<b>Abbie Denning</b>	31 year old woman/ New Zealand European (Scottish, English) Raised in Aotearoa New Zealand
<b>Alena Korpai</b>	20 year old woman / IndoFijian Raised in Aotearoa New Zealand (Non-indigenous arrivant)
<b>Alexandra “Poppy” O’Dowd</b>	25 year old woman / English, New Zealand European, Lebanese Raised in Aotearoa New Zealand
<b>Ava Huntsman</b>	40 year old woman / pākehā New Zealand European Raised in Aotearoa New Zealand
<b>Charlotte Savage</b>	27 year old woman / pākehā (English, Dutch, Belgian) Raised in Aotearoa New Zealand
<b>Kevin Young</b>	28 year old man / white (United Kingdom, Irish, German, Baltic, Romanian, Slavic, Jewish) Raised in Nevada
<b>Lily McElhone</b>	21 year old woman / pākehā, Irish Raised in Aotearoa New Zealand
<b>Lucky Darrell</b>	24 year old man / pākehā New Zealand European Raised in Aotearoa New Zealand
<b>Sharon Wilkes</b>	30 year old woman / New Zealand European (Scottish, English) Raised in Aotearoa New Zealand



*Figure 2.1:* Locations of interviews in the Wellington Region, New Zealand. All groups combined. Image from Google Maps (Retrieved 20 August 2022).

Table 2.4

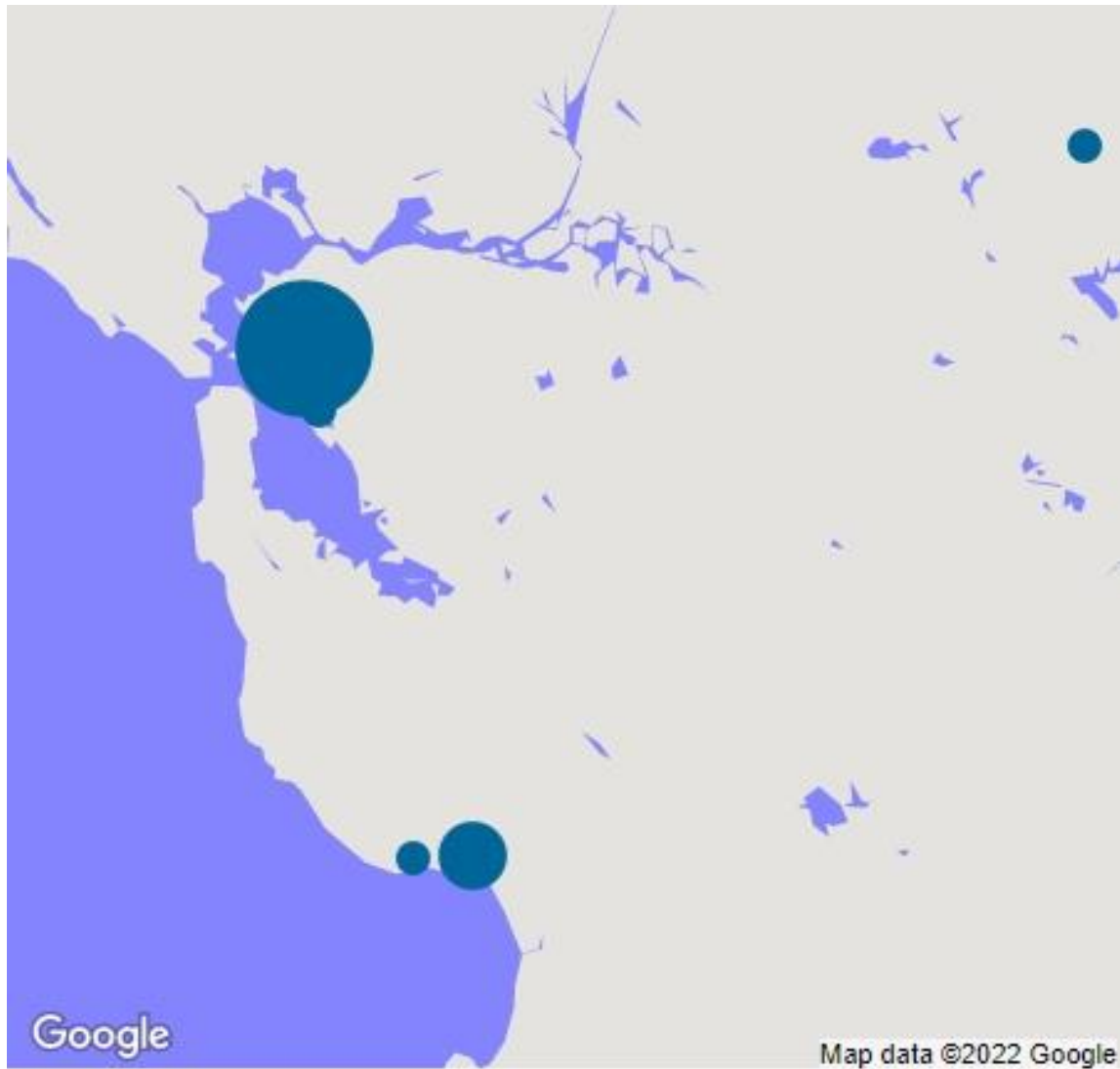
**San Francisco Bay Area—Pacific Islander Participants**

<b>Alex White</b>	32 year old man / Chamorro (Spanish, Chinese, African), Sicilian, German Raised in Colorado
<b>Bonnie Pauahi Tysse</b>	34 year old woman / Hawaiian, Filipina, Norwegian Raised in California
<b>Carly Noelani Kajiwaru</b>	19 year old woman / Hawaiian, Chinese, Japanese Raised in Hawai‘i
<b>Donna Maria Siguenza Bordallo Rigler Baker</b>	63 year old woman / Chamorro (Basque, Spanish) Raised in Guam and continental United States (Mother of the author)
<b>Elizabeth “Ellie” Radburg</b>	25 year old woman / Hawaiian, Japanese, Jewish (Hungarian, Polish) Raised in California
<b>Leo Haube</b>	23 year old man / Hawaiian, Chinese, German Raised in Hawai‘i
<b>Richard Ng</b>	39 year old man / Hawaiian, Chinese, Japanese, Spanish, Puerto Rican Raised in Hawai‘i
<b>Ruby Fanaika Fa‘agau</b>	40 year old woman / Samoan, Tongan, Fijian Raised in California
<b>Siola‘a Pepea</b>	24 year old woman / Tongan, Fijian Raised in California
<b>Tiffany Rose Naputi Lascado</b>	40 year old woman / Chamorro, Filipina Raised in Guam, Hawai‘i, Philippines and California
<b>Turia Iek</b>	22 year old woman / Palauan Raised in California

Table 2.5

**San Francisco Bay Area—Non-Pacific Participants**

<b>Brissa Llero</b>	32 year old woman / Puerto Rican, Mexican, Croatian, other European Raised in California
<b>Jerry Javier</b>	22 year old person / Filipinx, Guatemalan, white Raised in Hawai‘i (Non-indigenous Hawai‘i local)
<b>Karine Ponce</b>	29 year old woman / Ecuadorian, Brazilian, Sicilian, indigenous South American Raised in California and Brazil
<b>Kimberly Berrecil</b>	24 year old woman / Mexican Raised in California and Mexico
<b>Marina Blum</b>	25 year old woman / Jewish, European Raised in Nebraska
<b>Mariam Galante</b>	58 year old woman / Ashkenazi, Scottish, Irish, English Raised in California (Mother of Nash Galante)
<b>Nash Galante</b>	20 year old man / Jewish (Ashkenazi, Sephardic), Scottish, Irish, English Raised in California (Son of Mariam Galante)
<b>Quinn Miller</b>	24 year old woman / Ashkenazi, Irish, German Raised in California
<b>Ryan Stemmler</b>	36 year old man / German, Welsh, Irish Raised in California
<b>Shayna Getz</b>	25 year old woman / Romanian Jewish, German Raised in California
<b>Tyler Gholson</b>	26 year old man / Polish, English, Irish, German, Jewish Raised in Oregon



*Figure 2.2:* Locations of interviews in the San Francisco Bay Area, California (all groups combined). Image from Google Maps (Retrieved 20 August 2022).

## Online Surveys

The inclusion of a survey method is intended to provide a supplementary extensive aspect to the intensive focus of my interview and discourse analysis methods (Bradshaw & Stratford, 2010). The anonymous online survey was created using Qualtrics software and made accessible to respondents through a URL link. I had originally aimed to collect sixty responses—thirty from Aotearoa New Zealand and thirty from California—over a one year period. However, 219 responses were received within the first twenty-four hours of launching the survey in December 2018. By November 2019, a total of 503 responses were collected from fourteen countries.

The survey was made up of thirty-one questions, and depending how a respondent answered a question, subsidiary questions may have been asked. A list of these questions is provided in the Appendix. Data was collected through multiple choice options and/or write-in answers. Questions one through six collected respondents' demographic data and are addressed below. Questions seven through thirty collected correlative data on respondents' values, influences, market preferences, cultural connections, gift economy, uses and perceptions of coconut oil, and other related topics and are addressed throughout the thesis. Question thirty-one asked respondents for any extra comment and was optional. Respondents who answered question seven and beyond were included in the final data pool, even if they did not complete the survey entirely. Those who did not continue past question six—meaning they did not produce any correlative data—were removed from the data pool entirely and are not represented in any of the figures. There was an overall completion rate of about eighty-one percent.

Most responses were received from Aotearoa New Zealand (311); followed by the United States (167); Australia (6); the United Kingdom (2); India (2); Canada (1); Italy (1); Mexico (1); Papua New Guinea (1); Sāmoa (1); Tonga (1); and Vietnam (1). Seven respondents from Guam and one respondent from the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands reported these polities as separate countries. Most responses from Aotearoa New Zealand came from the Wellington Region (277), followed by Another



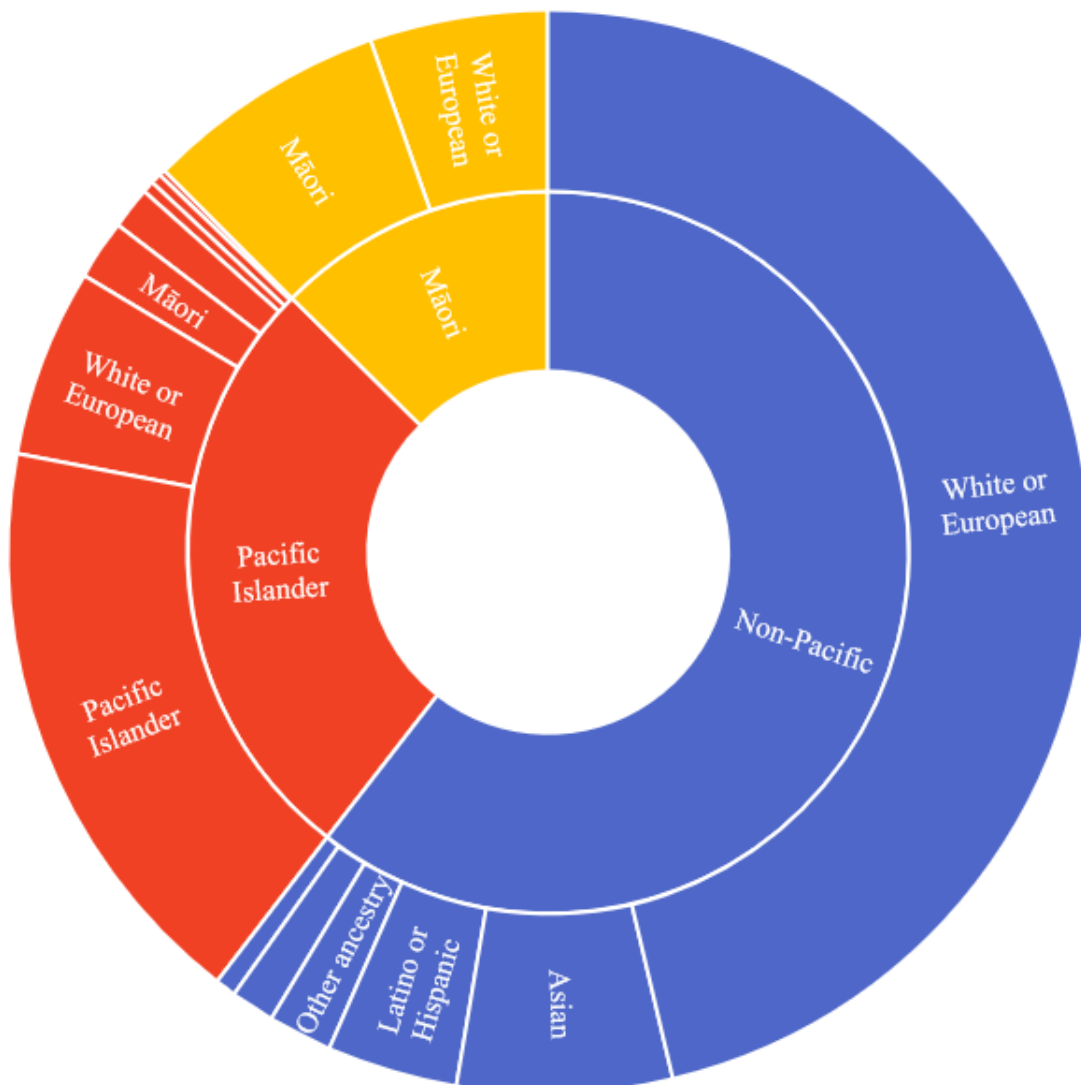
Region (21), and the Auckland Region (13). Most responses from the United States came from California (132), followed by Another State (35)—including those who reported Guam (5) and the Commonwealth of the Northern Marianas Islands (1) as a separate U.S. state and not as a separate country. Most responses from California came from the San Francisco Bay Area (115), followed by the Greater Los Angeles Area (9); Another Area (5); and San Diego County (3).



*Figure 2.3: Respondents' Places of Residence. Results of the survey question: "Where do you live?" All respondents (503).*

Eight non-exclusive cultural and ethnic ancestry categories were provided for respondents to categorize themselves as. These categories were based roughly on the United States and Aotearoa New Zealand Census format. Five categories—Pacific

Islander, white or European, black or African American, Latino or Hispanic, and Asian—were further divided into multiple choice subcategories and provided options for write-in answers. Those who selected Native American or American Indian and Other Ancestry were directed to write in their answers. Māori participants were not requested to specify their iwi. In total, 620 ethnic or cultural identities—representative of all eight categories—were reported. Most respondents identified only, or in combination, as white or European (355); followed by Pacific Islander (108); Māori (56); Asian (48); Latino or Hispanic (26); Other Ancestry (14); Native American or American Indian (9); and black or African American (4).



*Figure 2.4: Respondents' Cultural or Ethnic Ancestries.* Results of the survey question: “What is your cultural or ethnic ancestry?” As answers to this question were non-exclusive, the inner circle of this figure represents the primary demographic group that respondents identified with according to the hierarchical categorization structure previously addressed. The outer circle represents the secondary demographic groups that respondents identified with. All respondents (503).

I decided to make two changes in the way I categorized cultural and ethnic ancestry data (though I did not alter survey questions post-publication.) First, I had originally listed ‘IndoFijian’ within the Pacific Islander category. However, I have since recategorized IndoFijians as Asian. I do not at all wish to imply that IndoFijians are not Pacific peoples, only that *for the purposes of this research* I have prioritized indigenous ancestry for the Pacific Islander category. Second, while designing this survey, I listed ‘Filipino’ within the Asian category, despite valid arguments for the inclusion of the Philippines within the Pacific Region, and for Filipinos with Pacific Islanders generally (Rondilla, 2002). In the United States as well, Filipinos are often understood as Pacific Islanders by default. As such, one American respondent identified herself as a Pacific Islander based on her Filipina ancestry. In accordance with the feminist method I employed in this research, which recognizes research subjects as the expert of their own lives (Anderson et al., 1987), I had originally counted her within the Pacific Islander category. However, as I have recategorized two interview participants—Alena Korpai (Wellington, non-Pacific) and Jerry Javier (Bay Area, non-Pacific)—as non-Pacific Islanders, I have also recategorized this respondent as Asian even though she did not identify herself in this way. In this situation indigenous-centric frameworks and the constructivist-feminist method came into conflict, and I upheld the former. As these complications demonstrate, there are no essential truths to Pacific borders or Pacific identities (Teaiwa, 2010; Wesley-Smith, 1995), and although my research imposes a set indigenous-centric framework, at no point should this standard be regarded as essentially real. I discuss the political implications of this decision in greater detail in the following chapter.

By posting this survey on Facebook, it was easily accessed and shared. However, this online platform likely excluded older age groups less active on social media. Had I designed the survey to be more accessible to older age groups, then different responses may have been reported. Therefore, it should not be concluded that low participation rates of older groups indicate a general lack of coconut oil consumption by them. Rather, it

should be contextualized as a limitation of my online method. The largest respondent age group were between the ages of 18-24 years (181); followed by 25-30 years (124); 31-40 years (95); 41-50 years (45); 51-60 years (31); 61-70 years (23); and 71 years or older (4). Participants below the age of eighteen years were excluded from participating in the survey to maintain consistency with interview participants.

Most respondents were women (419); followed by men (73); those who declined to answer (6); and non-binary persons (5). While the clear skew towards women's participation may suggest a link between coconut oil and feminine understandings of self and gender performativity, this may also have to do with women's higher rates of participation in surveys generally (Slauson-Blevins & Johnson, 2016). In hindsight, this survey would have been improved by allowing a write-in answer for gender identity to recognize and promote gender diversity, especially for Pacific respondents. Those who identify as takatāpui, mahu, leiti, or fa'afafine for example, and who would have preferred an option to express themselves in a way that is right for them, deserved better. To these individuals, I offer my sincerest apology. Hopefully other ethnographic works will learn from my mistake.

To collect data on respondents' self-reported economic 'class,' I provided the 2017 median American household income (USCB, 2018) and a table of 2017 decile incomes that was emailed to me from a Statistics New Zealand (SNZ) representative as a guide (personal communication, 25 September 2018). However, I encouraged participants to consider their own economic contexts, as their places of residence are likely to significantly impact their general economic class. The excerpt and table below were provided to respondents:

The median 2017 household income in the United States was USD \$61,372 (United States Census Bureau, 2018). New Zealand decile income levels for 2017 are presented in the table below (Statistics New Zealand, 2017). This information should be used as a rough guide, as costs of living vary significantly depending on place of residence.

1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
Under NZD \$23,900	NZD \$23,900-\$36,499	NZD \$36,500-\$49,399	NZD \$49,400-\$64,399	NZD \$64,400-\$80,199	NZD \$80,200-\$97,599	NZD \$97,600-\$117,699	NZD \$117,700-\$142,799	NZD \$142,800-\$188,899	Over NZD \$188,900

Most participants reported themselves as economically middle class (216); followed by lower (191); upper (63); and those who declined to answer (33).

I designed the levels of educational qualifications as rough equivalents between standard United States and New Zealand institutional qualifications. The largest educational group was those who held a bachelor's degree (230); followed by those with an NCEA or high school degree (108); a master's degree (68); an associate's degree (35); some high school or secondary school experience (23); a professional degree (14); a doctoral degree (12); decline to answer (10); and no formal education (3).

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## Conclusion 2.5

# **Making Sense of the Material**

The methodological approaches I have incorporated into this project seek to produce research that is collaborative and empowering. I embrace moments of constructivist and naturalist-realist ontological tension as an opportunity to explore interdisciplinary solutions that bridge these different worldviews. This especially pertains to the conflict between mainstream medical institutions and naturopathic health advocates over the 'real' health efficacy of coconut oil. Through a Pacific studies approach, this work contributes to a field of knowledge that aims to expand how the Pacific—its peoples and its products—are, and can be, known. To do so, I strive to hold this research to be interdisciplinary, involve comparative analysis and to account for, as well as explore what gets to constitute, indigenous ways of knowing. Specifically, my incorporation of individualism aims to challenge sociocentric representations of Pacific identity and provide alternative representations of Pacific ways of being.

My comparative, multisited ethnographic project employs a mixed-methods approach that is both intensive and extensive (Bradshaw & Stratford, 2010). The incorporation of qualitative interviews explores participants' understandings and uses of coconut oil situated within their respective spiritual, political and sociocultural contexts. This interview method is informed by coconut wireless, inafa'maolek, talanoa and feminist methodologies (Anderson et al., 1987; Farrelly & Nabobo-Baba, 2014; Vaiioleti, 2006).

Surveys provide complimentary data on a wider range of respondents' consumption patterns. I analyze both interview contributions and survey data material in a similar way as I approach making sense of coconut oil related discourse, which I define loosely as any material that reflects or responds to our understandings of coconut oil. Examples of related discourse could be found in the form of medical reviews, advertisements, available brands of coconut oil at supermarkets, and naturopathic YouTube videos. While these different materials possess varying levels of credible 'truth' claims, in my thesis, I recognize that what is said about coconut oil matters just as much as who hears it, and where they hear it from. Knowledge is situated (Haraway, 1988) and the way information flows follows the contours of social networks.

To make sense of the information shared with me, I used an iterative process of moving between theory and information from interviews, surveys and wider materials. This iterative process allowed me to deeply engage with the material and find what themes seemed important for participants themselves as well as what themes fit with or challenged academic literature.

This process also shaped the way each of the following chapters took shape. For example, chapter three draws on wider materials, interviews and survey data to situate this project geographically within the Pacific diaspora, and within my two fieldwork sites specifically. I also use this material to highlight the tensions between migrant and indigenous communities' belonging to place, which reflect my positionality as a diasporic person. My supervisors have jokingly referred to my focus on this topic as my 'thesis within a thesis,' and I have used this project as an opportunity to engage with theoretical work on diasporas. The themes I focus on in chapter four emerged out of my fieldwork. I was originally resistant to the idea of writing about spirituality entirely. But responding to repeated requests and themes emerging from interviews and survey responses, it was necessary for me to engage with this material. My focus on Bourdieu's (1986) theory of capital in chapter five and six largely came about as the result of a discussion with an anthropology postgraduate at Te Herenga Waka Victoria University of Wellington who I met at an ethnographic writing seminar. Her honor's thesis uses Bourdieu to make sense of how cultural capital is enacted in a Wellington farmers' market (Nicholls, 2017). Following her example, I used Bourdieu originally as a working theory to encompass the

diverse topics my thesis engages with. Overtime, this working theory gradually solidified and became a worked-in theory. Though Bourdieu's theories are certainly an appropriate way to engage with this material, I recognize that there are other ways I could have framed this work.

In making sense of the material, I am reminded of a weekend writing retreat some years ago with my Pacific studies cohort. We were fortunate to be joined by Sia Figiel on our trip. On the second day of our retreat, Figiel planned an activity for us. She asked us to join her by the dining room table where she and April Henderson had laid out a grand display of flowers, leaves and twine. Figiel asked us to use anything on the table we wanted to construct leis. We did as requested and by the end we were asked to hold up our work. Figiel emphasized that although we all had equal access to the materials, the different (at times, very different) styles of leis we assembled reflect *us*. With our work, we walked to the sea together. Figiel tied our leis into a collective offering. She waded into the waves and ritualistically cast our work into the sea—to the place from where we all once belonged. How I framed this material reflects my iterative process, drawing on my positionality, people I worked with, and conversations with various people and communities throughout this research. I am grateful to everyone who has supported the development of these ideas.



## CHAPTER THREE

# Situating the Research

This chapter addresses key concepts that I critically engage with throughout this thesis. Section one addresses the culturally relative definitions of coconut oil. I discuss my decision to keep the definitions of ‘coconut oil’ and ‘coconut oil consumer’ broad in order to capture a wider range of experiences with and understandings of the product. Section two engages with the diverse experiences of diaspora. I account for how Pacific Islanders navigate the power relations of diaspora and focus on diasporic-produced knowledges to challenge Island-centric claims to cultural authenticity. Section three explains how ‘Pacific Islanders’ are defined for this research as those ancestrally descended from the indigenous peoples of the Pacific Islands. This section also elaborates on my own ambivalent critiques regarding how indigeneity is politically invoked. Finally, section four engages with Pacific identity in Aotearoa New Zealand and the United States and compares the lived experiences of Islanders in the Wellington Region and the San Francisco Bay Area. Here, I discuss issues of visibility and code-switching. By directly addressing these key concepts, I seek to make clear the political discourse and bodies of literature this research is situated within and what it seeks to contribute to.



### Section 3.1

## Coconut Oil

In May 2019, I was invited to spend an afternoon with the Porirua Mamas’ Tivaevae Collective in Cannons Creek just outside Wellington city. I was put in contact with the group through a fellow Pacific studies student who thought my project would benefit from



a community-based contribution of her Cook Islands Māori<sup>8</sup> elders. I had stayed up late the night before making taro doughnuts for the māmās (a term of respect for older Cook Islands Māori women). The recipe was my adaptation of buñelos dāgo that consistently won over Polynesian taste buds, although I’ve always preferred pumpkin doughnuts myself. I had anticipated that I would talk to a group of ten to fifteen. Instead, as I walked into the large auditorium used by the collective that afternoon, I was greeted by a group of fifty to sixty. Many were dressed in bright colors and ‘ei katu (flower crowns), and the room carried the aroma of scented coconut oil worn on their skin and hair. The interviews didn’t go as planned. Despite the group coordinator’s prior notice that I would be audio recording during my visit, my equipment made interactions unnecessarily formal and a few noticeably uncomfortable in their own community space. It cut through the unspoken etiquette of the room, so I decided to do away with it and returned the recorder to my bag. The countless overlapping conversations were impossible to transcribe anyway.

Throughout the meeting, different māmās discussed their thoughts about coconut oil and I struggled to keep up with my notes and questions. They shared anecdotes, opinions about today’s youth, and concerns over the state of Cook Islands Māori culture in diaspora—all sparked by conversations about coconut oil. Towards the end of the afternoon, I caught eye contact with one of the oldest women in the auditorium. I could see she was waiting to speak with me, so I walked over to her table and sat beside her. In the politest way possible, she said that she had one piece of feedback for my project: it made absolutely no sense. Why? Because from her Rarotongan understanding, there is no *one* thing called coconut oil. To her, coconut oil is a base product that makes hundreds of other products, so her question was what *type* am I researching?

This was a moment of culture clash. Although there is recognition of variation in Western understandings of coconut oil—virgin,<sup>9</sup> RBD,<sup>10</sup> cold-pressed, refracted—in her view, coconut oil is understood as a base ingredient of entirely different products—moso’oi, fetau, lolo ahi. In this Pacific context, coconut oil is defined by the different botanical, and sometimes zoological, ‘essences’ it’s infused with which have specific

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<sup>8</sup> The term Māori refers to the indigenous peoples of the Cook Islands and Aotearoa.

<sup>9</sup> There are no international standards of what makes coconut oil ‘virgin.’ Different countries and companies have their own regulations.

<sup>10</sup> An acronym standing for rehydrated, bleached and deodorized.

cosmetic, medicinal and cultural purposes (Percival, 2001; Stevens, 2018; Tcherkézoff, 2008). To this māmā, my approach to researching coconut oil is akin to researching bread by examining only flour. It reduces the diversity, functionality and history of all its iterations into just its base ingredient. She explained that in Rarotongan there is a word for oil, ‘inu,’ and there is a word for the specific stage of a mature coconut used to make oil, ‘akari’<sup>11</sup>—but there is no word for coconut oil. The combination of the two words ‘akari-inu’ does not convey the same meaning as a person may assume it would in English. Her recommendation was that I get more specific. However, as I have emphasized, this research does not deal with Pacific meanings of coconut oil alone. As a comparative project, it accounts for the diversity of meanings held by Aotearoa Māori and non-Pacific consumers as well. And these meanings vary widely from those held by this Rarotongan māmā, as well as those of the Porirua Mamas’ Tivaevae Collective generally.

Acknowledging that Pacific Island cultures have had more time to develop indigenous relationships to coconut oil compared to cultures that did not originate from where *Cocos nucifera* grows, it’s still beneficial for comparative ethnographic purposes to look for perspectives “beyond the reef” (Powell, 2021). Exploring the social lives of coconut oil in the West which, in this research, includes the United States and New Zealand, reflects how different cultures articulate new meaning to their product use. By examining the social lives of coconut oil with non-Pacific, Aotearoa Māori and Pacific Islander consumers, this thesis shows how the product acquires different forms of sociocultural capital that are unique to these groups’ respective (and at times overlapping) cultural fields. For this reason, I broadened the scope of research to best encompass the experiences and understandings of coconut oil discussed by all consumers included in this project. Therefore, for the purposes of this thesis, coconut oil is defined as the oil extracted from *Cocos nucifera* by any means, from any region, and for any purpose. This includes products that contain coconut oil so long as they are understood by interview participants or survey respondents as a conscious consumption of coconut oil. Additionally, a coconut oil consumer is anyone who self-identifies as such regardless of the frequency of their use or whether their use is current or in the past. Using a broad definition of coconut oil and

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<sup>11</sup> ‘Nu’ or ‘niu’ is the word for a young drinking coconut, which is phonetically similar to other Austronesian words for ‘coconut.’

coconut oil consumer enabled me to collect more stories and added depth to my research findings. Throughout this thesis, how coconut oil is implicated in identity-maintenance is discussed and analyzed. This especially pertains to how coconut oil conveys meaning in the Pacific diaspora. In order to properly frame this point, it's helpful to address what is meant by the term 'diaspora' and how diaspora functions in a socio-psychological sense.



### Section 3.2

## **Diasporic Knowledges**

The term 'diaspora' is derived from two Greek words, 'dia' (over) and 'speiro' (seeds) (Ang, 2005). The contemporary meaning from its original translation, "the scattering of seeds," refers to human population dispersal from one original place to others (Ang, 2005). According to William Safran (1991), diasporic communities are likely characterized at least partially by the following features:

[Diasporic communities are] "expatriate minority communities" (1) that are dispersed from an original "center" to at least two "peripheral" places; (2) that maintain a "memory, vision, or myth about their original homeland"; (3) that "believe they are not—and perhaps cannot be—fully accepted by their host country"; (4) that see the ancestral home as a place of eventual return, when the time is right; (5) that are committed to the maintenance or restoration of this homeland; and (6) whose consciousness and solidarity as a group are "importantly defined" by this continuing relationship with the homeland (Safran, 1991, pp. 83-84, quoted in Clifford, 1997, p. 247).

Diasporic discourse has closely been associated with Jews as a model of cultural displacement since our ancestors' expulsion from present day Israel and Palestine in ancient times (Ang, 2005). 'Diaspora' has continuously been applied to Jews' subsequent expulsions from the places earlier generations sought refuge (Ang, 2005). Implicit in this framing of Jewish diaspora—as well as the diasporas of Africans, Armenians, Irish and Palestinians to name only a few—is a narrative of violence and victimhood (Ang, 2005; Cohen, 2019). This victim narrative holds true for my paternal family who fled pogroms in Eastern Europe in the early twentieth century and arrived in North America as both

refugees and settlers. My family narrative impacts my perspectives on the tensions between native and migrant political discourse which I address in the following section.

This victim narrative is different to the type of diaspora celebrated in Epeli Hau'ofa's seminal piece "Our Sea of Islands":

[Pacific Islanders] have since moved, by the tens of thousands, doing what their ancestors did in earlier times: enlarging their world as they go, on a scale not possible before. Everywhere they go, to Australia, New Zealand, Hawai'i, the mainland United States, Canada, Europe, and elsewhere, they strike roots in new resource areas, securing employment and overseas family property, expanding kinship networks through which they circulate themselves, their relatives, their material goods, and their stories all across their ocean... (1994, p. 155).

The type of diaspora that Hau'ofa (1994) describes here can be referred to as a diaspora of opportunity. A diaspora of opportunity specifically refers to peoples who left their homelands for opportunities available elsewhere, and whose experiences are distinguished from those of so-called victim diasporas who fled immediate violence. Implicit in this framing is an assumption of choice and agency, however constrained each may be. This categorization would likely include a bulk of Pacific migration to the Pacific Rim for work and education opportunities but exclude those who have been forced out of their homelands for reasons including nuclear testing, blackbirding slavery, natural resource exploitation, climate change, poverty, land alienation and war. Still, because agency and force are so closely entangled, attempts to definitively categorize Pacific diasporas as solely victim diasporas or diasporas of opportunity becomes convoluted, as each family's migration is subject to multiple interpretations. In this tension, a diasporic person may be left to wonder whether their family's migration was due to a push or a pull. My maternal family often discusses how they came to the continental United States for opportunities unavailable at the time on Guam. However, I am also aware that the United States military, and later, overseas hotel developers, appropriated family land for which they received little-to-no compensation, and it likely would have been difficult for some family members to stay even if they wanted to. Different perspectives tell different narratives.

Though diaspora may be celebration-worthy for some, for others it can evoke generational trauma and should be handled with sensitivity. This consideration matters to me as a diasporic-identifying person in Pacific studies because for most of my life, diaspora has been a definitive characteristic woven into the foundations of my identity and at times is unsettled by the emphasis on indigenous identity and homeland-belonging in Pacific studies literature. Homeland is something not everyone has access to. Similar considerations are raised by Anne-Marie Tupuola regarding diasporic Pacific youth:

Firstly, there is a need to question the relevance of ‘indigenous’ and ‘native’ theories of identity when researching or working with youth of transient and multiple identities. Secondly, there is a need for Pacific scholars and educators to move beyond the categorisation of Pacific youth within rigid parameters [...] youth are crossing between cultures and adopting identifications far removed from their genealogy and local geography. Thirdly, research methods and theory about identity need to be constantly updated so that the youth of today and tomorrow are not penalised nor ostracised because models and assumptions about youth identity from the past continue to be prioritised (2004, p. 96).

There are substantial proportions of Pacific peoples living outside their ancestral homelands, and for several ethnic groups, those living outside their homelands greatly outnumber those within them.<sup>12</sup> This significantly challenges *where* the Pacific is, if assessed by *who* the Pacific is. Therefore, my research in the Pacific diaspora must contend with the power relationships between place and people. This dynamic has to do with how diaspora is imagined and experienced, and the ways diasporic and non-diasporic identities are linked to claims of cultural authenticity.

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<sup>12</sup> Over 870,000 Pacific Islanders live in the continental United States (EPIC, 2014). 66% of Chamorros live in the continental United States and Hawai‘i (EPIC, 2014, Punzalan, 2019). Nearly 380,000 Pacific Islanders (not including Aotearoa Māori) live in Aotearoa New Zealand (Statistics New Zealand [SNZ], n.d.). There are nearly 11 times more Cook Islands Māori and 15 times more Niueans living in Aotearoa New Zealand than there are in their respective homelands; and an estimated 90% of ethnic Tokelauans live in Aotearoa New Zealand (Central Intelligence Agency [CIA], 2020; Government of Tokelau, n.d.; SNZ, n.d.). Nearly 200,000 Islanders live in Australia (Bately, 2017). 20% of Aotearoa Māori live in Australia (Te Punga Somerville, 2012). These figures have likely increased by the time of this publication.

Diaspora presupposes the existence of a people's original homeland which Safran (1991) refers to as a "center." This center is not only conceptualized in geographic terms, but cultural, genealogical, linguistic, and in some cases, spiritual terms as well.<sup>13</sup> Based on conversations with Pacific Islander participants, there seems to be a recognition that the center, recognized in this context as the Islands themselves, is a sacred place. This is likely because the center is understood as the material place of our ancestral ties and the origin of our traditional cultural knowledge. But the sacredness of the center also creates the possibility for displacement. Indeed, diasporic discourse is premised on the pre-existence of a center and some form of estrangement from it (Safran, 1991). For several Pacific Islander participants, there is a perception that living in diaspora—living 'removed' from the center—removes us, as Pacific Islanders, from the seat of cultural authenticity.

This complex and somewhat disempowering relationship between geography and social psychology was a cause of shame for several participants and significantly impacted my research. Many participants—and more would-be participants—explained that they did not feel comfortable speaking on behalf of Pacific Islander coconut oil consumption practices due to their self-perceived lack of authentic cultural knowledge. Several individuals declined my invitation to participate citing this reason. For Bonnie Pauahi Tysse (Bay Area, Hawaiian), this sense of displacement has to do with how she understands the relationality of truth. She explained that 'truth,' framed as authentic Pacific cultural knowledge in our discussion, is something always "truest to the source." By living away from the Islands, she understood herself to possess less authentic cultural knowledge than her on-island kin.

Throughout my research, diasporic Islanders made disparaging comments about themselves which reflected a perception of their own cultural dilution. Some of the terms used were "haole" (foreigner), "fia palagi/palangi" (wanting to be white), "plastic," and "Bounty bar"—a type of coconut candy coated in chocolate that is brown on the outside and white on the inside. A detailed unpacking of this symbolism is discussed in chapter five. Vilsoni Hereniko discusses the similar ways 'coconuts' are invoked as epithets against 'non-authentic' Islanders: "Brown on the outside and white on the inside, the coconut

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<sup>13</sup> Some Pacific place names, like Sāmoa or Te Pito o Te Henua (Rapa Nui/Easter Island) literally translate to mean the "center" or the "navel" (Figiel, 1996; Haun, 2017).

became a symbol of Islanders whose values are of those of whites” (1999, p. 161). These terms shame Islanders for not being ‘enough,’ and in this context, not being ‘enough’ relates to a person’s diasporic status.

I want to use this project to challenge this dynamic. My research objectives were not to capture what the ‘authentic’ (and presumably fixed) Pacific Islander understandings and uses of coconut oil are by asking only ‘authentic’ Islanders. (The articulated view of culture I strategically adopt in this research frames authenticity as only a social fact anyway.) The point of this project is to examine the contemporary social lives of coconut oil in Pacific Islander, Māori and non-Pacific consumers’ fields. In this research, *all* Pacific Islanders’ voices are framed as representative of the reality of the Pacific diaspora, whatever form that takes, whatever that looks like. This group may include a ‘full-blood’ Samoan raised in the Islands and whose identity is closely entwined with a love for their culture and homeland. It may also include a ‘thirty-second percent’ fourth-generation Californian Hawaiian, who’s never been to the Islands and has little interest in going. In my research, both are qualified as Islanders equally. This framing of diasporic experience has the capacity to hold multiple narratives and non-uniform experiences, and it positions Islanders as producers of indigenous knowledge wherever they are. In my thesis, I seek to frame cultural knowledge produced in the diaspora as equal to cultural knowledge produced in the Islands. This framing also accounts for the fact that Pacific peoples are geographically dispersed, and therefore recognizes cultural identity as geographically decentralized. Therefore, Islanders’ claims to their Pacific identities are non-conditional, and Pacific voices are validated by the Pacific bodies they belong to. But, of course, *who* is defined as an Islander, compared to is not, is complicated.

However, with this framing, there remains an overarching tension between identifying Islanders as globalized migrant/settler communities or displaced/expanded indigenous peoples. I tend to understand myself in relation to the former which largely differentiates my perspective from other Pacific studies works that frame Islanders as inalienably and acontextually indigenous. There are several motivations as to why some Pacific peoples living in diaspora find it useful to maintain a trans-indigenous identity though:

[T]here are risks and consequences associated with the signification of a globalized Hawaiian identity. To take a primarily land-based and indigenous-focused cultural group and argue that such a group is now globally everywhere may deleteriously impact Hawaiians situated at home and the larger Hawaiian sovereignty movement that fights for native rights. Likewise, if Hawaianness is deemed everywhere, then claims over Hawaiian land and political sovereignty may be immediately weakened (Halualani, 2008, p. 18).

The section below hashes out these concerns further as they relate to my fieldwork and theoretical approaches. Ultimately, I do side with Halualani's (2008) defense of an indigenous-based framework for the purposes of this thesis. But in this discussion, I draw attention to the political implications and problems of doing so.



### Section 3.3

## **Defining Pacific Islander**

The term 'Pacific Islander' is used in this research to refer to anyone of indigenous ancestry linked to the tropical Pacific Islands, geographically included within the subregions that have been (problematically) termed Melanesia, Micronesia or Polynesia, and environmentally defined by a history of coconut cultivation. No standards of blood quantum, birthplace or cultural knowledge were imposed on Pacific Islander participants. Such standards would have been undesirable and counterproductive to the political aims of my research which seeks to empower Islanders for who they are now, not who they could be or 'should' become.

Māori consumers in this research are not defined as Pacific Islanders, unless they also have recent ancestry belonging to the tropical Pacific.<sup>14</sup> This is because Aotearoa's climate prevents coconut cultivation (although, in chapter four, I address the preservation of Pacific genealogical memory of *Cocos nucifera* through the naming of the nīkau palm [J. A. Bennett, 2018; Vennell, 2019]). While acknowledging that te ao Māori maintains genealogical connection with the tropical Pacific (M. Jackson, 2020), that Māori

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<sup>14</sup> There are five interview participants of Māori ancestry, two are placed in the Māori group; three are placed in the Pacific Islander group because of their ancestry linked to the tropical Pacific Islands.



whakapapa to Hawaiki (except for Ngāi Tūhoe who were born of Te Urewera mist [Aikman, 2019]), and that Aotearoa certainly is part of the indigenous Pacific world, this cultural distinction is intended to uphold Māori as tangata whenua first in accordance with Te Tiriti o Waitangi. In doing so, this project recognizes all tauiwi, including other Pacific peoples, as Treaty partners. This is not meant to diminish our indigenous Pacific kinship, but rather is intended to honor the cultural uniqueness of Māoritanga and Aotearoa.

Despite my painful ambivalence on the matter, this project excludes individuals of ‘arrivant’ ancestry from the Pacific Islander category (Rohrer, 2016). In the development of this thesis, questions raised about indigenous identity, its associated strategic essentialisms, and related sovereign or nationalistic political objectives have troubled this research design (Hoskins, 2012; Sissons, 2005). Even as I write this thesis, I have not personally reached any satisfactory conclusion as to what indigenous identity—especially trans-indigenous identity—means vis-à-vis the non-indigenous ‘other.’ I had originally wanted to include non-indigenous peoples with generational ties to the Pacific as Pacific Islanders as a way to recognize their hybridized cultural development in the region. But after further thought, I realized that there are significant factors to take into consideration.

Namely, there is the risk that including those of arrivant descent as Pacific Islanders—or to recognize their naturalization to place—may strengthen oppressive settler claims to land and power (Fujikane & Okamura, 2008; Kauanui, 2007; Saranillio, 2018). This concern stems from the identification of settler colonialism as an ideological structure—not a historical event—which operates by the continuous disfranchisement, dispossession and erasure of indigenous communities from their own homelands (M. Jackson, 2020). This argument is advanced in *Asian Settler Colonialism* (Fujikane & Okamura, 2008) which asserts that all non-indigenous peoples living outside of their respective homelands are settlers regardless of their former or contemporary oppression, and in seeking political power through civil rights rhetoric perpetuate an ideological settler colonial structure that disempowers indigenous communities. The authors’ central argument is that non-indigenous peoples do not belong to the land they live on in the same way that indigenous peoples do (see Trask, 1997). For this reason, they argue, indigenous peoples have a homeland, are entitled to home rule, and indeed *need* a nation to ensure their own survival.

Equally concerning though, and quite personally affective as the descendant of pogrom refugees, are how exclusive nativist claims over the intrinsic birthright to control place and power, and the classification of non-indigenous communities as permanent settlers or migrants in the ‘nation’ or ‘homeland,’ are also politically weaponized and used to justify state violence (Sharma, 2020; Sharma & Wright, 2008; Teaiwa, 2010). The Pacific is not exempted from this history of politicized xenophobia. As Nandita Sharma and Cynthia Wright argue (largely in response to *Asian Settler Colonialism* [Fujikane & Okamura, 2008]), “A discourse that posits that ‘all migrants are settler colonists,’ or that ‘all those who leave their “Native” lands are colonizers,’ necessarily renders the entire process of human migration as a serious problem, while denying the migratory histories of ‘Natives’” (2008, p. 123). The central argument laid out in Sharma’s recent work *Home Rule* (2020) is that the creation of a nation is a violent process premised on a group’s ability to establish and control its borders through the identification and exclusion of non-group members. Sharma argues that the nation is not a natural political phenomenon, but migration is, and therefore a freer world is one without obstructive indigenous ethno-nationalism.

I see valid arguments present in both political perspectives. But currently the theoretical divisions between the two seem too distant to bridge in this thesis alone. Currently, though, it seems that Pacific studies is more receptive to the pro-indigenous nationalism championed in *Asian Settler Colonialism* (Fujikane & Okamura, 2008), than it is to Sharma’s (2020) critique of it. I had attempted various ‘third space’ or ‘triangular’ designs to navigate around indigenous-dependent Pacific identity in order to recognize cultural hybridity, but ultimately none were befitting of a Pacific studies approach which holds attentiveness to indigeneity as a central tenet (Teaiwa, 2010). My inability to design a more inclusive definition of Pacific identity and adoption of an indigenous::non-indigenous binary reifies a boundary premised on racialized ethnic, cultural and genealogical distinction (Muecke, 2005). I don’t actually believe such a binary exists in any essentialist terms—neither do several indigenous-identifying participants included in this research. Still though, this binaristic definition is strategically employed here because, as Emalani Case argues, “in a settler colony, indigeneity has to matter” (personal communication, 6 July 2019; see also Case, 2021). For the purposes of this thesis, rooted

in Pacific studies, I accept that there is a political necessity in this binary, even if I disagree with the ontological foundations of it.

What this means is that those who are ‘commonly’ constructed as indigenous to the tropical Pacific are defined as Pacific Islanders and those who are ‘commonly’ constructed as non-indigenous are excluded.<sup>15</sup> For this reason, I have recategorized one Filipina survey respondent who identified herself as a Pacific Islander but who is not indigenous to the Pacific Islands as regionally defined in this research. I have also recategorized participants Alena Korpai (Wellington, non-Pacific) who is IndoFijian and Jerry Javier (Bay Area, non-Pacific) who is a non-indigenous Hawai‘i local. Still, there is insight to unpack from Javier’s consideration of their own positionality within this binaristic division and of the political impacts claiming their own Island-centered identity holds:

NR	You know how I just said that I was interviewing Pacific Islander, non-Pacific Islander [categories]—[I] don’t know how to categorize you. How would <i>you</i> categorize you, given that binary?
JJ	I think I would consider myself a Pacific Islander to an extent, as someone who grew up, was born and raised on Island. And I feel like I have a specific tie and responsibility to the Islands having been born on the Islands.
NR	Can you describe that responsibility?
JJ	I feel like as someone who was born on the Islands, you still have a responsibility for being informed. As a non-native person, I have a responsibility of understanding, of making attempts to understand Hawaiian culture and uphold it, right? Because if you’re born on the land and you’re living on the land or you—like I attribute a lot of what makes <i>me</i> is my experience in Hawai‘i [...] and everything that comes with that, you know? And if I want to uphold and affirm myself, I also have to do that by affirming the land and that also means the people and the culture because they’re inseparable. [...] I know that Hawaiian governance and Native Hawaiian society had thought about people who weren’t Native Hawaiian and had worked them into their legal systems in different ways.
NR	Are you talking pre-coup?
JJ	Yeah. Pre-coup. And so it’s like, you know. I still, I believe in upholding the

<sup>15</sup> The word ‘commonly’ is written in apostrophes here because it acknowledges contested, non-universal indigenous claims to the Islands—even amongst Islanders. For example, Polynesians in New Caledonia may not be recognized or personally identify as indigenous. (Both participants from New Caledonia in this research do not identify as indigenous.)

	Hawaiian Kingdom and sovereignty. And so when the Kingdom comes back, there would be some kind of position for me or there would be some kind of acknowledgement of my existence as well. If that makes sense?
NR	Do you feel that way in Hawaiian nationalist political spaces and discourse? That there is an accommodation for the non-native?
JJ	Um honestly there are a lot of different—I feel like there isn’t one stance on “What do you do with non-native people?” And so I’m going less off of a deep understanding of sovereignty kind of discussions. I’m kind of going off of my own personal experience. And what I know what it’s like to be—like having been born and raised in a small area and having—had Hawaiian friends, having Hawaiian people become part of your hānai [adopted] family and stuff like that. But I don’t know, once you’re born on the Islands, there’s part of—you’re a part of the Island in some way.

Javier’s sentiment does not speak on behalf of all non-indigenous peoples of the Pacific, but I include it here because it addresses key concerns of belonging and identity. Specifically, Javier draws attention to the reality that many peoples living in the Pacific are not indigenous to the region, but nonetheless have generational ties to it. Excluding these non-indigenous communities’ right to exist in the Pacific is a problem. This consideration invokes Epeli Hau‘ofa’s (1994) words in which he describes his views of Oceania: “Conquerors come, conquerors go, the ocean remains, mother only to her children. This mother has a big heart though; she adopts anyone who loves her” (pp. 155-156). Clearly there is more reckoning that needs to be done to grapple with what it means to be a child of the ocean. I critique indigeneity in this section not to dismantle the work of indigenous sovereignty movements—although, like Sharma (2020) I am cautious of nationalism in most forms. My critique is meant to draw attention to the reality that although indigenous rhetoric can be invoked for liberation, it can also be invoked to oppress, and therefore researchers should always, always remain cautious of uncritical essentialist assertions of indigenous identity and indigenous power. It can be a double-edged sword.

I am grateful to the works of indigenous scholars who complicate this indigenous::non-indigenous binary, such as Clea Te Kawehau Hoskins who recognizes that, “Marginalized groups depend for their survival on forms of representation” (2012, pp. 93-94), while simultaneously arguing that, “An oppositional politics alone, without the interruption of ethics, leads to competition and unproductive disengagement, and is likely

unsustainable...” (p. 92) Other indigenous scholars’ works complicate indigenous::non-indigenous binaristic identity and its relationship to products, place and power (Aporosa, 2015; Gonzáles, 2014; Kiddle, 2020; Teaiwa, 2010; J. Teillet & C. Teillet, 2016). Their efforts are aided by the work of non-indigenous scholars who offer ways to support indigenous sovereignty by focusing on settler responsibility (Frain, 2017; Rohrer, 2016; Saranillio, 2018; Thomas, 2020). While I recognize that the politicization of indigenous identity serves necessary objectives at present, an ideal decolonized future would diminish its need. But it’s clear that time is still far off into the horizon. Still, “human decency and a decent politics are fostered if we tune into the strange logic of turbulence” (J. Bennett, 2010, p. xi). As this research project takes place in the Pacific diaspora, this turbulence is invoked by the political implications of Islanders’ presence in the places they are not indigenous to (unless they are also of Māori or Native American heritage, which some are). In the next section, I examine the factors that cultivate migration out of the Pacific and into the Pacific Rim and explore Islanders’ experiences in diaspora.



#### Section 3.4

### **Comparative Geographies**

There are few regions on Earth that have as porous borders as the area of ocean referred to throughout this thesis as the Pacific Islands or just as the Pacific. It has and had many names: Oceania, South Seas, Nan’yō, Moana and Pasifik, none of which *exactly* mean the other as the Pacific is a region of imposed geographies (Peattie, 1988; Santos Perez, 2020b). In Aotearoa New Zealand, where this dissertation was written, the Pacific is oftentimes thought to be geographically ‘out there’ (Hau‘ofa, 1975; Wesley-Smith, 1995), while this indigenous Polynesian island nation may be referred to as Australasia or something to that othering effect. Sometimes this distinction is made to distinguish New Zealand’s settler society from presenting itself as unproblematically part of the ‘less’ colonized Islands where land is managed mostly or entirely by its indigenous peoples (Salesa, 2017). Sometimes this othering is made on Māori terms, as a way to distinguish tangata whenua from settlers—Pacific or otherwise—who arrived in droves seeking

opportunity and in doing so, benefit from Māori land dispossession (Case, 2021; Te Punga Somerville, 2012). Sometimes, Pacific peoples—usually Polynesian—are understood to have a unique indigenous relationship as *tuākana* of Māori that justifies a place in Aotearoa (Salesa, 2017). And sometimes this “ambivalent kinship” is strategically disregarded because even close family members need to be reminded of respectful boundaries every now and then (Teaiwa & Mallon, 2005; Te Punga Somerville, 2012).

Although ‘Aotearoa’ and ‘New Zealand’ may roughly refer to the same geographic place currently, they are not synonyms. As such, I use each term intentionally to convey a specific meaning. In short, ‘Aotearoa’ is the main indigenous term for the land, and through Māori *whakapapa* maintains connection with the wider Pacific. ‘New Zealand,’ as a European-dominated settler construction, holds a colonial relationship with Aotearoa and the wider Pacific, parts of which it administered as an extension of the British Crown (Salesa, 2017; Teaiwa & Mallon, 2005). The term ‘Aotearoa New Zealand’ indicates both these meanings in tension.

New Zealand maintains varying degrees of administrative influence in three other Pacific nations as well: Niue, the Cook Islands and Tokelau which, alongside the Kermadec Islands, Ross Dependency and Aotearoa New Zealand itself, comprise the New Zealand Realm. The Chatham Islands, which have their own unique Moriori culture, are politically incorporated into the nation-state. Niue and the Cook Islands are independent nations but maintain Free Association with New Zealand—a political design that most Micronesian nations have modeled their relationships with the United States upon (Peattie, 1988). Tokelau remains a dependent territory of New Zealand and is one of six Pacific nations listed by the United Nations as Non-Self-Governing Territories (United Nations, 17 August 2021).<sup>16</sup> Citizens of the New Zealand Realm hold New Zealand passports and are New Zealand citizens. Consequently, there are significantly more Cook Islands Māori, Niueans and Tokelauans living in Aotearoa New Zealand than in their homeland islands. New Zealand’s nearly half-century long colonial administration of Sāmoa ended with the nation’s independence in 1962—the first Pacific nation to gain independence from a former

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<sup>16</sup> The other five Pacific nations on the list are American Samoa, Guam, French Polynesia, New Caledonia, and Pitcairn. Hawai‘i was removed in 1959 following statehood, largely against the wishes of Hawaiians (Fujikane and Okamura, 2008).

colonial power. Although Samoans do not automatically qualify for New Zealand citizenship, legislation and diplomatic relationships have contributed to waves of Samoan migration into Aotearoa New Zealand.<sup>17</sup> In 2018, there were over 180,000 Samoans living in Aotearoa New Zealand (SNZ, n.d.). They outnumber the second and third largest Pacific cultural groups—Tongans and Cook Islands Māori—combined (SNZ, n.d.). Evoking ‘good neighbor’ rhetoric, New Zealand conditionally offers other Pacific nations set quotas of residency and special class visas to live and work in the country. New Zealand also actively recruits Pacific labor through its Recognised Seasonal Employer (RSE) scheme (Salesa, 2017). However, seasonal migrants face greater restrictions barring their ability to remain in the country long term. As Angie Enoka writes, “because of racist conceptions of New Zealand citizenship, these [RSE] workers are socially constructed as ‘temporary workers’ and unfit to be future citizens” (2019, p. 121).

Despite how the Pacific is commonly referred to and conceptually thought of as ‘out there,’ the Pacific is undeniably felt and seen in Aotearoa New Zealand through popular culture, sport, media and government representation (Salesa, 2017; Teaiwa & Mallon, 2005). For this reason, it’s argued that the presence of Islanders in Aotearoa New Zealand makes at least parts of the country a Pacific place independent of its indigenous Polynesian roots (Hau‘ofa, 1994). This argument is extended to other Pacific diasporic nodes such as Los Angeles, the San Francisco Bay Area and Salt Lake City. There are nearly 380,000 Pacific Islanders—not including Māori—living in Aotearoa New Zealand, nearly eight percent of the total national population (SNZ, n.d.). Most Islanders live in the North Island of Aotearoa New Zealand, with nearly sixty-four percent of the Pacific Islander population in the Auckland region and nearly eleven percent in the Wellington Region (SNZ, n.d.). An estimated ninety-four percent of Islanders in Aotearoa New Zealand are Polynesian (Pasefika Proud, 2016). This impacts how ‘the Pacific’ is understood. For many, ‘the Pacific’ and ‘Polynesia’ are synonymous, as are ‘Polynesian’ and ‘Islander.’ Melanesia and Micronesia are generally considered ‘somewhere else,’ if considered at all (Hanlon, 2009). In Aotearoa New Zealand, Melanesians and Micronesians

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<sup>17</sup> In 1982, Samoans born between 1924 and 1948 who were already residing in Aotearoa New Zealand became eligible for New Zealand citizenship as stipulated by the Citizenship (Western Samoa) Act (New Zealand Parliamentary Counsel Office, 2010; Teaiwa & Mallon, 2005).

are minorities within a minority sharing visibility constraints similar to American Pacific Islanders.<sup>18</sup>

In the United States, where I'm from, the Pacific is generally and easily understood as 'out there,' but this is compounded with a rough understanding that 'we,' as Americans, are out there too. There are three historically populated American territories in the Pacific: the Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI), Guam and American Samoa. After its United States-backed overthrow, the Kingdom of Hawai'i was annexed into the United States first as a territory in 1898, and then as the fiftieth state of the union in 1959. Each of these polities has its own uniquely 'negotiated' political relationship with the United States government, and with the exception of American Samoa, all residents born in these island polities are, with varying constitutional rights and protections, American citizens.<sup>19</sup> These political relationships establish migrational routes that push and pull Pacific peoples to the continental United States (M. Perez, 2002; Trask, 2008). Nearly two thirds of Chamorros and one third of Hawaiians live in the continental United States (Kajihiro, 2008; Punzalan, 2019). Nearly 200,000 ethnic Samoans live in the United States (including Hawai'i), but the data do not differentiate between Samoans from the American territory and those from the independent nation (USCB, 2019).

The Republic of Palau, the Republic of the Marshall Islands, and the Federated States of Micronesia were administered by the American government between 1947 to 1994 as the United Nations Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands. Their respective Compacts of Free Association (CoFA) permit citizens of these nations residency in the United States, where a significant proportion of their peoples live (K. Diaz, 2012; Van der Geest et al., 2020). Citizens of these independent nations may enlist in the United States military, which many do for economic opportunity or patriotic 'debt.' Islanders are overrepresented in the demographics of active-duty personnel (Arriola, 2020; Duffin, 9

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<sup>18</sup> In 2018, there were a total of 29,040 Melanesian, Micronesian, or non-explicitly Polynesian declared Pacific Islanders counted in the New Zealand Census, excluding Aotearoa Māori and IndoFijians (SNZ, n.d.). However, 19,722 identified as Fijian, who are sometimes colloquially considered Polynesian in Aotearoa New Zealand.

<sup>19</sup> In 2018, while writing this thesis, a lower United States court ruled in favor of three American Samoans granting them—and by extension all people born in American Samoa—American citizenship. However, this ruling was successfully appealed by the government of American Samoa in 2021. Therefore, those born in American Samoa once again remain American nationals (RNZ, 16 June 2021; see also Stover, 1999).



November 2021).<sup>20</sup> Reflecting this high enlistment rate, the United States military serves as a significant route that channels our peoples to new locales in the continental United States and beyond, as it did for my family. Wherever there is an American military base, a person can trust that an Islander is nearby.

The Pacific has at times been referred to as an ‘American Lake,’ and undoubtedly the United States impacts the lives of Islanders in the Pacific, especially those in American territories or CoFA nations. However, the awareness isn’t necessarily mutual. It’s common for Americans living in the continental United States to be unaware that American territories exist or to have their sense of physical geography superseded by an “imagined intimacy” which normalizes the political incorporation of Pacific Islands into the United States (Imada, 2004, p. 114). Pointing out how this American identity has been constructed in conversation with Americans often reveals how effective this normalization of national empire is. For example, in her interview, Marina Blum (Bay Area, non-Pacific) and I discussed how she conceptualizes Hawai‘i as part of the United States primarily and as a Pacific archipelago secondarily:

MB	Hawai‘i, I guess I wouldn’t—I guess when you say ‘Pacific Islander,’ I don’t think of Hawai‘i.
NR	Oh interesting! Why?
MB	I don’t know. I guess I think—in my mind the geography is such that I don’t know that they are further away [laughing]. Like Hawai‘i is doing its own thing and then there’s like Samoa and Guam and—like it’s very murky in my mind. I’m not gonna lie. I’m not aware which island is where.

In the continental United States, Pacific culture may be visible in popular culture but Islanders, with a handful of exceptions in sports and entertainment, generally are not (Henderson, 2011). Bonnie Pauahi Tysse (Bay Area, Hawaiian) describes this dynamic as “being seen and unseen at the same time.” It’s argued that this limited and conditional visibility (and strategic invisibility) has to do with how mythic representations of Pacific

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<sup>20</sup> Although Pacific Islanders are only 0.2% of the total United States population, they constitute 1.65% of all active duty enlisted women and 1.21% of all active duty enlisted men in the United States military, and these figures report those who identified themselves as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander *only* and not in combination with any other races (Duffin, 9 November 2021).

culture are ‘militouristically’ pacified, commodified and marketed (Teaiwa, 2016). For many Americans, there is a conceptual disconnect between Pacific culture—usually Hawaiian culture—and the indigenous peoples from which certain practices like surfing or hula originated. As a result, being ‘Hawaiian’ is understood by many as a *subcultural way of life* rather than as an indigenous-ethnic identity (Kauanui, 2007). Those who identify through so-called Hawaiian ‘subculture’ may call themselves ‘kama‘āina’ or ‘Hawaiian at heart.’

In the rare times that non-Hawaiian Islanders are acknowledged, we are commonly recognized in a way that renders us as versions of mythic Hawaiians. Often, it’s strategic for American Islanders to represent ourselves in this way for economic and political purposes or social ease (Teaiwa, 2016). As Ruby Fanaika Fa‘agau (Bay Area, Tongan, Samoan, Fijian) reflected:

RFF	I’m so used to them [Hawaiians] being—they used to be—like how Polynesians are over-shadowing Micronesians and Melanesians. It used to be Hawaiians who were overshadowing the rest of us where a lot of Samoans, Tongans we would just say after going in circles trying to explain what Sāmoa or Tonga was, we would just say Hawaiian. We would just say Hawaiian in the 1990s.
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Reflective of our relative invisibility, accessing data about Islanders in the continental United States is difficult because often Islanders are not specifically counted at all. When we are, we are often inappropriately categorized. Although the United States Census Bureau has since disaggregated Pacific Islanders from the Asian Pacific Islander (API) category, that label is still frequently used in other public and private institutions (Duncan, 2012; Kaholokula, Okamoto & Yee, 2020). Even the category ‘Asian’ is critiqued for underserving the diversity of communities it supposedly represents (Rondilla, 2002). When Pacific census data are disaggregated from Asian data, gross inequalities in health, education, incarceration, wealth and employment come to light (EPIC, 2014).

Although there are significantly more Islanders living in the continental United States (estimated 870,000) than there are in Aotearoa New Zealand (estimated 380,000), proportionately Islanders comprise a much greater amount of the total population of Aotearoa New Zealand (about eight percent) than Islanders in the United States (about two tenths of a percent) (USCB, 2019; SNZ, n.d.). This contributes to significant differences in

the ways we know ourselves, as well as how others know us, as Pacific peoples in these places. These factors were evident in almost all interviews and significantly impact how diasporic Pacific participants discuss their relationships to coconut oil.

#### Subsection 3.4.1

### **The Wellington Region and the San Francisco Bay Area**

While national contexts are too megalithic for one comparative ethnographic study, the Wellington Region and San Francisco Bay Area are informative research sites for the purposes of this project. This is because the ethnic identities of these regional Pacific populations reflect each nation's relationship to the Islands (e.g. there are more Chamorros living in the Bay Area than there are in the Wellington Region, and more Niueans in the Wellington Region than there are in the Bay Area). And due to the significant differences of the ethnoscares of these two sites, Islanders acquire different forms of sociocultural capital. This means that Islanders are more likely to articulate certain cultural elements of other cultural groups present in their home regions.

There are more Islanders living in the Bay Area than there are in the Wellington Region, although it's difficult to say exactly how many more are in the Bay Area due to the ways each government reports their census data. In the Wellington Region, Islanders comprise over eight percent of the total population of about 500,000 people, roughly calculating to about 40,000 people. This number includes those who declared a Pacific identity alone or in combination with other identities in their census reports. It does not include Māori, who comprise about sixteen percent of the total regional population (unless they also declared themselves as Pacific Islanders) (SNZ, n.d.). In the Bay Area, Islanders comprise nearly six tenths of a percent of the total population of over 8 million people, roughly calculating to about 48,000 people. However, this number counts those who identified themselves as Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander only and not those who reported themselves as two or more races. Therefore, the actual number is likely much higher (Duncan, 2012). Although proportionately this percentage is almost three times the national average of the United States, it's still significantly lower than Aotearoa New Zealand (USCB, 2019).

It's common for Wellington Region Islanders to live in majority Pacific enclaves (Salesa, 2017), but this isn't true for Bay Area Islanders. As a result of having low proportional numbers relative to the overall population of their residential communities, Bay Area Islanders tend to adopt different forms of code-switching (see M. Perez, 2002). This means that many Bay Area Islanders are (mis)read as Hispanic or Latino, black or African American, Asian, or white (Henderson, 2011; M. Perez, 2002), though this may also have to do with the fact that Islanders living in the United States are the most likely racial group in the country to identify themselves as belonging to two or more races (Duncan, 2012).

An emerging cultural identity category, which I observed and directly participated in during my fieldwork in the Bay Area, is Native American or pan-indigenous. This pan-indigenous identity is rooted in a sense of shared colonial experience with the United States nation and empire. While I don't want to diminish these cultivated community-alliances, I do want to acknowledge that the Bay Area and the Wellington Region are home to their own respective indigenous communities whose belonging to the land must be prioritized. Specifically, mana whenua of the Wellington Region are Ngāti Raukawa, Te Āti Awa, Ngāti Toa Rangatira, Rangitāne ō Wairarapa, Ngāti Kahungunu ki Wairarapa, and Taranaki Whānui ki Te Upoko o Te Ika which includes Te Āti Awa, Taranaki Iwi, Ngāti Ruanui, Ngāti Mutunga and Ngāti Tama (Greater Wellington Regional Council, n.d.). The Bay Area is represented by the Muwekma Ohlone Tribe, Amah Mutsun Tribal Band, Costanoan Ohlone Rumsen-Mutsun Tribe, Indian Canyon Mutsun Band of Costanoan Ohlone People, Association of Ramaytush Ohlone, Confederated Villages of Lisjan, Cloverdale Rancheria of Pomo Indians of California, Dry Creek Rancheria of Pomo Indians, Federated Indians of Graton Rancheria, Kashia Band of Pomo Indians of the Stewarts Point Rancheria, Koi Nation of Northern California, Lytton Band of Pomo Indians, and Suscol Intertribal Council.<sup>21</sup> Therefore, unless a participant included in this

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<sup>21</sup> This list presents a non-exhaustive and non-official registry of Bay Area native community groups. As there is no single reference source that lists all of these communities, this list is compiled from my own in-depth research. My apologies to any native Bay Area groups not properly acknowledged here.

research is Māori or Native American, this project recognizes them as a settler in these places, even if they too identify as an indigenous person.<sup>22</sup>

#### Subsection 3.4.2

### Code-Switching and Double Consciousness

In diaspora, many Pacific Islanders possess a highly developed ability to code-switch—a skill indicative of double-consciousness (Mila-Schaaf & Robinson, 2010). Although some participants discussed that code-switching reflects a disparity of power relations, Ruby Fanaika Fa‘agau (Bay Area, Tongan, Samoan, Fijian) understands this skill as a strength. She explained, “Throw us into anywhere and we will swim as a result of not having that privilege of having our communities.” Although double-consciousness was a strong theme that came through most of my interviews with Pacific Islander participants in both sites, from my observations, there seems to be greater pressure to code-switch in the San Francisco Bay Area where Islanders do not make up a significant proportion of the population compared to the Wellington Region where Islanders do.

There are two interview excerpts indicative of this difference between these two research sites. When interviewing Ellie Radburg (Bay Area, Hawaiian), I asked if she believes her cultural or ethnic background influences her coconut oil use. She responded:

ER	I don’t know if it influences how I use it. It certainly influences how I feel about my use. But my cultural background was not my introduction to coconut oil. My introduction into coconut oil was living with a bunch of hippies in Berkeley and everyone telling me that coconut oil was all the rage. You can use it as lotion. You can cook your food in it. You can use it as lube. And so that was my first real engagement with coconut oil. Now I use it constantly, but I think that my use of coconut oil is colored by a bunch of white hippies introducing it to me. And also my awareness that that wouldn’t be the case if I was more connected to my Hawaiian side.
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Radburg’s understanding of her coconut oil use reflects her familiarity of “tacking” between two cultural mindsets—white and Hawaiian—and the subsequent belief of which

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<sup>22</sup> I use the term ‘settler’ here as a non-exclusive reference to Islanders’ relationship and responsibility to place. While many may understand themselves as inalienably indigenous persons, even outside their homelands, they are not indigenous to these locations.

practices and commodities should belong to each (Clifford & Sanches, 2000). This was a central theme throughout her interview as well as the interviews with other Pacific participants, especially in the Bay Area.

By comparison, several Wellington Region Pacific Islander participants' interview discussions indicated a degree of insularity within their Pacific Islander community. These discussions often had to do with a lack of awareness of non-Pacific coconut oil trends. This is exemplified by Anntonina Savelio's (Wellington, Samoan) response to my interview question, asking if anyone in her family eats coconut oil:

NR	Does anyone ever eat it?
AS	No.
NR	Not for medicine? Not for anything?
AS	No [pause]. Not that I've seen. Has someone mentioned eating it?
NR	Lots of people.
AS	Oh. Nah. I haven't eaten it.
NR	Cause it's sort of building a reputation as a health food.
AS	Hmm...

Savelio was surprised that anyone ingests coconut oil which was the main use of non-Pacific survey respondents in Aotearoa New Zealand and the United States (though the majority of these groups use coconut oil cosmetically as well).<sup>23</sup> Though she was not dismissive of the idea altogether, the thought of eating coconut oil was "weird" to her. Based on her own experiences helping her grandmother make moso'oi-infused coconut oil in Sāmoa, she was skeptical of its food-safety. Savelio ended her interview commenting on her concerns over the lack of sanitation. She said, "See that's what happens when I grow up here [Aotearoa New Zealand]. I'm thinking I'm all posh now, eh." This comment indicated that Savelio was not comparing herself to non-Islanders as Radburg did. Rather

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<sup>23</sup> Of the 200 Aotearoa New Zealand non-Pacific respondents to answer, 169 use coconut oil for food or cooking and 156 use it cosmetically. Of the 131 United States non-Pacific respondents to answer, 109 use coconut oil for food or cooking and 90 use it cosmetically.

she compared herself to other *Islanders*—diasporic and non-diasporic. This diasporic::non-diasporic consideration was addressed by Pacific Islander participants in both sites but comparatively more often in the Wellington Region than in the Bay Area. From these observations, it appeared that the comparisons participants made were based on what was conceptually close in their respective communities. In the Bay Area and in the Wellington Region, the Pacific is felt differently.



### Conclusion 3.5

## Embracing Complexity

The purpose of this chapter was to situate my research within the conceptual complexities of coconut oil, diaspora, and Pacific identity, as well as to contextualize the geopolitical relationships the San Francisco Bay Area and Wellington Region hold with the Pacific and draw attention to how these relationships impact the lives of diasporic Islanders living in these two sites. The first section addressed culturally relative understandings of coconut oil. These differing interpretations required adopting a broad definition of the product in order to keep my research open to the culturally diverse groups of consumers I interviewed and surveyed. In this research, coconut oil is defined as oil extracted from coconut by any means, from any region, and for any purpose. Additionally, a coconut oil consumer is anyone who consciously consumes coconut oil, regardless of the frequency or temporality of their use.

The second section addressed the different ways diaspora is understood. I discussed my identity as the descendant of pogrom refugees as a way to contrast victim diasporas from the type of diasporas of opportunity that Epeli Hau'ofa (1994) celebrates in “Our Sea of Islands.” I explored how those living in diaspora often view themselves as lacking cultural knowledge and made clear how I intend to use my thesis to validate the experiences and knowledges of diasporic Islanders as equal to our on-island kin.

Section three defines Pacific Islanders as those descended from the Pacific Islands where *Cocos nucifera* grows. This definition does not include Māori because Aotearoa cannot cultivate coconuts. This distinction also drew attention to the responsibilities of all tauiwi to Te Tiriti o Waitangi. Also, in this section, I critiqued indigenous dependent

definitions of Pacific identity. I situated this binaristic division between the arguments laid out in *Asian Settler Colonialism* (Fujikane & Okamura, 2008) which identifies all non-indigenous peoples as settlers regardless of their former or contemporary oppression, and *Home Rule* (Sharma, 2020) which asserts that indigenous ethno-nationalism is a violent ideology and that the distinction between ‘migrant’ and ‘native’ is an unsustainable division. Ultimately, I decided to exclude those of arrivant ancestry from the Pacific category, but I made clear that I upheld this binary for the comparative purposes of my Pacific studies research only and voiced my concerns about accepting this distinction as essentially true.

Finally, section four discussed the colonial relationships New Zealand and the United States hold with the Pacific, and how these relationships have led to Pacific migrations to these two countries. I contextualized the lives of Islanders living in the San Francisco Bay Area and the Wellington Region with demographic data and explored how these factors relate to each group’s cultural visibility as well as their sociocultural capital. A main factor to consider is that although there are more Islanders living in the Bay Area than there are in the Wellington Region, proportionately Islanders in the Wellington Region comprise a much larger demographic block compared to Islanders in the Bay Area. Based on my conversations with Islanders in both places, those living in the Bay Area tend to compare themselves to other non-Pacific groups, demonstrating a degree of cross-cultural code-switching. By contrast, Islanders in the Wellington Region often make comparisons within their own Pacific groups but base these comparisons between those raised in the Islands and those raised in diaspora. Overall, these sections aim to situate this research through commodity, diasporic, indigenous and geopolitical lenses. Hopefully this chapter has provided some insight into the fluidity of all these concepts and terms.





## CHAPTER FOUR

# Spiritual Origins, Sacred Kinships

The symbiotic relationship between *Cocos nucifera* and Pacific peoples is ancient and enduring. As a “comestible, comfort and commodity,” coconuts provided our ancestors with the nourishment and seed needed to traverse and settle the largest geographic region on Earth (J. A. Bennett, 2018, p. 353; see also Hau‘ofa, 1994). In the islands where coconut was already present, it welcomed us, and where it wasn’t, we introduced it (or re-introduced it) and expanded its environmental domain (Harries & Clement, 2014). As family, Islanders and coconuts nurtured each other’s growth, and undoubtedly, the success of one depended on the care provided by the other. This sacred kinship is marked in an abundance of indigenous myths that dot the constellations of islands our people came to and came from. These myths function as a mirror, grounding our time-honored identities as Pacific peoples while simultaneously reflecting our ever-changing contemporary cultural forms.

This chapter examines the spiritual relationships Pacific interview participants and survey respondents share with coconut oil. Section one addresses the theoretical frameworks that inform how I qualify indigenous myths in this thesis. I examine two Chamorro myths that illustrate how memories of the past are impacted by present-day perspectives. This section directly addresses Christian influences in contemporary Pacific spirituality and focuses on scholarly debates over the role of cultural constructivism in indigenous cultures. Section two examines expanded understandings of kinship structured by myth narrative themes and language etymology. This section incorporates Māori perspectives as indigenous Pacific kin. Here, I focus on relational epistemology and contextualize how some Pacific interview participants and survey respondents understand themselves to be ‘related’ to coconuts as well as other Pacific products and places. In section three, I analyze several participants’ ritualistic uses of coconut oil in fofō, samaga,

omengat, tau‘olunga, hifo kilikili and laulau. Here, I explore the nuanced symbolic meanings encoded in these practices. Finally, section four is dedicated to a focused analysis of participant Alex White’s (Bay Area, Chamorro) practice of ancestral lineage healing. This section addresses the impacts of diaspora in contemporary indigenous spirituality.



#### Section 4.1

### **The Past in Present Perspectives**

Despite several requests from some Pacific scholars, conference convenors and participants, I was initially reluctant to dedicate any significant part of this thesis—let alone an entire chapter—to Pacific spirituality or myths. I wanted to resist implying that Pacific consumers’ understandings of coconut oil are authenticated by the ‘past’ or even by the Islands themselves. This, I had hoped, would avoid constructing any cultural litmus tests which were a significant source of shame for those who believed their uses of coconut oil were ‘inauthentic.’ As this project developed overtime, however, it became clear there was no way not to include this chapter. Indigenous spirituality was an inescapable theme in the discussion topics raised by Pacific interview participants and survey respondents. This was especially emphasized by Ruby Fanaika Fa‘agau (Bay Area, Tongan, Samoan, Fijian) who shared, “There’s a lot of history that we’ve engrained in mythology that Westerners might dismiss as children stories but they were actually our way to carry forward indigenous knowledge.” For Fanaika Fa‘agau, indigenous knowledge is encoded in our stories and through sharing these stories, indigenous knowledge is able to live in the present and ensure its future. This sentiment is supported by Moana Jackson who writes (paraphrasing Ben Okri, 1997), “rescuing the truth from old stories in order to make new understandings is essential if a country [in this case, cultures] is to be all that it can be” (2020, p. 153, brackets in original). Therefore, to discuss Pacific uses of coconut oil without addressing these spiritual foundations would have rendered the depth of these consumers’ contributions shallow and seemingly disjointed. They are anything but.

Many Pacific participants, including several who voiced a sense of cultural loss, relate their understandings of coconut oil and other Pacific products to indigenous myths. For some, spiritual knowledge was sourced from family. For others, knowledge came from

books, media or school. The main factor for everyone was access which, as will be addressed, is something that diasporic Islanders in particular struggle to maintain. Still though, estrangement from indigenous spiritual knowledge can happen for a number of reasons. Teuila Faaleo (Wellington, Samoan) for example, discusses how her urban upbringing in Sāmoa alienated her from a sense of indigenous knowledge reserved for rural life. She explains, “You can grow up in a culture but you know nothing of its depth.” For Faaleo, accessing this depth requires understanding the myths and etymology that reflect indigenous worldviews. I have decided to place this thesis body chapter first as a way to honor the insightful cultural meanings that Pacific interview participants and survey respondents attribute to their coconut oil use. This will set a foundation of indigenous perspectives on the product that subsequent chapters will draw from.

While I recognize that the term ‘myth’ may signal a dismissive ‘not real’ connotation, I use the term here functionally as a stand-in for contemporary spiritual narratives with roots in the pre-Christian era. Though the word ‘ontologies’ conveys similar, less tendentious, meaning (Watson & Huntington, 2008), I have chosen to maintain the term ‘myth’ as a way to indicate an assumed meta-awareness and intra-cultural critique. This accounts for how a person may value the creation story of their people or homeland, for example, while simultaneously embracing archaeological and geological history. Essentially, this term recognizes a person’s capacity to hold multiple narratives at once. This is a major assumption but a reasonable one to make. As Paul Veyne argues in *Did the Greeks Believe in Their Myths?* (1988), researchers should be cautious to assume that myths have ever been passively accepted as literal truth by any people at any point in history. Moreover, I invoke the term ‘spirituality’ as an umbrella term that refers to how a person existentially situates themselves within the world and the ways they draw meaning from it. As I will emphasize throughout this chapter, like myths themselves, some Pacific consumers also draw meaning from cultural narratives that reflect their non-Pacific spiritual influences, residential ethnoscares and political values. Here, I frame these people as agents who contribute to the *inevitable* and *expected* rearticulation of myth narrative structure and myth interpretation. In this section, I focus on issues of ‘authenticity,’ interpretation, change and agency. What I seek to make clear is that although myths may represent memories of the past, our interpretations of these myths reflect conditions of the

present and our hopes for the future. As Albert Wendt writes, “[W]e do not inherit the past. A written history is a recreation of the past, so it is about the present, the time the historian wrote that history” (1987, p. 84).

#### Subsection 4.1.1

### **Myths as Layered Knowledge**

This subsection addresses two coconut-related myths that illustrate myth interpretation and myth narrative change. The first is a Chamorro origin story. It recounts how two siblings, Fo’na and Pontan, created the universe from their bodies. By Pontan’s instruction, Fo’na tore apart her brother and used different parts of him to construct the world and cosmos. In the version I know, Pontan’s back became the Earth; his eyes the Sun and Moon; his urine the sea; and his eyebrows rainbows. When Fo’na was finished, she threw her own body onto the land and turned to rock. Overtime, chunks of her body fractured against battering waves and from these broken-off pieces, spirits, animals and human beings came into existence. Whether the creation of humanity was intentional or not leads to interesting existential posthumanist considerations. At the very least, this myth suggests that the universe wasn’t created for humans explicitly. It’s a sharp contrast to the instructions God gave to Adam and Eve in the book of Genesis, and the related anthropocentric ideologies that Christian missionaries first brought with them to the Islands nearly half a millennia ago (Kimmerer, 2015). The story of Fo’na and Pontan is well-known and revered amongst Chamorro/CHamoru spiritual practitioners. It’s also invoked for political purposes, especially regarding land sovereignty and self-determination (Santos Perez, 2020a).

In Chamorro, the etymology of Pontan’s name translates to “ripe coconut” (Flores, 2019; Santos Perez, 2020a). While historically the Chamorro origin story has narrated that all of humanity emerged from Guam (not just Chamorros),<sup>24</sup> it’s been suggested that Pontan’s name, which may poetically convey the voyaging characteristics of a coconut, could symbolically maintain a 3500 year old memory of our people’s Austronesian

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<sup>24</sup> Contemporary interpretations claim this myth as the origin story of Chamorros exclusively. But according to a 17th century Spanish text, the indigenous inhabitants of the Marianas believed this myth to be the origin of *all* of humanity (Barrett, 1975).

voyaging ancestors (Santos Perez, 2020a). If so, this interpretation establishes an indigenous worldview that centralizes trongkon niyok (*Cocos nucifera*) as both a constructive and expansive force of the universe. As the prologue of this thesis intends to express, I personally draw meaning from this story as a way to situate the current expansion of diasporic Islanders in the present day. We voyaged and took root then; we voyage and take root now.

The second myth I recount is a Chamorro coconut etiology. It narrates the day a beloved young woman fell ill from thirst. She craved the juice of an unknown fruit and explained that only this fruit could restore her health. Her father recruited their community to help but their search was unsuccessful, and the young woman died. After a funeral was held for the young woman, she was buried on a neighboring mountain. Her father intended to erect a latte stone (stone pillar) on her grave, but a period of heavy rains prevented him from doing so. The rains soaked the Earth and when the wet weather finally subsided, he found an unknown plant sprouting from her grave—the first coconut tree. After five years of growth, a fruit appeared. Manāmko’ (elders) demanded that the young woman’s father drink from it but he refused. Her mother volunteered, declaring:

Yanggen binenu i hanom este na tinekcha’ ya ha puno’ yo’, na’ daña’ ham gi naftan yan i difunta haga-hu. Humallom yo’ na ginen as **Yu’us** este na trokon patma (Barcinas & Faustino, 1973, p. 23, original spelling).

*If the water from this fruit is poison and it kills me, put me together with my dead daughter in the grave. I believe this is from **God’s**<sup>25</sup> palm tree* (translated by relatives, emphasis added).

The water of the fruit was sweet, and the meat was nourishing. The deceased young woman’s mother assured the community that coconut was safe and we, their descendants, have consumed it since.

While I was already familiar with the story of Fo’na and Pontan from childhood, I was introduced to this second myth during fieldwork. The excerpt above came from the

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<sup>25</sup> ‘Yu’us’ was originally translated by my relatives as ‘Jesus Christ’ but after external review the term ‘God’ was suggested for greater accuracy.

storybook, *I Estorian I Niyok* (The Story of the Coconut) (Barcinas & Faustino, 1973) which Alex White (Bay Area, Chamorro) lent me for research soon after we met. The book was written entirely in Chamorro, so I reached out to an uncle in the San Francisco Bay Area for a translation (personal communication, 2 October 2019 [confidentiality requested]). After collaborating with his sister, my uncle emailed me back a transcript, but he warned that I should be cautious using this myth in my research. The invocation of Yu'us (God) proved to him that this myth is inauthentic. Another piece of information that would have likely further added to my uncle's concern is that in my search for other coconut etiologies, I came across an amateur YouTube video which claims this same narrative as a Filipino myth (minus clear Chamorro elements, like latte stones) (The Doodle Boat, 16 January 2013, 2:20). Given the close historical, and very often genealogical, relationships between Filipinos and Chamorros, this blending of narratives is unsurprising. And given the significantly larger size of the Philippines compared to the Marianas, it's more likely that this myth voyaged East rather than West. However, rather than fixating on issues of authenticity, the articulation of Christian and foreign elements demonstrates a significant point: there are historical layers to indigenous myths that blend time, place and cultural influence together. No indigenous myth exists in geographic or temporal isolation. Like people, myths are agents. They have ancestors, descendants, extended family, friends, even enemies.

#### Subsection 4.1.2

### **Christian Articulations**

There is a double standard that affects how indigenous mythology is qualified. Generally, it is pre-Christian myths that are valued as authentic spiritual narratives worthy of salvage ethnographic work (Vaiioleti, 2006), even though myths developed in the post-missionization period undoubtedly impact our lives as well (Binney, 1988; Lindstrom, 1993; Nishihara, 2003). Paradoxically, pre-Christian myths, so sought after by researchers as structural representations of indigenous worldviews, were (and often still are) deemed as a threat to Christianity and violently repressed (Santos Perez, 2020a). This moral stigma has been effective at changing the value systems of Islanders, who often frame their own pre-Christian histories as “the era of darkness” before their peoples were ‘saved’ and, more

often than not, politically incorporated into Euro-American empires following their ‘salvation’ (Hau‘ofa, 1994, p. 149; see also Carroll, 2004; Hereniko, 1999; Wendt, 1982). Today, most Islanders identify as Christian, although census data suggest that Christianity is waning in the diaspora (Pasefika Proud, 2016; Salesa, 2017).

It’s difficult to draw sharp lines between pre- and post-missionization effects in indigenous spirituality though. This is because conversion towards Christianity is a gradual process, as is moving away from it. Although there is no denying that cataclysmic spiritual changes resulted from missionization, Christianity shouldn’t be viewed simply as the religion of conquest (V. Diaz, 2010). This type of historical framing strips indigenous Christians of their agency and discredits their active role in Christian expansion and adaptation. It also denies Christianity its ability to adapt to indigenous values (Carroll, 2004). Additionally, while the articulation of Christianity has significantly impacted access to precolonial ontological knowledge, it’s clear that certain spiritual practices with pre-Christian roots are maintained and attributed new meaning through the church (Alefosio & Henderson, 2018). In some cases, the church and indigenous spiritual frameworks even strengthen the other’s validity and power through opposition (Ho, 2018; Soker, 1972).

My own Chamorro grandfather illustrates this dynamic in his unpublished autobiography, *My Happiness* (2001):

My fellow tanoris [altar servers] and I would get up about 4 a.m. every Sunday to be at church for the 5 a.m. Mass. At this hour, things were quiet in Agana [Hagåtña]. Sometimes a priest would go around our neighborhood waking us up so that we would get to church on time. I remember that we had to pass the Naval Hospital near the morgue. There was an ancient Chamorro belief that when a person was dying, a black bird called ‘Utak’ [*Phaethon lepturus*]<sup>26</sup> would fly over the hospital making weird screeches. So when we would hear the Utak, we tanoris would run like mad, racing to reach the church first. I’m sure some of the priests must have thought we were eager to perform our duties, not realizing we were really being spooked by the Utak. The word for this is ‘mafa’ñague’ [to communicate with the dead].

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<sup>26</sup> An utak is an equatorial seafaring bird. Its appearance in the Mariana Islands from its southern Carolinian atolls was interpreted as an omen foretelling the coming of typhoons (Pereda, n.d.).

In this excerpt, my grandfather—who I have always known as devout Catholic—demonstrates how he simultaneously maintained indigenous spiritual views alongside his baptized faith, even if in the form of superstition. As the son of a *techa* (traditional Chamorro prayer reciter), this unique blend of indigenous mythic and Catholic spiritual practice was already well-established in his family line.

While Christian and indigenous worldviews may seem mutually exclusive, spiritual identity consistently defies sharp categorization. Afterall, as Seforosa Carroll writes, “Pacific Christology was an attempt to earth Jesus in Pacific soil or in the Pacific context” (2004, p. 72). In this context, even coconuts and indigenous myths about coconuts articulate new meanings as a representation of Christ’s life, death and resurrection and emphasize his sacrifice as a foundational source of Islanders’ spiritual nourishment (Havea, 1985, cited in Carroll, 2004). By recognizing Christianity’s ability to incorporate multiple spiritual frameworks, I seek to recognize Christianity as a new form of Pacific spirituality, ‘authentically’ indigenous in its own way and actively engaged with by Pacific Christians with their inherent agency (Clifford, 2001; Hereniko, 1999; Vaioleti, 2006). Myths that incorporate Christian elements, such as the Chamorro coconut etiology above, therefore should not be viewed as ‘inauthentic.’ Rather, they should be recognized as a reflection of our present.

Still, I want to reiterate that this project does not hold Pacific identity as dependent on Christian faith in any form. While I recognize that my Jewish genealogy distinguishes me from most other Islanders, during fieldwork it was made clear that many Pacific participants—especially in the Bay Area—do not identify as Christian at all. Some even voiced strong resentment towards the church and to Christianity. Additionally, several of these participants discussed how reviving pre-Christian spiritual practices is, for them, a conscious act of decolonization. This rejection of Christianity in favor of reclaiming a ‘decolonized’ indigenous Pacific spirituality is championed elsewhere (Santos Perez, 2020a; Ho, 2018). Though I don’t agree that decolonization, including spiritual decolonization, is dependent on the rejection of Christianity, I do explore these sentiments more in this chapter. Overall, though, I seek to portray both Christian and non-Christian consumers’ respective beliefs as informative, but not definitive, of their relationships to



coconut oil. To hold indigenous spirituality to equally reflexive critique however, in the subsection below I examine how myths and memory respond to present-day conditions.

#### Subsection 4.1.3

### **Cultural Constructivism**

As a result of existential shifts in Pacific cultures, especially through the adoption of Christianity, access to knowledge encoded in myths has become constrained. In efforts to preserve this knowledge through ‘salvage’ ethnographic work, many myths have gone through, or are currently going through, a state of revival, standardization and rearticulation (Keown, 2001). In this process, myths once historically transmitted through non-written means are preserved in text and other forms of documentation. This change in the way knowledge is transmitted has reconfigured intra-Pacific relationships. There are valid arguments why recording myths is undesirable: oral storytelling provides knowledge holders greater control to decide who is worthy of knowledge and on what terms, but most importantly, to receive an oral story means that someone must tell it to you; text requires little-to-no social interaction or relationship maintenance.

In my research, I noticed that inconsistencies in a recorded myth’s narrative structure was often upsetting for those familiar with different versions of the same myth. For example, one YouTube commenter accuses the narrative structure of an animated version of the Samoan coconut etiology Sina and the eel as being “skewed” (TheCoconetTV, 9 May 2014). In the version presented in the video, a woman named Sina befriends an eel, who was once a prince (in other versions, the eel is a disguised Fijian chief). Overtime, the eel grew increasingly abusive towards Sina, forcing her to ask her family for help. In a battle, Sina’s cousin severed the eel’s head. Following the eel’s instruction, Sina planted his head into the soil from which the first coconut tree sprouted.

In this myth, the eel is aggressive, and Sina is fearful for her safety. But in the alternative version that one commenter presents, Sina and the eel are lovers. The eel gifted his life to demonstrate his love for Sina and to provide resources for her family. The commenter explains that this version demonstrates how caring for a person’s family is the proper way to show love in Samoan culture. This indicates that as narrative structure changes, so do the interpretations of the knowledge encoded in these myths. However, even

before myths were recorded through text or other forms of media, narrative change took place—the existence of different versions of a myth reflects this. Change in myth narrative structure and interpretation is part of the lives of cultures. For this reason, indigenous myths can be framed as contemporary structures of indigenous worldviews that inform how we know ourselves in the present, past and potential futures. As Wendt writes, “We are what we remember...” (1987, p. 90).

The idea that the present affects how the past is remembered invokes an “invention of tradition” debate that exemplifies some of the tensions between indigenous sovereignty movements and academia—especially anthropology. This debate has contributed to what has been referred to as a conflict between “politics of culture” and “cultural politics” (Tobin, 1994, p. 116), and has specifically taken form in a Pacific context through the scholarly feud between the recently passed Haunani-Kay Trask, and anthropologists Jocelynn Linnekin and Roger Keesing (Handler & Linnekin, 1984; Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983; Keesing, 1989; 1991; Linnekin, 1983; Trask, 1991). In this debate, Linnekin and Keesing argue that things can be, and are, made sacred through contemporary politics which interpret memories and mythology to meet a group’s objectives, especially nationalistic objectives. Linnekin makes no negative ethical judgments of cultural constructivism. Rather, she—like I—argues that constructing the past through the perspectives available in the present is, at least in part, inevitable and expected.

But Trask, a prominent Hawaiian sovereignty activist and scholar, refutes Linnekin’s assertions of Hawaiian cultural constructivism and challenges the foundations of any non-Hawaiian’s position to make claims about Hawaiian culture. Trask argues that sacred things *may* become political if they are threatened by colonial restrictions or desecration, but they are not ‘made’ sacred because of it. Trask asserts that the accusation that politics create sacredness weaponizes political theory against indigenous sovereignty objectives. She references how Linnekin’s portrayal of Hawaiian tradition as ‘invented’ was cited by the United States Navy as justification to continue bombing the island of Kaho‘olawe for training exercises. Linnekin’s ongoing support for Hawaiian sovereignty, even her membership in Protect Kaho‘olawe ‘Ohana, was irrelevant to the material impact her theoretical work had in the desecration of Kaho‘olawe; Trask argues that it is not intention but impact that matters most. Jeffery Tobin (1994), who summarizes this

extensive debate, urges academics to be conscious of the impact of their criticisms. Tobin concludes, “If we acknowledge that criticism can be a weapon, then we must accept responsibility for the weapons we produce” (p. 133).

While Tobin’s (1994) warning weighs heavily on my mind and heart in discussing the spiritual nature of this chapter, I am not convinced that there are intrinsic ethical issues that should prohibit addressing political influences in contemporary indigenous spirituality. Rather, there may be ethical issues stemming from *not* critiquing structures of sacredness. Ideally though, these critiques should come from within a person’s own cultural group rather than from the outside. As this thesis will make evident, I do have cultural constructionist views. This partly reflects my anthropology background, but mostly it’s a result of my upbringing in an ideological Zionist community. Zionism also interprets past memories and mythology for nationalistic objectives. My ideological split from the Zionist community I was raised in has taught me to be critical (though not always dismissive) of nationalism, especially nationalism based on a people’s mythic connections to place and the subsequent arguments for exclusive birthrights to it. If we are to acknowledge that criticism can be weaponized, then we must also acknowledge that silence can be weaponized as well.

My pro-cultural constructivist position is at odds with some parts of the Pacific studies community. Ultimately though, in my research I have found that Pacific products *can* be made sacred through political, especially anti-colonial, sentiments that impact Islanders’ lives and values. Other research has discussed how Pacific products can be made non-sacred for contextual reasons as well. Vilsoni Hereniko (1999), for example, addresses how coconut trees in Hawai‘i lose their sacredness when their nuts are pruned for tourists’ ‘safety.’ He writes, “Like eunuchs, they grace the shoreline of Waikīkī. Coconut palms without coconuts. Symbols of lost identities” (p. 406). Here, Hereniko describes how coconuts, once symbolic of Pacific peoples’ vitality, are made non-sacred when the political or sociocultural context that coconuts are situated within changes. This suggests sacredness is derived from context, rather than from an object itself.

To be clear, though, I am not arguing that Pacific products do not have any intrinsic sacred qualities or that claims about their sacredness are necessarily ‘invented.’ I simply argue that things, like people, are malleable to their sociocultural environments and

political contexts. With that said, I explore what interpretations consumers draw from their respective indigenous myths and how these myths impact their understandings of coconut oil. In section two below, I analyze sacredness structured through language and myths. In sections three and four, I analyze sacredness enacted in rituals.



## Section 4.2

### Relational Genealogy

After a few email exchanges, Kahawai Alana (Wellington, Hawaiian) confirmed that he would be free for an interview a few hours before we met. He told me to come meet him by his bus stop on his way home from work. I stuffed my audio recorder into my bag and headed into town from my university office. The rain was heavy that day, marking the dreary beginning of Wellington's shift into winter. As I waited for Alana underneath the awning of a fish n chips takeaways shop, I realized I didn't know what he looked like; I didn't think to ask. Unlike the San Francisco Bay Area, where I could at least look for someone with distinct Pacific features, in the Wellington Region these features didn't stand out amongst the many Pacific faces of the region's residents. It's a strange experience to blend into the ethnoscaples of a country that neither of us belong to fully.

Alana recognized me first. My oddly huddled stance outside the takeaways shop and university bag must have been my giveaway. We decided to walk to the only cafe still open inside the city's main movie theater for our interview. I began the conversation as I did all the others by asking whether Alana believes his cultural or ethnic background influences how he uses coconut oil in any way. Alana, whose voice had previously held the bubbly tone of someone meeting a new acquaintance, shifted into a slightly more serious timbre. He responded:

KA	Coconuts from the beginning, from our gods, they are kino lau, or they are forms of coconuts, where we can see our actual gods in our surroundings and nature. So as a Native Hawaiian, in a Native Hawaiian lens, when I look at a coconut it's more than a coconut, it's a relationship with my gods and my ancestors, my connection to my divine.
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‘Kino lau,’ which Alana references here, translates to mean ‘many bodies’ in Hawaiian. It’s a concept that recognizes divinity in the material world that a person can interact with directly. In a kino lau-minded framework, divinity can be touched, grown, consumed and revered in a very tangible sense. This is because certain products, including coconuts, are understood as material iterations of sacred beings or gods. According to Alana, coconuts are kino lau of Kū or Kāne, depending on which myth a person references. Although this concept is unique to Hawaiian culture, it draws from pan-Pacific worldviews, specifically spiritual views that relate to the ecological world as kin. This was the first time in my fieldwork that a Pacific participant related themselves to coconuts in this way, but it wasn’t the last. Though I didn’t quite understand what Alana meant at the time, I knew it was a necessary topic to unpack.

In this section, I ask what is meant when an Islander expresses that they are ‘related’ to coconuts? What is meant when they say they are related to any plant for that matter? Or related to physical features like the sea, stars or mountains? A simple—too simple—explanation is that these assertions of kinship are merely rhetoric used to describe affective bonds *metaphorically*. This limited explanation suggests that claiming kinship is a way to express a strong feeling of closeness with or appreciation for something, but nothing more ‘realistically.’ But to dismiss these relational claims as only rhetoric sacrifices so much nuanced spiritual detail that lies behind the term ‘kinship.’ Here, I examine expanded understandings of this term by analyzing mytho-linguistic etymology and myth narrative structure. This approach frames the unique worldviews that inform some Pacific consumers’ relationships with coconut oil, coconuts and other Pacific products.

#### Subsection 4.2.1

### **Mytho-Linguistic Etymology**

Depending how it’s measured, the Pacific is the largest, most linguistically diverse region on Earth. Its geographic size is immense: the ocean itself is larger than the area of the world’s continents combined. Eighteen percent of the world’s languages come from the Pacific, dispersed across less than one percent of the world’s population and landmass (Pawley, 1999). Roughly 25,000 islands are speckled throughout this oceanic universe, networked together in complex webs of political feuds, shared history and migrational

genealogies. Such an expansive area has in the past cultivated a problematic “laboratory rationale” which frames the Islands and Islanders as isolated communities (Wesley-Smith, 1995). But as Pacific scholars have asserted in more recent times, distance is relative and the ocean is full of relatives (Santos Perez, 2020b).

Despite the region’s immense linguistic diversity, the indigenous languages of Melanesia, Micronesia and Polynesia belong to only two phyla (extended language families)—Trans-New Guinea and Austronesian. Trans-New Guinea is significantly larger than Austronesian by language count, but its geographic domain is confined to Melanesia only. Austronesian, a comparatively newer arrival to the region, is significantly larger geographically and present in all three subregions. For this reason, as well as because of my (limited) familiarity with it, Austronesian mytho-linguistic connection will be the focus of this discussion. Here, I approach language in a theoretical sense, meaning that I recognize language as “a cultural, social experience that carries a commonly understood set of meanings, beliefs, values, and traditions that use words as symbols...” (Sailor, 2013, p. 13). This discussion will highlight how coconuts exist in the Pacific world as a symbol, and how this symbolic value exists in relation to its material form (Carroll, 2004). This discussion will also demonstrate how cross-cultural comparisons within the Pacific are able to establish regional similarities in language and in myth. These similarities set a foundation for common indigenous Pacific worldviews.

The etymology of ‘coconut’ in Austronesian-Pacific languages demonstrates how the product maintains its symbolic value independent of its material form. Throughout the Austronesian-speaking Pacific, the word for ‘coconut,’ at some point in its life cycle, tends to be phonetically similar. In New Caledonia, coconut is called ‘nu;’ in Hawai‘i, it’s ‘niu’ (Roosman, 1970); and in memory in Aotearoa, a place where *Cocos nucifera* cannot grow, coconut may be called ‘niu’ or ‘nī.’ Here, the symbol of coconuts may be preserved in te reo Māori (Māori language) through the naming of the nīkau palm (*Rhopalostylis sapida*), the only endemic palm to grow in Aotearoa (J. A. Bennett, 2018; Vennell, 2019). In *The Meaning of Trees*, Robert Vennell presents a theory of how the nīkau acquired its name (although he does so with notable skepticism):

It has been said that when the Polynesian ancestors of Māori arrived in New Zealand they first attempted to find a coconut tree, which in the Pacific is a vitally important food plant and serves a great number of practical uses. Upon discovering the nīkau, they were dismayed to find it lacked the all-important feature of coconuts. Indeed, one somewhat dubious translation of the word ‘nīkau’ is ‘niu-kau’: without nuts. While this makes an enjoyable story, and it is quite possible those early explorers were disappointed, it is most probably apocryphal. Either way, the Polynesians surely recognised the likeness, and would have immediately begun using the nīkau in similar ways (2019, p. 211).

Due to a lack of written history in pre-colonial Pacific cultures, as well as a Eurocentric bias that privileges written history over other forms of knowledge-keeping, there is no way to know with absolute certainty whether the naming of the nīkau maintains ancestral memory of Hawaiki in te reo Māori, or whether it’s apocryphal as Vennell (2019) suggests. Still, his level of skepticism isn’t entirely fair. It seems that his dismissal of this nīkau-coconut theory frames New Zealand (specifically, *New Zealand*) as ‘outside’ of the Pacific. But realistically Aotearoa isn’t, at least not to the extent this framing suggests. Even without written history there is strong evidence to suggest that the linguistic connection that Vennell addresses is not apocryphal, and that the naming of the nīkau likely does maintain connection with the wider Pacific in some form. Here, alternative forms of Pacific knowledge-keeping, embedded in elements like mytho-linguistic etymology and myth narrative structure, provide evidence suited to a Pacific studies approach—one that is comparative, interdisciplinary, and incorporates indigenous ways of knowing (Bellwood, 1991; Teaiwa, 2010).

It’s well-established that other plants throughout Austronesian-speaking world share etymological origins, like kalo/taro/dalo (*Colocasia esculenta*), kumara/kumala/cumar (*Ipomoea batatas*), and ‘ulu/uto/‘uru (*Artocarpus altilis*). Countless other terms used to refer to places, features and ideas support this point as well. Therefore, it’s not a far leap to trust that the naming of the nīkau could in fact reflect this linguistic connection. Another potential reference point may be found in regional myths. In her work on the cultural history of coconuts, Judith A. Bennett summarizes the Hawaiian coconut-related myth below:

Long ago, a woman, also called Hina discovered a young man, son of a Tahitian chief, cast ashore on one of the Hawaiian Islands. Hina and her father helped him. After a time, the stranger and Hina gave birth to a son, Nī-au. The Tahitian chief dreamed his old father needed him, so he had to return to Tahiti. He gave Hina care of their child, Nī-au, but warned that once this child was a man he too would need to come to Tahiti. When that time came Nī-au, fearful of making the long voyage, told Hina he would not go. She prayed to the family's special guardian, the life-giving coconut that, long before, had been brought from Kahiki (Tahiti). She planted a young coconut, which sprang to life and grew quickly. Hina said to her son, 'Climb the tree and hold on tight. You will be safe, Nī-au' [...] The tree kept growing and bent down in a wide arc across the vast Pacific Ocean until it reached Tahiti where Nī-au stepped off it, the *niu-loa-hiki*, the far travelling coconut, to be re-united with his father (2018, p. 355).

In this myth, two locations—Kahiki and Hawai'i—feature prominently. The incorporation of multiple island locations is a theme consistent in many other Pacific myths as well. Situated within a network of islands and cross-referenced with other Pacific plants, these regional connections prove to be consistent, and therefore, expected. Using mytho-linguistic etymology to understand this connection helps frame the spiritual influences that inform different Islanders' relationships to coconuts and other Pacific products.

#### Subsection 4.2.2

### **Myth Narrative Structure**

In addition to the pan-regional commonalities present in many Pacific myths, there is indigenous knowledge encoded in the structure of events that unfold in myth narratives. In Pacific etiologies for example, a common sequence of events often includes: (1) the 'death' of a god, human or animal, often with a strong emphasis on the character's head; (2) burial into the supernatural realm of the Earth; and (3) the reformation of the character in the form of a plant, animal or feature (Roosman, 1970). This structure is present in the Tongan etiology of kava and sugarcane which sprouted from the head and feet of a young girl named Kava (G. Smith, 1999); in the Samoan and Manganian etiology of coconuts which sprouted from the decapitated head of a young woman's eel lover, who according to some accounts, was a disguised Fijian chief (J. A. Bennett, 2018; Henry, 2014); and in the



Filipino-influenced Chamorro coconut etiology discussed in the previous section (Barcinas & Faustino, 1973). When these Pacific myths are compared to Western myths, a significant distinguishable theme emerges: even after a characters' material transformation into a plant, animal or feature, the character still maintains the same genealogical connection they previously held. To emphasize this theme, I will reference a well-known Hawaiian taro etiology and focus on how the Earth, death, genealogy and personhood are understood (Fox & McDermott, 2020). Throughout this chapter, I will build on this unique understanding and address how it relates to the spiritual lives of several Pacific consumers.

In the kumulipo (Hawaiian origin story), it's recounted how the goddess, Ho'ohōkūkālani conceived a child, Hāloa, with her father Wākea (the sky), but Hāloa died in his mother's womb. His stillborn body was buried into the soil—the womb of his grandmother, Papahānaumoku (the Earth). Ho'ohōkūkālani wept over Hāloa's grave. Her mournful tears watered his body and transformed him into the first taro plant. The baby was renamed Hāloanakakalaukapalili—a name which poetically describes the way taro leaves quiver in the wind. After her first child's death and rebirth in the form of a plant, Ho'ohōkūkālani conceived a second child with Wākea. This child was also named Hāloa in honor of his elder brother. Hāloa lived and became the first kanaka (person).

In this myth structure, taro is genealogically recognized as an older sibling of Kānaka (Hawaiians) and retains the responsibilities and privileges bestowed to that position. Kānaka, therefore, have the responsibility to care for their eldest sibling, as well as their other genealogical kin including Papahānaumoku (the Earth), Wākea (the sky), Kanaloa (the sea), and Mauna-a-Wākea (the highest mountain in Hawai'i) to name only a few. In return, Kānaka are reciprocally cared for by their genealogical kin who provide them their homeland, universe, and spiritual and physical sustenance (Trask, 2008). In her contribution to *Asian Settler Colonialism*, Haunani-Kay Trask unpacks the significance of this narrative for the political and spiritual lives of Hawaiians today:

As the indigenous people of Hawai'i, Hawaiians are Native to the Hawaiian Islands. We do not descend from the Americas or from Asia but from the great Pacific Ocean where our ancestors navigated to, and from, every archipelago. Genealogically, we say we are descended of Papahānaumoku (Earth Mother) and Wākea (Sky Father), who created our beautiful islands. From this land came the taro, and from the taro, our Hawaiian people.

The lesson of our origins is that we are genealogically related to Hawai'i, our islands, as family. We are obligated to care for our mother, from whom all bounty flows (2008, p. 45)

With a similar sentiment to Trask, Dominic Martinez writes, “To plant kalo is to care for the older brother. To eat kalo is to consume the mana of the ancestors” (2010, p. 27).

Knowledge of this mythic structure is necessary in order to understand what is meant when an Islander expresses genealogical relationships to the natural world. This mythic knowledge is also necessary to contextualize how it structures some Pacific consumers’ product use. For example, Carly Noelani Kajiwarā (Bay Area, Hawaiian) explained why, in her experience, she finds poi (pounded taro) more culturally significant to her than coconut oil:

CNK	[I was taught that] poi was <i>the</i> crop. Because we believe we’re descended from Hāloa which was the first kalo [taro] plant—or he was like our brother. That’s our creation story. That’s why we have poi in every meal and it’s very, very central to the Hawaiian identity at least. And I believe that coconut oil is very important as well, but I grew up more on poi than coconut oil. So not the same. But I wouldn’t say that one is less important than the other. But I guess the level of how much we use and how much it’s part of the lifeblood is different.
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What Kajiwarā likely meant when she made this lifeblood differentiation is that, as a Hawaiian, she understands herself in a cultural-spiritual sense as genealogically related to taro as a younger sibling. Though coconuts are kino lau, Kajiwarā does not hold the same close relational genealogy with them, as coconuts do not feature in the kumulipo in the same intimate way as taro. The ways in which her lived experiences as a Hawaiian are structured by this myth is not limited to metaphor. In her interview, we unpacked how taro is understood as a sacred product and touched on the ways coconut is not to the same extent.

To assess the cultural significance of different products, I asked Kajiwarā how she would feel if she saw poi being sold as a superfood in a Western supermarket. She said it would likely have a negative emotional effect and explained why:

CNK	Because I suppose one could argue [poi is] kinda a spiritual thing too. There’s a certain way you have to make the poi. It’s grown in a certain way in a lo‘i [taro patch], right? It has to be tended and everything done in a certain way and steamed
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	and everything is done with intentionality, even pounding the poi—there’s a certain way you have to do it [...] it’s a very strict practice, ku‘i, or pounding poi. I was in the ku‘i club in high school and we would do monthly pounding days and I got yelled at so many times because I didn’t do something correctly. I had layers in my hair, you’re supposed to have your hair braided really tightly because it’s food [...] and a strand came loose, and I was pounding, and I didn’t notice and a kumu [teacher] came and he started yelling at me and I almost cried [...]
NR	Is that because of food safety or that because of kapu [sacred protocol]?
CNK	I think it’s both. You know because you’re making food for people and you’re making it for the community, you don’t want anything in there. But also, it’s pretty strict because kapu. It’s just something that you <i>don’t</i> do. You have to watch out. That, and just the eating of it is very—so the making and the eating can be very spiritual right? [...]
NR	You’re kind of referencing that importance—ritual importance [of making poi]—was there a club for making coconut oil?
CNK	No there was not.

Although there was no coconut oil processing club at Kajiwarā’s high school, she did learn how to make it through her leadership club retreats. However, Kajiwarā explained that during the lesson, her kumu did not follow or teach any coconut oil-specific kapu protocols. This demonstrates one of the ways that Kajiwarā was raised understanding poi as kapu (sacred), while coconut oil remained noa (non-sacred; common) by comparison. In my research, I have found that the context in which something is consumed significantly matters in how it is or isn’t understood as sacred. Whether a sacred product itself dictates the terms of its consumption or whether consumption practices construct a product as sacred is a central question of this work, which I give special attention to in the following chapter.

As the Hawaiian myth above has referenced, in addition to taro, specific places or realms are genealogically situated as kin. This includes Papahānaumoku (the Earth) who is personified as a maternal figure. Here, it’s helpful to focus on the relational genealogy Pacific peoples hold with the Earth as it’s understood through language and myth to make sense of some indigenous rituals. Specifically, the significance of burials in these myths, whether of just a character’s head or of their entire body, could reference multiple things.

In a functional structuralist framework, it could be argued that because plants emerge from the soil, plant etiologies are obliged to place them there somehow. Though there's likely truth to this, this explanation alone misses crucial nuanced spiritual meaning. For example, the fact that the word for 'land' and the word for 'placenta' are homonyms in te reo Māori— 'whenua'—indicates a strong conceptual bond between the two. Additionally, in the Pacific, burials which ritualistically place a person into the Earth either in part (if just their placenta) or entirely (upon or well-after death),<sup>27</sup> aim to situate this person in relation to their geographic, spiritual, even political realms (Alefosio & Henderson, 2018; DeLisle, 2015; Powell, 2021).

In her doctoral thesis, Emma Powell (2021) reflects how her own placenta burial ritual served to geographically expand the Cook Islands Māori universe. This is a material manifestation of the Cook Islands Māori concept of 'akapapa'anga' which Powell describes below:

The word 'akapapa'anga comes from the kupu tumu, or the base word, papa in the Cook Islands Māori language. Papa has many meanings depending on the context. It can convey a base, a foundation, a solid rock or a layer, an arrangement or list of things. The affixation 'aka is a prefix that turns the word papa into a transitive verb or something that is done to something else. Therefore to 'akapapa is to layer, to arrange or to ready. The particle 'anga is a nominalising suffix. 'Akapapa'anga therefore refers to the act of layering, arranging or readying and in the vernacular, is most often used to refer to a list of contents or items that are continually put into the correct order or arrangement (p. 5).

Although they are not exact synonyms, the meaning of 'akapapa'anga overlaps significantly with the Aotearoa Māori concept of 'whakapapa' defined by Pounamu Jade Aikman as the "genealogical ordering of the universe" (2019, p. 43). As the distinction between plants, places and people tends to be much more fluid in Pacific mythology than in Western mythology, whakapapa is a framework in which a person can genealogically situate themselves with their nonhuman relatives alongside their human ones. This

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<sup>27</sup> In some parts of the Pacific, there are long-standing practices of exhuming deceased relatives' bones for ritualistic care. In Sāmoa, for example, "there is an Indigenous practice known as the liutofaga (literally, to change one's sleeping place), through which people are able to meet with their loved ones again in a spiritual sense whilst cleaning and washing their bones in coconut oil" (Alefosio & Henderson, 2018, p. 412).

whakapapa framework reconceptualizes personhood as an identity which belongs to nonhuman entities. I will return to this point again in chapter six as it relates to coconut oil consumption. This type of spiritual ideology that recognizes divinity in the material world has been classified by anthropologists as an iteration of animism. There is notable historical stigma associated with that classification though and it is often resisted by indigenous peoples partially for this reason (Bird-David, 1999). Still there is useful insight to be gained by framing Pacific kinships in this way.

The term animism, derived from the Latin ‘anima,’ meaning “vitality, will, soul,” is a spiritual structure which recognizes a multitude of spiritual beings within the natural world (G. Bennett, 2021, p. 3). Implicit in this framework is a radical reconceptualization of personhood and the individual. Summarizing Marilyn Strathern’s (1988) comparison of indigenous Melanesian and Christian conceptions of personhood, Nurit Bird-David (1999) writes, “The Melanesian ‘person’ is a composite of relationships, a microcosm homologous to society at large” (1999, p. S72). Specifically, the relational foundations explored in Strathern’s work pertain to the distinction made between ‘*individuals*’ and ‘*dividuals*.’ Jonathan Morgan explains that difference is that “The term *individual* suggests that who we are is an irreducible unit of identity carried underneath all of our titles and experiences—the real self” (2017, p. 1); while “*dividualism* [is] a sense of composite identity comprised of distinct and interrelated parts with, most importantly, no one aspect having dominion over the others” (p. 1). Morgan continues, “This alternate sense of selfhood arises in what Nurit Bird-David calls *relational epistemology*, or understanding the world as made up of relationships and doing so from a fluid point of view that is defined by those relationships” (p. 1). As addressed before, Pacific ethnographic research should be cautious of overly sociocentric characterizations of Pacific cultures, but in the context of relating to the natural world, both animism and “dividualism” offer helpful theoretical insight.

Qualifying what is meant when an Islander expresses they are related to coconuts requires adopting a different approach to relating to the world and to kinship entirely. Coconuts—whether constructively or innately sacred—are a product that embody symbolic meaning. This sacredness is structured by both language and by myth. Through a ‘dividualistic’ approach, a person can claim coconuts as part of their sense of self, as

several participants and respondents do. Through a relational genealogical approach, the material world, and the things that comprise it, are elevated to a higher status than simply inanimate objects or lesser beings. Certain plants, animals and places are ascribed a form of personhood in this worldview. Pacific myths, which tend to not have the same anthropocentric narrative focus compared to Western myths, position human beings on a level that is closer in status to these plants, animals and places by our shared genealogy. As this is a central consideration for many Pacific consumers, this spiritual worldview deserves its due recognition in this ethnographic-commodity research. In the following section, I examine how these spiritual ideas are enacted in rituals.

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Section 4.3

## **Rituals**

Tiffany Rose Naputi Lascado (Bay Area, Chamorro) was a young girl when her Chamorro mother passed away. Her Filipino father moved her and her two brothers from Guam to Hawai‘i as an interim site to start again. They later relocated to the Philippines and finally settled in the San Francisco Bay Area where I interviewed Naputi Lascado in a cafe not far away from her home. In the cafe, Naputi Lascado continued a conversation we began weeks prior about her first memories of coconut oil. She recalled, “So my earliest memories of coconut oil, I remember my [maternal] grandmother who was a *suruhāna* [healer], and I remember her making coconut oil and also massaging my neck with it.” Naputi Lascado doesn’t know why her grandmother was focusing on massaging her neck; she was too young at the time to remember. But if the practice reflects those of other traditional Pacific healers, it’s possible that it was used to treat some sort of ailment, whether the problem was physical, social or spiritual in nature, as indigenous Pacific medicine tends to engage with health holistically (Alefosio & Henderson, 2018; McMakin, 1978). As Toaga Alefosio and April Henderson (2018) discuss in their work, part of the recent marketing strategy of coconut oil has been gesturing to its purported medicinal properties linked to indigenous Pacific cultures, but these gestures are rarely accompanied by substantive ethnographic information to contextualize its use. As some of these

‘traditional’ practices have been recontextualized in Western cultural fields, much of the spiritual and social aspects of coconut oil have been misconstrued.

In *The Coconut Oil Miracle* (1999), for example, Bruce Fife discusses how Pacific mothers rub their children with coconut oil as a way to promote healthy growth and alleviate blemishes. While this could be true to an extent, there are more nuanced understandings regarding these mothers’ intentions:

What Fife misses in his discussion is that it is not the coconut oil in and of itself that promotes health, but rather the use of coconut oil as part of a more holistic regimen aimed at maintaining, or restoring, the harmonious balance of body, mind, and spirit of the mother and child within their broader environment (Alefosio & Henderson, 2018, p. 408).

This sentiment is supported by an informal discussion during a conference I attended in 2019. As I presented my preliminary findings to a panel of mostly Pacific conference attendees, one Gilbertese Solomon Islander shared that in her community, babies are rubbed with coconut oil to promote muscle and skeletal development. This attendee continued to explain that because of this medical intention, physically maladjusted adults are thought to have been neglected as children, suggesting that a person’s physical stature reflects the love and care they did or didn’t receive from their family. In addition to its medical purposes, in this context, coconut oil is imbued with social, metaphysical and spiritual meanings as well. This knowledge is not immediately available to non-Pacific coconut oil enthusiasts such as Fife. Therefore, exploring these nuanced meanings will provide greater ethnographic understandings of the product that will add necessary depth to mainstream marketing material. This section focuses on indigenous Pacific rituals that incorporate coconut oil in some way. The rituals that I analyze here—fofō, samaga, omengat, tau‘olunga, hifo kilikili and laulau—emphasize how coconut oil holds multiple symbolic meanings and practical purposes simultaneously.

## Fofō and Samaga

Anntonina Savelio (Wellington, Samoan) greeted me in the lobby outside her university workspace during her study break, but she suggested that we walk to a nearby cafe and conduct our interview there. As we walked together, I noticed that Savelio was wearing loose fitting shorts. The skin on her legs was raised and clearly sensitive from a freshly tattooed malu (Samoan women's tattoo). The design work was beautiful, but I made no comment about it. As a man, it would have been inappropriate to openly observe Savelio's body. Also, as a non-Samoan keenly aware that I do not phenotypically code as Pacific to most, I tend to be very conscious of how I interact with other Islanders. The concept of *double* consciousness has always felt a bit too short for me. In my experiences in Pacific spaces, there's an extra level of reading other Islanders who are trying to read me. It's made for an awkward number of faux pas where one leans in for a kiss on the cheek, while the other extends an arm for a handshake. I usually default for the latter to be safe as I did meeting Savelio, even if it often conveys a distant formality which can set the tone for the rest of our interaction. Fortunately, though, Savelio is anything but distant. We ordered coffees and began the interview.

Savelio discussed how she visits Sāmoa with her grandmother most years. She explained that one of the first things her grandmother does when they arrive is prepare a batch of coconut oil by hand—specifically coconut oil scented with leaves from the moso'oi tree (*Cananga odorata*) that they will take back to Aotearoa New Zealand with them. Savelio usually helps with this process but doesn't yet feel confident doing it on her own. Her grandmother makes enough to last the family until their next trip back to Sāmoa. She always prepares extra for the inevitable relatives who should have made their request earlier but didn't, and for the relatives who will fall ill during the year and need extra moso'oi-infused coconut oil to help them recover.

Similar to other Pacific women I spoke to, Savelio's grandmother considered it improper for her granddaughters to leave the house without wearing coconut oil on their skin and hair. This characterized the majority of their use, but as Savelio explains, much of the family supply is also used for fofō (massage). None is ingested. As previously



mentioned, Savelio was shocked to learn that coconut oil was being eaten by anyone. Savelio tells me she knows a family member is unwell when they appear at her house for her grandmother to massage them, especially those who she rarely sees for other family events:

AS	Yeah growing up and still seeing those products and knowing about it has still kept me connected with my culture. Like if I was to talk to another Samoan about like, “Oh I’ve got a sore back.” My first thing I would tell them is, “Oh do you have coconut oil?” so that I could fofō, massage them. Your nana could do it or your mum could do it. Like, “Yeah we’ve got some coconut oil. We got it from Sāmoa blahblahblah.” And that’s where the conversation would continue and it would never end [...] the conversation would just keep our culture alive. [...] But [coconut oil] brings visitors over. It brings all the Samoans over.
NR	Especially for fofō?
AS	Yeah. Like massaging. Like if I haven’t seen my Samoan auntie in like five years, that’s usually one of the reasons why I would see her. [...] They’re over because nana’s got the coconut oil [...] so it connects families.

As we discussed the social aspects of coconut oil, Savelio drew her recently tattooed malu into conversation. The sociality of her malu was implicit in the ways she discussed it. Savelio received her malu with her cousin to maintain an even number of soa (participants) and because her cousin is older, Savelio was tattooed second. The entire event lasted from ten in the morning until six at night and neither her or her cousin were allowed any breaks. The event concluded with a samaga ceremony in which her Auckland-based tufuga tā tatau (master tattoo artist) ritualistically bathed Savelio and her cousin’s legs in sama (turmeric mixed with coconut oil) and cracked an egg on their heads lifting the tapu tatau initiates are bound by (Alefosio & Henderson, 2018; Galliot, 2015; Va‘a, 2006).

Savelio’s decision to receive a malu took over a year of consideration and a critical reassessment of what it means to have it marked on her skin. It wasn’t a matter of continuing family tradition—she and her cousin were only the second and third to receive a malu in at least three generations of her family history; and despite her rough familiarity with the process from online videos, the first samaga ceremony Savelio attended was her own. Neither Savelio’s mother or grandmother had a malu, and both women disagreed over

their support for Savelio to go through with the ritual. Her mother was in favor; her grandmother wasn't, out of concern for the immense physical pain Savelio would need to endure (Va'a, 2006). Historically, wearing a malu was reserved for taupou (women of chiefly lineage) (Alefosio & Henderson, 2018), but increasingly it has become a mark of ethnic pride and identity (Mallon & Galliot, 2018; Samau, 2016; Va'a, 2006).

Savelio was finally convinced to commit to the malu after Te Herenga Waka Victoria University of Wellington lecturer, Le'ausālilō Lupematasila Fata 'Au'afa Dr Sadat Muaiava, hosted a debate on the topic in her Samoan studies class:

AS	[Le'ausālilō] changed my mind completely. He was such a good teacher.
NR	I would imagine so.
AS	Cause like even I was debating about it. Cause that was one of our topics that we had during our class was about the tatau [tattoo]. So he goes "What are you guys' thoughts on it?" And I was like "Girls, you gotta earn it. You can't show it cause [that's] bad."
NR	To show it?
AS	Yeah cause that was just how I was brought up [knowing] this is sacred and it's our treasure that only you can look at and your family. But [Le'ausālilō] was like, "You know the tattoo. The females' tattoo is called 'malu.' And 'malu' comes from the word 'faamalu' which is the word for 'umbrella.' <sup>28</sup> And you're like the umbrella of your family. You shelter them. And you protect them. Once you get this, you got this responsibility that you're the one that's gonna take care of your family." And that just blew my mind. I was like, "Actually I never thought of it that way." I just saw it as measina [treasure]—Samoans' treasure should be hidden. It should never be shown to anyone cause they didn't have the right to look at it. But then he goes "We should be showing this because we should be proud of our culture." And yeah that got me good.

As this excerpt shows, Savelio's opinions about receiving a malu were partly informed by her Samoan studies course. This access to cultural knowledge and the ability to co-contribute to it demonstrates how academic spaces are productive sites for indigenous ways of knowing. As Le'ausālilō recognizes in his pedagogical approach, there is no single

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<sup>28</sup> There's a lack of universal agreement over the etymology of the word 'malu,' but generally the symbolism conveys protection, familial care and 'mamalu' (sacredness; dignity) (Galliot, 2015; Samau, 2016). This latter term is generally considered to be the most likely word from which a 'malu' derives its name from.

Samoan stance on the meaning of tatau, and consequently no single stance on the meaning of coconut oil used for samaga. However, there are some spiritual meanings coded in the visual and olfactory aesthetics of turmeric mixed with coconut oil addressed elsewhere:

There are deeper histories of meaning attached to both fragrance and colour in the Samoan pre-Christian belief system, where certain smells were attributed with powers – such as to attract or ward off evil spirits [Percival, 2015] – and certain colours, such as the orangey-gold imparted by turmeric root, associated with divinity [Tcherkézoff, 2004] (Alefosio & Henderson, 2018, p. 401).

Continuing our conversation, I asked Savelio what moment about the day she was tattooed was the most special for her. She answered:

AS	Having my family there. [...] I didn't really have a moment because the whole thing was so good. Even before my parents were preparing for—because they had to get the gifts and all that. We had to find the mats for me to lay on to do it and yeah just from watching them do that, I was so grateful that I have parents. They've taken this off me. I told them I would do it. I would do all of this. Me and my cousin, we'll do all this. We'll buy the gifts. We'll cook the food for them. But my mum and my auntie was like, "Nope. All you guys gotta do is think about—just be strong and think about what you're gonna be doing. But we're gonna be doing all that."
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As Savelio explained, it was her family's love for her and her cousin that imbued her samaga ceremony with intimate meaning. Savelio's decision to receive a malu reciprocated the love she received by visibly proclaiming her dedication to her family's wellbeing. It's suggested that bathing newly tattooed malu and pe'a (Samoan men's tattoo) in sama prevents infection and soothes sensitive skin (Galliot, 2015; Va'a, 2006), but the practice of this ritual also demonstrates a profound love and spiritual bond between the parties involved. The following subsection explores the symbolism of coconut oil mixed with turmeric further in a diasporic Palauan context.

## Omengat

Turia Iek (Bay Area, Palauan) was born in the Bay Area, and she and her sister are first generation Palauans raised in the continental United States. There is a longer history of migration in her family though. Her father migrated from Saipan to the continent searching for opportunity after tragedy. Before that, her grandparents migrated from Palau to Saipan, searching for safety before the outbreak of World War Two. Sadly, their decision made them witness to one of the most globally impactful events of the 20th century, one which shapes the lives of all peoples today, especially Pacific Islanders. Though this thesis, thus far, has focused mostly on the individual lives of coconut oil consumers and their immediate families, Iek's relationship to coconut oil demonstrates how global politics structures consumers' relationships as well. Specifically, as a Micronesian, Iek's relationship to the product is, in many ways, structured by the legacy of war.

In 1914, the present-day Commonwealth of the Northern Mariana Islands (CNMI), Republic of Palau (Palau), Federated States of Micronesia (FSM) and Republic of the Marshall Islands (RMI) were opportunistically annexed by Japan from their former German administrators *mostly* with the League of Nations' approval (Peattie, 1988). Today, Saipan, the largest island of the CNMI, is a multicultural place but in 1944, most residents were Japanese civilians who outnumbered Islanders (Chamorros and Refaluwasch) ten-to-one (Peattie, 1988).<sup>29</sup> As a defensive "caltrop" of the Japanese empire, Saipan was the site of one of the most vicious battles of the Pacific Theater during the Allied Forces' push West towards the Japanese Archipelago (Peattie, 1988). Between 15 June to 9 July 1944, tens of thousands of soldiers and civilians died and many of the civilian deaths were due to suicides. The takeover of Saipan, its surrounding islands, and finally Guam several weeks later, secured a terrestrial stronghold for the Allies within air range of the Japanese mainland. On 6 August 1945, on the island of Tinian just south of Saipan, two atomic weapons were loaded onto American planes. One was dropped on Hiroshima, and

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<sup>29</sup> Regionally, Japanese settlers outnumbered Micronesians by 20% by the mid-1930s. Intermarriage was common (Peattie, 1988).

three days later, another on Nagasaki. Two cities, also full of civilians, were destroyed in seconds. Six days later, Japan surrendered while never using that word. To this day atrocities committed by Japanese imperial forces against civilians in the Marianas, and elsewhere in the Pacific and Asia, including those inflicted on my family, are denied. Limited reparations are still a source of significant contention for Micronesians (Higuchi, 1995).

The devastation of war in the Pacific and its ongoing legacy of militarism, nuclearism and tourism (Teaiwa, 1999; 2001) is a central theme in migration narratives for the people affected by it, including several participants included in this research. Many elders who lived through the war and those born in its aftermath choose to die with their trauma kept secret so as to not burden their descendants with such painful memories (Aguon, 2008; Perez Howard, 1986). Iek didn't know that Saipan was one of the most significant battles of the Pacific; no one told her. Our historical memories are buried in shallow graves though, and they find ways to be heard. For example, while researching Chamorro cuisine for the undergraduate research paper mentioned in chapter one, I learned from an online article that my maternal grandmother was enslaved to work rice fields during the war (Santos Steffy, 25 October 2015). From personal experience, I have come to understand that although food and commodities may be held close to love, they are also held close to trauma (Jetril-Kijiner, 17 December 2013). Miraculously, Iek's family survived the war. Some relatives remained in Saipan—a place no longer politically incorporated into Japan. Some moved back to Palau—also no longer part of Japan. Others moved south to Guam. But the narrative of loss continued.

When Iek's father was twelve, his mother passed away. Familial tensions formed when her paternal grandfather refused to surrender his children to his late spouse's clan as Palauan matrilineal custom dictates (Fadiman et al., 2018). Without a mother, Iek's father assumed parental roles for his siblings at a young age. Eventually, he moved to the continent for better opportunities and sent for his siblings so they could have a new start as well. Iek's admiration for her father was evident in the way she spoke of him, and combined with the matrilineal customs of Palauan families, credits his story and her cultural influences for forming her and her sister into the successful women they have become.

Although Iek is a proud Palauan, she explained that she lacks cultural knowledge about traditional Palauan rituals despite attending several. These include Bay Area omengat, a public presentation ceremony that celebrates a mother after her first birth. Iek explains that before an omengat, a mlechell (new mother) is ritualistically bathed over a period of days by the women in her family or by a mechas (healer). This preparatory period is called ‘omesurech’ and the number of days depends on a mlechell’s rank, with more days dedicated a woman of higher status (Fadiman et al., 2018). On the final day, turmeric-infused coconut oil is applied to her skin, and she is presented to her community. During this time, her feet are forbidden to touch the ground, so women relatives lay out telutau (woven coconut frond mats) for her to stand on. Other attendees dance to honor her. Often women attending wear cheriut skirts woven from materials that display their clan colors and rank (Salmi-Saslaw, 1988). Iek has one that she wears for such occasions and proudly told me that hers is made with traditional plant materials, instead of imported yarn that has become increasingly common since the early 20th century (Fadiman et al., 2018; Salmi-Saslaw, 1988).

I questioned Iek about specific meanings behind omengat practices, but she explained that her knowledge was limited and was hesitant to give me any information that may not be correct, so eventually we changed the subject. When I arrived home from the interview, I searched out resources online about omengat. Iek didn’t give herself enough credit for her level of knowledge as resources online mostly confirmed what she discussed. There was, of course, variation in how these rituals are carried out. Like all ceremonies, omengat are not historically fixed nor universally practiced in the same way, and throughout the past century at least, different materials have been articulated into the ritual (Fadiman et al., 2018).

Iek’s familiarity with the ritual as ‘omengat’ links her family’s roots to Babeldaob and Koror where it is known by that name. On the island of Ngeaur, the ritual is called ‘ngasech’ meaning ‘to elevate’ or ‘to climb up’ (Fadiman et al., 2018). There mlechell ascend stairs constructed specifically for the event and, as with the number of days dedicated for an omesurech, the number of stairs also depends on rank (Fadiman et al., 2018). Omengat and ngasech rituals are quite a spectacle to watch. There are plenty of YouTube videos accessible to view, many of which clearly take place outside the Islands.

Some videos even show non-Palauans participating in central familial roles. These videos not only demonstrate how Palauans remain connected across the globe but also provide a record of cultural change and experimentation.

Maria Fadiman and colleagues (2018) record the biocultural material elements of omengat and ngasech rituals in Palau and examine how these rituals are impacted by diasporic influence and globalization. The authors list fifty-six plant and three animal products used in the ceremony, the majority of which are primarily of medicinal value. Of these products, the authors note that, “The essential plants including turmeric and coconut oil are still keystone species which remain commonly grown, harvested, and processed locally” (p. 8). Like the preceding discussion of samanga, the authors discuss how coconut oil mixed with turmeric remains consistently used, with an assumed importance in their observations. In a Palauan context specifically, this is because turmeric conveys matrilineal meanings as Fadiman and colleagues explain:

The Palauans visualize the rhizome of the turmeric plant as having a ‘mother’ root from which the off shoots grow. The mother root symbolizes the female side of the matrilineal descent system with strong kin links retained from one generation to the next. The multiple off shoots represent the male side of the matrilineal society with these offspring finding links with other family members increasingly dissipated [overseas]... (p. 8).

When coconut oil mixed with turmeric is applied to a mlechell’s skin, it displays to her community her position as a woman of her clan, connected from a matrilineal genealogy and who now passes this connection on to her child.

Finishing my interview with Iek, I asked if there was anything else that she wanted to share. She said that she was proud to come from a matrilineal culture although she wasn’t certain how exactly it fitted in with coconut oil. As Fadiman and colleagues (2018) demonstrate, coconut oil mixed with turmeric used in an omengat ceremony conveys matrilineal meaning for all to see. As the next subsection discusses, for Tongans the shimmering aesthetic of coconut oil similarly reflects the virtue of the woman wearing it and those she represents.

## Tau‘olunga

To tau‘olunga is to dance. The dance form itself is a Tongan variation of the Samoan taualuga which is distinguished by outward, rather than inward, hand movements and slight tilts of the head called ‘teke’ to mark the completion of a set of moves (quoted in TheCoconutTV, 13 September 2016; see also Kaeppler, 1972).<sup>30</sup> Young Tongan women tau‘olunga at major life events or cultural festivities, but it is not performed casually as a noa (non-sacred) art form. Given its tapu status, tau‘olunga is emphasized as representative of Tongan culture. The term ‘tau‘olunga’ itself refers to the King’s head,<sup>31</sup> and certain movements tend to be reserved to accompany lyrical subject matter which refers to the royal family (TheCoconutTV, 13 September 2016, Kaeppler, 1972). Many Tongan women—and their relations—are assessed by their ability to tau‘olunga elegantly; every year the tau‘olunga component of Tonga’s Miss Heilala competition draws significant attention for this very purpose. Those who watch it may feel personal investment in the women competing through familial, village, island, or even national connection. Introductions of the women about to tau‘olunga in the Miss Heilala competition are long and detailed as they list the relational things Islanders need to know (Ka‘ili, 2005).

Aesthetics are part of tau‘olunga, including external decorative beauty. However, the separation between what is considered solely visual and what is communicative is difficult to distinguish. As Adrienne Kaeppler elaborates, “It should be remembered that in Tonga, as elsewhere in Polynesia, verbal and visual expressions are integrally related” (1993, p. 477). As they perform, dancers wear elaborate teunga (traditional costume), many of which are embroidered with polished shell regalia. Aotearoa New Zealand pāua (*Halotis sp.*) regalia is popular, likely signifying a unique Aotearoa New Zealand-Tongan appearance and identity. When dancing tau‘olunga, Tongan women’s skin is expected to

<sup>30</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OnIPT32xUhc> for example of tau‘olunga choreographed by Sisi‘uno Helu (TheCoconutTV, 13 September 2016).

<sup>31</sup> In Samoan, the word ‘taualuga’ has both literal and symbolic meanings. It translates directly to mean the ‘roof’ of a fale (house). But as the construction of a roof takes place as the final stage of building a house, the word taualuga also connotes “the culmination of a gathering signifying the final act or climax of an event” (Vaifale, 1999 cited in Carroll, 2004, p. 78). As such, this dance form often takes place as the final stage of a Samoan event.



shimmer too and to achieve this, oil is applied generously on their exposed skin. Coconut oil was used historically and continues to be used now, but increasingly in the Pacific and in Pacific communities in the diaspora, Johnson & Johnson baby oil is a popular substitute. This prompts the question, taken up in chapter five, whether it is the shimmering aesthetic of oil or the material product itself that makes this part of tau‘olunga sacred?

Interview participants and survey respondents relayed a well-known belief that if a woman’s skin shimmers throughout her tau‘olunga she is virtuous, but if the oil dries up, she’s not, and if she’s not, people talk. ‘Virtue’ means different things to different people, but as was shared with me quite explicitly in interviews and survey responses, in this context, it’s synonymous with sexual virginity. The fact that tau‘olunga is reserved for unmarried young women emphasizes this expectation. Therefore, if oil dries on a woman’s skin while she performs tau‘olunga, it indicates to everyone watching that she is not a virgin. This ‘shame’ would very likely impact her family and community as well.

This belief first came to my attention through a survey respondent who wrote:

18-24 year old woman (Wellington, Tongan)	For a woman and the days that they are considered to be 'pure' - or a virgin, is where the coconut oil is introduced and put on when they are to wear it for a tauolunga (tongan traditional dance). When the oil is put on the skin (by a mother/woman figure) in the traditional way, it should shine and drip on the girl who is about to tauolunga and should not dry up during the performace [ <i>sic</i> ]. If it were to dry up, people may consider her impurity of not being a virgin...
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This belief does not go without intra-cultural critique or even humor. It’s difficult to say whether participants who discussed this belief whole-heartedly believe it. My perception is that they don’t. Nonetheless, they were aware of it as a social fact that, as such, necessitated measures to ensure good impressions were made. This included applying extra oil to their skin so they could avoid embarrassing themselves and their relations.

Given the sensitive nature of the topic though, Islanders do what Islanders do best to dispel social tension: joke about it (Hau‘ofa, 1987; 1990). Justine Jane Taito Matamua (Wellington, Samoan) discussed a meme shared by her Tongan friends directly poking fun at the issue:

JJTM	[Tongans] have mythical beliefs that [...] if you're putting the coconut oil on the girl performing—oil, just any oil—on a girl performing, if it dries up, it means she's not a virgin.
NR	Oh really!?! [laughs]
JJTM	Yeah! [...] on social media and stuff there's memes that have been made of the 'real lie detector' and it's a photo of the Johnson baby oil [laughs] [...] compared to Samoans, I don't think we go that much into oil. Like oil's just oil.

In my final San Francisco Bay Area interview, I met with Siola'a Pepea (Bay Area, Tongan, Fijian). Like many Pacific Islander participants, especially in the Bay Area, Pepea prides herself on her ability to code-switch between cultures. She feels comfortable in the non-Pacific communities she identifies with but there are certain things that tether her to her Tongan identity. Pepea comes from a prominent Tongan lineage and as her father's daughter, she is expected to tau'olunga at Tongan cultural events to represent her family. I asked Pepea directly about this oil-related belief and whether it really is just about virginity. Although she is aware of Tongans' perceptions of this belief—as well as other Islanders' perceptions of Tongans regarding this belief—she explained that much of it is lost in translation:

NR	Do you do dancing?
SP	On only very important family occasions.
NR	Like what would those be?
SP	It would have to be a real special occasion, like either it's like a special occasion for something I've achieved or something for my dad's family, just because my dad is the oldest son and [...] if you go back, back in time, my dad's line is the main mans' line. And so anything with my dad's family, I have to dance. So yeah coconut oil is really important because it just demonstrates the virtue of a woman. And if you don't wear it when you're dancing, it implies to everyone else that you're not a virtuous woman.
NR	When you say virtuous, I was told that that means virgin. Is that what you mean or is there more beyond just virgin?
SP	Yeah it's more than virgin. It's more like you respect your parents, so you abide by the cultural rules, you're just—I don't know how to say in English but in Tongan

	you're faka'apa'apa and so just respectful in general in the way you carry yourself in life.
NR	I've heard that word before, but I never knew what it meant.
SP	I think the closest word is respect.
NR	But it's more complicated than that?
SP	Yeah it's more complicated than that.

Taito Matamua explained that in her experience, Samoans don't attribute as much meaning to coconut oil compared to what she has observed of her Tongan friends. It was clear that Tongan consumers in my research care deeply about the product. One Wellington survey respondent even wrote that coconut oil is "Part of [my] basic cosmetic kit as a Tongan" (25-30 year old woman, Tongan, Māori, New Zealand European/pākehā). Kalo Afeaki (Wellington, Tongan, Māori) added, "With coconut oil, I definitely think it's important for us. But also just culturally, it's something that every family should have [pause] *in Tonga* [her emphasis]." Still though, coconut oil maintains meaning for others in their respective Pacific cultures. Teuila Faaleo (Wellington, Samoan) discussed its symbolic meaning in her life as well:

TF	I know Tongans, if it is not shiny [...] then they say you're not a virgin or something. It's what they believe. But [...] if we're to compare fagu'u Sāmoa [Samoan coconut oil] and baby oil, it's no different with a friend graduating and I give her a lei made of lollies and I make one out of flowers. So there's that value of [it being] more meaningful if it's flowers and also, the difference if it's flowers from the market and flowers from mum's garden. So there's the difference of that—so the value. So I'll say if people say coconut oil or baby oil on the body when dancing, I prefer more the coconut oil. I do not know why. But kinda like going back to what's more valuable in terms of dedication and what goes into it. But that's me personally.
NR	No, that makes sense. Do you think that would be other people's opinions too?
TF	I—cause every now and then you hear them say "Oh! If only it was coconut oil that we were using on her, it would complete the whole package." It's kinda like missing piece when a taupou [central tualuga dancer] is dancing but no ula [neck garland], no tuiga [headdress], so "Only if she was using coconut oil." Like, "Her body's not too shiny!" Again I do not know. Cause I find that really risky when they're dancing

	with nifo‘oti, the weapon thing, cause it’s slippery and I’ve seen my sisters dance with it. And I do not know the concentration and be thoughtful of the people around you while you’re dancing, swinging that weapon. Cause it’s slippery so I do not know. Yeah.
NR	I have seen it slip once.
TF	And then everyone’s like “Oh! If only. Whose daughter is that? What village is she from?”

As Faaleo discussed, if a dancer makes a significant mistake when they dance—in this case, drops a nifo‘oti—the embarrassment-derived shame such a mistake will cause is not limited to the individual dancer only. This is because a dancer represents more than just themselves. In these Pacific contexts, women (and often men, depending on the dance form) represent the virtue of their parents, their families, their village, and perhaps in a diasporic context, even their nation, culture or other constituencies such as a school Poly club or neighborhood church. Though I am skeptical that most who discussed that shimmering skin guarantees a dancer’s virginity believe it, the aesthetic of coconut oil—and increasingly Johnson & Johnson baby oil—remains symbolic of virtue. These visuals convey meanings in their own semiotic form, and for the time being, do not appear to lose their relevance.

#### Subsection 4.3.4

### **Hifo Kilikili and Laulau**

Sarah Finau (Wellington, Tongan, Māori) and her younger sister, Kalo Afeaki (Wellington, Tongan, Māori), were young when their father decided to relocate their family from Aotearoa New Zealand to Tonga. He moved to assume his role managing the family farm from his father who inherited it from his own. Finau likens their father’s fatongia (duty) as a Tongan version of the storyline in Albert Wendt’s classic Samoan migration novel *Sons for the Return Home* (1973). But another reason to return was because of his children. As ancestrally mixed Tongans (who are aware that they do not necessarily code to others as Tongans immediately) their father was afraid that staying in Aotearoa New Zealand would strip his children’s Tongan identities from them, so they moved. That way he could ensure that his children would know their anga fakatonga (Tongan cultural

knowledge). And now, as adults who have since returned to Aotearoa New Zealand for education and work, they do know their anga fakatonga, although as Finau admitted, they know it selectively.

Their family farm is eight acres, and the King leases them more which helps during fallow periods. Despite his passion for it, their father didn't know much about farming with his commerce background, but he learned over time. The seminars hosted by the United Nations' Food and Agriculture Organization helped develop his skills. On the farm they grow what Aotearoa New Zealand and other Pacific Rim countries will buy: hina (*Cucurbita pepo*), satiomo (*Colocasia esculenta*), vanilla, coffee and coconuts—lots and lots of coconuts. They also supplement their export supply from other local farmers' plantations which means that the farm has an economic impact in their wider community as well. It makes sense then that both Finau and Afeaki focused their interview discussions from a producer's perspective and concern for regional development, rather than solely a consumer's consideration of production processes.

In the early 2000s, before the recent boom in the coconut oil industry, Finau and Afeaki's family began producing coconut oil for domestic and international markets. During their summer holidays the sisters had to assist the women employees in the production line.<sup>32</sup> In their interviews, they independently recalled their discomfort standing over industrial ovens in already tropical humid conditions to dry the grated coconut meat. Their lives improved immensely when their father bought an automatic coconut grater. Before that, all grating was done by hand, and it takes about ten coconuts to make just one liter of oil; it takes hundreds to thousands to fill an order. Once dry, the grated coconut was loaded into a manual press machine and strong older women extracted the oil by pressing the weight of their bodies onto its levers.

The extracted oil was mixed with different essences for a distinct smell—ahi (*Santalum yasi*), tuitui (*Aleurites moluccanus*), mohokoi (*Cananga odorata*), and the royal family's flower, heilala (*Garcinia sessilis*). In Tongan, the prefix word 'lolo' is added to

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<sup>32</sup> See <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=WTqIhAD3tnk&t=402s> for an example of an industrial coconut oil production line in Tonga (Tasileger, 17 February 2015). (Note this marketing video is not from these participants' family business). Drying the coconut meat, as the video shows, is not usually the traditional means of making coconut oil in Tonga, which is usually made from boiling coconut milk or allowing it time to ferment. However, drying reduces water content and gives the oil a longer shelf life.

these essences to convey what type of oil it produces (i.e. sandalwood scented coconut oil becomes ‘lolo ahi;’ ylang ylang becomes ‘lolo mohokoi’). Afeaki explained that each scent conveys a social status among Tongans; the way a person smells indicates who they are and what they can afford. This olfactory symbolism matters, given that coconut oil isn’t cheap relative to the average Tongan income. This is another reason why Johnson & Johnson baby oil is used as a cheaper substitute, even if it lacks traditional scents or color hues. On the farm, Finau and Afeaki’s family infused coconut oil with scents of foreign origins too, like frangipani (*Apocynaceae plumeria*),<sup>33</sup> but as Afeaki explained, “Those are flowery smells. They’re very palangi [white] smells. For us, it’s always been lolo ahi and lolo tuitui... it’s not so much that we like the floral scents, but it’s more of the earthy smells.”

Finau and Afeaki’s family business branched out into new market niches. They sold packaged scented oil in the duty-free section of the airport for tourists returning from holiday or for Tongans returning to the Rim. The business also gained prominence in domestic markets, and for a while their family was the main producer of commercial coconut oil for Tonga. Every year they sponsored the Miss Heilala tau‘olunga competition by providing coconut oil for the dancers, and when the King died, they provided oil for that too. Although Johnson & Johnson baby oil is commonly used as a substitute for coconut oil, Afeaki trusts that there will always be a need for coconut oil in the ceremonial lives of Tongans. One market demand is for death.

Coconut oil has a place in death rite rituals in the Pacific, both before burial and after (Alefosio & Henderson, 2018; Cunningham, 1992; Stevens, 2018). In Tonga, kilikili (volcanic rocks) that decorate a person’s grave are ritually washed with coconut oil in a process called ‘hifo kilikili.’ Afeaki described this practice:

KA	[On the anniversary of someone’s death] what a family will do is all go together and dip the rocks in the oil so that it shines and that it’s beautiful. It’s almost like the natural decoration of a grave. So it’s this beautiful shiny <i>blackness</i> on the grave. So it stands out amongst all the other graves. And overtime, every year you’ll come back and do it again. [...] it’s how we would’ve remembered our dead pre-fake flowers and all of the colonial things that have happened. So it’s—there’s sort of
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<sup>33</sup> Despite its frequent use as a Pacific symbol, frangipani, also called plumeria, are endemic to the Americas.

	varieties of when we use coconut oil. It's for dancing. It's for great, happy things. But it's also takai lolo, <sup>34</sup> when someone's passing away or when they've already passed away.
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Although oil degrades, archaeological records show that the practice of decorating Tongan graves with kilikili is nearly 700 years old; and isotopic evidence shows that the volcanic rocks selected to decorate graves have come from as far away as Sāmoa (Clark et al., 2020). Records of specific royal and chiefly funerals discuss the momentous lengths whole communities, and even the majority of Tongan subjects, went through to produce funerary materials and rights (Clark et al., 2020). Historically, kilikili decorated the graves of the Tongan royal or chiefly class exclusively. But since the 1980s the ritual has expanded to Tongan commoners which has diversified the way it's practiced (Clark et al., 2020). The ceremony originally marked the end of a one-hundred-day mourning period, called pō teau, during which Tongans throughout the Kingdom were obliged to abide by intensified tapu restrictions (Clark et al., 2020). The consumption of certain foods and commodities were prohibited as were joyous activities like public singing and dancing in order to demonstrate respect for the recently departed (Clark et al., 2020). After the mourning period was observed, representatives of the deceased's family and members of designated clans brought kilikili to their loved one's grave (Clark et al., 2020). The rocks used were first washed with water in a process called lanu kilikili and then with scented coconut oil for hifo kilikili (Clark et al., 2020). After the ceremony, the tapu was lifted and Tongans were permitted to return to the normalcy of their lives (Clark et al., 2020). Although the funerary customs have changed in recent decades, the old customs are still diligently practiced especially by members of the royal family as state affairs.<sup>35</sup>

While researching hifo kilikili to contextualize Afeaki's interview material, I found an article by Adrienne Kaeppler (1993) which examines the poetics in laulau (Tongan eulogies). One laulau composed by Queen Sālote Tupou III honoring younger sister, Princess 'Elisiva Fusipala Tauki'onetuku (known as Princess Fusipala), discusses the

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<sup>34</sup> Takai lolo translates to mean 'applying oil.' Here, Afeaki uses the term specifically to describe applying oil to a deceased person before interment.

<sup>35</sup> See [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MDmAw3Nd\\_CU&t=998s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MDmAw3Nd_CU&t=998s) for a contemporary example of this ritual to commemorate the late Queen Mother Halaevalu Mata'aho (Latu, 10 March 2017).

scented coconut oil her sister wears on her way to Pulumotu (a chiefly spirit world similar in meaning to Hawaiki or Kahiki). Given the significance of coconut oil in Tongan society, the meaning behind the words symbolize nuanced spiritual and political concepts:

Sālote's second laulau for her sister [...] a metaphorical poem about scented coconut oils, honors Fusipala—and by extension Tongan society and culture. Today, as in Fusipala's time, scented coconut oil is an essential ingredient of a Tongan woman's toiletries: it is used in bathing and as perfume. A high-ranking woman is expected to have a beautiful scent; some scents are subtle and others quite direct. But more important, when applied in a certain quantity the oil indicates visually whether a woman is a virgin. Oil is applied when a young woman dances and when she appears at the public events dealing with her marriage. If it runs off her body (especially her arms and legs), the woman is a virgin; if it is absorbed into her skin, she is not. Thus, the oil must be made properly. Its manufacture is a sacred task of the old women of the family, but it is best to have a virgin knead the oil with the flowers that scent it. Scented oil is also applied to the dead while they lie in state, so the eulogy's reference to oils has a double meaning—oil would be used for Fusipala's funeral and also would be symbolic of her sexual purity (an absolute necessity for a woman of her rank). The association of good scent with high rank pervades this laulau. Each of the stanzas pairs a scented oil with a European perfume [...] In pairing a traditional scented oil with an introduced perfume, she also suggests that Fusipala combined traditional Tongan virtues and values with the best of the outside world. This pairing, of course, also shows Sālote's knowledge of both worlds and points to the importance of traditional values in modern Tongan life (Kaeppeler, 1993, p. 487).

This excerpt captures the power scented coconut oil holds in Tongan culture. It addresses both Christian and European elements, while also reflecting indigenous spiritual concepts. Scent—a vital olfactory aesthetic—symbolizes Pacific ways of thinking and being (Stevens, 2018). It is scent that has the power to transport our souls to different places—to spiritual worlds, to the Islands, to family, to fond and painful memories. And it is with the power of scent that I begin the following section.



●  
Section 4.4

## Ancestors in Training

Fieldwork notes, September 2019:

On my way to the train station, I noticed a small, but healthy plumeria tree growing from someone's front yard opposite Malcolm X Elementary School. It was about my height and reached out onto the sidewalk. I didn't know they could grow this far north. Plumerias were always my favorite tropical flower, even if they're not originally from the Pacific. Aesthetically, they're not that impressive but their smell makes me think of childhood visits to see family on Guam and O'ahu. There was a dead plumeria flower on the concrete beneath the tree. I lifted it to my nose and thought I could make out the aroma of humidity, stale cigarettes and those sandalwood incense my auntie liked so much. Some participants told me that the smell of coconut oil reminded them of the Pacific, but for me, it was this dead flower off Berkeley concrete.

The excerpt above captures the moment before I met Alex White (Bay Area, Chamorro) in a Berkeley train station on my way to San Francisco. His clothing caught my attention. He wore a faded blue-gray sweater with the Guam seal on it. I made a friendly comment and he asked if I was a Chamorro too. The train ride into the city gave us only enough time to exchange basic information about ourselves and our contact details. A week later, I messaged White. I was excited to meet another Chamorro, a rare occurrence in the Bay Area metropole. White invited me to a film screening at the Intertribal Friendship House in Oakland. The invitation was my first indication of how White understands his Chamorro heritage. For him, being Chamorro is an indigenous identity—*indigenous* being a descriptive label that neither of us were raised with but have cultivated in different circumstantial ways overtime. I was raised with an understanding that being Chamorro is an ethnic-racial identity, a passive fact about my genealogy. But the term 'indigenous' seems to implicate me into a political battlefield—one that I am yet to fully understand but expected to participate in nonetheless (and on the 'right' side). The dynamic was similar

for White, who wasn't even familiar with the term 'Chamorro' until late childhood. Before then, he was raised understanding himself as 'Guamanian-American.'

On the drive home from the film screening, I discussed my research with White. As mentioned in the introduction, I try to keep my personal and academic lives separate. It also felt weird to present myself as confidently Pacific, which many Islanders I've talked to assume is a prerequisite to do a PhD in Pacific studies. White said that he uses coconut oil, although not in any 'traditional' way. Still, he offered to help and agreed to participate in my project. We scheduled to meet at his house later that week.

This section is unique as it examines White as an individual, rather than as part of a collective voice tasked to represent indigenous ways of knowing. White's interview encapsulates previously discussed themes of this chapter which has focused on cultural constructivism, relational genealogies, and ritualistic uses of coconut oil. This discussion focuses on White's spiritual practice of "ancestral lineage healing" and how coconuts are implicated within his spiritual worldview. I have included this section as an example of an emerging form of Pacific spiritualism in the diaspora and to provide a narrative of the present spiritual lives of diasporic Islanders. I do this because, as White makes clear, one day we will be the ancestors of our descendants. Right now, we're still training to become them.

#### Subsection 4.4.1

### **Ancestral Lineage Healing**

White was raised in a place where there were very few Islanders, and for this reason, he didn't have access to a Pacific community to teach him about his roots. Factoring into this isolation was that his father was a child through the Japanese occupation of Guam during World War Two. Like many Chamorros, especially of older generations, White explained that this traumatic experience has made his father feel indebted to the United States for his liberation. Throughout the Chamorro world, this socio-psychological 'debt' is reflected in outward displays of hyper-American patriotism. 'Americanness' is an identity that many Chamorros seek to embody, both on- and off-island. White explained that his father always claimed to be "American first and then Guamanian second," and that he had little interest in 'being Chamorro' beyond sharing fond childhood memories, many

of which included coconuts in some way. Generally, his desire to transmit broader cultural knowledge to his children was strained.

It was White's non-Pacific mother who took the initiative to educate her son about his Chamorro heritage. She mail-ordered Chamorro children's books written about indigenous myths that both White, and eventually his Chamorro father, sourced much of their cultural knowledge from. *I Estorian I Niyok* (Barcinas & Faustino, 1973), referenced earlier, came from this collection. White explained that through these stories, "my dad and I were learning about Chamorro history at the same time." White continues to use Chamorro literature—authored by both native and non-native authors—as a way to source his knowledge about Chamorro spirituality.

White's Colorado hometown is largely Evangelical and religiously dogmatic. Neither White nor his family identified as Evangelical Christians, and this posed significant challenges for his spiritual development during his youth. The irreligiosity of his upbringing was harshly regulated by community residents who sought to 'save' White and his family through problematic behavior:

AW	I myself was not Evangelical. Actually no one in my family was, which was a huge issue for people in my community. Just to give three points I could give out to explain what sort of environment I was in: First, was when I was in elementary school, parents would invite me over for a birthday party and baptize me without my parents' permission or telling me. [...] And another is my parents used to have a Darwin sticker, you know like the Jesus fish with feet, and our car was vandalized, like keyed for having that on there. And we used to have pamphlets for salvation left on our car all the time.
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The bigoted treatment White endured from zealous community members sets the context of an assimilationist value structure that he was forced to navigate and eventually abandon in order to develop his alternative indigenous spiritual practices. Although he never needed to 'leave' the church (as he was never a member), its theological influence extended far beyond its walls, and opportunities for alternative forms of spirituality were systematically, and sometimes violently, cut off by the conservative institutions that governed social norms. Despite seeds of spiritual experiences that took place during his

childhood, White explained it was only after leaving his community that he was safely able to develop any spiritual practice at all.

White described certain spiritually grounded family practices, like wearing red for protection after a family death, as well as communicating with deceased relatives' souls (called 'fa'ñague' in Chamorro [see Ho, 2018]), as part of his childhood experiences in the continental United States. According to Dan Ho's (2018) ethnographic research into fa'ñague experiences, other Chamorros living both in the Marianas and in the continental United States also reported to have visits from their deceased relatives; only interactions with taotaomo'na (spiritual beings in Chamorro folklore, literally meaning "people before") were restricted to the Islands themselves. This suggests that while the Islands geographically remain central in indigenous spiritual ontologies, Pacific spiritualities can be transplanted, at least in part, outside the Islands and into new places, much like Islanders themselves. Also, like people, Pacific spiritual worldviews can mix with the spiritual worldviews of other cultures present in the places Islanders currently live.

White discussed how his own practices have been informed by spiritual practitioners from the San Francisco Bay Area indigenous Ohlone community and African diaspora. He explained how the supplementation of other indigenous spiritualities provides a way to further develop his own as a pan-indigenous practice. This also compensates for a general lack of specific spiritual guidance from Chamorro spiritual practitioners. White *has* reached out to Chamorro spiritual collectives based in the Islands for support, but at the time of the interview, none had responded to him in any meaningful way. Based on the email exchanges that we discussed, I suspect his diasporic status may contribute to these collectives' general lack of response to his networking attempts.

White discussed that in the early stages of his spiritual practice, he sought out guidance from a practitioner who he retrospectively understands to be a "plastic shaman," who he defined as "a white person who basically colonizes indigenous magic." Still, during a workshop with this practitioner, White was able to feel a spiritual connection with the soul of a deceased Chamorro ancestor. From that day, he resolved to dedicate more time with his ancestors and to use his spiritual practice to nurture their collective wellbeing. This is the foundation of White's ancestral lineage healing practice which he described below:

AW	<p>...it's basically going back and assessing the health of your ancestors from the 'troubled dead' to 'well-meaning but unhealed,' and 'the well and elevated.' And so you do these reverence rituals and then you basically try to find which ancestor is 'well and elevated' and knows all the ancestors that came before and then all the ancestors that came after. And then you are the anchor in this material realm. And then they're there. And then you work with them to heal the lineage in between and heal all the intergenerational ancestral trauma. So just generations of war and genocide and all that, <i>all</i> that pain that gets passed down generation to generation. You ask the well ones to heal. And you do that by offering gifts and blessings and doing that ritual work. [...] you start with one line. So I started with my father's father's line. And then I'll probably do my father's mother's line next. And you basically work with each lineage until you heal all four. So that's a summary. That's ancestral lineage healing.</p>
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As his ancestors' "anchor in this material realm," White understands that it's his responsibility to develop his ability to spiritually heal others. This includes the spirits of the living and the deceased, who never fully depart this world. In this Pacific worldview, we share the world with our ancestors who live among us in spirit. As this chapter has already addressed, this is because indigenous Pacific worldviews do not necessarily separate spiritual and material realms in the same sense that Judeo-Christian worldviews do. Within this spiritual structure (and as White stressed repeatedly, with healthy barriers and good "spiritual hygiene"), he can nurture relationships with the dead who in turn help guide the living. He understands this work as an active form of decolonization because he understands the perceived severance between the spiritual and material realms as a falsely constructed barrier that was imposed on indigenous communities during missionization campaigns. By developing and sharing his knowledge, he hopes to assist other indigenous people to decolonize their own forms of spirituality. From White's perspective, these spiritual worldviews were never truly eradicated, only forced into dormancy. He hopes to wake them once again so they can guide us through the challenges of the modern world.

#### Subsection 4.4.2

### **Compensating for Diaspora in Ritual Work**

Although White has developed—and continues to develop—his spiritual practice with the help of other indigenous spiritual practitioners, ultimately his work is informed by precolonial Chamorro spiritual worldviews. But this poses a challenge because White

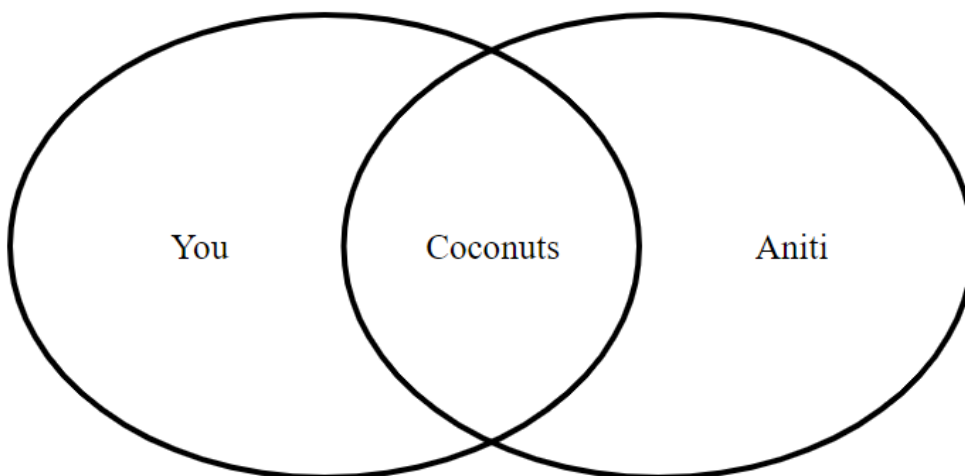
doesn't live in the Islands and it's things from the Islands that his ancestors request as offerings during his ritual work. When I met White for his interview, he led me upstairs to show me a shrine he had erected beneath a window. On the shrine were items of spiritual significance and compensatory substitutions for items that he can't get in the continental United States. There were various types of shells and printed pictures of trees and birds native to the Pacific. Also on the shrine was an imported Thai coconut which he bought from the large supermarket located between my house and his. There was no coconut oil (which White ingests for health purposes), only a whole coconut. I asked White about the spiritual significance of this decision:

NR	...Is there any connection between coconut oil use and spirituality for you? Or health and spirituality?
AW	Not the oil per se but the use of coconut on the altar for sure as a gift to the ancestors.
NR	Right, you had the coconut on there.
AW	Mhm. The whole coconut. Coconut shavings. Anytime I'm doing a reverence ritual, you know, offering thanks, expressing gratitude for the abundance of blessings, coconut is always a part of the gift. So I don't know if that's relevant.
NR	That's very interesting to know. Yeah that's very relevant. So it's not coconut oil specifically but it's <i>coconut</i> . Why? I mean I feel like that's kinda an obvious answer Islander to Islander but they ain't Islanders [points to the recorder]. Why?
AW	Well let me tell you why. It is [pause] using coconut is a form of ancestral reverence because it is my connection to the past. There's so few things outside my bones that are made up of my ancestors. I have so few fragments that connect me with my ancestors on the Island. So when I use coconut, it's something that is familiar to them. It's something that they would have had. It's comfort food. It's something that there is a familiarity. There is a comfort. And frankly they ask for it. Probably bottom line, they ask.

White's explanation for using a whole coconut for reverence rituals reveals both his own relationship to the product as his "connection to the past," but perhaps more pertinently, he alluded to his sense of spiritual isolation by virtue of living outside the Islands. He explained that ritual use of coconuts allows him to compensate for his geographic distance. When White said, "There's so few things outside my bones that are

made up of my ancestors. I have so few fragments that connect me with my ancestors on the Island,” he made a statement about his diasporic identity. It’s unlikely that such a comment would have been made by a spiritual practitioner living in the place where their ancestors’ bones lie and where the very fabric of their spiritual worldviews were developed. As discussed, White does not believe that Chamorro spirituality is limited to the Islands themselves. In fact, through his spiritual practice he acts as a “material anchor” to expand the geographic realms of Chamorro spirituality. Still, geographic distance is a major factor that he must contend with.

Diaspora affects how he uses coconuts in his reverence work, which hold meaning as a medium between the material and spiritual realms. White sketched the diagram below—correcting my own attempted sketch—to illustrate this medium relationship. (‘Aniti’ means ‘ancestral spirits’ in Chamorro):



*Figure 4.1: Coconuts as a Spiritual Medium. This Venn diagram illustrates the spiritual relationship between Alex White (Bay Area, Chamorro), coconuts and ancestors.*

With this spiritual relationship established, I explored the specific spiritual qualities of coconuts and coconut products with White. I asked whether his ancestors have a preference for where their coconuts come from, given that the one he had provided was from Thailand and not the Marianas or even the Islands:

AW	...Yeah I’m sure there’d be preference. Yeah. It’d probably be better if it was from
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	the Pacific Ocean but I don't know where to get Pacific Islander coconuts.
NR	I don't know either.
AW	It's more like the gesture rather than the actual—[...] well, if it's between having no coconut and having a Thai coconut, I'm going to have Thai coconut.

White explained that his ancestors are understanding of the limitations of diaspora when he asks them whether certain substitutions will be adequate. Normally these substitutions are accepted. His ancestors don't request items from the Americas, nor do they request Chamorro comfort foods made with foreign ingredients, like the guyeria (a confectionery made with wheat flour) that we were snacking on throughout the interview. He elaborated:

AW	I was asking them "What do you want on the altar?" They asked for crab. They asked for the nunu tree [ <i>Ficus benghalensis</i> ]. <sup>36</sup> And the feathers of the birds up there [printed photos hung above the altar]. I was like, "I can't get those. Will this do?" And that was acceptable. That was the offering the ancestors asked for me to put on the altar.
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To White, the spiritual significance of coconuts in a Chamorro worldview is grounded in the life-giving qualities of *Cocos nucifera*, and just as his human ancestors have given him life, White recognizes coconuts as an ancestor as well. He explained, "I feel like it's something that was a source of life. So the reason I'm here is because—I mean, I guess in a way I could even consider coconuts an ancestor. Whereas I have my human ancestors and that's a plant ancestor." It was clear that White's identification of coconuts as an ancestor was a consideration explored by the context of the interview and not necessarily something that he had previously examined. Still, I drew attention to how it paralleled kinship relationships with culturally significant plants in other indigenous Pacific myths such as those addressed at the beginning of this chapter.

As our interview passed the one-hour mark, I began to close out our discussion by providing White the opportunity to reflect or comment on topics he felt may not have been

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<sup>36</sup> *Trongkon nunu* or the giant banyan tree holds spiritual significance in Chamorro mythology as a place where taotaomo'na live (Soker, 1972).



adequately addressed. The following extended dialogue excerpt is presented best in its original talanoa form:

NR	What did you wanna talk about? Was there anything specifically that you thought I was gonna ask you? Is there something that you wanted to add to this? Keep in mind you can also type in [add comments in his Google Doc transcript] but this is easier.
AW	You know just that one of the sayings that I think of the most is that when an elder dies, a library burns down.
NR	Never heard that before.
AW	Yeah and that's something I just think of. More of an expression of gratitude that you are collecting these stories and that is going to be preserved for future generations. And more of just [pause] it's done in a way, it's done of not having a cultural connection. It's something to be Chamorro by bone, by blood and not culturally. Because I don't feel—I don't feel like I belong in Chamorro culture. But that's what I want more than anything.
NR	Is this a way to reclaim it?
AW	Yeah. Yeah in a private way.
NR	Is reclaim the right word? Or connect the right word?
AW	Connect. Connect. Yeah. I guess re-indigenize is something that I've heard too. I'm trying to decolonize my mind and soul.
NR	I've never talked to anyone who focuses as much on—I've never talked to a <i>Chamorro</i> , specifically a Chamorro, who's focused on the spiritual health aspect of it as much. And I really feel like there's something that's missing that I've never really thought about beforehand. It was just so glaringly absent. And I never questioned its absence, I think.
AW	Yeah. I mean it was a means of survival to be absent. [...] Yeah so it makes sense. And I think that's probably just my—both my fear and my longing—I just want to keep that alive. Yeah this is probably where I end, where I consider all of us to be ancestors in training. And so then I feel like it's—that's where I've tried to take up the mantle of like “I'm an ancestor in training.” And when I pass on, if I do the work in this lifetime, then I'll be able to support my descendants. Support my nieces and nephews.
NR	When you're old or when you're dead?
AW	Both. More directly when I'm older. And then when I'm dead. I mean that's what

	<p>the ancestors want to do. Because they're seeing everything you're doing. And they're seeing you really struggling but you're not really asking for help, then they're not going to be able to do as much, whereas if you have an established relationship. And I really feel like where we're headed in terms of our climate crisis, we need—yeah actually this will probably be the quote that I could end on [flips through journal] is that, "If you don't have strong roots, the coming storm will sweep you away." That's what my teacher tells me. The more that we can connect with our roots and—because the absence of ancestral reverence is a <i>very</i> recent phenomenon. And so I think if we reclaim our inherent connection with our ancestors then we'll be able to endure a lot more and survive. And that's really what I'm thinking, to support the unimaginable atrocities and suffering that lie ahead in the next ten years due to our climate crisis. That if I do enough of this ancestral work that I'll be able to—and if I get my nieces and nephews doing it, then we'll be able to be up there and support them and help them through the dark times. [Pause] And coconuts.</p>
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In this extended interview excerpt, White references his concerns, even fear, of cultural loss. It's clear that White values the knowledge embodied in elders' experiences. He believes their knowledge can help our people endure the challenges we face today, especially the looming existential threat of climate change. When these elders die and become ancestors, their ability to transmit knowledge to younger generations becomes much more strained. It's not lost indefinitely, however, so long as White and those he is able to teach, practice ancestral lineage healing to communicate—or *mafa'ñague*—with them. Ancestral lineage healing requires ritual work, and part of this ritual work is providing ancestors with offerings. This gift-giving is likely a reflection of reciprocal exchange customs common in Pacific cultures and addressed in greater detail in chapter six. These gifts serve as spiritual mediums that establish a relationship between a person in the living world, and those 'living' in the next. Coconuts can be used in this ritualistic way. White's ancestors' familiarity with coconut makes this product a valued item in their exchanges. *None* of this would likely please the Evangelical Christians from White's hometown. The ongoing development of White's spiritual practice requires de-articulating the predominantly Christian values that largely structured his upbringing. To White, this is a form of decolonization. He is wrestling back his soul from the hegemonic, mainly Christian, forces that have encroached on Chamorro ways of being over generations. Here, White reclaims himself and his ancestors' souls back.

## Connection through Coconuts

Writing this chapter has been a significant challenge for me. The nature of discussing indigenous spirituality follows no linear argumentative form as cultures rarely develop with the intention of explaining themselves. There is no clear beginning and no end. Key elements encompassed within this chapter are amorphous, alive and co-constitutive; it's impossible to adequately explain one without supplementary knowledge of the other. Although there are certainly pan-regional commonalities, spirituality has varied from place to place, time to time, and person to person. Spirituality, like everything else, is contested. There is no *one* indigenous Pacific spiritual worldview; there never has been. I have included this chapter on Pacific spirituality not for the purpose of 'salvage' ethnography but as an attempt to represent the present. And if Islanders still hunger for alternative forms of spiritual nourishment, then maybe what is included here can hold value for future generations. Indigenous spirituality is for us and we are for it.

Key concepts that Pacific participants and survey respondents emphasize in their discussions respond to present issues, demonstrating how our spiritual memories are remembered and constructed through present perspectives. These issues include cultural expansion in the face of diaspora; ecological kinship in an era of environmental collapse; new (likely based on old) relationships to death that allow us to hold our ancestors and loved ones close, and possibly even make peace with our own inevitable mortality; and the tangibility of sacredness in the world around us—a recognition of relational divinity in the soil beneath our feet, not lost in immaterial metaphor. These key elements, I hope, provide us a spiritual toolkit for the challenges we face in our collective, individual, and “dividual” lives. And (always) coconuts.



## CHAPTER FIVE

# Cultural Capital

Capital is a relative concept. To those who navigate multiple “fields”—or political and sociocultural contexts—knowledge about which objects, skills and habits hold value as things that can accumulate capital varies (Bourdieu, 1979). Historically, these values change through social trends, making capital an elusive concept to define in any universal or atemporal terms. Still, examining the forces of capital provides insight into the fields from which it draws meaning. This approach illuminates the experiences of those who enforce and subvert the power relations which structure their lives. In this chapter, and the chapter following, I use Pierre Bourdieu’s various theories of capital, field, habitus, practice and taste to make sense of the multifaceted social lives of coconut oil (Appadurai, 1986; Bourdieu, 2007; 1979; 1986; Bourdieu & Nice, 1980; see also Mila-Schaaf & Robinson, 2010). These social lives are informed by the experiences of coconut oil consumers and the marketing discourse coconut oil is currently implicated within. I begin with an overview of Bourdieu’s seminal work, *The Forms of Capital* (1986) which I structure this chapter upon.

Bourdieu (1986) defines capital as the accumulation of labor in all its varied forms. It is divided into three distinct categories: economic, social and cultural. Economic capital, the most commonly recognized form of capital, owes much of its theoretical foundations to the influence of Karl Marx. Economic capital refers to quantifiable markers of wealth that a person or group possesses and is represented by transferable things like money, assets or property titles. Social capital is access to other people’s capital (i.e. their labor or their wealth) through social obligation (e.g. family responsibilities or community expectation). Capital, in all its forms, may also be owed to someone through unreciprocated social debt which, it’s argued, may have greater implications in intra-Pacific relations compared to economic capital (Bertram & Watters, 1985; Gershon, 2007; 2012; Van der Grijp, 2002). This idea is explored more in chapter six. Cultural capital, the central focus of this chapter,

is the accumulated capital derived from the values of a person's specific field. Cultural capital is divided into three interrelated states: embodied, institutionalized and objectified, which constitute the focus of sections one, two and three of this chapter, respectively.

Embodied cultural capital is “the form of long lasting dispositions of the mind and body” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 47). This form distinguishes itself from the other two forms as it manifests as things which exist ‘in’ an individual. Individualized characteristics, such as a person's physical health (i.e. the body) or particular skill set such as language fluency (i.e. the mind) are examples of embodied cultural capital. These characteristics either require individual labor to accumulate or are possessed by an individual as an innate quality. As such, embodied cultural capital is not immediately transferrable. A person cannot give another the ability to speak a language or good health by simply handing it over. Overtime though, through practice and instruction, embodied cultural capital can be gradually acquired.

By extension, institutionalized cultural capital pertains to embodied cultural capital authority. It measures how an individual is externally recognized as someone who possesses a certain type of embodied cultural capital by institutional validation. Markers of institutionalized cultural capital are things like educational and vocational qualifications, chiefly titles and awards. These markers *theoretically* guarantee an individual's *assumed* knowledge-authority over a specific topic or skill set. Institutionalized cultural capital is often transferable to employment opportunities (i.e. it provides the means to acquire economic capital) or status (i.e. it may increase a person's social capital).

Finally, objectified cultural capital is “the form of cultural goods” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 47). It refers to material objects which are transferable but require embodied cultural capital (i.e. knowledge or innate characteristics) to imbue the objects with meaning. This means that objectified cultural capital is dependent on the pre-existence of embodied cultural capital. A musical instrument, for example, can be materially transferred from one person to another, but its value is dependent on the receiver's knowledge and skills. Other commodities that hold objectified cultural capital discussed by participants and in other Pacific scholarly works include handmade ngatu, flowers and “love food” (Addo & Besnier, 2008; Alexeyeff, 2004; Underhill-Sem, 2001).

To contextualize the power of capital, it's necessary to engage critically with Bourdieu's theory of "field" (Bourdieu, 2007; 1979; 1986; Bourdieu & Nice, 1980). These are the cultural and sociopolitical contexts in which a person lives and navigates unique power structures. While Bourdieu's concept of field has usually been applied to the differences in class culture within a largely homogenous European context, my thesis engages with field as it relates to different ethnic and cultural distinctions. What gains status in a Pacific context, such as matai titles in a Samoan context for example, will likely not hold the same power in a non-Pacific context. Similarly, what gains status in a non-Pacific context, such as using coconut oil as a cooking ingredient to convey meanings of cosmopolitan identity, may not hold the same meaning in a Pacific context, which tends to value coconut oil for its visual and olfactory aesthetic. The general differences in these ethnic and cultural fields are a main reason why my thesis often discusses Pacific and non-Pacific consumers separately. The meanings coconut oil conveys differ depending on the contexts in which it is consumed.

This chapter examines cultural capital derived from coconut oil consumption in three sections. Section one contextualizes coconut oil within its Western cultural field by examining health and wellness industry marketing rhetoric. Specifically, section one examines the pre-established discourses this rhetoric draws from, and how Pacific Islanders, as indigenous peoples, are problematically represented as models of embodied 'natural' health. This section also introduces a critical discussion about how institutional cultural capital is wielded by authoritative medical institutions to dispel what they label as coconut oil health disinformation. Section two continues this inquiry of the power relationship between authoritative medical institutions and coconut oil consumers. It examines survey respondents' reasoning to challenge the World Health Organization and the American Heart Associations' institutional cultural capital and discusses how coconut oil itself holds meaning to consumers as a subversive commodity. It draws attention to how 'truth' is framed by these consumers as situated knowledge (Haraway, 1988). Finally, section three examines coconut oil as objectified cultural capital and discusses a debate between Pacific Islander participants' traditionalist and reformist values. It also considers how diasporic experience may contribute to these participants' respective values. Overall, the main objective of this chapter is to critically engage with the meanings constructed

about coconut oil consumption and to draw attention to the ways representation, power and lived experience all contribute to the social lives of the product.



#### Section 5.1

### **Nature, Natives, Health and Power**

Too many health promises have been made on behalf of coconut oil to count. A non-exhaustive list claims coconut oil to be an effective treatment, even panacea, for so-called “diseases of civilization” (Knight, 2012). These include Alzheimer’s, Parkinson’s, diabetes, cardiovascular disease, cancer, Crohn’s disease, ALS, multiple sclerosis, ADHD, epilepsy, HIV, obesity, eczema, gingivitis, bacterial infections, psoriasis and autism (CNB, 2013; Fife, 1999; 2005; 2012; Tate, 2017). Coconut oil is even claimed to have reattached a nearly severed thumb (Fife, 2005)! With these promises, it’s clear why coconut oil has been referred to as a “miracle” product and “superfood” (Fife, 1999; Health Promotion Agency, 2019; Loyer, 2016). However, few of these claims are supported beyond somewhat doubtful anecdotal evidence. Though medical professionals have heeded coconut oil advocates’ calls for greater research (Marina, Che Man & Amin, 2009; Marina et al., 2009; Nevin and Rajamohan, 2004; 2006; Rele & Mohile, 2003), some of the main medical claims examined have been found to be either inconclusive or unconvincing (Lima & Block, 2019; Lockyer & Stanner, 2016; Sacks et al., 2017).

The constructivist methods I use in my research prevents me from making conclusive statements about the validity of these claims in medical terms. However, my methods do allow me to examine these mainstream medical institutions’ and naturopathic coconut oil advocates’ respective truth claims by analyzing their varying levels of credibility. Specifically, this section aims to critically examine how coconut oil is promoted as a miraculous product in Western health and wellness industries. I explore why Pacific Islanders, as indigenous peoples, are problematically represented as models of embodied natural health in coconut oil marketing material. This section sets the foundation for broader discussions of the complex relationships between nature, natives, health and power.

## **Health as Situated Knowledge**

Constructions of health are determined by situated knowledge, meaning its ‘truths’ are informed by and reflect historically changing power structures (Haraway, 1988). While medical science aims to produce and present itself as objective truth by appealing mainly to a naturalist-realist ontology through positivist methodologies (Wilson, 2000), I use the word ‘health’ here as a way to incorporate its culturally-embedded conceptualization as well. This intends to frame health discourse through a constructivist approach—one which takes into consideration the various power structures implicit in its formation (Schiebinger, 2013). Health is a type of embodied cultural capital, and like other forms of cultural capital, how it’s defined differs depending on its respective fields (Bourdieu, 1979; 1986). While I do not advocate for a solely constructivist approach to medical science, the purpose of incorporating a situated knowledge framing of health here is to explore coconut oil health information and consumption practices within broader political and sociocultural contexts. This constructivist approach aims to provide complementary nuanced information for other works that incorporate ontologically naturalist-realist research approaches. My ethnographic work will ultimately benefit health science discourse because, as Alice Julier explains, “sometimes, social problems are not solved by ‘more science,’ but rather by questioning the social uses and structural arrangements that go with the science” (2008, p. 484).

To make sense of coconut oil-related health discourse, I propose three interrelated rationales implicit in how health is conceptualized: (1) the mechanical body, (2) the affective body, and (3) the habitual body, all of which are tacitly present throughout my research.

- (1) The mechanical body rationale views the body as an organic machine, independent of any affective meaning it may hold in a broader psychological or sociocultural lens. This rationale is concerned solely with the inter-mechanics of how the body functions (i.e. its biology, physiology or genetics). Theoretically, a naturalist-realist framework views the body as an actant in its own right. This framing *ideally* lends itself to unbiased positivist methodological approaches which are arguably the aim



of the scientific method (Wilson, 2000). While ‘objective’ research should always be met with reasonable critique of its sociocultural influence (Haraway, 1988), it’s the *ideal* of objectivity that distinguishes this rationale from the affective body and the habitual body rationales.

- (2) The affective body rationale pertains to how a person may feel about their body or believe their body should function. An affective body rationale is grounded in its metaphysical characteristics and is situated within mainly constructivist or relativist frameworks. It views the body primarily as a vessel which contains or reflects things like a person’s soul, lifeforce, identity or mana (embodied or social power). This framing lends itself to greater psychological, spiritual and sociocultural interpretations. In a Western context, this rationale is reflective of a mind::body duality that assumes people perceive their mental and physical selves as distinct communicative entities (Bordo, 2008). In a Pacific context, this rationale is present in a person’s understandings of their cultural identity. A mechanical body rationale and an affective body rationale are easily convoluted as both ways of thinking draw meaning and validation from the sociocultural frameworks they originate from.
- (3) Finally, the habitual body rationale pertains to Bourdieu’s theories of ‘habitus’ which is an “embodied internal compass, as a system of dispositions, [that] guides the way in which we act, feel, think and talk” (Asimaki & Koustourakis, 2014, p. 125), and ‘practice’ which is “the result of an indefinite, unconscious, double relationship between habitus and the field” (Bourdieu, 1987, p. 147; see also Bourdieu, 2007). A habitual body rationale accounts for what someone does or does not do in the name of health, and it acknowledges that a person’s values and behavior often conflict. Such health contradictions were obvious in my research, and were demonstrated by participants who voiced a strong preference, even strict adherence, to consuming only organic foods while also regularly smoking cigarettes, binge drinking alcohol or recreationally consuming drugs—activities they did not dispute as unhealthy.

These three rationales, in relation to one another, constitute a web of health truths, experience and behavior that coconut oil consumption is embedded within. While my research focuses on health mainly through individual experience, in this section I examine how these three rationales have broader sociocultural implications, how they relate, and how they conflict.

#### Subsection 5.1.2

### **The Politics of Fat and Fatness**

Fat—both consumable fat and body fat—holds conflicting meanings in Western fields (J. Bennett, 2004; Bordo, 2008; Julier, 2008). Coconut oil is a consumable fat, and ninety-two percent is saturated (Health Promotion Agency, 2019). Mainstream medical institutions recommend restricting the intake of saturated fat as public health data link its ingestion with an increased risk of developing cardiovascular disease and other noncommunicable diseases (Gunnarsson & Elam, 2012). The genesis of this truth claim is largely credited to American physiologist Ancel Keys and has informed mainstream medical institutions' dietary recommendations since the mid-20th century (Gunnarsson & Elam, 2012; Keys, 1970; Keys et al., 1986; RNZ, 30 July 2014). This claim is well-funded, well-documented and its public health outreach campaigns have been incredibly effective in reducing saturated fat intake in mainstream Western diets (Miller, 20 December 1988; Schleifer, 2012).

However, the claim that saturated fat increases the risk of developing cardiovascular disease and other noncommunicable diseases is disputed in alternative naturopathic health literature and media (Fife, 1999; 2005; 2012; Tate, 2017; Zyrowksi, 31 August 2018). Some naturopathic advocates accuse Keys's research of being corrupt science and portray mainstream medical institutions as corrupt organizations with untrustworthy recommendations (Gunnarsson & Elam, 2012; Tate, 2017). These alternative health advocates usually point to carbohydrates, not saturated fat, as the culprit of rising rates of noncommunicable diseases. Beginning in the 1970s, and gaining significant traction in the past decade, carbohydrates have increasingly replaced saturated fat as vilified comestibles for this reason. But this shift is largely led by alternative media,

rather than by authoritative medical professionals (Gunnarsson & Elam, 2012; RNZ, 30 July 2014).

As dominant Western health and wellness standards hold thinness as a health ideal, much of this alternative media has shifted its primary focus from cardiovascular health to the ‘problems’ of body fat. This marketing approach draws from cultural constructs that equate thinness with good health, piety and productive work ethic. Fatness, conversely, is equated with poor health, low morality and lethargy (Bordo, 2008; Julier, 2008). Fat people—especially women—bear the brunt of this stigma and are cruelly portrayed as an acceptable group to mistreat. The extreme cultural pressures Western consumers navigate to avoid accumulating body fat creates a market hungry for weight loss ‘solutions’ (Bordo, 2008). Among so many other claims made on behalf of the product, coconut oil has consistently been marketed in alternative media as an effective weight loss supplement.

Consuming saturated fat to avoid accumulating body fat may seem paradoxical, but in certain controlled contexts, the ingestion of saturated fats as a caloric substitution for carbohydrates *may* reduce a person’s overall body weight (Yancy et al., 2004). This is because the ingestion of saturated fats theoretically increases levels of satiety compared to carbohydrates of the same caloric value. Therefore, an increased level of satiety *should* reduce a person’s hunger and lead to a lower caloric intake overall. While this claim is disputed by mainstream medical institutions, it has inspired alternative dietary trends to champion an *Eat Fat, Get Thin* mantra of sorts (Hyman, 2016). This claim is the foundation of the ketogenic diet, the paleo diet and the Atkins diet. But the foundational ideology of these high-fat, low-carbohydrate diets, which equates thinness with health, is critiqued by medical professionals as reductive and misleading (Gunnarson & Elam, 2012; RNZ, 30 July 2014). Additionally, one medical review found that the mostly anecdotal evidence which suggests that coconut oil is an effective weight loss product was “weak and not convincing” (Lima & Block, 2019, p. 62). Despite these critiques, high-fat, low-carbohydrate diets remain popular; coconut oil is still advertised as a weight loss product; and consumers continue to ingest coconut oil for health purposes.

The dispute over the health validity of saturated fat has given way to “culture wars”—or conflicts between several groups with different ideologies (Bourdieu, 1979)—which are fought through targeted literature, government-funded outreach campaigns,

foreign policy, market media and word of mouth (Gunnarsson & Elam, 2012; Yacob, 2019). I analyze several examples of these pro- and anti-coconut oil materials in this section. I focus on the ‘natural’ discourses they draw from and how Pacific Islanders, as indigenous peoples, are implicated within them.

#### Subsection 5.1.3

### **Validating Health through ‘Indigenous Wisdom’**

A central marketing strategy of health and wellness industries is to validate discourses of ‘naturalness’ using “frameworks of folk and indigenous wisdom” (Loyer, 2016, p. 19). These frameworks are loosely defined, generally unregulated, and easily manipulated for marketing objectives, especially in coconut oil marketing (Stevens, 2018). While not everyone views coconut oil as a superfood,<sup>37</sup> its marketing certainly reflects similar rhetoric. In an attempt to portray the naturalness of coconut oil, advertisements evoke its ‘traditional’ uses in ‘native’ cultures. This invocation of ‘nativeness’ is situated within a binaristic association that homogenizes ‘natives’ as non-Western, non-industrially developed peoples. ‘Westerners,’ by distinction, are closely linked with industrialism. There is moral weight linked with this association, as industrialism suggests a general ‘unnatural’ deviation from nature and is equated to moral corruption (Kata, 2012; Merchant, 2013). Carolyn Merchant has even traced this constructed narrative in Western fields to the Judeo-Christian myth of Adam and Eves’ original sin and subsequent expulsion from the Garden of Eden:

The Recovery of Eden story is the mainstream narrative of Western culture. It is perhaps the most important mythology humans have developed to make sense of their relationship to the earth. Internalized by Europeans and Americans alike since the seventeenth century, this story has propelled countless efforts by humans to recover Eden by turning wilderness

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<sup>37</sup> Of the 476 respondents to answer, only 99 answered that they would categorize coconut oil as a superfood; 224 respondents were not sure; and 153 would not. Likewise, while most participants were conceptually familiar with the term ‘superfoods,’ many were skeptical of its validity. For example, Ava Huntsman (Wellington, non-Pacific) commented, “I believe in a wide variety of foods. I don’t believe that there are just a few.”

into garden, ‘female’ nature into civilized society, and indigenous folkways into modern culture. Science, technology, and capitalism have provided the tools, male agency[,] the power and impetus (2013, p. 2).

Referencing the moral purity of nature is an effective marketing strategy. FIJI Water is one company of many that draws from these moral attachments explicitly (Kaplan, 2007). For example, one 2015 FIJI Water advertisement depicts a water bottle superimposed over a dystopian background of industrial cityscapes and congested motorways. The water bottle shows lush tropical greenery which emphasizes its distinction. Over the advertisement, a child’s voice narrates:

FIJI Water is a gift from nature to us,  
To repay our gift of leaving it completely alone.  
Bottled at the source. Untouched by man.  
It’s Earth’s Finest Water.®  
(FIJI Water, 11 February 2015).

FIJI Water is a foreign-owned company, and its market strategy ‘greenwashes’ its neoliberal commodification of a confiscated aquifer sacred to the displaced Fijian community genealogically related to it (Eden, 2010; Kaplan, 2007). Although FIJI Water claims that its product does not come into physical contact with people during packaging (as is the case with most industrial bottling technologies), there is double meaning implied by the phrase, “Untouched by man.” It romanticizes Fiji as part of nature through an emphasized distinction from the industrialized West. “Untouched by man” also emphasizes a feminized ideal of virginity—an ideal which ‘virgin’ coconut oil conveys as well. This marketing strategy draws from constructs of feminine ‘nature’ and ‘natives’ vis-à-vis masculine ‘industrialism’ and ‘the industrialized.’ This marketing approach allows Western consumers to ritualistically consume ‘nature’ by drinking FIJI Water in hopes of reconnecting with their own senses of a lost ‘indigeneity’—a result of their ancestors’ departure from ‘Eden.’ Martha Kaplan writes, “The promise, the hope, for the U.S. consumer, is to be the indigene, to restore health like an imagined indigene” (2007, p. 15). The goal of natural health is to transcend the perceived barrier between humans and nature.

Indigenous peoples, presumed to have maintained an innate connection with the natural world, are constructed to possess natural health as embodied cultural capital and therefore serve as a model to guide industrialized peoples' respective health practices.

The constructed connection between indigenous peoples and nature predates modern English. 'Nature' and 'native'—originally 'nativus' meaning "innate or natural"—share the common Latin root, 'nasci' meaning "to be born" (Williams, 1985, p. 215). 'Native' entered English first as an adjective in the late 14th century and then as a noun in the 15th derived from the French 'naif' meaning "artless or simple" (p. 215). 'Naif' is also the root of 'naïve,' which like 'native,' conveys unequal power relations. 'Native' has historically been used as an epithet towards different groups who were distinguished by markers of class, geography and culture. Specifically, 'native' referred to "the inferior inhabitants of a place subjected to alien power or conquest, or even of a place visited and observed from some supposedly superior standpoint" (p. 215). Groups who may have been considered 'natives' historically, may no longer be considered 'natives' with the same meaning now. For example, 'native' originally referred to the peasants of the European countryside. It then globalized during the European expansionist period when it was ascribed to non-European peoples in their own homelands. This shift in meaning suggests that context, rather than 'intrinsic' embodied characteristics, defines native status—though the existence of innate native identity, independent of any colonial context, is debated amongst scholars (L. Smith, 2005; Sissons, 2005).

Though the term 'native' has been reappropriated as an identifier of pride in "one's own place or person" (Williams, 1985, p. 215), in the late 20th century, it was increasingly replaced by or used in conjunction with synonymic terms like 'indigenous,' 'autochthonous' and 'aboriginal' (L. Smith, 1999; Williams, 1985, pp. 215-216). According to Stephen Muecke, 'indigenous' in particular "re-emerged more positively as a postcolonial identity tag in the 1980s and 1990s after political movements initiated by indigenous peoples spread around the world" (2005, p. 180). However, the associated connection between 'nature' and 'native' (or an equivalent) has been maintained by self- and externally-imposed representations of indigenous peoples, and is continuously reified through media and legislation (Case, 2021; Sissons, 2005). Though recognition of

indigenous communities' connection with nature may serve specific political objectives, the absence of external 'native' recognition may restrict indigenous communities' usufructuary rights (González, 2014).

There is intra-indigenous debate to what extent an embodied connection with nature exists as an unquestioned essentialism (Case, 2021; Hoskins, 2012; Orange, 2018). For example, speaking to the experiences of San Francisco Bay Area urban indigenous communities, novelist Tommy Orange writes, "Being Indian has never been about returning to the land. The land is everywhere or nowhere" (2018, p. 11). Whether environmentalism is an innate indigenous characteristic or not, indigenous communities are represented as peoples with an embodied connection to nature in naturopathic media. Pacific Islanders, as indigenous peoples, are implicated in this marketing strategy; Pacific bodies are problematically portrayed as models of health; and these representations inform coconut oil consumers' consumption practices.

#### Subsection 5.1.4

### **Pacific Implicated Marketing**

The implication of indigenous Pacific Islanders as having an embodied connection to nature and with good health as evidence, is evoked by promotional coconut oil literature. Bruce Fife, author of *The Coconut Oil Miracle* (1999) and *Coconut Cures* (2005), especially implicates Islanders in this way, as the opening paragraph of *The Coconut Oil Miracle* demonstrates:

If you were to travel the world looking for a people who enjoy a degree of health far above that found in most nations, a people who are relatively free from the crippling effects of degenerative disease, you couldn't help but be impressed by the natives who inhabit the islands of the South Pacific. These people in their tropical paradise enjoy a remarkable degree of good health, relatively free from the aches and pains of degenerative disease that plague most of the rest of the world. These people are robust and healthy. Heart disease, cancer, diabetes, and arthritis are almost unheard of—at least among those to live on the traditional native diets (1999, p. 1).

Fife’s (1999) dearth of knowledge about Islanders’ mechanical health, histories and cultures, as well as how these factors inform Islanders’ coconut oil consumption practices, is critiqued elsewhere (Alefosio & Henderson, 2018). Although Fife (1999) references one specific Pacific dietary research paper (Prior et al., 1981), his discussions of its findings are selective. Additionally, it’s worthwhile correcting that at the present time, Islanders’ mechanical health is far worse than most other racial groups both in the Islands and in diaspora (Carucci, 2011; Duncan, 2012; Hughes & Lawrence, 2005; Kaholokula, Okamoto & Yee, 2020). When I discussed Fife’s claims with Pacific interview participants, most were astounded by such an audacious and largely inaccurate statement. Yet this was the basis for many coconut oil health claims. Fife does qualify his claim that “good health” is reserved for those who “live on the traditional native diets,” which, condescension aside, may have a point. Many food sovereignty movements in the Pacific also seek to promote indigenous “food regimes” with similar motivations to reclaim past ideals of health (Plahe, Hawkes & Ponnampereuma, 2013). The term ‘traditional’ in this context is often uncritically used as a synonym for ‘precolonial’ which highlights a sense of a lost healthy past. ‘Decolonized’ diets are sometimes used in a similar way but that discourse usually relates to food systems holistically and is comparatively more concerned with access to nutritional equity, “food regimes” and resistance to “food dumping” (Plahe, Hawkes & Ponnampereuma, 2013); it’s less concerned with promoting ‘authenticity’ or restricting foods divisively viewed as ‘inauthentic.’ As the following section will elaborate, equitable access to nutritional *information* significantly matters for Islanders’ health too.

While Fife (1999; 2005; 2012) and other non-Pacific coconut oil advocates claim that coconut oil is beneficial for everyone irrespective of their cultural or genetic background, some indigenous consumers believe that coconut oil is beneficial for indigenous bodies specifically. These consumers assume that mainstream anti-saturated fat health standards are based on European bodies and do not apply to them for this reason. These consumers believe that what makes saturated fat ‘good’ or ‘bad’ depends on a person’s genetics. This point was elaborated further by Karine Ponce (Bay Area, non-Pacific), a professional naturopath who identifies as partly indigenous to South America:

KP	Indigenous people metabolize fat <i>completely</i> different than people of a different,
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	<p>maybe more Western European heritage, DNA. So coconut oil is great if you're doing a high-fat diet, like a keto diet for example or paleo-keto diet because you're able to metabolize that fat and it doesn't accumulate any negative side effects. But if you don't have that gene then you could be doing more harm than good. And I think this is where the misinformation comes in, that people automatically assume that it's a superfood, when in fact it's really not a superfood unless you're able to transform those nutrients so that your body will absorb it. I have worked with clients [and] it's made people sick. Too much coconut oil.</p>
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Ponce's discussion of the health efficacy of coconut oil is premised on distinctive genetics: that indigenous bodies are different from non-indigenous bodies and require different foods and food practices (Nabhan, 2008). Though this is certainly an important consideration for health science discourse, in my research many indigenous-identifying consumers are of mixed ancestral backgrounds, including Ponce. Here, the affective indigenous-identifying body and the mechanical genetically mixed body become convoluted. Additionally, as discussed shortly, to what extent the ingestion of extracted coconut oil features in these 'traditional' diets is debated.

In the award winning cookbook, *Me'a Kai* (2010), authors Robert Oliver, Shiri Ram and Tracy Berno list 108 Pacific recipes, sixty-four of which include at least one coconut product, and eight include coconut oil. In a section of their book designated exclusively to coconut oil, the authors write, "Once much maligned as an unhealthy saturated fat, coconut oil has been described as the 'healthiest oil on earth.'" (Oliver, Ram & Berno, 2010, p. 34). However, this claim is rejected by most mainstream medical institutions, and as coconut oil gains popularity as a health food, some medical professionals have taken it upon themselves to refute this emerging 'truth.'

In a 2018 lecture titled, "Coconut oil and other nutritional errors," Harvard professor Karin Michels refers to coconut oil as "pure poison" and "one of the worst foods you can eat" (quoted in Sweeney, 2018).<sup>38</sup> Michels's statements provoked cutting responses from coconut oil advocates who dismissed her views as misinformed at best, or corrupt at worst. One source even called Michels's lecture "fake news" (Zyrowski, 31 August 2018). Other consumers responded to Michels through satire—an effective

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<sup>38</sup> Michels's lecture was presented in German, so I was unable to quote it directly at the time of its publication on YouTube. Additionally, possibly because of significant harassment Michels received for her comments, the recording has been made private.

technique used to refute similar claims against coconut oil made by the American Heart Association a year prior.<sup>39</sup>

Several participants became aware of this “pure poison” reference after it went viral on social media. This included Kalo Afeaki (Wellington, Tongan, Māori) who had mixed feelings about the accusation. Mostly, Afeaki was skeptical how Michels sourced her information. She questioned what *type* of coconut oil Michels had examined—a question which reflected Afeaki’s relationship to coconut oil within a Tongan context which, like the Rarotongan māmā I spoke with at the Porirua Mamas’ Tivaevae Collective meeting, views coconut oil as many things, rather than as a single homogenous product. Afeaki wasn’t too concerned about the health ramifications of ingesting coconut oil though. This was because based on her own experiences, ingestion isn’t a primary Pacific Islander use despite promotional coconut oil literature portraying it as such. Afeaki explained, “I would say that *eating* coconut oil is a very palangi [white] thing.” Afeaki’s primary use of coconut oil, like the majority of Pacific Islander consumers in this research, is cosmetic.

However, though ingesting *extracted* coconut oil may not be perceived as a traditional Pacific food practice, coconut fat is ingested through the consumption of coconut meat, milk and cream. These products also contain oil, albeit in lower amounts. Additionally, Afeaki *does* ingest coconut oil occasionally as does her family. Her palangi mother used coconut oil as a butter substitute, as do several of her Tongan relatives who are lactose-free. Generally though, most—but not all—Pacific Islander interview participants said that extracted coconut oil was not commonly used as a food during their upbringings, even if at the time of the interview they currently were or previously had used it as a food. In contrast to interviews however, most Pacific Islander survey respondents reported to use coconut oil as a food or for cooking,<sup>40</sup> and most believe coconut oil is healthy to eat.<sup>41</sup> And while proportionately less Pacific Islander respondents report to use coconut oil for food or cooking compared to non-Pacific respondents (whose main use of

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<sup>39</sup> See [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I\\_j-tBJ3Kss](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=I_j-tBJ3Kss) for satire critique of the American Heart Association (Sears, 26 July 2017).

<sup>40</sup> Of the 97 Pacific Islander respondents to answer, 71 reported to use coconut oil for food or cooking; 77 use it cosmetically; 66 use it medicinally; and 17 use it for another purpose.

<sup>41</sup> Of the 97 Pacific Islander respondents to answer, 65 reported that they believe coconut oil is healthy to eat; 25 were not sure; and 7 do not.

coconut oil was for food or cooking),<sup>42</sup> more Pacific respondents believe coconut oil is a healthy product to eat compared to non-Pacific respondents.<sup>43</sup> There is no clear answer as to why this is, but based on my discussions with interview participants, I suspect it has to do with an affective trust many Pacific Islander consumers place in their homeland commodities.

Although the majority of all survey respondents do ingest coconut oil, several Pacific Islander interview participants who eat coconut oil explained it was non-Pacific (majority white) relatives, friends or media who had (re)introduced coconut oil as a food to them; and this introduction, they explain, was recent. For example, Maggie-May Maybir (Wellington, Samoan, Māori) has used coconut oil as a cosmetic product since infancy. She only recently began eating it and discussed her motivations to do so:

NR	Did you ever eat coconut oil?
MMM	Pff nah it wasn't until like recently that I've started <i>eating</i> coconut oil.
NR	Okay. Can you tell me about that? What made you wanna eat it and why?
MMM	You know! Health craze!
NR	Health craze?
MMM	Coconut oil, good for you to digest, apparently. Mmm?
NR	Where are you getting that information from?
MMM	From the white mates who reckon it's good. I don't know.

The perception that Pacific Islander uses of coconut oil are primarily cosmetic rather than for food or cooking was supported by Lily McElhone (Wellington, non-Pacific) who, as a child, was introduced to coconut oil as a cosmetic product by imitating her mother's Samoan partner. Later in life, McElhone rediscovered coconut oil through her

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<sup>42</sup> Of the 336 non-Pacific respondents to answer, 287 reported to use coconut oil for food or cooking; 256 use it cosmetically; 113 use it medicinally; and 32 use it for another purpose.

<sup>43</sup> Of the 336 non-Pacific respondents to answer, 208 reported that they believe coconut oil is healthy to eat; 76 were not sure; and 52 do not.

non-Pacific flatmates as a food. She explained, “[M]y re-introduction [to coconut oil] was food based. And that was completely different to how I previously experienced it.”

As this section has discussed, Islanders, represented as indigenous peoples, are marketed as examples of embodied natural health due to their *assumed* ingestion of coconut oil. Many Pacific participants were aware of the emerging health discourses about them and several had ambivalent thoughts regarding the information produced from ‘their’ bodies. Some trusted medical institutions’ recommendations against ingesting coconut oil; others trusted naturopathic advocates’ counterarguments and sought to model their own consumption practices on high-fat, low-carbohydrate diets which they believe are better suited to their specific Pacific Islander needs. While Martha Kaplan (2007) and Jessica Loyer (2016) critique how indigenous bodies are implicated as models of natural health, neither critique the mechanical::affective tensions of the ‘indigenous body’ itself. Genetics matter for dietary needs, but genetics and cultural identity are not the same. Therefore, the assumption that ingesting coconut oil is ‘good’ for Pacific peoples may not adequately consider the mechanical health of Pacific bodies. Several Pacific Islander participants voiced a critical awareness that these dietary trends are supposedly informed by medical ethnographies on Pacific peoples, but inappropriately reinterpreted through a Western lens and therefore out of sociocultural context. From my research, I have found that coconut oil, situated within a Pacific context tends to emphasize affective health; coconut oil situated within a Western context tends to emphasize mechanical health. While there was no consensus among Pacific Islander participants as to whether the ingestion of coconut oil was a ‘traditional’ practice or a practice recently articulated following Western health trends, the lack of historical evidence has not prevented others from making—and commodifying—such claims.

#### Subsection 5.1.5

### **Contested Evidence**

Many naturopathic advocates promote coconut oil ingestion by referring to indigenous peoples’ assumed static dietary consumption habits as evidence for their assumed good health. However, some of these advocates have poor knowledge of the peoples they discuss. For example, responding to Michels’s (2018) “pure poison”

comment, naturopath vlogger Nick Zyrowski (31 August 2018) presents a counterargument in support of saturated fat ingestion. He bases his argument on the assumedly fixed diets of different “ancient” ethnic groups, including Tokelauans, who he refers to as a “tribe out of New Zealand” (31 August 2018, 3:30). Zyrowski explains that Tokelauans, framed as a globally isolated people, consume a diet composed of sixty-six percent saturated fat and correlates this oddly specific and likely inaccurate data with the false conclusion that Tokelauans have “one of the lowest rates [of] cardiovascular issues and heart disease” (3:40).

There are problems with Zyrowski’s (31 August 2018) claims. First, Tokelauans are *not* a “tribe” of Aotearoa New Zealand. Rather, the atoll islands of Tokelau are administered by New Zealand and part of the New Zealand Realm. Second, Tokelau and Tokelauans are globalized; nearly ninety percent of Tokelauans live in Aotearoa New Zealand (Government of Tokelau, n.d.; SNZ, n.d.). If Zyrowski intended to refer only to Tokelauans in Tokelau, most of Tokelau’s food is imported, and land is rarely cultivated beyond the gardens of “a few enthusiastic individuals or NGO representatives” (Jasperse, 2015, p. 11). Even products that can be produced domestically, like coconut cream, are commonly imported. Finally, although “the overall health status of Tokelauans [in Tokelau] is reasonably good,” noncommunicable diseases are an increasing concern and nearly three-quarters of the population are obese (World Health Organization, 2013, p. 3).

Zyrowski’s (31 August 2018) lecture—viewed over 660,000 times on YouTube at the time of writing this thesis—mentions how Tokelauans were researched in past dietary ethnographies. He is likely referring to a 1981 medical review referenced by other coconut oil advocates (Fife, 1999; Thrive Family Health Center, n.d.). In the review, Ian Prior and colleagues (1981) examined medical data collected since the late 1960s that quantified the relative cholesterol and body fat measurements of community populations in Tokelau and Pukapuka, Cook Islands. The researchers compared the data with the communities’ observed dietary practices, emphasizing that, “coconut [was] the chief source of energy for both groups” (p. 1553). Their research found no significant cardiovascular issues in these populations.

Prior and colleagues’ (1981) findings theoretically challenge Ancel Keys and colleagues’ (1970) earlier work that correlated high intake of saturated fat with an increased

risk of developing cardiovascular disease and other noncommunicable diseases. While Prior and colleagues (1981) do not claim that their research entirely negates Keys and colleagues' (1970) findings, their work has emboldened some naturopathic advocates to draw sweeping conclusions in favor of coconut oil and saturated fat generally. For example, Fife writes, "The simple fact is: Pacific Islanders, who live on traditional diets rich in coconut, don't get heart disease" (1999, pp. 37-38). There are problems with Prior and colleagues' (1981) findings, however. According to a World Health Organization (2007) report, in 1981—the same year that Prior and colleagues published—nearly one third of mortalities in Tokelau were due to cardiovascular diseases, and that number was already in decline due to Tokelauans' overall reduction of saturated fat intake.

The main problem with these pro-saturated fat claims is that in places where there is little saturated fat consumption, there are fewer cases of cardiovascular diseases; and in places where saturated fat intake has decreased, so have cardiovascular-related deaths. According to epidemiologist Rod Jackson, "Coronary heart disease death rates have declined by over 80 percent [...] in New Zealand since 1967. And the same in the US—over three percent every year since 1967" (quoted in RNZ, 30 July 2014, 2:02). This correlation is linked to an overall decrease in smoking and salt intake as well, however. Mortality data from 1948-2018 which show a significant decrease of ischaemic and cerebrovascular-related deaths for all ethnic groups combined in Aotearoa New Zealand over the past five decades<sup>44</sup> support Jackson's (2014) claim. This trend coincides with a decrease in saturated fat intake generally (Ministry of Health, 2003; 16 December 2021). Mortality data in the United States from 1999-2017 show a similar decrease in cardiovascular-related deaths as well (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 24 October, 2019).<sup>45</sup> Still, even with these decreasing trends, nearly one in three deaths in Aotearoa New Zealand and the United States is due to cardiovascular disease which remains the leading cause of mortality in the world (Heart Research Institute New Zealand, n.d.; Sacks et al., 2017). While Jackson acknowledges that compared to the past "we are

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<sup>44</sup> Ischaemic heart disease-related deaths for all ethnic groups combined in Aotearoa New Zealand peaked in 1968 at 253 deaths per 100,000 people and decreased to its lowest recorded level in 2018 at 48 deaths per 100,000 people. Cerebrovascular heart disease-related deaths peaked in 1973 at 119.2 deaths per 100,000 people and also decreased to its lowest recorded level in 2018 at 23.1 deaths per 100,000 people.

<sup>45</sup> Heart disease-related deaths have decreased in the United States from 266.5 deaths per 100,000 people in 1999 to 165.0 per 100,000 people in 2017.

fatter,” he links this change to caloric overconsumption of increasingly accessible food products, and warns against “misconstruing” fatness as something to be ‘treated’ by saturated fat ingestion as trendy high-fat, low-carbohydrate diets recommend. He concludes, “In the history of humankind, we have never been healthier” (RNZ, 30 July 2014, 2:34)

#### Subsection 5.1.6

### **Health or Hype**

Though public health data in Tokelau, Aotearoa New Zealand and the United States generally do not support the health claims made by naturopathic advocates in pro-coconut oil material, there is little evidence to conclude that Pacific Islanders historically did *not* ingest extracted coconut oil at all either. It certainly was present in the Islands at the time of European contact, though European explorers seem to emphasize its cosmetic application in their records (Stevens, 2018).<sup>46</sup> This unclear and largely non-written history gives way to poorly referenced culture wars between coconut oil advocates and established medical institutions. And in the past few years, these culture wars have gained more attention. In mid-2019, for example, a New Zealand Health Promotion Agency poster, titled “Behind the Hype: Coconut oil,” was strategically displayed at Wellington Hospital for the public to read. The first section of the poster addresses the question, “Why is this an issue?” It answers:

Coconut oil is widely promoted as a healthy oil with alleged multiple health benefits. These claims contradict heart health recommendations that coconut oil intake should be limited because it is very high in saturated fat (92%). Diets high in saturated fat increase the risk of heart disease (Health Promotion Agency, 2019).

Another section of the poster addresses the question, “What about evidence from traditional Pacific diets?” It responds:

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<sup>46</sup> Coconut oil was one of the first commodities exchanged between Islanders and Europeans and was documented to be present at first contact in Guam in 1521 (Rogers, 1995).

Low levels of heart disease in traditional Pacific communities are often used as proof of the benefits of coconut oil. However, coconut oil was not widely consumed as part of a traditional diet in Pacific countries. It was more commonly used on the skin and hair rather than as a food. Coconut was eaten as coconut flesh and coconut milk or cream in meals together with seafood, vegetables and fruit. This eating pattern was also combined with an active lifestyle (Health Promotion Agency, 2019).

The message, from my research perspective, was clear: an established medical institution had taken notice of coconut oil and was making efforts to defend its stance against coconut oil ingestion to the public. Unlike other sections of this poster's text however, the excerpt regarding Pacific diets lacked any references that actually discussed Pacific ethnographic uses. There may be several reasons for this. First, as a New Zealand institution, the Health Promotion Agency may be informed by Pacific employees or representatives who are positioned as authoritative persons on the subject. But another possible reason is that the Health Promotion Agency is depending on the public to trust its institutional cultural capital as an informed authority. Regardless, the lack of transparent references suggests that the Health Promotion Agency is potentially concealing or dismissing the reality that there is little to no adequate written historical ethnographies that address coconut oil ingestion in precolonial Pacific dietary practices.

As I will argue in the following section, this lack of transparency likely exacerbates a distrust of institutional power by many coconut oil consumers who suspect that these institutions produce disinformation in order to conceal suspected economic and political ulterior motives. This lack of trust has serious consequences for a medical institution's ability to make impactful recommendations. This distrust may also affect its ability to make recommendations on other important matters such as vaccinations. Some consumers' sentiments demonstrated the correlative logic that if a medical institution was wrong about one recommendation in the past (such as previous recommendations to ingest trans fats [see Sack et al., 2017; Schleifer, 2012]), then why should its recommendations against saturated fat be trusted now? If it was wrong before, it could be wrong again. Fife pre-warns his readers about this suspected disinformation:



People who consume large quantities of coconut and coconut oil have been shown to be some of the healthiest on earth. However, you are likely to hear criticism of coconut oil for years to come. But who are you going to believe, the soybean industry and misinformed writers and doctors who are dying right and left from degenerative diseases, or the healthy Pacific Islanders and the researchers making discoveries? I put my trust in the facts and not the marketing propaganda of the soybean industry (1999, p. 221).

As Fife (1999) indicates, it's possible that some coconut oil advocates and consumers may perceive the Health Promotion Agency's (2019) poster as propaganda. However, Fife's (1999) counterclaims are dependent on the bodies of Pacific Islanders—peoples he doesn't know very well.

Whether coconut oil ingestion was primarily a pre- or postcolonial practice in the Islands (if it can even be reduced to either of those periods in general terms), the Western belief that Islanders ingest coconut oil remains a 'truth' that informs health blogs, cookbooks and dietary trends. Promotional coconut oil marketing materials encourage Western consumers to ingest coconut oil as a way to seemingly mimic native peoples' 'traditional' coconut oil uses. At the same time, some Islanders use coconut oil as a way to acquire cultural capital by conforming (or code-switching) to the current trend. Despite evidence to the contrary, the belief that coconut oil is a healthy product continues to inform consumers' consumption habits. In the following section, I will explore the reasons why survey respondents have difficulty trusting mainstream medical institutions' recommendations to restrict the intake of saturated fat. These reasons draw attention to situated knowledges (Haraway, 1988), the postmodern medical paradigm (Kata, 2012), and the relationship between truth and trust (Neville, 2001).



## Section 5.2

# **Anti-Institutional Capital**

The dispute over the health validity of coconut oil reflects a larger conflict over different groups' competing claims to health knowledge and health authority. In this conflict, alternative health promoters use terms like 'alternative medicine' and 'natural

health’ to advocate for their own understandings of (and approaches to) health against established and powerful medical institutions. These alternative health promoters emphasize their distrust of mainstream medical institutions’ recommendations and use their work to challenge the truth claims that these institutions produce. Their work commonly argues four central points: (1) corrupt medical institutions are incentivized by food lobbyists and/or the pharmaceutical industry to disseminate disinformation; (2) the scientific methods used by mainstream medical institutions are flawed and their recommendations are therefore inaccurate; (3) individual bodies, used as empirical ‘case studies,’ are more reliable sources of information than external medical institutions’ recommendations; and (4) “frameworks of folk and indigenous wisdom” (Loyer, 2016) offer more established health knowledge than contemporary medical institutions. These points draw attention to coconut oil consumers’ understandings of what ‘truth’ is, what it isn’t, how it’s constructed, how it’s situated, and subsequently, how it can be challenged, even dismantled. Implicit in this alternative health discourse are counter-hegemonic ideologies which incorporate similar political beliefs. In my research, I have found that pro-coconut oil consumption rhetoric is frequently entangled with other anti-institutional politics, especially anti-vaccination and anti-authoritarian sentiments. Reinforcing this conflict is consumers’ lack of trust in mainstream medical institutions, changing power relationships between health consumers and health ‘experts,’ and general reconceptualization of the meanings of health ‘expertise’ all together (Kata, 2012). This section explores these issues further by analyzing survey respondent data.

Given that counter-hegemonic ideologies were common in pro-coconut oil marketing materials, I anticipated that coconut oil consumers may subscribe to similar anti-authoritarian views of health. My upbringing in alternative subcultural spaces also informed this assumption. To test this idea, I incorporated a series of survey questions on the topic. First, I asked whether respondents were previously aware that coconut oil was classified as a saturated fat and found that most were.<sup>47</sup> Next, I asked respondents whether

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<sup>47</sup> Of the 476 respondents to answer whether they were previously aware that coconut oil is classified as a saturated fat, 344 answered that they were; 132 were not.

they were aware that the American Heart Association and World Health Organization<sup>48</sup> recommend restricting saturated fat intake—most were.<sup>49</sup> Finally, I asked respondents whether they believe the American Heart Association and World Health Organizations’ recommendations are trustworthy—less than half did.<sup>50</sup> Although these findings are limited to the survey respondents who answered these questions, their responses suggest that coconut oil consumption is implicated in an anti-institutional power struggle.

Respondents who answered that they either do not trust these recommendations or that they are unsure of them were asked to explain with a write-in answer. I coded four central themes from these respondents’ answers which align with the central debate points found in alternative health material that I addressed above: (1) suspicion of institutional corruption (i.e. the belief that mainstream medical institutions conceal the truth for profit or power); (2) disputed scientific research (i.e. a reference to contradicting scientific evidence); (3) individual experience (i.e. people who empirically evaluate coconut oil by consuming it themselves and find no major issues); and (4) traditional counternarratives (i.e. a reference to indigenous peoples’ *assumed* good health correlating with their *assumed* ingestion of coconut oil). The write-in answers of those who answered that they *did not trust* the recommendations of the World Health Organization or American Heart Association differed from those who answered only that they were *not sure*. Specifically, of the 101 respondents to elaborate why they did not trust these recommendations, forty-eight refer to suspected institutional corruption; thirty-three refer to disputed scientific research; fourteen refer to individual experience; and thirteen refer to traditional counternarratives. Of the 151 respondents to answer only that they were not sure if they found these recommendations trustworthy, sixty-two refer to disputed scientific research; fifty-three refer to individual experience; thirty-four refer to suspected institutional

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<sup>48</sup> This survey would have been improved by referencing a New Zealand specific organization, like the New Zealand Heart Foundation. To maintain consistency, however, I did not alter any questions after I had made the survey active.

<sup>49</sup> Of the 476 to answer whether they were aware the American Heart Association and World Health Organization recommend restricting saturated fat intake, 397 answered they were; 79 were not.

<sup>50</sup> Of the 475 respondents to answer whether they find these recommendations trustworthy, 103 answered they did not; 177 answered they were not sure; and 194 answered they did.

corruption; and nineteen refer to traditional counternarratives.<sup>51</sup> This difference in data suggest that suspected corruption likely played a stronger role in respondents' distrust. Conversely, those who were not sure about the World Health Organization or American Heart Association's recommendations tended to reference individual experience more often.

Two additional sentiments were implicit in both groups' responses: (1) a frustration over a perceived fickleness of scientific recommendations, and (2) a strong anti-American or pro-Aotearoa New Zealand nationalistic rhetoric. I have labeled these two points as sentiments rather than separate coded themes because how they were employed usually supported a respondent's overall reasoning related to the points above. Twenty-three respondents (combined in both groups) mentioned a perceived fickleness of dietary recommendations and twenty-seven conveyed an anti-American or pro-Aotearoa New Zealand sentiment. In addition to some consumers' considerations of genetic-specific dietary needs discussed in the previous section, these two other sentiments draw attention to consumers' situated understandings of 'truth' as a constructed claim that reflects specific time periods and national geography. These consumers argue that whether coconut oil is considered 'good' depends on *who* is ingesting it, as well as *when* and *where* that value judgment was made.

The following six subsections provide representative examples of respondents' answers and analyze the different rationales they draw on. As many respondents' write-in answers touched on multiple points, I coded their contributions in multiple categories. In each subsection though, I discuss what considerations these answers have in common. Pacific Islander, Māori and non-Pacific respondents' answers are not separated in this section as all three groups shared greater similarities than differences in their reasoning. This applies to regional differences as well. Therefore, several respondents living outside the San Francisco Bay Area and Wellington Region are included. This section will ultimately show that coconut oil is implicated in an anti-institutional power struggle, and that for many of its consumers coconut oil conveys conscious subversive meaning.

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<sup>51</sup> Several respondents' answers were excluded if they could not be categorized in any way (i.e. respondents who answered "no," "N/A," "none" etc.). Other answers were counted more than once if they could be coded in multiple ways.

### Temporally Situated Truth

18-24 year old woman (Wellington, European New Zealander/pākehā)	I feel like advice on what is good food or not changes very rapidly. I'm not necessarily distrustful of the Health Organisation's recommendation itself, but I generally think that most foods are fine in moderation. With so many different recommendations out there, it becomes difficult to decide which to take on board.
18-24 year old woman (Wellington, Indian, Malaysian, Continental European)	Scientific research is wonderful but advice by health organisations often change[s] with the trends (research gets funded based on what's 'hot'). Traditional medicine holds its belief throughout the generations so in some cases I prefer to [heed] their advice.
51-60 year old woman (Wellington, European New Zealander/pākehā)	Because they change their minds every five minutes

These three respondents share a common concern about how the trends, values and knowledge of a specific time period influences the production (or non-production) of truth claims, which in this context are health recommendations based on medical research. The first respondent addresses her belief that value judgments about food—specifically, which foods mainstream medical institutions consider to be “good”—changes too quickly. This frames these institutions’ health recommendations as unstable, and therefore, unreliable. Her solution is to consume foods in moderation. This echoes the sentiments shared by several interview participants including Kevin Young (Wellington, non-Pacific) who repeatedly stressed that when it comes to health, “moderation is key.” However, as the previous section has addressed, the overall reduction of saturated intake in Western diets over the past several decades correlates with a decline in cardiovascular disease-related deaths. While it’s true that mainstream medical institutions have made recommendations which they later retract or revise with new evidence (Sack et al., 2017), the recommendation against the ingestion of saturated fat is long-standing.

The second respondent addresses how funding follows trends. She suggests that coconut oil is not popular enough to have been adequately researched by medical institutions. But the scientific community has acknowledged the popularity of coconut oil within the past two decades (Google Trends, n.d.; IndexMundi, n.d.), and its medical

claims have received significant attention as a result. Although it's difficult to conclude how much research is 'enough' research, according to Renan da Silva Lima and Jane Mara Block (2019), scientific articles on the health efficacy of coconut oil grew exponentially between 2010 and 2019, before hitting a sharp decline. These authors write that most claims made on behalf of coconut oil were inconclusive or unconvincing and maintain their support for mainstream institutions' recommendations against the ingestion of saturated fat. In fact, as Frank Sack and colleagues write, "the evidence to recommend reduction of saturated fat and its replacement by polyunsaturated and monounsaturated fat has strengthened as better methodology is more widely adopted for the analysis of dietary intake in observational studies" (2017, p. e3). In other words, evidence to support mainstream medical institutions' recommendations is not weakening with new research as naturopathic literature suggests. Rather, new research has made this truth stronger overtime.

#### Subsection 5.2.2

### Geographically Situated Truth

18-24 year old woman (Bay Area, Tongan)	I feel like any medical institution within the United States is exists [sic] mainly because of profit. I also do understand that when purchasing coconut oil from a store, there may be added chemicals. Also, I believe that the American Heart Association may have only done studies on middle age white males, which excludes the rest of the demographics that make up America, esp. Pacific Islanders.
18-24 year old woman (Wellington, Cook Islands Māori, European New Zealander/pākehā)	The United States have continuously produced incorrect information and my personal belief is that fak[e] news is generated by the states.
18-24 year old woman (Wellington, European New Zealander/pākehā)	Because of the ridiculous food America produces and how fat their nation is

These three respondents situate their understandings of truth within the political or sociocultural contexts of the place in which it was produced. Specifically, they address their distrust of *American* institutions' abilities to produce healthy recommendations. The first respondent, who lives in the United States, assumes that American medical

institutions’ recommendations are untrustworthy because they are structured by invested economic interests. This suspected corruption belief is similar to those in the subsection below, which I will address shortly. The second respondent believes that the United States manufactures disinformation, commonly termed as “fake news” in popular media. I addressed in the previous section how Karin Michels’s (2018) lecture on the health problems of coconut oil was also labeled as fake news by one naturopathic source (Zyrowski, 31 August 2018). The concept and use of this term is somewhat paradoxical in the ways it’s employed in popular media and political discourse, however. This is because the concept of fake news relies on a belief in real-but-concealed facts, while at the same time it has been weaponized (especially by the alt-right) to justify their own “alternative facts” which assert that two truths can exist simultaneously, even if these truths are logically exclusive (Neimark et al., 2019). Recently, the term ‘fake news’ has been co-opted by alternative health movements to dispel trust in mainstream medical institutions, especially for anti-vaccination purposes. To label a specific truth as fake news calls into question the reputability of its production—it situates truth in order to dismiss it as not ‘real.’

Finally, the third respondent addresses her perception of American cuisine and American bodies as evidence not to trust American truth claims. Implicit in this perception is the assumption that American food industries *do* follow American medical institutions’ health recommendations (which they don’t necessarily), and that Americans are fat because of these misguided recommendations. Aotearoa New Zealand has a similar obesity ranking as the United States (Ministry of Health, 19 November 2019) but the consistent portrayal of American obesity in media likely influences her points of reference. This respondent also equates body fat as her marker of mechanical health, which as discussed earlier, demonstrates how contemporary beauty standards (affective health) is entangled in health discourse.

### Subsection 5.2.3

## Suspected Corruption

31-40 year old woman (Bay Area, European	Government run programs are generally untrustworthy. AMA [American Medical Association] is bought by big pharma who
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American)	makes money off sick people therefore their true goal is not health but [pseudo]-health which is a big money maker. And control, AMA is definitely about [controlling] the populus. The WHO is another group whose agenda does not value the true welfare of humanity. Power, wealth, & control is their agenda from a worldwide view.
25-30 year old woman (Wellington, Tongan, Māori, European New Zealander/pākehā	Each organisation has its agenda and I have seen enough cyclic fads rise and fall with all kinds of doctors stating “facts” and later retracting. There is a massive move always by Americans to promote their own products / I doubt they are a big exporter of Coconuts and therefore would prefer it remains unpopular
31-40 year old woman (Bay Area, Samoan)	Depends when we use alternative cultural items that has worked for years in its purpose, and if the aha [American Heart Association] and who [World Health Organization] are connected to funding sources that needs them to share things that they have not put effort into researching enough to give accurate information.

The common denominator of these responses is the belief that economic and political power corrupts truth claims. The first respondent believes that the American Medical Association has an incentive to provide the public with disinformation in order to produce and commodify sick people. The fact that she directs her comment towards the American *Medical* Association, an organization that I did not ask about, is telling as it reflects deep state conspiracist rhetoric. Specifically, it suggests that monopolizing global control is the main objective of government-funded institutions. This comment therefore positions coconut oil consumption as a form of resistance to these attempted power grabs—if a person maintains their own health by ingesting coconut oil, then they can avoid becoming a product for “big pharma.” In this way, coconut oil is held as a subversive commodity to institutional control.

The second respondent addresses their belief that competing American-based agricultural industries corrupt health recommendations. The concern here mirrors those discussed by satirist JP Sears’s six-point critique of competing vegetable oil lobbyists (26 July 2017, 3:18). In a YouTube video viewed over 1.4 million times as I write this thesis, Sears presents the key points: (1) The majority of the United States landmass does not grow coconuts and therefore coconuts are not a profitable commodity; (2) the United States



produces a great amount of soy, corn and canola which are used to produce alternative vegetable oils; (3) there is great economic potential in selling these alternative vegetable oils; (4) soybean and canola industry representatives are on the American Heart Association's advisory panel;<sup>52</sup> (5) the American Heart Association promotes these alternative vegetable oils and recommends not ingesting coconut oil; and (6) Sears comically concludes "this all equates to vegetable oils are good for your health; coconut oil is bad for your health" (4:17). Sears is a well-known satirist whose videos usually critique leftist alternative subculture while simultaneously pushing anti-government, libertarian political ideologies. (Since the outbreak of COVID-19, Sears has been a prominent anti-mandate spokesperson.) Even as satire, Sears's work is powerful in informing consumers' opinions. Through media like YouTube, Sears's videos on coconut oil reach wider audiences than peer-reviewed articles in medical journals. This sort of knowledge production therefore draws on and contributes to anti-institutional populist ideologies.

Finally, the third respondent also addresses research funding. She argues that because "alternative cultural items" do not attract as much funding as do other products, they cannot be validated by medical researchers. This similarly assumes that coconut oil has not received enough scientific attention. As the previous subsection has addressed though, coconut oil has received a significant focus in medical reviews. However, *where* this information goes—who it reaches and who it doesn't—significantly matters. Scientific medical reviews, especially those held behind paywalls (such as several that I have referenced in this thesis), are not intended to reach the general public and remain largely inaccessible for this reason. This is a serious problem as it prevents individual consumers' from making informed decisions about their consumption choices. This is not to say that consumers *will* decide to not ingest coconut oil as a health food even if they do have access to these scientific medical reviews. Rather, in a similar vein to decolonized food movements which are concerned about Islanders' access to nutritional equity, the emphasis here is that equal access to nutritional information is also necessary to make impactful changes in consumers' dietary choices.

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<sup>52</sup> I was unable to confirm this as true.

### Disputed Science

31-40 year old man (Wellington, Māori)	The scientific evidence does not amount to a causal relationship between dietary saturated fat intake and heart disease. Thus, recommendations for reducing saturated fat intake are not accurate
31-40 year old woman (Bay Area, Choctaw, Middle Eastern, European American)	they also recommend vaccines, which are not proven to be safe in any independent double blind studies. I don't trust any organization that recommends vaccines
41-50 year old woman (Bay Area, Samoan, European American)	Research conducted. Learned that saturated fats are in fact healthy- poly unsaturated are not. Study massage and practice- school, text books, resources like Dr Mercola and Dr David Getoff.

These three respondents believe that the research informing mainstream medical institutions' recommendations is flawed and therefore untrustworthy. The first respondent rejects the causal (rather than correlative) relationship between saturated fat intake and cardiovascular disease. He doesn't elaborate why he believes this explicitly, but according to the way he answered another survey question, "How did you learn about coconut oil?" the information sources he draws on likely influences his answer. This man explained that he learned about coconut oil from a 'friend or peer group,' 'health blogs,' 'books or other literature,' and 'another source' which he specified as "Mātauranga Māori, ancestral knowledge." It's likely that pro-coconut oil literature informed his understandings of saturated fat and cardiovascular health, and that like other pieces of literature I have examined in the previous section, it led him to conclude that medical institutions' recommendations are wrong.

Coconut oil consumers who challenge the trustworthiness of mainstream medical institutions' scientific methods evoke what Anna Kata (2012) refers to as "the postmodern medical paradigm"—a populist shift in health knowledge and health practice that reconceptualizes who health 'experts' are and what health 'expertise' means. Partially quoting Scott Ratzan (2002, p. 170), Kata writes that as a result of the postmodern medical paradigm, "There has been a transition from the 'white coat ethos of the "traditional" physician' to the current environment of shared decision-making between patients and

professionals” (2012, p. 3779). According to Kata, the influence of the postmodern medical paradigm has negatively impacted mainstream medical institutions’ abilities to make effective health recommendations, and this has serious impacts that extend beyond coconut oil.

Kata focuses her work on anti-vaccination sentiments which, I have mentioned, pro-coconut oil rhetoric is entangled with. For example, the second respondent addresses her skepticism about the health efficacy of vaccinations directly and uses this belief to assess the trustworthiness of a medical institution’s ability to make other health recommendations. Similarly, the third respondent references two pro-coconut oil naturopaths, Joseph Mercola and David Getoff, both of whom are strong anti-vaccination spokespersons as well. Like Sears (Sears, 26 July 2017), both Mercola and Getoff’s main media presence is on the internet.

The presence of unregulated medical information on the internet is a major concern for Kata who writes:

The Internet provides easy access to online health information, and through the redefinition of expertise and notion of relativism, postmodernism allows for that information to be interpreted in various ways — rather than an interpretation of being “wrong”, it can be reframed as “another way of knowing” (2012, p. 3784).

Kata continues, “With the anti-vaccination movement embracing the postmodern paradigm, which inherently questions an authoritative, science-based approach, ‘facts’ may be reinterpreted as just another ‘opinion’” (2012, p. 3784). The incorporation of coconut oil in naturopathic, anti-vaccination literature articulates the product in a subcultural health value system, one which distinguishes itself by its attempted subversion of authoritative medical institutions and medical norms. The consumption of coconut oil, consciously against the recommendations of the World Health Organization and American Heart Association, therefore implicates the product in a counterculture ideology.

### Individual Evaluation

51-60 year old woman (Bay Area, Irish, Scottish, French, German)	I believe in “intuitive eating” - eating what feels right to me, makes my body feel good. I don’t trust “organizations” to tell me what is good for me. I believe they all have their own agenda.
31-40 year old woman (Kansas, Chamorro)	I think it’s relative to where you and the coconuts are raised. Lol Coconuts grown in Florida arent the same as the coconuts grown on Guam. What does the American Heart Association and World Health Organizations know outside their frame of reference or study? I was raised using coconut oil for many things and consider myself to be pretty healthy with great skin/hair that I attribute to the use of coconut oil. I respect all those who go ahead of me [and] do research to help the general public, but before I listen to research I look at those around me first as “proof is in the pudding.” Has it failed or helped them?
41-50 year old woman (Bay Area, European American)	Their information does not align with the extensive research I’ve done for my own personal health that has proven results nor with the reputable sources from which I’ve learned about healthy eating from; to control inflammation, lose weight, and clear skin problems.

All three of these respondents’ answers employ an individualized or local-communal empirical sense-making approach to coconut oil. The first respondent addresses affective health—how coconut oil makes her body feel. This practice suggests that she trusts her body as an information source more than organizations she is not familiar with and are not familiar with her as an individual. The second respondent also addresses lived experience. She asks how can an organization know the real health validity of coconut oil without using it themselves? As institutions, the American Heart Association and World Health Organization do not have organic bodies and therefore are perceived as limited in their ability to make these body-related truth claims. This respondent adds that her relationship with coconut oil is reaffirmed by the experiences of those of her community which strengthens her belief that it’s a healthy product. Finally, the third respondent also uses her body as an individual case study, and anecdotally, her experiences with coconut oil are positive.

Many of the claims regarding the health validity of coconut oil are drawn from anecdotes like these. Anecdotes are effective in strengthening the product's popularity among friends, peer groups and relatives, especially if they are reaffirmed by other people's experiences as well. Anecdotes have also significantly informed pro-coconut oil literature. But this reliance on anecdotes highlights an epistemological conflict between mainstream medical institutions' largely positivist methods and consumers' largely empirical approaches to health. Though medical researchers have investigated anecdotal claims, they have substantiated few to none, and generally remain dismissive of accepting anecdotes as sufficient evidence altogether. As the title of Ratzan's article declares, "The Plural of Anecdote is not Evidence" (2002, p. 169). However, it's misguided for medical researchers to assume that most consumers are sourcing their information from medical reviews only, if at all. And for consumers who do source information from medical reviews, it's misguided to assume they do so uncritically. Consumers rely on their bodies to make sense of the products in their lives. If a consumer assesses coconut oil as a product that aligns with their own standards of health (e.g. as a weight loss supplement as the third respondent references), then the 'proven' efficacy of coconut oil as a health product will likely challenge institutions' dismissal (and at times, quite condescending dismissal) of their lived experiences. In this way, it makes sense that these institutional truths are demoted to another "opinion" or "way of knowing" (Kata, 2012).

#### Subsection 5.2.6

### Traditional Uses

51-60 year old woman (Northland, Māori, European New Zealander/pākehā)	I use coconut oil in moderation and in place of other saturated fats. I feel that their warnings may be relevant if you were consuming coconut oil every day, in addition to other high energy foods. However, I have heard that Pacific people working hard physically and eating a traditional island diet are very healthy.
18-24 year old woman (Wellington, European New Zealander/pākehā)	Health standards are generally those surrounding what is the "optimal" health for white people (i.e. western/Caucasian) and this takes the form of what coincides with societal beauty standards. A lot of "health" based things are also connected to fat shaming etc... so I don't really have full trust in them. Saying this, I do not know for certain how they find their research, and how it is conducted to give their recommendations.

18-24 year old woman (Auckland, Tongan, European New Zealander/pākehā)	I think their views on health [...] are based on western science and medicine which means that indigenous ideas about health and well-being may be interpreted as “unhealthy” even though they have been beneficial to indigenous populations for years
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All three of these respondents critique Eurocentric health standards which they believe exclude non-white, indigenous understandings of health. The first respondent references Pacific Islanders’ assumed ingestion of coconut oil as a counternarrative to Western medical institutions’ recommendations. It’s possible that she may also have an invested interest in the health validity of coconut oil if she understands herself to embody a Pacific body. However, she is cautious to dismiss these mainstream medical recommendations entirely, and like other consumers discussed in this section, advocates for moderation. The second respondent, despite embodying a European body, is critical of these health recommendations presumably on behalf of non-European peoples, who she assumes are excluded from health research. She situates these recommendations in the dominant Western cultural influences which she assumes influence mainstream medical institutions. She also directly addresses the influence of fatphobia in Western health standards which was discussed in the previous section. Finally, the third respondent addresses what she perceives to be misfitting standards imposed onto indigenous peoples. Like the second respondent, she addresses the cultural contexts that qualify health and challenges these institutions’ implied claim to represent scientific objectivity. All three of these respondents employ a critical ‘situated knowledges’ framework in order to assess mainstream medical institutions’ truth claims. None are necessarily dismissive of these recommendations entirely. Rather, their comments ask who is this truth for? What cultural influences have shaped the production of this truth? What power relationships are embedded in this truth-making process? And, specifically, who does this truth benefit and who does it leave out?

These selected contributions outline how the trustworthiness of the World Health Organization and American Heart Association are called into question by some coconut oil consumers. Respondents in all subsections voice their doubt of these medical institutions’ authority to make recommendations by situating the organizations within broader temporal, geographical and political contexts. These respondents also evoke discussions of

traditional cultures as well as their own bodies as counterevidence to these medical institutions' truth claims. Based on these sentiments, coconut oil is constructed as a subversive commodity against a "white coat ethos" of health authority (Ratzan, 2002). As will be discussed more in the following chapter, the subversive social lives of coconut oil articulate new alternative subcultural meaning—one which conveys an intentional break from mainstream culture. But before entering that discussion, I first examine how the meanings of coconut oil itself are disputed by Pacific Islander consumers and what factors may contribute to these conflicting understandings.



### Section 5.3

## **Objectified Cultural Capital**

Despite my intensive focus on commodities, a substantive discussion about commodity fetishism has, thus far, been absent. There are two reasons for this. First, at this point in academic practice, commodity fetishism is so ingrained in the way products are framed that the concept has become putative (Ouzman, 2006). Its foundational ideology has given way to post-commodity fetishism concepts, such as Lamont Lindstrom's (1993) reflexive "cargo cults" or Sally Eden's (2010) "consumer fetishism," both of which have informed the theoretical frameworks of this thesis. The second reason pertains to agency. The concept of commodity fetishism originates mainly with Karl Marx who was concerned about the power that consumers attribute to inanimate things. Marx addressed this fetishization with the intention of preventing it. He did so to undermine capitalism itself, recognizing commodity fetishism as an integral part of a capitalist system (J. Bennett, 2004). While it's beneficial to examine the constructed power that commodities hold in any commodity-ethnography such as this one, implicit in this sentiment is a perception of objects as passive recipients of the human gaze. Specifically, in this commodity-fetishist theoretical framework, an object is understood to receive human sense-making and its meaning becomes implicated within anthropocentric constructions. Certainly, there is truth to this.

But there is another view worth exploring in this thesis—one which does not completely negate the constructed meanings of things but does resist stripping nonhuman

material things of *their* agency entirely. In the previous chapter, I drew attention to multiple perspectives of posthumanist agency in my discussion of coconuts and coconut oil by positioning each within indigenous Pacific worldviews. Implicit in this approach are animistic spiritual considerations, which as Nurit Bird-David writes, means that, “‘Meaning’ is not ‘imposed’ on things—it is not pre-given in consciousness—but ‘discovered’ in the course of action...” (1999, p. S74). In a broader sense, this “thing-power” framework views coconut oil as an “actant” (Latour, 1996), defined by Jane Bennett as “a source of action that can be either human or nonhuman; it is that which has efficacy, can *do* things, has sufficient coherence to make a difference, produce effects, alter the course of events” (2010, p. viii). If viewed as an “actant”—whether spiritual, political or social in nature—coconut oil itself can convey meaning in its own right.

This section examines nonhuman agency further. It draws coconut oil into debate—or perhaps coconut oil itself stimulates debate—regarding Pacific Islander consumers’ understandings of the traditional aspects of coconut oil use. Relatedly, this debate addresses the complexities of ‘tradition’ just as much as it addresses the role of coconut oil within it. As the previous sections have made clear, although many Pacific Islanders do ingest coconut oil, a main purpose is for cosmetic use. Chapter four in particular examined the nuanced socio-spiritual meanings that coconut oil aesthetically conveys when used in this way. But if valued for its aesthetic alone, it’s reasonable to ask—as participants *did* ask—whether it’s possible for a substitute product to hold the same meaning if it can provide the same functional use? If a different product topically shimmers as coconut oil does, is it an adequate replacement? Broadly speaking, is it the material object or the function of a material object that matters most regarding cultural practice and the preservation of tradition?

This idea became a guiding research question as it was brought to my attention from several Islander participants that Johnson & Johnson’s baby oil (referred to from here on as baby oil) has become increasingly popular as a substitute for coconut oil. This cheap commodity has flooded Pacific markets and as several participants share, it has become more accessible by proximity and price than coconut oil. The ubiquity of baby oil, both in the Islands and in diaspora, is indicative of globalization. But even more significant is how baby oil is now commonly used in Pacific rituals. For some participants, the substitution



of baby oil for coconut oil is an affront to their understandings of what constitutes tradition, which they view as something dependent on ‘correct’ material products. To other participants though, baby oil is an adequate substitution, as they view the concept of tradition as a practice primarily, and mostly independent from the material products used.

This latter group—who I will call ‘reformists’—point to other examples of commodity change to justify their stance, while the former group—‘traditionalists’—perceive commodity change as indicative of cultural loss. Fundamental to both groups’ opinions in this debate is their conflicting understandings of what culture is, how it functions, and how it *should* be enacted. In his own object-focused research, Sven Ouzman (2006) encountered similar disputes of material products’ agency—and rights—within cultural representations. Like this project, the term ‘authenticity’ in Ouzman’s work was invoked in multiple ways:

“[A]uthenticity” is a malleable concept and can accommodate fakes if they are old, sufficiently spectacular, or endorsed by sufficiently authoritative connoisseurs. Authenticity is also directional. Some people are more concerned with the object as material manifestation while others are more interested in the knowledge and emotions tethered to objects. (p. 274).

To orient this debate, it’s necessary to address my own academic influences that ultimately pull my discussion towards a pro-reformist understanding of culture. Pacific studies at Te Herenga Waka Victoria University of Wellington traces parts of its academic genealogy to cultural studies which itself draws from the theoretical works of Antonio Gramsci and Stuart Hall. Articulation theory, which stems from this academic genealogy largely informs how I make sense of participants’ contributions to this work. Articulation theory is evoked as a counter-discourse to essentialist views of culture. An essentialist framing constructs culture as an organic body that possesses what James Clifford has referred to as “critical organs” which are elements like language or traditional customs (2001, p. 478). Framing culture as an organic body implies that if a culture was to lose its “critical organs,” it will die. Articulation theory, conversely, views culture as a process of ‘hooking’ and ‘unhooking’ of cultural elements with no exact endpoint:

[A]rticulation refers to concrete connections, joints. Stuart Hall's favorite example is an 'articulated lorry' [...] Something that's articulated or hooked together (like a truck's cab and trailer, or a sentence's constituent parts) can also be hooked and recombined (Clifford, 2001, p. 478).

This articulation framing implies that a culture cannot 'die' in the same sense as an organic body. Rather, culture is in a perpetual state of change, often referred to in this context as 'rearticulation.' The central difference between these two framings in ethnographic research is that an essentialist perspective may find cultural loss; an articulated perspective may find cultural change. The implications of this difference in perspectives are significant.

Pacific studies postgraduate students at Te Herenga Waka Victoria University of Wellington are introduced to articulation theory through our preliminary coursework, and many of us find it a useful research tool that allows us to seek out articulated elements in our work. Articulation theory helps us account for (and maybe even cope with) cultural change, especially our own embodiments of cultural change. But just as much as we may find markers of articulated change in our research, we also encounter rigidity of tradition—whatever has come to constitute tradition at that time and context. There are two ways to view attachment to tradition: either dismissively as a dedication to a timeless false consciousness (Hereniko, 1999; Wendt, 1982), or as a hopeful, if precarious, truth.

While articulation theory may be useful to account for (and accept) cultural change, it requires a degree of emotional restraint and discipline, because when culture is accepted as impermanent or in a constant state of rearticulation, something once trusted as a foundation of stability becomes much more fragile and fleeting. Overtime, perhaps mirroring the concerns of participants I spoke with, this anxiety took its toll in my research, and is evident in my conversation with Tiffany Rose Naputi Lascado (Bay Area, Chamorro):

NR	In Pacific studies [at Te Herenga Waka Victoria University of Wellington], there's this tension between cultural maintenance and this idea that "It's okay if cultures change and they become what they become."
TRNL	Evolve. You know I always talk about evolution.

NR	But I think more than not—as much as I want to fight it, as much as I don’t want to believe it, there are merits of truth, if not entirely true, that you can lose culture. Do you think that the fact that many Chamorros now—let’s not even get into language loss and things like that—but [that many Chamorros] don’t use coconut oil, do you think that represents any cultural loss? Or do you think it’s just different now and canola oil is sweet, it’s fine—or baby oil—for whatever uses?
TRNL	Yes, I agree that there is a loss of culture and that that’s just another example of culture that has been lost.

Here, cracks of anxiety regarding the vulnerability of Chamorro culture break the facade of my own pro-reformist theoretical approach and led to me inadvertently feeding Naputi Lascado my preformed opinions. It also reveals my concerns regarding how this work may be interpreted and used by others. Framing what could very well be cultural loss as cultural change in this thesis has the potential to disempower my own people. If our “critical organs” are dying, we need to revive them, not label their death as ‘change.’ Additionally, as Pacific studies researchers, we should be cautious about employing methodologies that reject the validity of tradition entirely. As Vicente Diaz and J Kēhaulani Kauanui write:

While hybridity may better describe the condition of things, and can be harnessed for our own strength, we aim to take care that its value as an analytical tool is not used to commodify or cheapen our own sources of empowerment [...] Cultural studies has been remarkably distant, if not hostile, to indigeneity (2001, p. 324).

The following subsections hash out these concerns by discussing what may be gained—and lost—by the substitution of coconut oil for baby oil. What is the difference, if any, between cultural change and cultural loss? Is culture dependent on commodities or is it dependent on knowledge about the function of commodities? How do material things, like coconut oil, enact their own agency in culture? What concerns do Pacific coconut oil consumers hold regarding the substitution of coconut oil for baby oil?

While I will attempt to address these questions, it’s impossible to settle on any one concrete answer, nor is it my intention to do so. Still though, the following subsections are structured in a way that provides evidence for a theory, suggested by Sarah Finau

(Wellington, Tongan), that the experience of diaspora impacts reformist or traditionalist values that coconut oil consumers may hold. Central to Finau's theory is the observation that material commodities (objectified cultural capital) are used by diasporic Islanders as a way to compensate for a perceived lack of immaterial cultural knowledge (embodied cultural capital), and in the process, material commodities gain greater cultural significance. To contextualize this theory, I begin with one of the first Pacific interviews conducted in this project.

#### Subsection 5.3.1

### **“Do it properly or don't do it at all”**

Justine Jane Taito Matamua (Wellington, Samoan) was the first person to address what has since been known as the ‘baby oil debate’ with me. At the time of our interview, Taito Matamua was enrolled as a design student at Te Herenga Waka Victoria University of Wellington. Part of her interest in the program, she explained, is that she is someone who learns visually. During her interview, she would reflect on direct experiences, emphasizing the concrete things she saw: what Island foods were on the table at church festivals, what the label of a certain coconut oil brand looked like, what differences it made in the texture of her “Island girl hair” and how it helped her feel more confident wearing it naturally. Several times she would pause our discussion to scroll through her phone to find exactly what she was talking about. As we talked about the cultural contexts of coconut oil, Taito Matamua pulled out her phone to show me what she considers to be a traditional Pacific use.

Taito Matamua showed me a video posted by a Tongan teunga (traditional dress) designer she follows on Instagram.<sup>53</sup> The video depicted a young woman, likely on her twenty-first birthday, preparing to tau'olunga. She wore a beautiful teunga embroidered with polished pāua shell regalia. The young woman is surrounded by four older women attentively patting oil on her exposed skin. The oldest woman of the four holds a bottle of oil in her hand. She draws the oil into her mouth and spits it as a fine spray onto the younger woman. The oil coats the young woman's body entirely, and like the pāua shell, her skin

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<sup>53</sup> To maintain privacy of the Instagram account holder and the people depicted in the video, I have not included a link.

beautifully glistens in a way that demonstrates her virtue, and her family’s virtue, to her community. Taito Matamua read the video caption aloud to me. It explained to the viewer that a person using their mouth to takai lolo (apply oil) is an old and sacred Tongan tradition. Taito Matamua continued reading the description, “Our traditions and customs are slowly dying, simply because we don’t practice it as much nowadays.” Presumably, by applying oil in this way, the women are attempting to keep their Tongan tradition ‘alive.’ The comparison of Tongan culture to an organic body is implicit in the text.

Taito Matamua admires this video as an aesthetic reflection of a traditional Pacific use of coconut oil, and that means a lot to her given her concerns over the encroachment of Western substitutions like baby oil which she said, “takes away from our origin and our culture.” It was a statement I returned to later in our interview:

NR	I was curious about when you were saying “I feel kind of like we’re breaking away from our cultural origin” when you were talking about Johnson & Johnson.
JJTM	Yeah the baby oil.
NR	Do you wanna talk a little more about <i>what’s</i> being broken?
JJTM	I feel just the essence of the oil. Just our ancestors used coconut oil. A lot has been taken away from us, you know? Maybe not the same songs being used, the same movement, but at least we’ll be using the same oil.
NR	Yeah so you’re saying that this is a cultural continuity thing?
JJTM	Yeah it’s like the only thing that we can continuously use. At least it will be the same oil. I feel we’ve just been Westernized.

I asked Taito Matamua whether it matters to her that coconut oil comes from the Pacific versus Southeast Asia or elsewhere.<sup>54</sup> She wasn’t concerned about where it comes from, only that it’s coconut oil. To her, coconut oil is appropriate precisely because it isn’t baby oil—a product she described as “full of chemicals” and thinks shouldn’t be used on babies at all. Johnson & Johnson recently settled a lawsuit over their use of a known

<sup>54</sup> In 2019, the Philippines was the top producer of commercial coconut (copra) oil with nearly 38% of the 3,160,465 metric tonnes produced globally in that nation alone; Indonesia (28%) and India (11%) followed (Food and Agriculture Organization of the United Nations, 2021). The 12 Pacific nations or autonomous regions listed in the data collection produced slightly over 2% of the global commercial supply.

carcinogenic in their products (RNZ, 28 January 2020). To Taito Matamua, this lawsuit demonstrates that the corporation doesn't care about the wellbeing of their consumers. And there are a lot of them, especially in the Pacific, where Johnson & Johnson products are cheap, available and increasingly familiar.

I didn't think much about the video after my interview with Taito Matamua. But to my surprise, it came up again during my interview with Kalo Afeaki (Wellington, Tongan, Māori). Afeaki's interpretation of it was very different to Taito Matamua though. This was because neither Taito Matamua nor I noticed that it wasn't coconut oil that coated the young woman—it was baby oil. I watched the video a second time after my interview with Afeaki—she was right. The bottle the older woman holds has a Johnson & Johnson label in clear view. Like Taito Matamua, Afeaki's distaste for baby oil is visceral:

KA	I'm very against baby oil. I hate the smell of it. I hate seeing it. I hate how it's been used on our babies because it is petrol. You're putting really bad chemicals on people. So I have strong feelings against it. I think it's stupid.
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I didn't have the same strong feelings against baby oil as Afeaki or Taito Matamua when I met with either of them. I hadn't given it any previous thought. But I was curious—if the women in the video use baby oil in a 'traditional' way, is that not a traditional practice? What makes something traditional? And how do commodities come into play in this question? This query was the beginning of the oil debate that a number of Islander participants weighed in on. As a methodological approach, I often summarized the key points that a participant shared in their interview and then, while maintaining confidentiality, shared these key points with another participant for their response. This building-dialogue eventually led to larger questions about the identities and experiences of *who* it is that holds reformist or traditional values in Pacific culture.

To Afeaki, the application of oil in the video was not a proper Tongan tradition because the substitution of coconut oil for baby oil was improper:

KA	Now if you were to do this tradition, you would use lolo ahi. You wouldn't use baby oil. But this was a young lady in New Zealand—it was in Auckland. So again, it goes back to that access. They wanted to recreate the tradition of [pause] <i>this</i> . But didn't have the correct oil. They may have not known. And again, it goes back to
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	whatever was easiest to access, they would use.
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Afeaki stressed this latter point multiple times during her interview. As much as she hates baby oil, she doesn't blame Tongans for using it if that's the only product they have access to. And she can't imagine a world with no oil of any kind—it's just too important. What she took issue with though is the alteration of what is considered proper culture. Viewing Tongans attempting to recreate a tradition without the proper material pieces to enact that tradition is at odds with how she was raised. We continued:

NR	So this girl said "I would prefer if we stopped using baby oil." But other people [...] didn't really have strong feelings about it. They just said, "It's not so much the ingredient itself as it is just how it's being used. It's the practice, not the things." So what's your opinion about what makes it traditional?
KA	I definitely think it was really strange to see it because we grew up in Tonga with our auntie [...] She was our guide in a lot of things. But she never, ever, spat on us. Like she was our guide in anything traditional. She would make all our teunga when we tau'olunga. She would be doing all our hair. She would make sure we had everything right for any katoanga, for any function that we needed to be [in] and play a part. She never did that! So it's not so much the tradition, but it's just when you are doing something, do it properly or don't do it at all.

Most people who consciously enact a cultural tradition have a basic understanding of what constitutes that tradition as it is collectively and currently understood. There are specific structures to cultural rituals, which may be malleable in some cases, but likely have a boundary. When this boundary is crossed, participants may no longer consider a ritual to 'properly' enact a certain tradition. Likely, we are not aware of these boundaries until they are called into question, as it was for Afeaki in the example above. It's possible that 'reform' can be pushed so far, so quickly, until a tradition loses its meaning altogether. The point here is that there are different standards regarding what makes something traditional, and commodities play a part in that structure. But where the limits of tradition lie are going to be different for different people. As this section will address, the lived experiences and identities of people enacting a tradition likely inform their understandings of it, and therefore their opinion of what is malleable to reform and what isn't.

Afeaki's identity as an Aotearoa New Zealand-born, Tongan-raised, New Zealand citizen may impact her opinions regarding what constitutes Tongan tradition. As her sister, Sarah Finau (Wellington, Tongan, Māori) explained, both her and Afeaki exist in an in-betweenness of identities common of many transnational diasporic Islanders and Islanders of mixed ancestry:

SF	Where would I kind of fall? I'm kind of a unique [case] cause I grew up in Tonga, but I grew up in a New Zealand household in Tonga. So I'm not a traditional Tongan. And I pick and choose the culture for what I want to—and other things I'm just like “That's just stupid, and I don't need that in my life.” But I'm lucky because I can do that, because I look white. Whereas someone who's brown won't have that luxury. They'd just be called “afi palangi,” which is “wanting to be white.” Whereas I can be, well I am. I <i>am</i> Tongan and a palangi.
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Finau argued that the sense of connection to the Pacific has a major impact on how Islanders engage with Pacific commodities. She suggested that in some cases material items may be used as a compensatory symbol of cultural connection. To recall the previous chapter, Alex White (Bay Area, Chamorro) similarly used coconuts as a means of connection with his ancestors which was otherwise strained due to his diasporic status. This is one example of several that support Finau's observation. The following two subsections address the experiences of Leo Haube (Bay Area, Hawaiian) and Teuila Faaleo (Wellington, Samoan). Both participants were raised in the Islands and neither voiced strong cultural connection to coconut oil. This contrasts with Jamie Webster (Wellington, Fijian), discussed in a subsequent subsection, who was born and raised in the diaspora and discussed at length their affective relationship with coconut oil. These participants' lived experiences illustrate how embodied cultural capital and objectified cultural capital interact with one another, and how the context of diaspora may play a role in this process.

#### Subsection 5.3.2

### **“It's just a thing”**

Leo Haube (Bay Area, Hawaiian) has been living in between the San Francisco Bay Area and Hawai'i for the past couple of years, but it's clear that his heart belongs to Hawai'i where he was born and raised. Haube was introduced to coconut oil as a teenager from his



sister who is a lā‘au lapa‘au (Hawaiian medicine) practitioner. Both Haube and his mother learned through his sister how coconut oil was used by their ancestors and they both began to incorporate it into their lives too. Haube’s sister and her partner have since experimented with coconut oil in new and new-ish ways like mixing it with ‘awa (kava), ‘ōlena (turmeric),<sup>55</sup> or infusing it with marijuana for topical pain relief.<sup>56</sup> Additionally, much of Haube’s cultural knowledge about coconuts was learned in the classroom. Like Carly Noelani Kajiwarā (Bay Area, Hawaiian), Haube also attended a Kamehameha school where cultural education classes, including ‘ōlelo Hawai‘i (Hawaiian language), were mandatory. From my perspective, Haube appeared to possess a high level of embodied Hawaiian cultural capital.

As with every participant, I asked Haube whether he believes his cultural or ethnic background influences his coconut oil use. His answer, with several pauses to think, was a lukewarm, “*maybe*.” He explained that he is drawn to coconut oil mainly as a moisturizer to treat his dry skin normally accustomed to Hawaiian humidity. Haube viewed coconut oil as a medicinal product primarily, and a cultural product secondarily. We discussed his lack of a cultural relationship to coconut oil more:

NR	When you use it now do you feel like there’s a sense of cultural connection or any cultural maintenance from it? Or is it just a thing?
LH	I think it’s just a thing. But I mean I think from—because of this, talking to you right now, I can see that it’s more, I mean it makes me think of it more as a cultural thing.

Despite this recognition of cultural significance, Haube generally viewed coconut oil as a noa commodity (although he didn’t use that term). In my research I found that Hawaiian participants, more so than participants of other Pacific ethnicities, tended to voice less cultural connection to coconut oil compared to other Pacific products, especially taro; Haube was no exception. However, only two out of six Hawaiians interviewed—Ellie

<sup>55</sup> Given the commonality of this practice throughout the region, mixing coconut oil with turmeric is likely a pre-colonial practice in Hawai‘i.

<sup>56</sup> Nearly half of all participants in both fieldwork sites discussed infusing coconut oil with marijuana in their interviews. In the Bay Area, recreational marijuana consumption recently became legal for consumers at least 21 years old. In the Wellington Region, marijuana consumption is not legal, indicating a further anti-authoritarian aspect to this coconut oil consumption practice.

Radburg (Bay Area) and Bonnie Pauahi Tysse (Bay Area)—were raised in the diaspora, and both women had different, ambivalent relationships to coconut oil. Both voiced a sense of cultural connection to the product, while also discussing their hesitancy to position themselves as ‘authentically’ Hawaiian. This sample size is small, but as I will build on in the following subsections, this difference between Pacific Islander participants’ diasporic and non-diasporic identities likely factors into their relationships with coconut oil.

Haube and I continued to discuss the absence of his personal-cultural relationship to coconut oil. We discussed how Haube may hypothetically feel if he saw poi marketed as a superfood in Western supermarkets. Like Kajiwara, Haube said it would likely make him uncomfortable. The recent trendiness of poke (Hawaiian-style chopped fish) in the Bay Area was already a referential experience. The commodification of his familiar home cuisine out of context and by non-Hawaiians was cringe-inducing—an opinion which multiple Hawaiian participants, including Radburg and Tysse, shared. But coconut oil, for him, was different:

NR	How does that make you feel as someone who I guess—even though you said it’s just kinda a thing, it’s not important—is there any cultural claim to it? Would that make you feel odd to see it in something like, I don’t know, a cuisine that doesn’t have a traditional stake?
LH	No. Well yeah, no. Unfortunately, I would say for me and my family coconut oil is, I guess we don’t have—we don’t put it in that cultural light...

At the time of our interview, Haube was a graduate student who focuses on agricultural sciences. Before moving to the Bay Area for his current program, he worked in Hawai‘i cultivating Hawaiian varieties of Pacific crops. He had affective sentiments towards many Pacific plants. He even offered to list his top five favorites—kalo, ‘ōlena, māmaki (*Waimea pipturus*), kō (sugarcane), and ‘ulu (breadfruit). His absence of a significant opinion on coconut oil, despite his general cultural awareness of it, indicated that it means very little to him. We discussed the way his absence of cultural connection was itself meaningful:

LH	I know that coconut is a Polynesian crop that my ancestors used a lot and it has a
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	lot of stories surrounding it but I guess in thinking how it's used in other places and if it's problematic or not—I've just never thought of it.
NR	That's fine. I think you not thinking about it says a lot. Your absence of thought says a lot about your thoughts on it if that makes sense.
LH	Yeah it does [...] people say your silence says a lot right? If you don't say anything, that's a response.

Rather than solely focusing on why someone *does* have a personal sense of cultural connection to coconut oil, there is insight to be gained by asking simply why someone *does not* have this connection. What factors differentiate Haube from other Pacific participants who did voice a cultural connection? While the agricultural history of Hawai'i and the tourist industry's repurposing of the coconut palm—pruned of its nascent fruits—as an ornamental rather than functional or cultural product may play a part (Hereniko, 1999), I am not convinced that this is the only answer. I imagine there are many reasons, but as Haube and I discussed, his upbringing in Hawai'i is likely a major factor.

I asked Haube if he identifies as diasporic. He does not. I asked him how he thinks his *non*-diasporic identity may affect the way his opinions are formed regarding these diasporic-centered discussions, as these discussions tend to center around maintaining 'connection,' which presupposes that connection is strained in some way. Haube responded:

LH	In a way what I've realized is that there's different—your scope and your issues or the grain of focus really shifts from depending on where you are and what groups you're surrounded by. So what I mean by that is in Hawai'i, when you're in the Islands, when you're with Hawaiian people, there's a certain lens and focus you put on culture and issues [...] and it's very specific in certain ways. If you come to the continent, so here I am in the Bay Area, the scope of things has widened and [...] things are prioritized differently here compared to home.
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How are things prioritized differently? As the following subsection examines, this shift in “scope” almost certainly impacts the way diasporic identifying and *non*-diasporic identifying participants interact with Pacific products, with the former diasporic group more likely to be invested in commodity maintenance as a form of connection, and the

latter group more likely to be open to commodity substitution. I will address how these sentiments may contribute to both traditionalist and reformist views of culture.

Subsection 5.3.3

**“My roots aren’t rooted here”**

I first reached out to Teuila Faaleo’s (Wellington, Samoan) younger sister requesting an interview, but she declined. In her response email, she explained that she doesn’t use coconut oil at all as she has a stronger preference for baby oil. She told me that her older sister does use it though, however sparingly, and included her contact information. Teuila Faaleo and I soon scheduled an interview. We met in the main Pacific studies classroom—a space she was familiar with as a Pacific studies student.

The Faaleo sisters were born and raised in Sāmoa. Their father sent them to Aotearoa New Zealand for education and work opportunities and it was his hope that they would remain there despite his own aching desire to have his children close. A few of the sisters have since returned to Sāmoa, and despite her father’s wishes, Faaleo ideally would like to follow in the next couple years. She doesn’t feel at home in Aotearoa New Zealand, despite having lived in the country for nearly a decade. Her sense of belonging elsewhere—specifically to Sāmoa—was a central theme that came through her interview, especially regarding her relationship to Pacific commodities. Like Haube, Faaleo does not identify as diasporic because she envisions returning to Sāmoa, someday.

As children, Faaleo and her sisters were obliged to apply coconut oil to their skin and hair daily. It was a chore that Faaleo hated doing, especially because her sensitive skin wouldn’t absorb the oil. Often, she would return home with oil stains on her school uniform and her mother would scold Faaleo for eating greasy foods. Sometimes, Faaleo would even lie when asked if she had put on oil before leaving the house to avoid conflict. After leaving home, Faaleo gained the personal autonomy to stop using coconut oil altogether. But when she moved to Aotearoa New Zealand, her skin didn’t react well to the dry air. Recently, Faaleo began reusing coconut oil but this time with new considerations.

Faaleo works at a creche (childcare facility), and the mostly non-Pacific parents there would suggest using coconut oil on their children to treat rashes. Faaleo told me that some of the claims she heard from parents about the healing properties of coconut oil were

so far-fetched that it seemed like, “anyone will believe anything.” Still though, she figured, “if that works with babies then I’ll try on myself.” Another influence came from Faaleo’s Peruvian friend who is keenly interested in coconut oil and would gift Faaleo tubs that she bought at the supermarket. Sometimes her friend would ask Faaleo about Samoan uses of coconut oil, but Faaleo told me that she doesn’t know much about coconut oil despite having used it from a young age. She likes using it now, but mostly she values it as a gift from her friend, rather than as a ‘miracle’ product that her friend claims it to be. She explained, “[I]f it’s from someone else buying it for me, I’ll treasure that. That’s something I’ll actually use. I have to use it because it’s from a friend.”

Beyond daily cosmetic use in her childhood, there were other Samoan coconut oil uses that Faaleo was raised with. Her grandmother practiced fofō and preferred coconut oil but used baby oil sometimes instead. It made sense to substitute it, Faaleo explained. Baby oil was everywhere and cheap. I took the opportunity to draw in the ‘baby oil debate’ to hear her thoughts on the topic. Her response reflected her previous exposure to a Pacific studies articulation framework:

TF	Samoans now, I do not know what we consider traditional and what’s not. It’s like we say this is our traditional wear, the puletasi [formal dress], but I’m like, “That’s not our traditional wear. Our traditional wear was the leaves and dahdahdah.” But people—cause Christianity and the culture go, people are getting lost in that living in between those. There’s certain things, kinda like how that guy was saying—the Pacific studies student <sup>57</sup> —his people [Māori] hook and unhook what they feel like makes sense to them. So I feel like that’s what I feel like with baby oil, so I’m in the middle.
NR	Something in between?
TF	Yes, because it was affordable and it was right there. Any shops, rather than you waiting for a taxi or a bus or waiting for someone to take you to the market to go [get] it. [...] [T]he only other time I see people use it in our family is for a special occasion when there’s a taualuga taupou [representative dancer]. That’s when we’d use it on my sisters’ skin, when they dance.

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<sup>57</sup> Faaleo is referring to a fellow Pacific studies postgraduate’s presentation on Māori (dis)articulations from a pan-Pacific identity to a specific Aotearoa-centered identity.

To Faaleo, there's nothing essentially sacred about coconut oil, and through her discussion of other Pacific commodities, it's clear she views mana (objectified power) itself as malleable to shifting contexts. For her, coconut oil is a product, among many, that is used within Samoan cultural practices which are in constant re-negotiation according to an articulation framework. She views baby oil to possess the same agency as coconut oil and therefore the same potential to become 'traditionally' Samoan—like puletasi, like pisupo (canned foods), like Christianity. The process may have already begun as the familiarity of baby oil has grown in Pacific communities, and Faaleo thinks it's likely going to replace coconut oil as a ubiquitous product. While she prefers coconut oil over baby oil in some rituals, like for taualuga for example, it's not absolutely necessary to her. Perhaps Faaleo's previous exposure to articulation theory within Pacific studies has challenged the framing of tradition as static. She explained "in some ways PASI [Pacific studies] helps me process a lot of things and it has changed how I look at things." However, other participants in this research also had varying exposure to Pacific studies and they didn't necessarily settle on the same conclusions as Faaleo. I return to diaspora—or non-diaspora in this case—to examine as a factor that contributes to a person's sense of connection to Pacific commodities.

Faaleo said that during family visits, she brings more commodities from Aotearoa New Zealand to Sāmoa than she brings from Sāmoa to Aotearoa New Zealand. She explained this is because the gravitational pull of Sāmoa is emotionally stronger than it is in Aotearoa New Zealand. (However, one of her sisters disputes Faaleo's claim about her directional flow of commodities.) Still, the *sentiment* shared by Faaleo is that the flow of commodities is mostly one way. We discussed:

NR	Do you still use certain products from Sāmoa here? Other than coconut oil? Like maybe food or what are some other things?
TF	We're terrible—me and my sister—no, we don't. When we go, we buy a lot for our family [...] There are suitcases for other people. [...] But any other [things], no. We don't bring anything.
NR	Do you think that it would be different if you lived here a lot longer? If you were born here maybe?

TF	Yeah.
NR	Why?
TF	I think the reason why I do not bring anything is because I do not find connection here, like my roots aren't rooted here. I am still in that phase where I tell people in the near future I would wanna go back home.
NR	Would you?
TF	Yeah as much as I love the money and the material things, I feel like there [Sāmoa] is much richer. Like if we get rid of this wealth things, if we just go back and work in our Islands. That's where my mind is at, just going back home. Why come here and suffer trying to work or get something? Rent. Money. Food on the table. Whereas at home, you already own it.

Faaleo's lack of desire to surround herself with homeland commodities contrasts with diasporic-identifying Islander participants I spoke with. For example, Hannah Kette (Wellington, Tongan) describes how her mother, who was raised between Aotearoa New Zealand and Tonga, decorated their home with Tongan cultural items as a way to signal her cultural identity. Kette explained, "mum just wanted Tonga to be all around cause she missed Tonga." As the following subsection will address, this desire for connection impacts the way that someone may engage with their cultural commodities. While the issue is certainly complicated, I suggest that these diasporic Pacific Islander participants have a desire to use Pacific material commodities as a way to compensate for a perceived lack of immaterial cultural knowledge (embodied capital), and as a result the material commodities (objectified capital) are constructed to hold greater personal access points for connection.

#### Subsection 5.3.4

### **"Coconut oil in the hot water cupboard"**

Jamie Webster (Wellington, Fijian) and I met soon after they moved back to Wellington from Melbourne where they had been living since the age of ten. I was also refamiliarizing myself with the city where I had lived six years prior in high school, and we were both in a state of social flux. Webster and I didn't become friends right away but gradually the ebbs and flows of our respective friend groups pushed us together long enough to share a weekend working a music festival just outside Whanganui. It was long

enough to learn that Webster is Fijian and that their relationship to their Pacific identity is complicated. As I entered the research phase of my project, I asked if we could set up an interview and they agreed.

Our conversation was more reciprocal compared to other interviews. It centered around our mutual senses of being ostracized by Pacific communities and our ambivalence towards identifying, and being identified, as Pacific. The interview was unintentionally therapeutic for both of us and it solidified an otherwise socially contextual friendship. Webster and I started looking out for each other after the interview—promoting queer Pacific gigs in the city, sharing Pacific foods we learned to cook through internet recipes, and when a position opened at the op shop (thrift store) that I worked at part-time, I referenced Webster for the job.

At the op shop, Webster and I took turns sorting through donations dropped off by Wellington residents that we would sell in the store. Some items were of particular cultural value but required at least some embodied cultural knowledge to recognize them as such. I, for example, was the only employee who could identify kiddush cups or shabbat candle holders assumedly donated by Wellington residents of Jewish ancestry who may have not known what these items were or their significance in Jewish culture. At the shop, staff members could purchase some inexpensive items at the end of the workday. Perhaps because of our Pacific-yearning tendencies that bonded us in the first place, Webster and I began competing with each other for certain Island goods like mats, baskets or shell necklaces that were donated by Islanders no longer in need of them or from former tourists decluttering their homes. Webster was usually much faster than I was at spotting these items. I would admire their growing collection of shells, masi and fine mats proudly displayed in their home when I visited for an occasional post-work drink. Another one of our coworkers who was born and raised in Fiji had no interest in buying these items and would often set them aside for us.

Webster's connection to Pacific commodities, and to coconut oil in particular, was implicit from the very beginning of our interview conversation:

NR	Do you think that your cultural background influences how you use coconut oil in any way?
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JW	To be honest, I [pause]—my mum was raised very white in Auckland. Her family didn't speak, her parents didn't speak Fijian at home. And she's talked about coconut oil at home growing up and how it was always around. Like in the hallway cupboard or whatever. And how my grandma used it a lot [...] It sounds like a lot of love and nostalgia and associations with it, but she never used it when we were growing up. Not even really in cooking. It just kinda wasn't around much. I mean she used it a bit in her hair but I didn't really grow up with it even though she did. And it kinda sounds like it was one of the few things in the house that had any connotations to her background, like not being white.
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Webster traces their Fijian genealogy through their mother who was born in Fiji and migrated to Auckland at a young age with her parents. She was an only child and for this reason, as Webster explained, she was “their only shot to break the class barriers.” Her parents, Webster’s grandparents, worked low-paying jobs available to them. They were determined to push their child towards success, and success to them meant leaving behind Fiji and Fijian culture. This background, as Webster explained, is what they meant when they said that their mother “was raised very white.” Webster traces a ‘severance’ of Fijian identity to their mother’s upbringing in Auckland and pressure from her own parents to assimilate and perform in ways that would allow her to succeed in a culturally Western dominated society. Webster’s mother acquired Western cultural capital through her own line of work and passed very little Fijian cultural capital to her children, as she didn’t necessarily have the ability to. Webster’s mother lost the ability to speak Fijian with no one to practice it with, and she didn’t have many relatives to contact in the Islands as she never was able to develop a close relationship with them. For Webster, this dynamic has created a significant barrier between who they understand themselves to be now and who it is they ‘should’ become if they are to ‘reclaim’ a sense of Fijian-ness—and that is something they want:

NR	Has Fijian identity ever been something that you’ve sought out?
JW	It has been but I also feel quite [pause] I have to be feeling quite good to be able to sorta feel able to own my identity because I feel quite self-conscious about not having a <i>huge</i> connection to it and I guess I’ve tried to seek it out more in my mum than in anyone else. And I don’t know, she’s about the same. So it’s kind of hard. I know she feels like she’s lacking a lot in having some kind of grounding ideas of

	<p>who she is but her—I guess since her parents died she’s just been—she’s had like a couple times of like <i>really</i> doing some searching but she’s just one of those—she’s been working non-stop since she was like <i>really</i> young and doesn’t take time for herself and also works in an industry where [...] she’s kind of tokenized, but not enough to be asked about it, kind of thing. But she’s in a really white industry. But being palatable to white audiences has always been super important to her being successful.</p>
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Given this generational separation from Fijian cultural connection, Webster explained that using coconut oil provides an access point to connect with their Fijian identity which is otherwise strained. Their mother doesn’t use coconut oil anymore, but Webster, who only recently began using it, is able to construct nostalgic meaning from their use. Their sense of nostalgia is grounded in a perceived generational inheritance of an affective relationship with the product.

#### Subsection 5.3.5

### **“Patron of coconut oil”**

The designation of coconut oil as a significant form of objectified cultural capital is contested. Leo Haube (Bay Area, Hawaiian) understands why coconut oil may be thought of as a culturally relevant product for other people, but it doesn’t hold that same meaning for him or his family. To him, “it’s just a thing.” For Teuila Faaleo (Wellington, Samoan), coconut oil is one of many ‘traditional’ products that she positions within a theoretically articulated view of culture. It possesses no intrinsic quality that functionally differentiates it from baby oil. To Faaleo, cultural traditions are always in flux and therefore so are the commodities used within these traditions. But to Jamie Webster (Wellington, Fijian) as well as several other Pacific participants raised in the diaspora, coconut oil is special. It possesses the ability to connect them to their cultural identities, which are frequently called into question by those around them, as well as called into question by their own doubts of embodied cultural literacy. Coconut oil consumption, to them, provides an access point to the Pacific which otherwise would be inaccessible through geography, experience and knowledge.

I likely wouldn’t have made a connection between participants’ relationships to coconut oil and their respective diasporic experiences on my own. That observation came

from Sarah Finau (Wellington, Tongan, Māori) during her interview, who related this observation to her own experiences and to those around her. She viewed a reliance on commodities, such as those self-described by Webster, as a way to compensate for immaterial cultural knowledge which she perceived diasporic Islanders to be lacking, and from my observations, many diasporic Islanders perceive themselves to be lacking as well (despite the problems of reductively qualifying cultural knowledge in this way).

During Finau’s interview, I summarized Justine Jane Taito Matamua’s (Wellington, Samoan) sentiments against baby oil as a non-traditional product. Finau considered such a strong distaste for baby oil as a form of small-scale “activism”—one which perhaps does not adequately consider economic constraints on choice, especially in the Islands. But she made another point as well:

SF	I can imagine there’ll be a particular type of person who would [advocate for coconut oil over baby oil]. And that would be potentially a Tongan who’s grown up here [Aotearoa New Zealand], an Islander who’s grown up here. They’ve gone back [to the Islands and they see that] all of my relatives are using baby oil, when they could go back to coconut oil and use that because it’s better. And then taken that as [their] own little activism thing.
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I was curious about Finau’s response and asked for clarification. She related this observation back to a “Bounty bar” metaphor, described below, which echoed Vilsoni Hereniko’s (1999) description of diasporic Islanders as “coconuts”—‘brown’ on the outside and ‘white’ on the inside. As an American, I wasn’t previously aware of what a Bounty bar is, metaphorically or literally. Finau explained:

SF	A Bounty bar. You know the chocolate and coconut on the inside? That’s literally—so you’re a Bounty bar. So you’re brown on the outside, but you’re white on the inside. And because your parents come, they migrate to New Zealand, they immigrate to New Zealand, they basically see their lack of education a barrier to success, right? Education is a—formal classroom education—they see that as “That’s your progression to be successful so you don’t have to be a cleaner, so you don’t have to be a factory worker. So learning your fa’asāmoa or fakatonga—culture that’s—throw that away to the side. That’s not going to help you win at anything.” So you have these kids that grow up and they don’t know their language because their parents are like, “You speak English at home. You don’t need to learn
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	Tongan. It's not important." Right? So you have these kids grow up and of course, the world sees them as Samoan. They see them as Tongan. But they're basically—they don't have their culture. So you're starting to see that first generation New Zealander, New Zealander-Samoan, New Zealander-Tongan go back and they're <i>so</i> patriotic. But also they're lost because they don't fit there and they don't fit there. And there's this massive identity crisis, yeah.
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At this point I drew coconut oil, and commodities in general, back into conversation. I asked Finau whether commodities play a role in this diasporic identity compensation. She imagines they do. We continued:

NR	I was talking to someone—so talking about this one girl who was raised here who was like, "No. No more baby oil. We're gonna use coconut oil." And I was talking to a girl who's been living in New Zealand for ten years but she's like, "I'm not diasporic because I grew up there. I'm gonna go back there." And she didn't really care about coconut oil that much and I thought that was a pretty interesting tension. How do you think that commodities, homeland commodities, can get tied into that identity?
SF	I guess it's what you place importance on. You know, like clearly the girl who's kind of gone back, she sees coconut oil as this really important thing for her. [...] she went back to find her culture and this is the thing that stood out to her. Because she went back, she was gonna try to learn to speak Samoan in six months, or for however long she went back for, and she failed at that. So she's like, "Well what can I do? Can I do something? Yep. Coconut oil. I'm gonna be the patron of coconut oil." So maybe this other chick was like, "It's important, but it's just a thing."

Here, Finau succinctly described the differences between these two diasporic and non-diasporic identities and how each may interact with commodities respectively. For diasporic-identifying Islanders, coconut oil may be used as a way to connect with their sense of Pacific identity, which for an array of valid reasons they may feel is lacking. Further complicating this issue, as Finau stated, is that the world may also view these diasporic Islanders unproblematically as 'Pacific Islanders' who possess a 'Pacific way of thinking'—or an *indigenous way of knowing*—which adds pressure to possess a certain type of traditional embodied cultural knowledge. Maggie-May Maybir (Wellington, Samoan, Māori) discussed this pressure:

MMM	I wish I could be outside of Western categorization but I think for the most part that's all I know. Even I'm still kind of learning now that even when I look at Samoan culture or Māoritanga I'm still in this realm of Western thought. I'd be looking at both things within that Western kind of way I guess.
NR	I follow what you're saying. Do you feel like that's good or bad or neutral?
MMM	It's pretty balls. It's not so good. Guess I'd like to—obviously I'd like to think differently to be able to [pause] I don't know, have a modicum of understanding that my grandparents did. My Samoan grandparents. A more Samoan thought, but I don't really have that.
NR	Are you saying that [...] the way that you interact psychologically with the world, the way that you measure things is from a Western paradigm, a Western lens and not a Samoan one?
MMM	Well that's all I know! Yeah. I'd say so.
NR	While at the same time being type-casted like either Māori or Samoan?
MMM	Yeah. Yeah. Yeah.

As Maybir's discussion indicates, diasporic Islanders are obliged to navigate a world of double, perhaps even triple, forms of consciousness. They are viewed by others to be 'culturally' distinct, treated as culturally distinct, while at the same time perhaps not feeling as though they are 'Pacific' enough to be labeled as Pacific Islanders. This contributes to a deep sense of shame that multiple participants (and even more would-be participants) discussed with me during fieldwork. After all, "afi palangi," "plastic," "Bounty bar," and even "coconut" are not compliments when used to cut down another person's claim to Pacific cultural authenticity or belonging. As Finau suggested, commodities can signal to others and to oneself a Pacific identity. Therefore, commodity use may ease this shame.

Conversely, Islanders raised in the Islands may not feel as though they need to use commodities to connect with their Pacific identities, which likely are not called into question to the same extent as they are for diasporic Islanders. There are counterclaims to this of course, such as Teuila Faaleo's explanation as to why she enrolled in Pacific studies in the first place when she said, "You can grow up in a culture but you know nothing of its depth." In this statement, Faaleo referred to her own sense of lacking traditional Samoan

knowledge. Still though, I would argue that Faaleo still possesses a less-contestable claim to ‘Samoanness’ than many American- or Aotearoa New Zealand-born Samoans generationally removed from the Islands. This is not to say that she *does* possess more ‘Samoanness’ than other Samoans, only that she is less likely to be subjected to the same external scrutiny.

I include Finau’s theory here as a helpful structure to frame diasporic-identifying and non-diasporic-identifying Islanders’ relationships to coconut oil. For some, coconut oil holds intrinsic meaning as a traditional product. And while many things about culture can change, coconut oil is valued as a product which provides a sense of cultural continuity. For others though, baby oil is one of many commodities to find a home within Pacific cultural practices. Its incorporation does not threaten Pacific cultures as Pacific cultures are not viewed as organic bodies. They cannot ‘die’ in the common understanding of the term. Rather, these ‘reformist’-minded participants view culture as adaptive and evolving to the changing world and the world of things. But people, like things, dictate the terms.



#### Conclusion 5.4

### **Coconut Oil Cultural Capital**

This chapter examined coconut oil through a cultural capital framework in three ways. The first section addressed how coconut oil is marketed as a health food and used to treat so-called “diseases of civilization” (Knight, 2012). In this discussion, I approached health as situated knowledge, meaning that I took into consideration the non-fixed power structures that currently inform ideals of health. I presented a three-part model that addresses health through a mechanical body rationale, which *ideally* interprets the body as an organic machine; an affective body rationale, which takes into account socio-psychological and spiritual understandings of the body; and a habitual body rationale, which accounts for contradictions in health beliefs and health behavior. This section also addressed how representations of Pacific Islanders’ bodies are manipulated in coconut oil naturopathic marketing material as evidence of good health. These representations also serve to act as counternarratives to mainstream medical institutions’ recommendations against ingesting coconut oil and saturated fat in general.

This tension in health claims, and the authority to make health claims, was the focus of section two. In this section, I analyzed survey data and found that while the majority of respondents were previously aware that coconut oil is classified as saturated fat and that the American Heart Association and World Health Organization recommend restricting saturated fat intake, less than half of all respondents found these recommendations trustworthy. I divided respondents' reasoning into four central categories. These included a suspicion of institutional corruption for power and profit; a disagreement over the scientific data that led to these institutions' recommendations; a clash in personal experience relating to coconut oil consumption; and the invocation of traditional cultures as points of counterevidence to these recommendations. These reasons were also influenced by a perceived fickleness in medical research as well as strong anti-American or pro-Aotearoa New Zealand nationalist sentiment. This section concluded with a recognition that coconut oil is ingested in a way that signals intentional anti-institutional symbolism.

Finally, in section three, I addressed the 'baby oil debate'—the evolving dispute between different Islanders' opinions over the substitution of baby oil for coconut oil in Pacific cultural practices. For several participants, baby oil diminishes the cultural meaning of traditions. This traditionalist stance asserts that proper tradition requires correct material products. However, this stance was countered by a reformist approach, which was at times influenced by a cultural articulation framework. This reformist stance did not view coconut oil as intrinsically sacred, nor did it necessarily view baby oil as a cultural threat. In this approach, baby oil was yet another foreign element articulated and indigenized to Pacific cultures. One idea that emerged from this debate came from the observations of Sarah Finau (Wellington, Tongan, Māori) who suggested a link between diasporic identity and a relationship with coconut oil. Finau speculates that for those raised in the Islands, whose experiences provided them a greater degree of embodied cultural capital, homeland commodities were generally viewed as "just a thing." This is contrasted with those raised outside the Islands, who use coconut oil as an objectified form of cultural capital to compensate for their senses of possessing little embodied cultural capital. Essentially, Finau suggested that the more estranged a person feels from their Pacific culture, the more likely they are to rely on commodities to compensate for their sense of estrangement. This

observation suggests that the ‘sacredness’ of coconut oil—specifically how its sacredness affects a person’s behavior and beliefs—is dependent on the experiences of its consumers.

In all three sections of this chapter, the ways in which coconut oil is perceived, consumed and marketed implicates the product in some form of cultural clash. This is because coconut oil is a product at the edge of cultural change. The following chapter addresses how this potent symbolism becomes incorporated into different Pacific Islander, Māori and non-Pacific social networks. Coconut oil is a product that holds meaning; and in many ways, it speaks multiple languages.





## CHAPTER SIX

# Social Capital

During fieldwork, many interview participants discussed how they associated coconut oil with a sense of ‘alternative’ identity in the San Francisco Bay Area and the Wellington Region. This association is reflected in popular coconut oil-related discourse as well, which indicates that this association exists in other Western sites (see Sears, 26 July 2017). While culture is always in a state of flux, my research shows that coconut oil’s association with alternative identity is, at the time of writing, an embedded social fact in these consumers’ fields. Additionally, coconut oil consumers included in this research (mainly of non-Pacific ancestries) presented alternative lifestyle markers in their own lives or at the very least acknowledged that these markers were associated with them. These markers are consistent with Richard Johnson’s description of “alternative ways of living” as “fused with anti-industrialism, ruralism, and preference for ‘the natural,’ with avant-garde literary and artistic movements [...and] transgressive practices and spaces like free love, drug-taking, or gay scenes” (2005, p. 4). Other markers of alternative identity or lifestyle that Johnson addresses include alternative consumption practices, alternative spirituality and counter-hegemonic alternative politics (p. 5)—all of which have been addressed in previous chapters. However, this ‘alternative’ status linked with coconut oil consumers is misfitting when applied to Pacific Islanders living in the same Western sites. For many of these Islanders, coconut oil consumption is a means to maintain cultural and familial connection across an ever “expanding” Pacific (Hau‘ofa, 1994).

Comparing how coconut oil is situated within the culturally specific fields of Pacific Islanders, Māori and non-Pacific consumers,<sup>58</sup> shows that social capital is evoked

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<sup>58</sup> Although this non-Pacific group includes persons of non-European descent who may have generational connection to coconuts, the majority identify as New Zealander European/pākehā, white, or European American. Specifically, 349 out of all 503 survey respondents are identified as non-Pacific, which excludes Māori. Of this number, 268 identify as ‘white or European’ exclusively.

in different ways. For many non-Pacific consumers, coconut oil holds symbolic value as a subversive commodity and its use is indicative of an alternative value system and lifestyle. Coconut oil offers these consumers a sense of subcultural group belonging, even liberation from aspects of Western conservatism. For many diasporic Islander consumers, coconut oil materially symbolizes the durability and elasticity of transregional social bonds. In this context, coconut oil sent from family in the Islands holds value as an affective commodity within a greater Pacific “economy of affect” (Besnier, 1995 quoted in Alexeyeff, 2004). This exchange is structured by indigenous systems of reciprocity, such as *fa‘alavelave* for Samoans, *inafa’maolek* for Chamorros, and *feveitokai‘aki* for Tongans. These reciprocal systems have also been referred to as “transnational corporations of kin” (Bertram & Watters, 1985), but as I will discuss later in this chapter, this term is somewhat limited by its overly economic focus. For this reason, I offer this chapter as a way to foster more empowering social capital-grounded theory. For some Māori consumers, coconut oil symbolizes a cultural connection with the wider Pacific, but not necessarily with the same immediate familial connotations as Pacific Islander consumers. As chapter three and four have discussed, Māori *are* Pacific peoples and many draw on indigenous Pacific worldviews to make sense of their relationships with coconut oil. However, because Aotearoa cannot grow coconuts, these relationships tend to be distinct from Pacific peoples who have recent ancestry from the tropics. Specifically, Māori relationships with coconut oil tend to reflect a liminal space between Pacific Islander consumers’ and non-Pacific consumers’ meanings and uses of the product. Although there are instances of overlap between Pacific Islander, Māori and non-Pacific consumers’ uses and understandings of coconut oil, given the general differences in the ways social capital is enacted by these groups, I have structured this chapter in three parts which first compares these differences through analyzing survey data, and then contextualizes these differences through participant interviews.

The first section of this chapter compares Pacific Islander, Māori and non-Pacific respondents’ survey data. This section shows how each group tends to acquire, know and use coconut oil reflects the different political and sociocultural fields they are part of. As this chapter focuses mainly on the experiences of Pacific Islander and non-Pacific consumers however, Māori data are limited to this section only. Section two addresses the

“consumer fetishism” of coconut oil consumption amongst non-Pacific interview participants. Consumer fetishism—a close cousin of commodity fetishism—pertains to the ways consumers intentionally use commodities in order to emit social signs. While commodity fetishism focuses on the sociocultural power of commodities, consumer fetishism is differentiated by the ways this power is intentionally wielded. Specifically, consumer fetishism is concerned with the “selective and stylized presentation of commodities...” which allow consumers to use products as signifiers of lifestyle, ideals, fantasies and personality (Eden, 2010, p. 171). The third section focuses on the experiences of diasporic Pacific Islander interview participants. I address the transregional social connection of coconut oil acquisition and situate this exchange within indigenous systems of reciprocity. This section invokes Ilana Gershon’s complimentary reconceptualization of Epeli Hau‘ofa’s (1994) “sea of islands” as a “sea of families” (2007, p. 474). This three-part structured division recognizes that coconut oil has different positions in relation to a person’s cultural field and upbringing. By examining the way coconut oil is situated within these fields, this research investigates the experiences and values of its consumers.



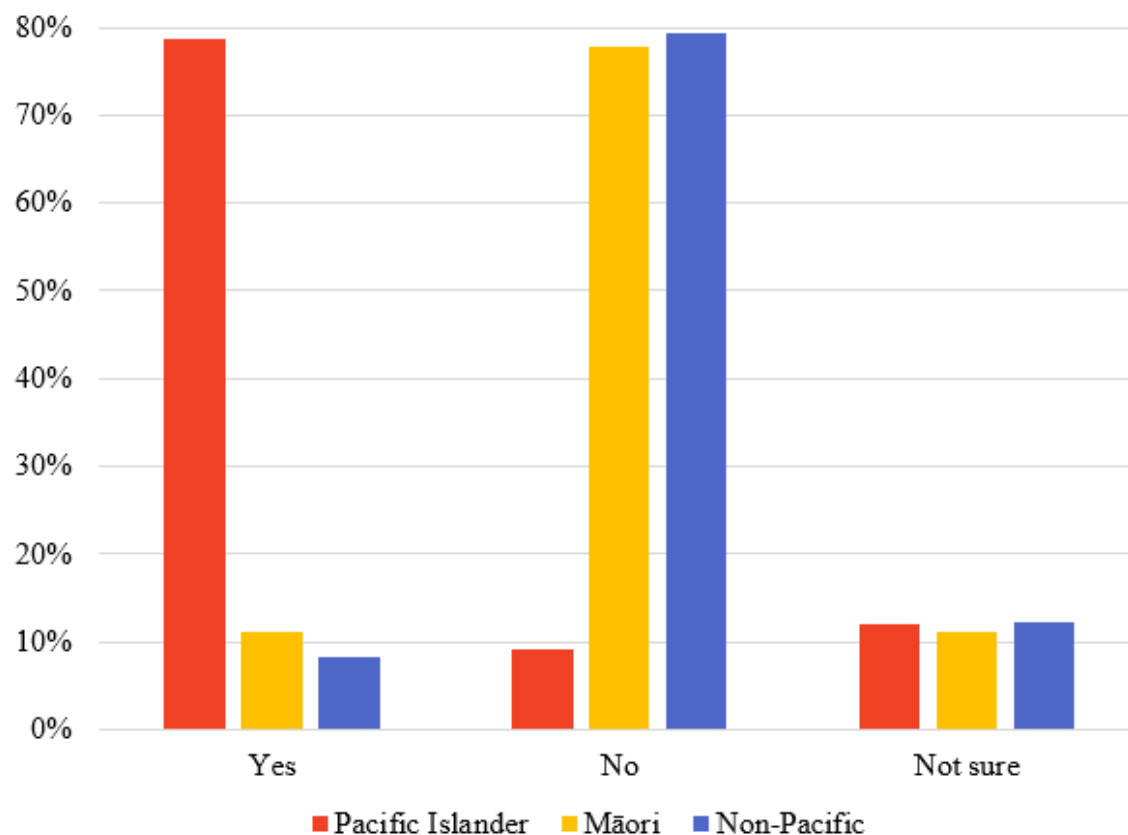
#### Section 6.1

### **Ancestry, Information and Experience**

For most consumers in the West, coconut oil is likely not a culturally familiar product unless they are ancestrally descended from places where coconuts grow. For this reason, I assume that most Western consumers’ relationships with coconut oil, at some point, must have required an intentional effort to know, acquire and use it. This distinguishes their relationships from those who learned about the product mainly through passive cultural osmosis. There are exceptions of course, especially for Western participants who may have had exposure to coconut oil through their relationships with persons from coconut cultures. This would include Lily McElhone (Wellington, non-Pacific) who, as a child, was introduced to coconut oil by imitating her mother’s Samoan partner. This would also include other non-Pacific participants who link their early relationship with coconut oil to the value systems of their alternative “hippy” parents, as several participants describe their own upbringings. But these non-Pacific consumers’ relationships with the product still tend

to be roughly confined to one to two generations compared to most Pacific Islander consumers whose familial use precedes generational memory. Māori respondents, who embody a liminal space between these two groups, tend to reflect understandings of the product that blend both Pacific Islander and non-Pacific meanings together. Therefore, the reason why discussions of Pacific Islander, Māori and non-Pacific Western consumers are separated largely has to do with differences between when, why and how coconut oil had become a part of their lives. Here, I compare these three groups' survey response data which reflect how their cultural or ethnic ancestries do or do not influence their coconut oil use, how they learned about the product, who introduced it to them, and how long they have been using it. This section will show the political and sociocultural contexts in which a person develops a relationship with coconut oil largely defines the meanings they will construct of their product use.

In both interviews and in surveys, I asked coconut oil consumers, 'Does your cultural or ethnic ancestry influence how you use coconut oil?' Of the 108 Pacific Islander survey respondents who answered this question, eighty-five reported that their cultural or ethnic ancestry does influence how they use coconut oil; thirteen reported they were not sure; and ten reported that it does not. Of the forty-five Māori respondents who answered this question, 35 reported that their cultural or ethnic ancestry does *not* influence their coconut oil use; five reported that they were not sure; and five reported that it does. Of the 350 non-Pacific respondents to answer, 278 reported that their cultural or ethnic ancestry does *not* influence their coconut oil use; forty-three reported that they were not sure; and twenty-nine reported that it does.



*Figure 6.1: Ancestral Influence in Coconut Oil Consumption. Results of the survey question: “Does your cultural or ethnic ancestry influence how you use coconut oil?” Pacific Islanders (108), Māori (45), Non-Pacific (350).*

The data indicate a major split in how these groups understand the roles their cultural or ethnic ancestries play in their coconut oil use. Pacific Islander respondents, significantly more than Māori and non-Pacific respondents, believe that their ancestries do influence their coconut oil use. Most Māori and non-Pacific respondents report that their ancestries do not influence their product use overall.

Respondents who answered that their cultural or ethnic ancestry does impact their use were asked to elaborate in a write-in answer. One of these non-Pacific respondents relates the influence of his cultural or ethnic ancestry to California alternative health movements:

25-30 year old man (Bay Area, European)	As a white male whose family has been in California for 3 generations, I believe my cultural ancestry has greatly influenced my coconut oil use.
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American)	I can see my use being tied to health and wellness movements of the 1960s-1970s and a certain kind of “Californian Ideology” of alternative products.
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This non-Pacific respondents’ write-in answer referenced a regionally based ideology that incorporates alternative products. This reference point was also addressed by many other non-Pacific interview participants living in the San Francisco Bay Area and in the Wellington Region.

However, compared to Pacific Islander consumers, the relationships non-Pacific consumers hold with coconut oil tend to be relatively young, meaning that these relationships are limited from one to three generations. In contrast, the two Pacific Islander respondents’ write-in answers below discussed their coconut oil use in a way that emphasized their familial ties to their respective Pacific cultures and to the Pacific Islands generally:

18-24 year old woman (Australia, Samoan)	Coconut oil has been used within my family for many generations passed through my elders and to my parents. Fagu’u Samoa [Samoan coconut oil] is used for cultural ceremonies such as the siva Samoa [dance] and taupou [head dancer]. I’ve used coconut oil since birth for my skin and hair. My father always said coconut oil was best for our skin and spirit as the coconut tree is life for tagata Pasifika [Pacific peoples]
18-24 year old woman (Wellington, Cook Islands Māori, Irish)	I’ve always used it. Sparingly though. Our family in the islands would make it and whoever travelled there and came back to NZ would distribute it amongst [ <i>sic</i> ] relatives. We’d always have makeshift jars or bottles filled with oil in the bathroom. If we ran out it could be another year until we got oil from family. We only used it for beauty, on the hair or skin not cooking. My (islander) grandmother would smother us in coconut oil whenever we visited her...

In between these Pacific Islander and non-Pacific respondents’ write-in answers, are two Māori respondents’ explanations as to how their ancestry influences their coconut oil use:

31-40 year old man	As Māori, I understand my relationship with the natural world through
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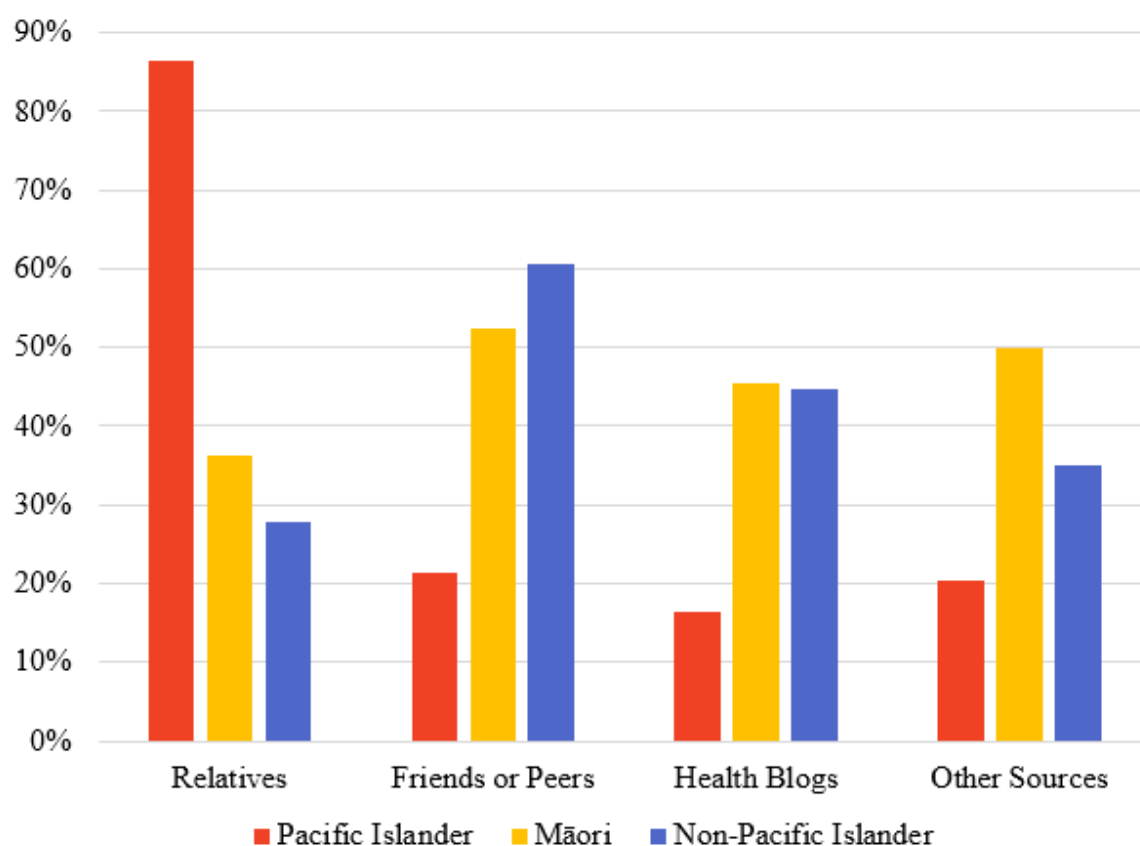
(Wellington, Māori)	whakapapa (genealogical relationships). Whakapapa enables me to make sense of the world around me, thus the coconut is not merely produce, but a very part of my identity, as is the natural environment.
25-30 year old man (Wellington, Māori)	Maori connection to Pacific makes me more comfortable in my use of coconut oil

The first write-in answer emphasized the way that whakapapa allows him to relate coconuts and the natural world as part of his own identity. As chapter four discussed, this way of incorporating whakapapa as a relational epistemology draws on pan-Pacific indigenous worldviews, similar to those discussed by Pacific Islanders. The second respondent evokes transregional connection into his response. This indicates that coconut oil, for him, symbolizes a shared genealogical connection to the tropical Pacific.

To contextualize the information sources that consumers draw their coconut oil knowledge from, I asked survey respondents, ‘How did you learn about coconut oil?’ I instructed them to select from a non-exclusive list of seven categories: ‘relative;’ ‘friend or peer group;’ ‘health blog;’ ‘television;’ ‘radio;’ ‘advertisements;’ ‘books or other literature;’ and ‘another source.’ Of these seven categories, ‘friend or peer group;’ ‘health blog;’ and ‘relative’ were the most selected for Pacific Islander, Māori, and non-Pacific respondents (though with varying hierarchies). If respondents selected ‘relative,’ they were directed to select from the non-exclusive list: ‘grandparent or elder relative;’ ‘parent, aunt or uncle;’ ‘sibling or cousin;’ or ‘other relative.’ These relative categories were designed to roughly differentiate generational groupings.

Of the 103 Pacific Islander respondents who answered the question, ‘How did you learn about coconut oil?’ eighty-nine reported that they learned about coconut oil from a ‘relative;’ twenty-two learned about it from a ‘friend or peer group;’ and seventeen learned about it from a ‘health blog.’ Of the eighty-nine Pacific Islander respondents who answered that they learned about coconut oil from at least one ‘relative,’ fifty-eight identified their relative(s) as a ‘parent, aunt, or uncle;’ fifty-five as a ‘grandparent or elder relative;’ twenty-two as a ‘sibling or cousin;’ and eleven as ‘another relative.’ Of the forty-four Māori respondents who answered the question, ‘How did you learn about coconut oil?’ twenty-three reported that they learned about coconut oil through a ‘friend or peer group;’ twenty learned about it from a ‘health blog;’ and sixteen learned about it from a ‘relative.’

Of the sixteen Māori respondents to answer that they learned about coconut oil from at least one ‘relative,’ fourteen identified their relative(s) as a ‘parent, aunt, or uncle;’ three as a ‘grandparent or elder relative;’ and one as a ‘sibling or cousin.’ Of the 343 non-Pacific respondents who answered the question, ‘How did you learn about coconut oil?’ 208 reported that they learned about coconut oil through a ‘friend or peer group;’ 153 learned about it from a ‘health blog;’ and ninety-five learned about it from a ‘relative.’ Of the ninety-five non-Pacific respondents to answer that they learned about coconut oil from at least one ‘relative,’ sixty-three identified this relative as a ‘parent, aunt or uncle;’ twenty-four identified this relative as a ‘sibling or cousin;’ nineteen identified this person as a ‘grandparent or elder relative;’ and eight identified this person as ‘another relative’ (four of whom were identified as the child of the respondent in a write-in answer).

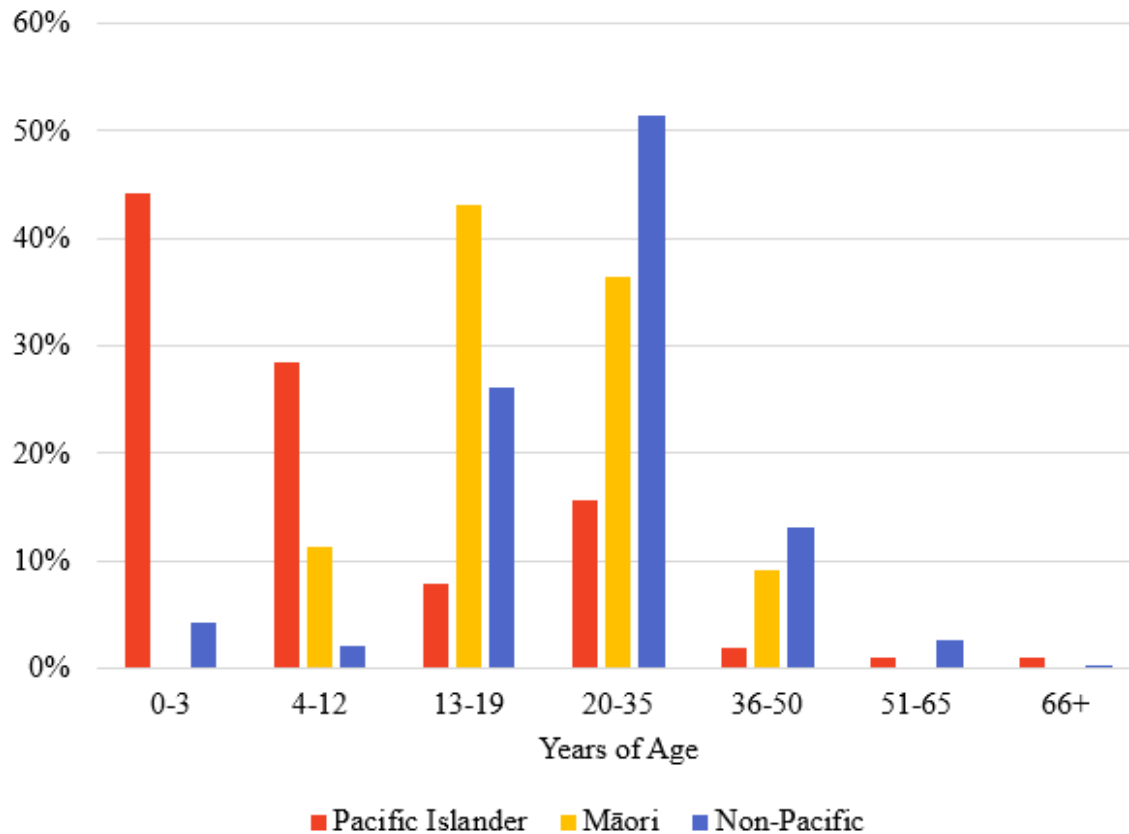


*Figure 6.2: Coconut Oil Information Sources. Results of the survey question: “How did you learn about coconut oil?” Pacific Islanders (103), Māori (44), Non-Pacific (343).*



The data suggest that Pacific Islander consumers tend to receive information about coconut oil from relatives significantly more than Māori or non-Pacific consumers, and that this information is sourced mainly from relatives of older generations, rather than relatives who were likely of a similar age group. Conversely, over half of Māori and non-Pacific respondents sourced their information from a friend or peer group, and slightly under half of these two groups sourced their information from health blogs. This indicates a major difference between these three groups' information networks and likely the information received. For Pacific Islander respondents, data suggest that there is a strong familial connection to the product and that information about it draws from intergenerational knowledge. For Māori and non-Pacific respondents, information about coconut oil likely comes more from regionally specific trends and popular media.

The age of exposure to coconut oil differs between these demographic groups as well. In my survey, I asked 'When did you start using coconut oil?' Respondents were instructed to select from the list: 'as an infant or toddler (0-3 years);' 'as a child (4-12 years);' 'as a teenager (13-19 years);' 'as a young adult (20-35 years);' 'in midlife (36-50 years);' 'in mature adulthood (51-65 years);' or 'in later life (66 years or older).' Of the 102 Pacific Islander respondents who answered the question, forty-five began using coconut oil as an infant or toddler; twenty-nine as a child; eight as a teenager; sixteen as a young adult; two in midlife; one in mature adulthood; and one in later life. Of the forty-four Māori respondents who answered the question, five began using coconut oil as child; nineteen as a teenager; sixteen as a young adult; and four in midlife. Of the 344 non-Pacific respondents who answered the question, fifteen began using coconut oil as an infant or toddler; seven as a child; ninety as a teenager; 177 as a young adult; forty-five in midlife; nine in mature adulthood; and one in later life.



*Figure 6.3: Age of Introduction to Coconut Oil. Results of the survey question: “When did you start using coconut oil?” Pacific Islanders (102), Māori (44), Non-Pacific (344).*

This indicates a different type of active relationship with the product. For non-Pacific respondents who began using coconut oil in their adulthood, I assume that they did so with informed agency, meaning they chose to use the product. Conversely, for Pacific Islander respondents who began using coconut oil as infants or children, I make the assumption that they likely did not have the same amount of informed agency or personal body autonomy and that they did not choose to use the product. Rather, someone else—likely a caregiver—made that decision for them. No Māori respondent reported to start using coconut oil as an infant or toddler. Like non-Pacific respondents, the trend in Māori data show an introduction of coconut oil use mostly after childhood, though with a slightly younger curve than non-Pacific respondents.

This introduction to coconut oil through passive cultural osmosis was discussed by Maggie-May Maybir (Wellington, Samoan, Māori) during her interview. As an infant and into late childhood, coconut oil was applied to Maybir’s body by older women relatives.

Maybir explains that as she entered her early teenage years and gained greater autonomy over her body, she made the decision to stop using coconut oil. She began substituting it for other scented products which she described as “something that you’d imagine a pākehā scent to be like.” By using ‘pākehā scents,’ Maybir hoped to successfully assimilate into Western norms. However, as she entered her young adult years, and especially after a trip visiting family in Sāmoa, Maybir discovered a new appreciation for coconut oil. She explained that now she values the product as symbolic of decolonized beauty standards and uses it to reclaim her own decolonized beauty.

Still though, like other Pacific Islander participants, and very likely Pacific Islander respondents, Maybir’s initial use of coconut oil as an infant did not take into consideration her feelings towards the product. Rather, it was expected for her to consistently wear it regardless if she wanted to or not. Other Pacific participants voiced similar experiences of having coconut oil applied to their bodies with little agency to decide if it was a product they wanted to use. As children they did not have the same level of personal autonomy over themselves compared to many Māori and non-Pacific consumers who began using the product in their teenage years and adulthood. Here, coconut oil consumption reflects a passive inheritance of material culture that is indicative of Pacific Islander identity. Conversely, some non-Pacific consumers in this research had more of an identity-forming relationship with coconut oil because, for them, it’s a product which required more conscious effort to acquire and consume.

The following section addresses the processes that took place for non-Pacific participants to seek out and use a product many had not grown up knowing. It examines how subcultural environments—defined as “the culture of a distinguishable smaller group” (Williams, 1985, p. 82)—introduced several individuals to coconut oil. It also explores participants’ meta-awareness of being categorized as “*those* people” according to Abbie Denning (Wellington, non-Pacific) who says that coconut oil likely did play a role, albeit a minor role, as “a gateway to a more alternative lifestyle” in her life. The participants I have chosen to illustrate this point are included because their experiences are indicative of the general experiences of their non-Pacific demographic group. I will address how many coconut oil consumers included in this research demonstrate a distaste for mainstream norms and consciously use coconut oil as a subversive commodity. In doing so, these

consumers signal themselves as individuals who identify with alternative value systems. I will address how certain values such as counter-hegemonic beliefs, tendencies to pursue things considered to be ‘natural,’ and non-conventionalism are articulated with coconut oil consumption in these subcultural alternative social niches.



## Section 6.2

# Consumer Fetishism

Although I’ve since learned that coconut oil was a product around me since childhood, my first conscious exposure to it was not in any familial or Pacific spaces—it was on a farm. In 2014, I briefly worked and lived on an experimental organic farm in the northern San Francisco Bay Area. I was accepted into a paid internship that taught novice gardeners, mostly from urban backgrounds, the skills needed to work in sustainable agriculture. For the most part, it was a regular internship. Our days consisted of waking close to sunrise, tending to animals or other assigned chores, and harvesting crops for several Bay Area farm-to-table restaurants. We finished each workday with a lecture from the head farmer, Dan. Mostly Dan taught us practical skills like how to lay out irrigation piping or construct a greenhouse. But sometimes Dan’s lectures incorporated pseudo-spiritual elements which made the internship a little less regular. Some days we learned how to maintain a tractor, other days we learned how to read the auras of plants or each other’s past lives. The farm was an alternative spiritual place with counter-hegemonic values to tout.

There were thirteen of us in that season’s program. We lived together in a two-story, three-bedroom, chipped white painted house. Our home stood beside a decaying barn that sheltered a rusted once-red-now-orange tractor with a Ron Paul campaign sticker stuck to the back. Because a lot of our schedules were staggered with chores, we took turns preparing communal lunches and dinners. The farm staff stocked our staples: butter, eggs, olive oil and flour, and we supplemented everything else with crops grown on site. The olive oil came from a nearby orchard, but we were strictly forbidden from cooking with it. We were told heat would alter its chemical structure and its ‘free radical damage’ would make the oil carcinogenic. Most of us, including Dan, were daily smokers so it was a

paradoxical health conscious rule in hindsight (although Dan didn't trust 'misinformed' and 'corrupt' doctors' advice about smoking anyway). The other staple products were produced locally or at least domestically. That was another rule set by Dan, who went to great lengths to 'buy American' first. There was one exception to this rule though. It was a big jar of imported coconut oil that we were instructed to cook everything with, and we did. The taste of coconut oil became the taste of the farm for me. It still very much is. Dan swore by coconut oil. He believed it cured most ailments. He paraphrased his information from the many books he had read on the subject. He was an avid reader and had even built a library on site to house his collection. I would frequently skim through his books in my downtime between chores. I noticed Dan had a taste for certain styles of writing: most were naturopathy-focused. This, after all, was a naturopathy focused farm.

When I first read Bruce Fife's work *The Coconut Oil Miracle* (1999) and *Coconut Cures* (2005) for this research, they too reminded me of my time on the farm, especially because many of the health claims Fife had written, Dan had paraphrased in his discussions of coconut oil. In fact, a lot of the claims that mostly non-Pacific interview participants had discussed with me seemed to loosely reference Fife's literature, even if these participants were not familiar with Fife by name. When I was the one to address specific claims about coconut oil during interviews, these claims didn't seem to shock most non-Pacific participants to the same extent as they did most Pacific Islander participants. This was true even if these non-Pacific participants were not previously aware of these specific claims—no matter how miraculous. For example, while speaking with Charlotte Savage (Wellington, non-Pacific), I asked if she was aware of the medical claims made on behalf of coconut oil. She wasn't directly aware but asked me to list some. As I did, I tried to read her expression for any shock as I had seen in the interviews I had conducted with Pacific Islander participants before her. But Savage's gaze remained neutral. She explained why:

CS	I'm not like wow-ed by you saying those things. Like they seem familiar. But I think I would struggle to specifically list the health benefits or the health claims related to the use of coconut oil. Yeah but they're consistent with how I perceive it I guess.
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Savage had been consuming coconut oil for several years. She was introduced to it through friends and liked it. She consumed it when travelling in trendy backpacker hostels

and in other alternative spaces as well. Over time though, she grew increasingly disillusioned with the product—never enough to cast it out entirely, but enough to not feel as though it was missing from her life when she ran out. As her feelings towards coconut oil shifted, it started to feel increasingly expensive and subsequently harder to justify buying—even though its price remained relatively consistent. Conversely, she thought of olive oil as more affordable even though its price was roughly similar to coconut oil. Savage explained she was willing to pay a certain price for olive oil without needing to justify its purchase in the same way because, to her, coconut oil was somewhat of a luxury item and therefore expendable if money was tight. As a staple product in her life, olive oil wasn't:

CS	I think that I perceive [coconut oil] as expensive, even if [coconut oil and olive oil] are somewhat on par because I have probably <i>devalued</i> it somewhat or it hasn't sustained the level of value it kind of was once elevated to have.
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This is something all consumers involved in any economic market exchange system do. We evaluate commodities and assess if the price is worth the cost. A product that promises to heal a consumer's body, provide a powerhouse of nutrition, or *be* a 'superfood' (Loyer, 2016) is likely worth eleven dollars, maybe even fourteen for a glass jar if a consumer wants to be environmentally conscious. But a product that promises a consumer certain results and then doesn't deliver is worth less. In extreme cases, a product might not even be worth the amount of space it takes in storage or the intake of calories in a consumer's body. Savage and I discussed this more:

NR	So what's changed for you? What has it been?
CS	Maybe that I haven't seen the miracle in myself [laughing]. Sure I don't have Alzheimer's and I don't have autism. [...] There isn't such a thing as taking this magic product that's gonna be visible and noticeable. You gotta have coconut oil <i>and</i> kale <i>and</i> quinoa <i>and</i> do a boxing class or whatever the other trendy [thing is] [...] Like do something social with your friends, that's also like the miracle social thing. You gotta do all of those things rather than just <i>one</i> . And I suppose [it's] the same with food.

Savage's introduction to coconut oil came about as the product trended in 2014. This was roughly around the same time it entered my own awareness on the farm for similar reasons. Unlike me though, Savage actively fostered its consumption, while my mostly passive use ended after my internship. It was a context-specific commodity for me. And unlike Savage, I didn't necessarily experience the full arch-shaped life structure of a trend—the introduction in fringe spaces, commodity and consumer fetishization, and mainstream normalization or, in her case, disillusionment.

The end of a trend is not necessarily the end of a product, however. And according to recent coconut oil sales and Google searches, it's likely premature to declare this trend entirely over, although its popular interest is almost certainly in decline.<sup>59</sup> According to some participants though, it's unlikely coconut oil will depart supermarket shelves anytime soon. As Kevin Young (Wellington, non-Pacific) said in his interview, "everything will always have its place." A main research aim of this project is to examine where that place is in the lives of some of its consumers. To do this, I examine the social contexts in which coconut oil is consumed. The following subsections examine how participants, Tyler Gholson (Bay Area, non-Pacific) and Quinn Miller (Bay Area, non-Pacific), came to know coconut oil in their early adult years. Both discuss their initial trepidations about the product as well as their motivations to use it now. I will examine how coconut oil functions in their social networks as a signifier of cosmopolitanism, politically left-leaning ideologies and alternative subculture.

#### Subsection 6.2.1

### **The Politics of Pretentious Eggs**

Tyler Gholson (Bay Area, non-Pacific) and I met on a boat. It was a retired baby blue sailer that Gholson co-owned with a close high school friend of mine. Gholson slept on the boat a few nights a week, and sometimes I would crash there too when home felt

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<sup>59</sup> Google Trends (n.d.), which record the popularity of search topics from 2004 to the present, show an overall decrease in coconut oil-related searches on their website. In the United States, peak interest ranges from March 2014 to June 2017; in Aotearoa New Zealand peak interest ranges from July 2015 to August 2018; and globally peak interest ranges from March 2015 to June 2017. In November 2021, however, the monetary value of bulk coconut oil produced in the Philippines and Indonesia reached its second highest peak in the last 30 years (IndexMundi, n.d.). The overall value of coconut oil peaked in February 2011 at roughly \$2260 USD per metric tonne.

like too far a bike ride away. Gholson and I met on the boat for his interview right before sunset. Our conversation lasted long enough for our surroundings to turn dark and for the seagulls' persistent cawing over our audio recording to give way to harbor-side white noise. Our interview was the first time that Gholson and I were alone together, and it was a good opportunity to learn things about his life that I most likely wouldn't have known had we not talked about his relationship to coconut oil. His background—as with every coconut oil consumer's background—is vital to contextualize his taste (and distaste) for the product.

Gholson comes from a working-class logging community in central Oregon. His parents, as he described them, were hippies and that was unusual in his conservative town. After high school, Gholson moved north to Olympia, Washington for university. He attended a progressive state school that, from his observations, attracted and fostered an array of alternative leftist subcultures—a place where “[i]t was part of the culture to be an activist.” He explained, “[The university] invites a certain style of person. People would say hippy. Some would say anarchist. Some people would say New Age or woo-woo kinda people. I also found that it was a very diverse place, ideologically—not ethnically.” From Gholson's memory, most students were white and few seemed to come from affluent backgrounds. It was in this setting that Gholson first observed regular consumption of coconut oil—a product he imagines would have been hard to find in his hometown's one grocery store, now permanently closed.

The food culture of his university introduced a sharp break from the food culture he had been raised with in his hometown which, although supplemented by several beloved taquerías and his parents' vegetable garden, Gholson described as textbook “American.” He explained how the cultural context and settlement history of his town produced its food culture:

TG	I think, to be frank, just a redneck logging family that has kinda hunkered down isn't exposed to a lot of diversity, isn't exposed to things that their direct parents didn't really show them what to make. And there's kinda a long chain or maybe a bottlenecking of recipes that were being made. We would go to our friends' parents' houses and they would be making, you know, pot roasts or kinda classic, almost '50s-esque dishes—American '50s sort of dishes. Or just microwave dinners, you know. It felt like a very American food kind of place.
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In university, Gholson didn't want to consume coconut oil. In fact, he had only begun using it as a natural product to treat his sea salty skin and hair since moving into the Berkeley marina where the boat was docked. Our mutual friend had introduced him to it, but it took multiple conversations to convince Gholson to try it. He told me that his prior resistance to using coconut oil was really a resistance to the alternative subculture he found himself surrounded by while living in Olympia. He explains, "I think I've had just some bad experiences with people that are almost a little bit over the top obsessed with coconut oil." For Gholson, coconut oil was indicative of something—a statement of identity, articulated subculture and political values that he wasn't quite willing to embrace himself at that time, at least not in the same overt way. He explained that just the hype of coconut oil made him want to avoid it—partially because of its trendiness, but also because of the dogma of dietary uniformity. Like others in this research, Gholson thinks that diets should be cultivated to an individual's specific needs. He explained, "If other people are doing it because other people are doing it, that puts me off. Like I want people to be doing it because it's specifically for them. I don't think it's a diet that's gonna fit everyone's need."

Gholson avoided coconut oil mostly successfully. Sometimes it was a featured ingredient in communal dinners with friends who used coconut oil to cook 'exotic' dishes. Gholson suspected that these friends were likely also unfamiliar with these dishes given their pre-university, working- or middle-class upbringings. Each time he tasted coconut oil, Gholson said he was able to know something more about the person cooking it:

TG	[Coconut oil] has such a unique taste too that I think it's interesting that you can go and eat someone else's meal and know exactly something more about them in some ways.
NR	What do you know about them?
TG	That they probably, I mean in my eyes, see it as probably a little bit of non-conventionalism. Maybe that's because we're so far away from coconuts that it's a little bit more rare, a little bit more [of an] exotic flavor. It's something you don't taste in most of the meals you're eating. So when you do taste that flavor, it signals something. I think that is a big part of it.

The non-verbal communication of coconut oil was commented on by several other participants. Gholson's discussion touches on the sociality of the product, because, as

Pierre Bourdieu writes, “Taste classifies, and it classifies the classifier” (1979, p. xxix). For some, including Gholson, coconut oil signaled a pretentiousness about it. For others, coconut oil signaled a willingness to explore beyond what was considered conventional in their lives which were, generally speaking, things that were either generationally consistent (i.e. the recipe “bottlenecking” Gholson describes earlier), or representative of their complacency within industrialized food systems (i.e. microwave dinners).

Most non-Pacific participants did discuss how they perceive coconut oil consumption among their own demographic group as a way for consumers to distinguish themselves or their subcultural communities from mainstream society. Charlotte Savage (Wellington, non-Pacific) succinctly described coconut oil consumption in her own community in this way:

CS	There’s an <i>unspoken</i> communication. Just kind of having it, noticing it, like your friends or whoever you’re cooking with or whoever you’re living with, an awareness of its presence and its use [...] it’s not spoken about, it’s present.
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In Gholson’s mind, coconut oil consumers in these contexts perform “a New Agey signal that you’re more worldly than the people around you.” Gholson suspected that this cosmopolitan identity didn’t necessarily reflect the world that these consumers had originally come from—one likely similar to his. At times this desire to be recognized as cosmopolitan was enacted in ways Gholson considered to be crass, even desperate attempts. For example, sometimes his friends, or friends of friends, would cook eggs in coconut oil hoping to give their student-budgeted diets a little extra pizzazz—to transform something mundane into something else, something with cultural currency:

TG	There was a little bit of like food elitism kinda thing. I felt like people were using it as an excuse to be like “This food’s fancy even though it’s just scrambled eggs. But I’m using coconut oil, so it’s a fancy dish now.”
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For Gholson, these coconut oil consumers were being overly performative. Plus, the way he saw it, there was nothing wrong with their coconut-oil-less lives before. It was okay to not be cosmopolitan all the time. But it seemed that coconut oil provided an escape of sorts for these consumers—one that gained them cultural capital in these alternative

fields, and by extension, the social capital that comes with alternative group belonging. Conversely, those who didn't use coconut oil were perceived to be lacking the capital needed to belong (i.e. their level of cultural capital affected their social capital). Taste is a (sub)cultural construct (Bourdieu, 1979; 1987) and so is distaste, even disgust (Rozin, Haidt & McCauley, 2009). But, as Gholson's observations beg, did these coconut oil consumers have a distaste for their own cultures? If so, what does coconut oil consumption mean if coded as a disapproving commentary on their own home communities or desire to be recognized as distinct from them?

Despite Gholson's distaste for the alternative subculture he navigated in university, he does not identify, nor would he likely be identified, as conservative. His own upbringing with hippy parents (who also recently began ingesting coconut oil for health purposes) prevented that. As he grew older though, he became more skeptical of the values they raised him with, such as viewing 'processed' things as inherently bad. But there were vestiges of a hippy habitus that were harder for Gholson to shake. This was implicit in his desire for 'natural' things, especially for homeopathic medicines which he was currently using coconut oil for:

TG	I like to be as natural as possible. I wouldn't consider myself as someone who is totally holistic medicine—like <i>all</i> no Western medicine kind of person. But in a case where I can use something a little more from the source, I do.
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Coconut oil fits into this desire for 'the natural' easily. For Gholson, using a product that is traditionally used by other cultures was comforting. Trusting the traditional use of something became a substitute for a lack of familiarity with the product itself. As he said before, "we're so far away from coconuts." He continued:

TG	I see something like coconut oil, something that's probably been used for longer than this strange Ketoconazole or whatever shampoo I was using. I get weirded out by the idea that there's this chemical in the shampoo that you don't see in culture. You don't hear people talking about it. It's not a thing that's been passed down.
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As I can relate (perhaps from the influence of my own hippy parents), the cultural uses of coconut oil made Gholson feel safe because there is a certain degree of anxiety that

comes with consuming something not quite understood and the simplicity of a one-ingredient product provides a sense of security. We continued:

NR	Does using coconut oil kind of fill that desire for simplicity?
TG	I think it does. It satisfied my mind a little bit around it. There's a little bit of anxiety that I get every time that I use something that I don't fully understand, or even understand what it is or where it came from. So any chance that I can get to find something that is useful that's not that, I'm into. So for example, the shampoo, I don't know much about its origins. Coconut oil, I do. So I feel happier about that.

This perception of 'natural' products is echoed by Shayna Getz (Bay Area, non-Pacific) and Ava Huntsman (Wellington, non-Pacific) who define natural things as that which consists of familiar, identifiable ingredients derived from recognizable plants and animals. When buying a product Getz asks herself, "Do I know everything that's in it?" Huntsman similarly is dissuaded from purchasing products that have an ingredient list "a paragraph long."

Although Gholson was, and maybe still somewhat is, dubious of 'coconut oil subculture,' he still has a connection to that alternative health subculture due to his parental influence and university experience. Other participants in this research also discuss their connections to subcultural identities and practices which distinguishes them from the larger 'mainstream' cultures around them. The following subsection further explores these distinctions of identity, community and value systems.

#### Subsection 6.2.2

### **Coconut Oil in the Co-ops**

After my time on the farm, I moved back into the co-ops to resume my undergraduate studies. The Berkeley Student Cooperative system (BSC), or 'the co-ops' as it's informally referred to, is a communal living organization that provides discounted rent to students attending UC Berkeley or other accredited institutions in the San Francisco Bay Area. The BSC is known (sometimes infamously) to attract and foster politically left-

leaning values, queer identity<sup>60</sup> and ‘alty’ aesthetic. In a university with very active, and mostly socially conservative, heteronormative fraternities and sororities, the BSC, generally speaking, strives to be the antithesis of all things institutionally ‘Greek.’<sup>61</sup> There are twenty semi-autonomous houses that comprise the BSC, and each house fosters a unique community-culture. To the trained ‘co-op eye,’ the way someone presents themselves (i.e. the way they speak, dress or generally ‘look’) could be a giveaway as to which house they belong to.

In ethnographic research, aesthetics are recognized as part of a larger language of semiotics. Kingman house, where I lived with Quinn Miller (Bay Area, non-Pacific) for nearly a year, was known to foster a hippy-ish atmosphere, although I think the common aesthetic that house members tended to rep could have best been described as “hickster”—a blend between hick and hipster. Frequently, housemates asked (or didn’t ask) if they could borrow my corduroy jacket or leather working boots I bought for the farm, to use as fashion apparel. And for the house of nearly sixty residents, there was a high proportion of Birkenstock sandals ownership, which at the time were worn almost exclusively by those touting an ‘alty’ aesthetic. (They have since become quite mainstream apparel). Miller owned a pair and her choice to buy them as a social commodity would feature in her interview discussion. As it turns out, Birkenstocks and coconut oil have some things in common.

When I returned to the Bay Area from the Wellington Region for fieldwork nearly three years after moving out of Kingman, Miller and I reconnected. A lot of friends I made through the BSC still lived in co-ops elsewhere in town; some even established their own. I met Miller in her new South Berkeley co-op for our interview. Like Kingman, Miller’s house kept a large tub of communal coconut oil in the kitchen which featured in a lot of communal meals. Miller also kept a smaller bottle in her bedroom. One of the main purposes Miller uses coconut oil for is as a lubricant for sex. Nearly a quarter of all interview participants (Pacific and non-Pacific combined) shared with me that this is one

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<sup>60</sup> Though most cooperative houses in the BSC are queer-friendly, there is one house explicitly designed as a living space for queer students.

<sup>61</sup> On American university campuses, the term ‘Greek’ is often used to metonymically refer to the fraternity and sorority system, as fraternities and sororities derive their names from letters of the Greek alphabet. I use the term here in this way, not in reference to Greek people or Greek culture.

of the main purposes of their use as well.<sup>62</sup> The perceived ‘naturalness’ of the product mattered to these participants, given the physical intimacy of this purpose.

Like Gholson (Bay Area, non-Pacific), Miller values coconut oil as a ‘natural’ product although she too is cautious to invoke ‘naturalness’ with any objectivity. She elaborated, “[Coconut oil] is just nice and it feels good and it feels natural if that’s even a word that we can use anymore—having been co-opted by [pause] consumerists.” I asked Miller why she is hesitant to use the term ‘natural.’ She explained that although it’s not a term that is necessarily ‘real,’ the general habitus of it impacts her consumption choices:

QM	I think at this point in my life having lived in Berkeley for six years now, and just being surrounded by people who like to eat in a certain way, and live their lives in a certain way, kinda health-focused, and in this sphere of influence, I feel like those things have seeped into my psyche and made me unconsciously prefer things that have a plant-based origin and easily pin-pointed ingredients rather than something that’s more commercial...
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Miller situated her consumption of coconut oil into subcultural value systems and lifestyle practices. For this reason, I asked whether she thinks that there are any subcultural practices that coconut oil consumption is associated with. Her response to my question was somewhat guarded:

QM	I think where you’re leading me is the liberal [politically left-leaning] West Coast-thinking people, predominantly white and middle class kinda folk.
NR	I wasn’t totally doing that but—
QM	Yeah, yeah, but that’s where my mind goes.
NR	Okay. Have you found that to be true in your life?
QM	Yeah. I think mostly because that is the people that I hangout with.

What made this interview interesting for me, is that although I knew that Miller associates with the demographic she described above, I learned that she doesn’t come from

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<sup>62</sup> Ellie Radburg (Bay Area, Hawaiian) explained that one of her motivations to use coconut oil as a sexual lubricant is because it makes it easier for her to maintain more sexual partners. For her, coconut oil provides a way to explore and strengthen her sexuality.

a politically left-leaning community at all. Miller was brought up in a conservative home and, ultimately, Miller was the only one in her family to deviate from a conservative value system and lifestyle. Her move away from her family’s conservatism was how she came to know coconut oil in the first place. For Miller, part of the process of experimenting with new value systems had to do with consuming new foods, and new products generally, as a medium to engage with different subcultural identities. The catalyst to adopt these changes was moving to the Bay Area and enrolling in university (‘college’ as Americans say). The shift challenged her familial relationships:

QM	College was eye-opening to me.
NR	How so?
QM	Well moving to the co-ops for sure and just getting this really good food [...] And like my dad—I was vegetarian in college—my dad would send me care packages of protein bars you know? Cause he was like “There’s no way you’re gonna get your protein if you don’t eat meat.” Yeah just like the concept that there are other <i>diets</i> out there and other ways that people eat and whole other cultures that have been vegetarian for centuries. That’s just totally outside [my parents’] view of things.
NR	You’re kinda talking about food as a vehicle for cultural experimentation.
QM	I mean food is cultural right?

For Miller, the lifestyle changes she adopted in her consumption patterns reflected a general shift in the values she had been brought up with. This was interesting for me because for as long as I had known her, Miller seemed to embody an alternative identity. She was outspoken in the co-op we had previously lived in together, active in different sustainable environmental projects, and well-liked in the ‘alty’ crowds we both floated between. Learning that she did not come from a similar community to the one that we shared in university contrasted with the perception I had of her. Unlike Miller, I was raised with hippy parents in a community well-known for its left-leaning, alternative values. If anything, moving to Berkeley was the first time I engaged with conservatism, and even then, it was minimal. But for Miller, the move to Berkeley was life changing.

Miller explained that living in the Bay Area has offered her an escape from the oppressive value systems of her conservative upbringing. She elaborated, “I think just moving to a place, you don’t have to conform. I don’t know, I guess being here you do have to conform but it’s to a different way of being.” Given that the subcultural lifestyle she currently fosters was not the one she inherited, I asked her if she anticipates that it’s a lifestyle that she will continue to maintain. She answered that it is, and reflected on her experiences, and her unhappiness, that stemmed from the value systems of her conservative parents—specifically patriarchy, heteronormativity and the pressures of cultural uniformity. We continued:

NR	Do you think that this is a lifestyle that you see yourself existing within for a long time? Or do you think that you’re still in this experimental part of your life?
QM	No, I think I’ve made a lifestyle change when I moved here. Or just I don’t know, I was never happy as a teenager and then living this way makes a lot more sense to me.
NR	What works for you about it?
QM	Mm just eating food that makes me feel good and—it’s so hard to explain. It’s just like being a liberal open person.
NR	You’re kinda grimacing when you say that. Sorry, I just have to say that out loud. But what makes you uncomfortable saying that?
QM	Cause they’re such loaded terms in this day and age.
NR	Well they’re kinda like the best ones that we have to use.
QM	They’re the best ones—I also feel like it doesn’t—I don’t know. Words are hard to explain how I feel I guess. And those are the best ones that I can come up with and they don’t seem quite right. I guess I can say as a teenager, I was unhappy and I was insecure about myself and my body all the time. And I thought I had to be pretty and be like this so boys would like me. And then I moved here [Bay Area] and I realized I can just be a person in my own right and be honest with people and not worry about looking a certain way or acting a certain way. I could just be comfortable with myself and that is the space that I built here. And I don’t really know how that relates to coconut oil, it’s just in that.

Although in the moment, it was difficult for Miller to articulate how coconut oil relates to her subcultural identity, it’s a topic we unpacked. Coconut oil, valued for its



perceived health benefits and non-conventionalism, is a commodity commonly consumed in subcultural spaces. By extension, it has become symbolic of subcultural communities. Coconut oil in itself does not necessarily create a subcultural value system, but to those who consume it (without previous genealogical attachments to the product), coconut oil may serve as a “gateway” commodity that introduces them to other alternative values and communities. Likewise, a person who finds themselves in these subcultural spaces, like Gholson and Miller did in university, may be introduced to coconut oil through these communities. In a consumer fetishist framework, coconut oil is a symbolic commodity consumers use to signal their identities and values (Eden, 2010). Coconut oil is one of many commodities used in this way. Birkenstocks, like coconut oil, signifies similar subcultural values and group belonging:

NR	What came first? What was the vehicle—what was that transition? Because it seems like coconut oil somehow was in there. Cause you said that you started using it about 4-5 years ago—
QM	It was the co-ops, yeah.
NR	And that’s the co-ops.
QM	Yeah the co-ops <i>hugely</i> changed me as a person and people that I met there. I think the first thing was meeting Bethany [a mutual friend] and talking to her. We became really good friends in the dorms [residence hall].
NR	You met her in the dorms?
QM	I met her on my second day of college. And we were just so close.
NR	She would be good to meet—[jokingly] who bought Birkenstocks first?
QM	She did and then I—well cause the thing too was just for my whole high school time, I’d tried so hard to fit in, you know. And even in Berkeley, when I met someone I thought was cool, I didn’t know what to do but try to fit into this new thing, right? I met Bethany. I thought she was super cool and I was like “This is the way people are here.” I bought Birkenstocks because she had Birkenstocks. I did this thing that she did, because I thought “Oh that’s how you are here in Berkeley.” And she even pushed back on that as my friend. She was like “You know you can do things that I don’t do. You can be your own person here.” But I thought that whole college time, a lot of it was very uncomfortable for me, and just feeling very out of place and very insecure. But I think from that—from that place of discomfort,

I became much more—it became much easier to do Quinn things, be myself.
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Here, Miller discussed how her introduction to alternative values, subcultural spaces and the commodities within them was part of an identity-forming process—a process that liberated her from oppressive elements of the conservative value system she was raised with. In this way, Miller presented her consumption of coconut oil as indicative of a life of her own choosing—one which provides her with a sense of satisfaction and supportive relationships.

The following section builds on the ways coconut oil is symbolic of these relationships. Unlike the non-Pacific consumers whose consumption of coconut oil generally reflects their support networks through friend and peer groups, the Pacific Islander participants discussed in section three use coconut oil mainly to connect with their families. As I argue later in this chapter however, the common denominator of both of these two groups' experiences with coconut oil pertains to relationships in general. Though relationships between friends and between families are different, both draw on the powers of social capital.



### Section 6.3

## Wealth in Relationships

Like most Chamorros of her generation, my mom was raised as a Catholic. In university she met my dad, an Ashkenazi Jew (and absolute hippy), and gave up her baptized faith shortly after. After my brother and I were born, she officially converted to Judaism. But there were habits from my mom's Catholicism—specifically her Chamorro Catholicism—that she never fully abandoned. For her, Judaism was a participatory religion rather than a passive cultural claim as it is for the rest of my family. As a kid, I would sometimes hear her reciting Hebrew prayers at night which substituted her former rosaries. But the most obvious habit was her desire to maintain community relationships through our local synagogue. Ilana Gershon (2007) has written about the ways church substitutes village in the Pacific diaspora. Though the religion may have been different, the motivation

for community was the same. It was my mom who enrolled my brother and me in Hebrew school, and it was my mom (with the help of my Jewish grandma) who expected us to be bar mitzvahed.

A bar mitzvah for Jews is a ceremony that marks a transition from childhood to adulthood. Initiates appear before their congregation, visiting relatives and middle school friends to read from the torah and lead other Shabbat prayers. When my older brother was bar mitzvahed, my mom invited her Chamorro relatives to attend and those living in or near the San Francisco Bay Area drove hours to arrive at our synagogue early that Saturday morning. Most had never been inside a synagogue before. (It's not unreasonable to think that my mom's relatives could have been the only Chamorros inside a synagogue anywhere in the world that morning.) I'm sure more than a few bit their tongues from commenting that this was yet more proof of my mom's well-known non-conventionalism. It's customary for guests to bring gifts to bar mitzvahs, usually money. Funds received may go to covering some of the costs of hosting the event or into savings for the bar/bat mitzvah to access later in life. My mom's relatives were aware of this custom and gave generously.

After my brother's bar mitzvah, my mom had him write thank you cards to all who attended and acknowledge their gifts. My brother, not yet knowing a cardinal but unspoken Chamorro rule, wrote out a card to the Chamorros who attended and formulaically acknowledged the amount he received from them. Right before the thank you cards were to be dropped in our neighborhood postal box, my mom realized what he had done. She panicked, found the cards addressed to her relatives in the stack of hundreds and tore them up. She explained that to acknowledge their gift so explicitly would have appeared to reduce their love to a monetary exchange. And that, by far, was the worst thing a Chamorro could do to a family member. I didn't make the same mistake when I was bar mitzvahed, but I can't say that I would have intrinsically known not to as my mom assumed my brother and I did. We didn't have the same Chamorro cultural knowledge she had.

When reading Pacific commodity-ethnographies, especially those written by non-Pacific authors, I remember this experience. The authors attempt to explain in basic terms the nuanced customs that Pacific peoples supposedly 'intrinsically' know and practice in material and monetary exchange. The discussion of money in intra-Pacific relationships is often uncomfortable. That may seem odd given how much money is transferred between

Pacific families—enough for economists to create specific Pacific Island economic models. But the reason why there is tension discussing money so overtly is because to do so, especially in familial settings, “is to commit a kind of vulgar materialism” as Kalissa Alexeyeff (2004, p. 71) explains recounting her own observations of Cook Island Māori exchanges. Although there is no one Pacific custom regarding economic exchange, there are certain regional factors to consider. Specifically, the forces of social capital *must* be accounted for.

It’s in our interest, as Pacific peoples, to address the subject of material exchange because for too long that narrative has been controlled by others, however well-meaning they may be. The main issue is that in many of these framings, the flow of commodities between relatives in the Islands and relatives outside the Islands have been consistently represented as unequal (Alexeyeff, 2004; Brown, Connell & Jimenez-Soto, 2014; Gershon, 2007; Hau‘ofa, 1994). These economically reductionist narratives suggest that, in addition to foreign aid, those living in the Pacific parasitically reap the benefits of their diasporic relatives’ labor through remittances. Not only does this present a biased narrative but it also emboldens those with little understanding of complex Pacific exchange networks to label Pacific peoples living in the Pacific (and sometimes Pacific peoples living in the Rim) as economic “leeches.”<sup>63</sup> For example, the MIRAB model (an acronym standing for the economic forces of MIgration, Remittances, Aid and Bureaucracy), frames Pacific communities as dependent on sacrificial generations of family members to migrate to Western nations in order to secure for their on-Island kin a high standard of material wealth through remittances (Bertram & Watters, 1985). The authors impersonally label these families as “transnational corporations of kin” and argue that through remittances, “Islanders have thus become proletarianised without in the process becoming a proletariat” (Bertram & Watters, 1985, p. 511).

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<sup>63</sup> In 2018, popular Aotearoa New Zealand talk-show host Heather du Plessis-Allan critiqued New Zealand’s economic relationship with the Pacific Islands, stating: “What are we going to get out of [the Pacific Islands]? They are nothing but leeches on us. I mean, the Pacific Islands want money from us. We don’t need money from them” (quoted in RNZ, 4 April 2019). Du Plessis-Allan was likely targeting the issue of aid more than she was remittances (though these two topics are intertwined [Enoka, 2019]). Still the perception of remittances is often negative (Brown, Connell & Jimenez-Soto, 2014).

Although the MIRAB model offers helpful ways to frame the economic relationship the Islands hold with the Pacific Rim, it has been critiqued for its economically-reductionist approach (Brown, Connell and Jimenez-Soto, 2014; Gershon, 2007; Alexeyeff, 2004; Hau‘ofa, 1994). While it’s true that more monetary remittances flow into the Pacific than out, it’s misguided to assume this means these exchange networks are intrinsically unbalanced or that diasporic relatives are exploited by their on-Island families. To appreciate the reciprocal flow of transregional exchange, as well as understand intra-Pacific exchange customs similar to the one demonstrated during my brother’s bar mitzvah, it’s useful to turn attention to the forces of social capital and the ways social connections are symbolically conveyed through commodities. In the subsections below, I examine coconut oil as a symbolic commodity and address how it functions within indigenous systems of reciprocity.

#### Subsection 6.3.1

### **Show Your Love, Hide Your Shame**

Like over half of the Pacific Islander survey respondents, Turia Iek (Bay Area, Palauan) sources her coconut oil mainly from her relatives.<sup>64</sup> And like over half of the Pacific Islander respondents who source their coconut oil from relatives, Iek explains that these relatives live overseas, mainly in the Islands.<sup>65</sup> She also receives coconut oil from Pacific friends, mainly those living in the Islands as well. Iek has a large collection of coconut oil at home but it’s a product she rarely purchases for herself. This was also true for other Pacific Islander participants as well. In fact, some Pacific Islander participants, like Teuila Faaleo (Wellington, Samoan) for example, have never purchased coconut oil from a store before. Rather, they have thus far relied entirely on friends’ and relatives’ generosity.

Comparing Pacific Islander respondents’ answers regarding this coconut oil gift economy to non-Pacific respondents reveals a significant difference in social practice. Most Pacific Islander survey respondents received coconut oil as a gift before and about

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<sup>64</sup> Of the 104 Pacific Islander respondents to answer where they get their coconut oil from, 60 report to source their coconut oil from relatives.

<sup>65</sup> Of the 60 Pacific respondents to source coconut oil from relatives, 35 report that these relatives live overseas.

half have gifted it to someone else.<sup>66</sup> In contrast, most non-Pacific respondents haven't received coconut oil as a gift before and most haven't gifted it to someone else.<sup>67</sup> This gift economy of coconut oil within Pacific Islander exchange networks, or "economy of affect" impacts the sentimental value of coconut oil for its consumers (Besnier 1995). When respondents were asked if coconut oil would have the same meaning if they bought it at the store, half of the Pacific Islander respondents said it wouldn't; most non-Pacific respondents said either that it would or that they weren't sure.<sup>68</sup> For Iek and other Pacific Islander consumers in this research, coconut oil is valued for much more than just its utility. Coconut oil represents a transregional connection with their families and communities, and its exchange is indicative of enduring social bonds.

While Iek was someone who clearly had established social connections across different Pacific communities—both in California and in the Islands—discussing the nuances of these relationships and how they relate to her coconut oil use proved to be somewhat difficult. Often, Iek would deflect talking about the complexities of these relationships by saying that it's something I, as an Islander, already understand, and therefore didn't require any further elaboration. But my limited understanding alone is not enough to inform this project. To prompt a more in-depth conversation, I discussed the problematic implications of the MIRAB model and stressed the importance of contributing to Pacific-led narratives of transregional material exchange. Iek agreed that it was beneficial to provide empowering counternarratives to economically reductionist frameworks, and so we continued to discuss what, to both of us, felt to be somewhat obvious—that Pacific wealth is in relationships.

I asked Iek if she ever pays her family members for the coconut oil she receives from them. Her eyes narrowed as she attempted to conceal her shocked reaction to such an

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<sup>66</sup> Of the 99 Pacific Islander respondents to answer whether they have received coconut oil as a gift before, 73 said 'yes' and 26 said 'no.' Of the 99 Pacific Islander respondents to answer whether they have gifted coconut oil to someone else in the past, 52 said 'yes' and 47 said 'no.'

<sup>67</sup> Of the 337 non-Pacific respondents to answer whether they have received coconut oil as a gift before, 68 said 'yes' and 269 said 'no.' Of the 337 non-Pacific respondents to answer whether they have gifted coconut oil to someone else in the past, 62 said 'yes' and 375 said 'no.'

<sup>68</sup> Of the 62 Pacific Islander respondents to answer whether coconut oil would have the same meaning if they bought it at the store, 31 said no; 17 said yes; and 14 said they were not sure. Of the 34 non-Pacific respondents to answer, 16 said yes; 11 said no; and 7 said they were not sure.

audacious question I knowingly asked her. She laughed nervously and explained that *no*, she does not pay them. We continued:

NR	Why do you not pay them for it?
TI	I think because they're family [...] When you're with family you don't—like things that are not super expensive, you don't expect to be paid. Or like if I have family that come over here [...] they usually stay with us. And there are a lot of times where I will treat my younger cousins and it's just expected. I think it's just <i>culture</i> . Culturally, I grew up around where, if anything, you'll fight for the bill [...] If you ask for money, it's only if you're the main family back in the village. And it's like family money that it's for. You know, it's for overall for maintaining your land or stuff like that. And you're—my family—we're expected to consistently give money to that part of our family. So we always give money to family back in Palau. And that's expected...

While money is part of this familial connection, Iek claims that it's not *about* the money at all. Rather, money is merely symbolic of reciprocal love and care between families and between friends. In her interview, Iek discussed multiple examples of labor that her Pacific family and friends have provided her as evidence of their love. Iek recounted one related anecdote that involved her California-based cousin as an example of this love-in-action relationship:

TI	One time I got asked to represent Palau for a huge Pacific Island festival for San Mateo County with Pacific Islands Together. They're a group in San Mateo who want to advocate [for] and show Pacific Island culture while also bringing awareness to what the Pacific Islands is. They asked me to run a booth and do maybe a number or a song. And I did not tell my cousin until the week of. And [she's] the one cousin who knows our culture down to the core. She lives all the way in Chico [a three-hour drive away], and I told her the week of and she came up here and she helped me [...]. She came up here for the whole weekend. She did it with me. We practiced the night before, hella late. And it's just like I think that's something that's very normal. Okay, I shouldn't say normal but it's something that's common in our culture. And I think giving money is also a part of that too. But not in the sense of it's just money. I don't know how to explain! Okay, let me try. It's like <i>that</i> . I don't know it's just part of <i>that</i> —that whole trust and just knowing.
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As Kalissa Alexeyeff (2004) writes regarding Cook Islands Māori culture, *aro'a* (love) is something that is demonstrated through action rather than through words alone.

And from my own experiences, I would agree that this holds true in Chamorro culture as well. (I never learned how to say ‘I love you’ in Chamorro but I know how to cook). But while discussing this with Iek, as well as reading this in other scholars’ works, my inner pessimist kept asking, is this *professed* ideal of altruism actually true?

In Alexeyeff’s (2004) work, she recounts how her Cook Islands Māori host unequivocally denied any potential self-interest that comes with reciprocal exchange. However, Alexeyeff also noted that her host’s material gainings from her Aotearoa New Zealand-based family far outnumbered what she had originally gifted them in monetary value (although much was to be distributed amongst her community). Alexeyeff reflects that even her questions to her host about this exchange were dismissed as shallow and unappreciative of the expectations of showing aro‘a. Similarly, Ilana Gershon (2007) discusses that from her own observations in diasporic Samoan and Tongan communities, gifts are said to be primarily given out of love for relations or faith to God, while those receiving the gifts are considered to be secondary beneficiaries. In both accounts, *giving* rather than receiving, is emphasized. However, both authors cautiously hint at a suspicion about whether exchange really is all about giving. Geoff Bertram and Ray Watters (1985) conclude in their presentation of the MIRAB model that it’s likely advantageous for Pacific government representatives to deny the material benefits of transregional exchange between nations and between families. I, too, am cautious to over-emphasize a completely altruistic model of indigenous systems of reciprocity. Just as much as Pacific narratives need an empowering edge, they also require grounding self-critique.

The subject of self-interest remains taboo in Pacific spaces given the stigma of individualism. Still, my suspicion of concealed self-interest is present in my discussion with Iek. But for Iek, reciprocal exchange *is* about giving. The way that she explained this demonstrated a genuine honesty speaking from her own experience—something she must be recognized as the expert of in this context (Anderson et al., 1987). We continued:

NR	Okay so, I know this is uncomfortable, but do you think—because she would never say it—do you think your cousin did this one) because she loves you but two) because now she knows she can count on you when she needs help?
TI	Oh I know she did because she loves me. I think the “count on you for being helped”



	is secondary. I think first and foremost, it comes from love and the way that we grew up. In our culture that's just how you show love too [...] When I talk to my other friends who are not Pacific Islanders about this, they'll always ask, "Why would you go so far for other people?" But I think because you grow up in a culture where it's normal. It's like "Of course I did that. I love that person. What do you want me to do?" I think that my cousin did not do it because of that. I <i>know</i> my cousin did it because she loves me. And I feel very strongly in my heart that that is the main reason.
NR	Okay so do you think that that love then plays into why your relatives give you coconut oil?
TI	Yeah.

Perhaps there's a medium that lies between the polar extremes of viewing Pacific material exchange as inherently and entirely altruistic, and viewing it as inconspicuously calculated and self-interested. To examine this in its full complexity, it's helpful to examine the motivational forces of shame.

Shame is the focus of the market-ethnographical works of Paul Van der Grijp (2002) who examines the absence of open markets in Wallis, as well as Ping-Ann Addo and Niko Besnier (2008) who examine the pawning of textiles by Tongans. Van der Grijp probes the culturally-specific conceptualizations of markets in general, asking the overall question, why (at the time of his research), "there [was] no central market on the Polynesian island [of] Wallis" (2002, p. 17)? Van der Grijp concludes that past attempts to establish an open market ultimately failed because "there was a pride in giving, during katoaga [large community event] and family events, a pride which was complemented by the shame (matagafua) of not giving enough and the shame attached to buying or selling" (p. 30). In other words, it was discussed by Pacific interlocutors in Van der Grijp's research, that to participate in an economic market over a 'social market'—or "economy of affect" (Besnier, 1995)—implied to others that they did not possess the material and social resources needed to adequately contribute to large social functions as was expected of them. Their inability to give as well as their dependence on the economic market was shameful because it reflected low social capital.

Likewise, Addo and Besnier's (2008) research on pawnshops in Nuku'alofa and Auckland demonstrates how culturally significant Tongan symbolic commodities (called

koloa), including textiles and to a lesser extent, coconut oil, are implicated in a material exchange network spanning across the diaspora. They write, “Remittances are part of a complex system of exchange that also involves textile valuables” (p. 43). Addo and Besnier argue that for Tongans, pawning koloa for cash is a shameful act, as it’s “stigmatized as an act of desperation” (p. 46). The authors explain:

Shame derives from the fact that Tongans prescriptively expect the kinship system to provide for everyone’s financial, emotional, and ceremonial needs. Patronizing a pawnshop implies that one is poor not only in material goods, but also, and more importantly, in social relations, and therefore poorly integrated into the traditional system (p. 51).

Relating these authors’ work back to this research, coconut oil is part of a nuanced social system in which symbolic material goods are expected to be exchanged between families and larger Pacific communities. While the love of giving certainly may be part of this—and necessary to draw attention to as a counternarrative to overly reductionist economic models—love of giving in itself may not reveal the full picture. Shame of not meeting social expectation, in addition to love, both factor into these indigenous systems of reciprocity. In the following subsection, I return to my interview with Kalo Afeaki (Wellington, Tongan, Māori) as an example of multigenerational reciprocal exchanges and the tensions that lie within them.

#### Subsection 6.3.2

### **Give What’s Been Given**

Kalo Afeaki (Wellington, Tongan, Māori) and her sister, Sarah Finau (Wellington, Tongan, Māori) hold a unique position in this research because unlike other Pacific Islander participants who may have helped relatives produce coconut oil for immediate familial use, Afeaki and Finau’s family produced coconut oil commercially. As a commercial enterprise, their economic livelihoods depended on selling coconut oil to consumers—Tongan or otherwise. As Afeaki explained, coconut oil is “just important to our family because for a long time that’s what was putting food on our table.” However, due to the significant costs

that went into its production, Afeaki's family had discontinued manufacturing coconut oil and returned to selling other agricultural crops for export. But in the past several years, Afeaki's sister-in-law began producing coconut oil once again to fill small-scale orders. Afeaki and Finau prefer to source coconut oil from their sister-in-law rather than from an unfamiliar (and untrusted) supermarket brand. But while sourcing from their relative has its perks, it does create potential tension by entering an economic exchange. Afterall, selling coconut oil puts food on the table for their sister-in-law too.

I asked Afeaki whether entering an economic exchange posed any challenges for their relationship. Her answer prompted a discussion of indigenous systems of reciprocity and the complicated ways she, as a consumer, and her sister-in-law, as a producer, navigate Pacific cultural norms and expectations:

KA	[My sister-in-law] never expects money from us, but I give it because I understand the value that has gone into actually making it. And in a way I'm actually like "Oh of course I'd support!" If I wasn't working, she wouldn't expect it. And I know she doesn't expect it anyway but I'm like "Nah I expect it of myself." Like I'm working, I can afford it. [...] Yeah so I think for some, maybe exchanging money is weird. But we are starting to understand the value of what's provided—all the ngatu, the tapa, the mats [types of textiles]. That's <i>labor</i> . And a lot of times, it's labor of love that they just give without expecting anything else. But there is that moving mentality because we always were reciprocal. So even if there was no money given for some kind of product, it was given in labor. Even if I didn't have money, I'd figure out another way I can provide something for it.
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Here, Afeaki situated her acquisition of coconut oil into a greater socially bonded reciprocal exchange. To Afeaki, coconut oil is one of many different commodities implicated in indigenous systems of reciprocity. As Turia Iek (Bay Area, Palauan) and Afeaki suggested, the exchange of money isn't *about* the money at all (although it may certainly take that form). What it *is* about is showing your appreciation and love to someone else through action. And that action, in this specific case, takes the form of labor—something everyone, including the economically poor, has access to theoretically. It's helpful to return to the framing of capital in its base form of labor, as it's defined by Pierre Bourdieu (1986), because doing so allows for a productive overlap in comparing social capital to economic capital. Both social capital and economic capital require labor, but

often through different means depending on the context. The main point here is that capital may take the form of work, cash or commodities—including coconut oil.

Social capital may be given altruistically or as a calculated return-on-investment. Generally, this depends on the individuals involved and the context rather than on the social system itself. This makes it difficult to adequately capture Pacific reciprocal exchange practices in any one theoretical model. The main point of social capital for Afeaki is that it cultivates interdependence. The exchange of coconut oil and other koloa represents this interdependence:

KA	<p>[T]hat's feveitokai'aki. It's just reciprocal. It's understanding that I give cause you'll give. One day, I'll be in a situation where I'll have something and I'll give it back [...] I would never take money for babysitting my nephew, but my sister will do something nice. She'll be like "Ah I'm going to take you to coffee." You know? It's understanding that we don't take it for granted. She doesn't take it for granted. You know when I'm home in Tonga, if I haven't given [my sister-in-law] money for oil, I'm gonna take all her kids for like a week. And she'll be like "Oh thank God!" [Laughs]. You know? It's understanding that we give because you're going to give anyway. I think the issue that people might have here in New Zealand is that disconnect from that village mentality—the kavenga [shared responsibility]. So, oftentimes for Samoans, [it's] the fa'alavelave. There's a misunderstanding of it here in New Zealand because always it's represented money for them. It's represented your auntie's called up from Tonga—someone's getting married, don't-even-know-who-gives-a-shit, and suddenly your parents have given a grand. You know? They don't understand at one point this auntie may have been the one to fill out the visa and pay for all of that to get the parents here, or they may have been the ones to give all the katoanga stuff for the first birthday or the first child. That lack of understanding of: they wouldn't give unless it had already been given. So I think it's really hard for New Zealand-borns. Whereas for us Tongans, we've grown up knowing that we've had a funeral and everyone in the community has rallied around us, because when they had funerals we rallied around them. When they had a big thing that happened, we rallied, they rallied. It becomes an issue when you don't see the rallying. When you're here physically in another country and you don't see anything coming back, until for example you have a 21st and you wonder where all the mats and ngatu has come from. You know? From your auntie.</p>
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Here, Afeaki compared the Tongan system of reciprocity—feveitokai'aki—to the Samoan fa'alavelave. These systems are comparable to the Chamorro concept of inafa'maolek discussed earlier as well. In general, the core ideology of these systems is

community interdependence. These indigenous systems of reciprocity are demonstrated time and time again to transcend national borders and even generations. But despite their influential force, it shouldn't be assumed that these systems are indefinite. As Afeaki suggested, there is a looming threat of diasporic rearticulation of cultural values.

I asked Afeaki if, as the diasporic population of Tongans grows, she thinks someday the reciprocal exchange of coconut oil will come to an end. Obviously, the articulation of baby oil has already had a major role as a substitute product. Afeaki wasn't sure:

KA	It's hard to say. I've met a lot of New Zealand-born Tongans who've moved away from a lot of that. They don't want anything to do with being Tongan sometimes. And going back to the oil, and that understanding, [...] I know how much goes into making [coconut oil] because I've made it you know [...] So you know, it's just we understand what's gone into making it. So when my sister-in-law brings it, I'm like "Wow. Beautiful. Thank you." Because I know it took a lot of work to do this. So what am I going to do to reciprocate?
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While social bonds may be durable, they aren't unbreakable. Geoff Bertram and Ray Watters (1985) anticipate a diasporic break in bonds and argue that is a reason why Islanders continue to migrate to the Pacific Rim—to compensate for the lack of remittances from relatives no longer interested in participating in these reciprocal exchanges. But the inverse of this logic makes for a different argument—specifically, that the potential break in bonds motivates on-Island relatives to reciprocate too. Nurturing these bonds—or to 'teu le vā' as Samoans say—therefore becomes a priority for those involved. As Melani Anae explains, teu le vā “emphasises the importance of relationships, and the significance of the context behind the necessity of understanding the domains of social relationships...” (2016, p. 123). Using coconut oil to belong and using it to nurture bonds is something Pacific Islander and non-Pacific consumers have in common. The following conclusion unpacks this by reflecting on my experiences of social capital and the ways it transcends this division.

## **The Vast Pacific in Tiny Places**

To conclude this chapter on social capital, I want to return to my mom whose decision to break away from mainstream conventionalism has left a legacy of subcultural values which my brother and I have inherited and embody now. Because of my mom, I can position myself between both sections of this chapter. It's clear that I am implicated in the alternative subcultural communities I attempt to address through an ethnographic lens. I am also implicated in Pacific exchange networks, but not to the same extent as many Pacific participants I interviewed seem to be.

For the most part, I didn't grow up with strong connections to a Pacific community or to Pacific culture. This partly had to do with the absence of any significant Pacific population in my hometown, but it also had to do with my mom's break with Chamorro culture in general, for which she had her own reasons. As a child, my mom spoke to me in English as her parents spoke to her in their accented English. It was legally discouraged to teach Chamorro to children when my mom was young (Faingold, 2018). But even if it wasn't, I suspect she wouldn't have wanted to learn it anyway. Chamorro wasn't the language of the music she liked or of the modern identity she wanted to embody. Chamorro wasn't in the lyrics written by her idol, John Lennon, for whom I'm named. But if this thesis attempts to demonstrate anything, it is that language comes in many forms, whether in taste, products, aesthetics or lifestyle. And the concepts that language conveys refuse to be bound by words—or by place—alone.

Writing this thesis inevitably leads me to reflect on where I fit into all of this. Until recently, I assumed that Pacific sociocultural capital was something other Islanders had and I didn't—how would I, given my upbringing? But overtime I have come to reconsider if this is true. Through my involvement in Pacific studies, I have learned that while the Pacific is unfathomably vast, it also contorts itself into tiny places—like coconut oil in my mom's makeup kit discussed at the beginning of this thesis. It fits into care-packages sent by relatives in the Islands. It fits into each bite of potu. And it hides in my melanin until it

comes to greet the sunshine. And, as this chapter has shown, the Pacific exists in intangible things as well. It exists in relationships.

In this chapter, the discussions of relationships have been divided between different demographic groups. In the first section, I compared how Pacific Islander, Māori and non-Pacific survey respondents understand their coconut oil consumption in relation to their respective ancestries, how they acquire knowledge about coconut oil, and how long it has existed in their lives. This showed the different ways coconut oil exists in multiple cultural fields and how these fields impact how the product is understood.

Section two, dedicated to non-Pacific participants, addressed how coconut oil signifies a break from mainstream culture and conservatism generally. For Tyler Gholson (Bay Area, non-Pacific), coconut oil signified a pretentiousness—a negative commentary on a person’s own inherited cultural field and desire to distance themselves from it. For Quinn Miller (Bay Area, non-Pacific), coconut oil was symbolic of her path to a self-constructed identity and offered her liberation from conservative norms. Both Gholson and Miller—as well as Charlotte Savage (Wellington, non-Pacific) discussed earlier—situated their coconut oil use in relation to other people. Specifically, they situated their use in relation to alternative subcultural communities which all three have some degree of connection to. Although their associations with coconut oil had much more to do with friends or peer groups (compared to Pacific consumers who primarily associate coconut oil with relatives), ultimately, coconut oil conveyed social meaning, and all three were aware that its consumption provides the potential to grow social capital. This section demonstrated the ways that coconut oil serves as a key to building relationships.

Section three discussed how coconut oil is situated within transregional indigenous systems of reciprocity. Both Turia Iek (Bay Area, Palauan) and Kalo Afeaki (Wellington, Tongan, Māori) sourced their coconut oil from family members living in the Islands. They explained that while money may be exchanged between family members, it’s not simply payment for the coconut oil they received. Rather, both money and coconut oil are understood to be different forms of labor-produced capital. The exchange of these two forms of capital, within a socially-minded framework, was perceived as a reciprocal exchange of labor vital for healthy relationship maintenance. Therefore, examining the ways coconut oil is acquired by diasporic Pacific Islander consumers provides the

opportunity to establish counternarratives to overly reductionist economic models of Islanders' transregional relationships. Although there are stark differences between Pacific Islander and non-Pacific participants' motivations and understandings of coconut oil, fundamentally the main consideration of both groups was relational maintenance.

Social capital is the common denominator of the three sections that comprise this chapter. It's a loose term that offers a limited window into the relationships established between alternative Western consumers, as well as the familial bonds that stretch across the largest geographical region on Earth. Accounting for social capital offers complimentary information to economic models, and it can also help revise these models for more valid, nuanced and balanced representation of commodity and labor exchange. Using social capital as a framework also emphasizes the ethnographic importance of decoding the hidden language of commodities and the meanings they convey. And especially, incorporating a social capital approach draws market research discourse closer to understanding affective relationships and the love that sustains these bonds.





## CHAPTER SEVEN

# The Social Lives of Coconut Oil

I began this thesis with a story of severance, and I am ending it with a story of connection. Through my research, I have found the Pacific in things. Specifically, I have found the Pacific in coconut oil, and I have situated its place in the lives of some of its consumers living in the San Francisco Bay Area and the Wellington Region. These are two places I have spent over a decade living between but have come to know with new perspectives through my fieldwork. Through reciprocal interview conversations, survey data and discourse analysis, I have come to appreciate coconut oil as a medium to discuss the current issues that impact our lives. These discussions center around belonging, identity, change, agency, spirituality, health, power, trust and truth, all of which I have addressed throughout this thesis and will revisit once again in this conclusion. My research was about coconut oil, but really it was about so much more than just the product. The social lives of all material things extend far beyond supermarket shelves and hidden makeup kits.



### Section 7.1

## A Pacific Studies Ethnography in Diaspora

I began this project with little idea as to where it would lead me. Six years ago, I hadn't heard of Pacific studies before. My original attraction to the field was based on simple intentions: I wanted something that could draw me closer to developing a Pacific identity which, since early childhood, I had felt was shamefully lacking. Though my learning curve with Pacific studies has been steep, I have found that positioning my research within this field was the best way to engage with the topics I address. Adopting a Pacific studies approach offers a unique way of engaging with the world—both the Pacific and non-Pacific—and provides an ethical structure to guide my methodological

approaches. The three tenets of a Pacific studies approach at Te Herenga Waka Victoria University of Wellington, as prescribed by Teresia Teaiwa, structure my research to “be interdisciplinary, account for indigenous ways of knowing, and involve comparative analysis” (2010, p. 116). These tenets serve to uphold the empowerment of Pacific peoples as they reposition authoritative power to those who have a stake in equitable Pacific representation. Pacific studies also offers critical frameworks to explore the depths of Pacific peoples’ changing and multifaceted cultural knowledges.

The Pacific is the largest region on Earth, and depending how it’s measured, the most culturally diverse as well. Therefore, accounting for all the ways it can be known is an insurmountable task. There is no single Pacific way of being or knowing, and for this reason, no single way to do Pacific ethnographic work. As such, the scope of my research needed to be well-defined. In my thesis, I focused mainly on diasporic Pacific knowledges in comparison to Western alternative subculture. This diasporic focus innately challenged essentialized structures of Pacific tradition, and throughout this thesis I have sought to push the boundaries of overly simplistic Pacific cultural truisms. This is necessary work to undertake.

It’s a problem that some Islanders didn’t want to participate in this research because they felt shame over their perceived lack of Pacific cultural knowledge due to their diasporic status. From personal experience, I understand how this feels. This thesis has forced me to wrestle with my own positionality. The way that I have come to understand myself in relation to the Pacific and a Pacific identity has gone through radical transformations as a result of doing this project. Although this process is ongoing, I no longer feel the same pressures to perform my identity in any particular way, and I no longer feel obliged to appeal to the past or to tradition in order to validate myself as authentically Pacific, as an indigenous “double bind” would expect of me (Orange, 2018). My concerns have shifted toward accepting the way I am and to use my work to extend that sense of cultural contentment to others who struggle in similar ways. When a Pacific person does not fit into the mold that supposedly defines Pacific identity, the problem does not lie with the individual Islander; it lies with the limitations of contemporary Pacific representation. This is why, in chapter two, I sought to challenge the confines of what constitutes indigenous ways of knowing to include individual experience.

Drawing inspiration from conversations with participants and creatives, I have qualified all Islanders' knowledge—in whatever form it takes—as Pacific knowledge by virtue of a person's Pacific heritage. This is not the only way to account for indigenous ways of knowing—traditional knowledge and knowledge produced from communities are important factors as well—but individualism is an informative aspect to incorporate. It's especially relevant to the lives of diasporic Islanders who may not possess much traditional knowledge or have access to a Pacific community. This was a major theme in my discussions with diasporic Islander participants and continues to feature in our conversations now. I have even participated in Ruby Fanaika Fa'agau's (Bay Area, Samoan, Tongan, Fijian) project *Pacific Stories in America* (16 September 2020) where we discuss this topic at length.<sup>69</sup> My thesis calls for a reconceptualization of Pacific representation—one that validates individual experience, and challenges the emphasis on traditional and sociocentric knowledges. Reconceptualizing Pacific cultures in this way requires dissecting overly simplistic assumptions about who Pacific peoples are and what we are like. This also requires researchers to experiment with new methodological approaches.

An issue that I have consistently encountered in Pacific ethnographies is that certain methodological recruitment techniques tend to have a self-perpetuating design. When, for example, Pacific ethnographies emphasize the role of church in Pacific identity formation and maintenance (which certainly *is* important, just not all encompassing), then future research projects may be more likely to return to churches to source information (Carucci, 2011), as I was suggested to do during my overseas fieldwork stint. As a result of these common ethnographic tropes, the influence of Christianity is reinforced as an essential truth of Pacific identity. I have addressed how this emphasis on Christianity is isolating for some individuals who do not identify as Christian. To interrupt this cycle, researchers must take the necessary time to seek out alternative voices that deviate from this expected norm.

By relying on a coconut wireless methodological approach to seek community networks outside of church groups, I provided a platform for some participants to discuss their relationships with coconut oil in ways that may be at odds with Christian norms. These uses include recreational drug use, queer identity, casual sex and alternative spirituality. I

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<sup>69</sup> Available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VCE6nMYcPAA>

consistently identified these alternative lifestyle markers in both Pacific and non-Pacific demographic groups—although they were more common in the latter. This coconut wireless recruitment methodology complimented the other feminist, talanoa, and inafa’maolek methodological approaches that structured my relationships with both Pacific and non-Pacific participants. By seeking out alternative means of recruitment, this thesis provided supplementary narratives of consumers’ relationships with coconut oil and offered new insight into the social lives of the product.

In this thesis, I discussed the cultural articulation framework I used to make sense of consumers’ contributions. This framework identifies cultures as comprised of situationally ‘hooked’ elements. As cultures change, so do these elements. Drawing on Epeli Hau‘ofa’s (1994) focus on cultural expansion, I engaged with the Pacific in a metaphysical ‘articulated’ sense, and accounted for the ways Islanders ‘bring’ the Pacific to the places we go. In these new diasporic sites, like the Bay Area and the Wellington Region, our knowledge adapts, rearticulates and contributes to the communities we grow into. In these places, we learn to code-switch, we learn to “swim,” and we learn to thrive. In the process we expand, in some sense, where, who, and what the Pacific is and can be. However, there are significant ethical factors regarding the power relations that shape this celebratory narrative of diasporic ‘expansion.’

Throughout this thesis, especially in chapter three, I addressed how the relationship between agency—specifically migrant agency—and external structural forces are intertwined. I illustrated agency as a ‘pull’ factor to migrate, and external structural forces as a ‘push.’ The way these factors are perceived largely differentiate the characteristics of victim diasporas or diasporas of opportunity. While Hau‘ofa (1994) seems to celebrate the latter, it’s clear that the process of becoming diasporic is complex and open to multiple narratives. Often how a person interprets these narratives will inform, and be informed by, their political values. As a result, there may be radically different narratives within a single family, as is the case for my own. I would argue that in a diasporic Chamorro context at least, pro-American values likely champion a narrative of migrant agency—a ‘we chose to be here’ interpretation; anti-colonial values will likely champion a narrative of displacement—a ‘we were forced to leave’ interpretation. These differing understandings likely influence how a person relates to indigenous identity and homeland commodities

generally. As a Chamorro born and raised outside the Islands, I view my diasporic status as a fact of my existence. And that means, for me as well as others in this research, some form of estrangement from our ancestral homeland, our so-called “center” (Safran, 1991).

While Hau‘ofa (1994) argues that the diaspora expands where the Pacific is, I find this idea somewhat romantic and, politically speaking, potentially problematic if descendants of Pacific migrants maintain a ‘trans-indigenous’ identity in places we are not indigenous to. There must be a greater willingness to recognize Pacific peoples’ status as settlers, rather than simply co-indigenes, in the settler colonies we currently live in (Te Punga Somerville, 2012). This does not mean that indigenous relationships should be disregarded in favor of a settler colonial framework entirely, only that we should strive to embrace the complexity of our relationship to place and power. Pacific peoples, by our very existence, are complex. We certainly have the capacity to acknowledge this in our work and day-to-day lives and we should strive to do so. This will challenge overly simplistic indigenous::settler binary structures—even Pacific Islander::non-Pacific Islander binary structures—both in diaspora and in the Islands. This, I hope, will give way to more collaborative social justice-minded relationships, in which both migrant and indigenous communities’ unique belonging to place can be honored on non-oppositional terms. At the very least, researchers should take more care to address the “xenophobic shadow” of indigenous nationalism that influences academic critique (Clifford, 2001, p. 483; see also Sharma, 2020; Sharma & Wright, 2008; Teaiwa, 2010). One way to instill this shift in academic discourse is to recognize the contextual histories and power relations in which indigenous claims are situated, and to frame indigeneity as a concept that is primarily place-based. Pacific cultural identity, conversely, can be framed as geographically decentralized through migration, and therefore expansive.



## Section 7.2

# **Reciprocated Affect in Pacific Practices**

Diaspora presupposes some degree of estrangement to homeland (Santos Perez, 2020a). Accepting this as a foundational truth of my research, I have asked how does a person maintain connection when positioned on the ‘outside’ of their cultural center? This

project has shown that commodities, to an extent, provide a way to remain connected to homeland. In fact, as Sarah Finau (Wellington, Tongan, Māori) suggests in chapter five, the more one identifies—or is identified—as diasporic, the more likely they may be to rely on commodities as a way to compensate for a perceived lack of embodied cultural capital. This in turn may also influence their traditionalist or reformist views of culture. My examination of Finau's theory compared the differences in the ways diasporic-identifying and non-diasporic-identifying Pacific Islander participants discussed their affective relationships to Pacific products. From this small sample size, I found that those who identified as diasporic voiced a stronger connection to homeland commodities compared to those who did not identify as diasporic (though there were some exceptions). This likely has to do with the different culturally performative pressures experienced by diasporic consumers, but other factors are likely at play as well. Certainly, more research is needed in this area.

Additional evidence for this theory, though, can be found in chapter four in the section dedicated to Alex White's (Bay Area, Chamorro) ancestral healing rituals. While White does not specifically incorporate coconut oil into his spiritual practice, he does incorporate whole coconuts. By placing coconuts on the altar for his ancestors, White provides a product that is familiar and comforting to his deceased loved ones. He explained that a coconut acts as a medium between himself and those who came before. This holds spiritual power for him because, as he elaborated in his interview, other than his bones there are few things that connect him to the Islands. In this ritual, a coconut operates much like a spiritual and cultural anchor. While White can't source certain products that his ancestors request due to his diasporic status, coconuts—even non-Pacific imported coconuts—allow him to compensate for this strained material connection.

Coconuts hold immense spiritual significance in indigenous Pacific worldviews as both a genealogical relative and *kino lau*, or a material 'body' of divinity as Kahawai Alana (Wellington, Hawaiian) referenced in his interview. In my research, I use Pacific myths and Austronesian etymology to understand these indigenous worldviews. I also reference Western myths and Anglophonic etymology throughout this thesis for similar purposes. Often Pacific semiotics emphasize a relational genealogy with the natural world in a way that distinguishes these indigenous worldviews from Western worldviews. Accounting for

this reconceptualization of relationships with nonhuman entities in my ethnographic work therefore required adopting an expanded understanding of the term ‘kinship.’ Certain animist characteristics can be identified in these indigenous worldviews, which—problematic stigmas associated with that term aside—do offer helpful ‘dividualist’ approaches (Bird-David, 1999; Morgan, 2017; Strathern, 1988).

As emphasized in chapter four, how a person engages with these spiritual structures is likely influenced by present day conditions (Wendt, 1987). This is a foundational tenet of cultural constructivism which accounts for how current political issues and social values are projected onto memories of the mythic past, and how these contemporary interpretations of the past are used to justify a certain, especially nationalistic, objectives. However, the legitimacy of cultural constructivism in the Pacific is fiercely disputed (Handler & Linnekin, 1984; Hobsbawm & Ranger, 1983; Keesing, 1989; 1991; Linnekin, 1983; Stevens, 2018; Tobin, 1994; Trask, 1991). This is because some cultural constructivist works have been politically weaponized to discredit sovereignty movements and contemporary indigenous culture as based on ‘invented tradition.’ In her rebuttals to Jocelynn Linnekin and Keesing Roger, Haunani-Kay Trask emphatically argues that in Hawai‘i, sacredness has always preceded settlers’ politics and their critiques of culture. Trask also asserts that the harmful impact of a person’s work matters more than their harmless intentions. Though my own academic influences in anthropology and rejection of an ideological Zionist upbringing have drawn me more towards cultural constructivism than away, for the purposes of my research, I didn’t want to position my project within either side of this debate entirely. Therefore, throughout this thesis, I methodologically ‘tacked’ between viewing coconut oil as something that is intrinsically sacred and something that is constructively sacred (Sanches & Clifford, 2000). Through this process, I demonstrated how the concept of sacredness itself is debated amongst different Pacific coconut oil consumers. For some, coconut oil, as a derivative product of coconut, is sacred. For others, the way coconut oil (or baby oil) is aesthetically used in Pacific rituals is what it derives its sacredness from.

The ritualistic aesthetics of coconut oil means different things in different fields, but it does mean something. For some Pacific consumers, the metaphysical meanings conveyed by coconut oil are structured by indigenous worldviews. In a Tongan context,

for example, wearing coconut oil (or baby oil) aesthetically conveys virtue. This was originally translated by interview participants and survey respondents as sexual virginity. But according to Siola'a Pepea (Bay Area, Tongan, Fijian), a better translation is faka'apa'apa—something closer to, but more socially nuanced than, the English term 'respect.' For Turia Iek (Bay Area, Palauan) wearing coconut oil mixed with turmeric during an omengat ceremony aesthetically conveys the power of women in her matrilineal culture. For Kalo Afeaki (Wellington, Tongan) using scented coconut oil to decorate a relative's grave for hifo kilikili commemorated love for the dead. As Adrienne Kaeppler (1993) aptly notes, in the Pacific, verbal, visual and olfactory aesthetics are closely intertwined, and these rituals certainly show a blend of semiotic meaning.

My research has similarly emphasized how language functions in multiple forms. In some cases, spiritual, sociocultural and political semiotics are closely interrelated and therefore difficult to differentiate. But some of these meanings are derived from deeply personal experiences as well. For Maggie-May Maybir (Wellington, Samoan, Māori), returning to coconut oil after years of wearing 'pākehā scents' that she had hoped would ease her assimilation into Western norms meant reclaiming decolonized beauty standards and her own decolonized beauty. Wearing coconut oil, to her, was a political declaration of self-love. For Justine Jane Taito-Matamua (Wellington, Samoan), coconut oil provided the confidence to wear her "Island girl" hair naturally. It also meant cultural continuity in the face of Western commodity encroachment, especially the encroachment of Johnson & Johnson baby oil. To her, coconut oil represented resistance to Western hegemony and provides a way to hold onto the "essence" of the past. In all cases, the meanings that coconut oil conveys are symbolically powerful and respond to the social and political issues of their cultural fields.

For many Pacific Islander participants, just receiving coconut oil from others was interpreted as a symbolic gesture of love. And for those who received coconut oil from friends or relatives living in the Islands, the product affectively meant more than coconut oil bought from the store. Pacific Islander survey data suggest similar sentiments. The gift economy of coconut oil is a factor that reframes economic-focused market research. To participants who received coconut oil as a gift from family overseas, the product became a symbol of the durability and elasticity of transregional family bonds. These bonds bind



many participants to indigenous systems of reciprocity which I focused on in chapter six. I discussed how these systems—referred to as “transnational corporations of kin,” *inafa’maolek*, *fa’alavelave* and *feveitokai’aki*—challenge overly reductionist economic representations of Islanders’ transregional connections. These economic models, specifically the influential MIRAB model (Bertram & Watters, 1985), do not adequately account for the forces of social capital. As a result, the exchange of resources between the Islands and diaspora is portrayed as inherently unequal. However, as other ethnographers have emphasized in their works, the forces of social capital cannot be and should not be excluded in any Pacific-related market research (Gershon, 2012; 2007; Addo and Besnier, 2008; Alexeyeff, 2004; Van der Grijp, 2002; Besnier, 1995).

Generally, the rule of these reciprocal relationships is intuitive: reciprocate, or as Kalo Afeaki (Wellington, Tongan, Māori) expressed in her interview, give what has already been given. It’s impossible to definitively conclude whether these reciprocal exchange systems are truly altruistic entirely, as some (usually with invested interests to portray these exchanges as such) suggest they are (Alexeyeff, 2004; Bertram & Watters, 1985; Gershon, 2007). Regardless, it wasn’t my aim to prove or disprove the sincerity of a person’s professed intentions. Fixating on this question would only be counterproductive; how the market is engaged with or manipulated varies person-to-person. Pacific cultures, like any other cultures, are full of moments of altruism and selfishness. Rather, my focus analyzed how the social capital market or “economy of affect” uniquely subverts the categorical barriers that differentiate material commodities from individual or collective labor (Besnier, 1995). To account for such ingrained customs of reciprocity, Pacific Islander participants addressed how they understand coconut oil, money and personal favors in similar ways. All three are understood as different forms of labor, and labor, as Pierre Bourdieu (1986) defines, is the foundation of capital. Labor, theoretically, is also something anyone can provide regardless of their economic income. This complicates how wealth and poverty can be measured in Pacific networks because, as discussed, Pacific wealth tends to lie in relationships.

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Section 7.3

## Health Claims on Native Bodies

Throughout this thesis, I situated coconut oil in relation to different forms of social and cultural capital based on Bourdieu's (1986) theories of each. In chapter five, in the section dedicated to my discussion of embodied cultural capital, I analyzed the ways coconut oil marketing material implicates Pacific Islanders as models of natural health. This representation draws heavily from discourses of nature and indigeneity, as do most so-called superfoods (Loyer, 2016). However, these indigenous-related discourses are often premised on laboratory rationale assumptions of Islanders' isolation both in a geographic and temporal sense (Wesley-Smith, 1995). In pro-coconut oil literature, Islanders are represented as static peoples ideal for comparative ethnographic and biological—in this case, dietary—research. These representations also proclaim Pacific peoples as healthy due to an assumed intake of extracted coconut oil. However, though quantities of coconut oil certainly were and continue to be ingested as constituent components of coconut meat, milk and cream, there is little ethnographic evidence to support the claim that extracted coconut oil was commonly ingested in traditional Pacific diets. This seriously jeopardizes the authority of pro-coconut oil naturopaths like Bruce Fife (1999; 2005; 2012) and Mark Zyrowski (31 August 2018) who make health recommendations based on this assumption. Conversely, there is little evidence to definitively claim that extracted coconut oil was *not* historically eaten by Islanders either. This factor too challenges the authority of mainstream medical institutions such as the Health Promotion Agency (2019) who, without any ethnographic references, claimed that extracted coconut oil is not part of a traditional Pacific diet. In my research, I found that most—though not all—Pacific Islander participants generally understood coconut oil as a topical product primarily, and a food secondarily, if at all. However, survey data have shown that most Pacific Islander respondents do ingest it. Therefore, my research is unable to verify either one of these claims conclusively.

Although I do trust mainstream medical institutions' recommendations against saturated fat ingestion, it was never my intention to use this thesis to prove or disprove the

health validity of coconut oil through any positivist approaches. Rather, my aim was to use constructivist approaches to address why there is a disproportionate focus on Islanders in this coconut oil-saturated fat debate. This is necessary to question given that Islanders are not the only peoples to maintain a historic relationship with coconuts. Although the copra industry was once a powerful force in the region, today and for most of the past century the Pacific has not even come close to being the main commercial exporter—let alone producer—of coconuts or coconut oil (Pham, 2016). In this thesis, I have argued that the main foundational assumption, even repertoire of references to claim that Islanders are healthy because of an assumed dietary relationship with extracted coconut oil, has to do with a discourse premised on indigenous peoples' romanticized relationships to nature.

In this thesis, I have engaged with the concept of nature as a social construct—one that frames indigenous peoples as part of the natural world (Merchant, 2013; Williams, 1985). In a Western context, this construct of nature functions in an oppositional binary with industrialization or civilization (Kaplan, 2007), and because this binaristic structure is grounded in biblical myth, it is culturally relative. Exploring indigenous perspectives, structured by relational genealogies with the ecological world, may be helpful to find collaborative ways to live symbiotically with our environment. To be clear though, I am not saying that Islanders or any indigenous peoples *are* in fact closer to nature, only that nature isn't necessarily understood and engaged with in the same oppositional terms (Case, 2021; Kimmerer, 2015; Orange, 2018). That is an important distinction to note because although a Western imaginary may currently pedestal indigenous peoples' 'innate' connection to nature, it does so on its own terms, and ultimately, this imaginary reifies its hegemonic authority over indigenous bodies. Although this nature-native discourse can be strategically articulated as an empowering force for some indigenous peoples, especially for a community's political appeal to regain autonomy over land and natural resource management rights, the ways that this discourse has been codified in law and history has also done significant damage and been used to erode indigenous peoples' claims to autonomy and personhood (Case, 2021; Gonzáles, 2014; Sissons, 2005).

In this research, I examined the mythic frameworks that impact this nature::civilization binaristic construct in a Western context, and addressed how this structures contemporary health ideals. In a Western ideology, structured by Judeo-

Christian myths, nature is framed as industrialized peoples' 'lost' Eden from where mankind was expelled as a result of our original sin of seeking knowledge against God's will (Merchant, 2013).<sup>70</sup> From our original sin, we developed away from our rudimentary 'native' status to industrialized society. It was in their expulsion from Eden that Adam and Eve first experienced the pains of the world which we, their descendants, must still suffer and endure. The fact that certain noncommunicable diseases associated with industrialization are referenced as "diseases of civilization" reflects this myth narrative (Knight, 2012). These 'diseases' which include obesity, heart disease, cancer, diabetes, Alzheimer's, HIV, Crohn's disease, ADHD, epilepsy, multiple sclerosis, Parkinson's, ALS and autism (CBN, 8 January 2013; Fife, 1999; 2005; 2012; Tate, 2017) are framed as industrialized peoples' punishment for 'leaving behind' a romanticized past connection with nature. Coconut oil, with little-to-no scientific substantiation, has been claimed to treat or cure all of them (Lima & Block, 2019).

In oppositional terms, indigenous peoples—imagined to have a closer embodied relationship to nature by virtue of their assumed lifestyles—are implicated as vestiges of natural health in superfood marketing material (Loyer, 2016). Subsequently, this marketing technique suggests that indigenous peoples supposedly hold the key to curing these diseases of civilization. Specifically, industrialized peoples are led to believe that by mimicking indigenous peoples' *assumed* (though not necessarily actual) consumption habits, they too can reclaim their own senses of a lost embodied indigenous self (Kaplan, 2007). Structured within this Western ideological framework, this natural indigenous self is equated with moral purity as it supposedly rewinds time and draws the industrialized closer to nature—to Eden and the health it once guaranteed.

A nature and natives discourse, premised on romantic depictions of indigenous peoples, is problematic and fundamentally flawed. This is because by virtue of being alive today, indigenous peoples are modern peoples (Arriola, 2020). The reason some indigenous peoples maintain lifestyles seemingly 'closer' to nature (if they even do) is not because they have not yet 'developed' to the standards of industrialized civilization. Those

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<sup>70</sup> The way this myth mirrors Prometheus' punishment for providing humanity fire is insightful. Both these influential narratives in Western ideology emphasize the desire of God or the gods to place limitations on human agency as part of an intentional natural order. By contrast, this 'lack' of agency is then projected onto indigenous cultures.

standards of social development are externally imposed and do not relate to the cultural value systems of many communities. Labels of ‘underdeveloped’ and ‘developed’ reflect a culturally chauvinistic rubric. And far from being isolated, many Pacific peoples, especially in Micronesia and Polynesia, are some of the most globalized communities anywhere. Islanders cannot be confined geographically, temporally, biologically or culturally to the romantic representations our peoples receive in naturopathic literature. It’s also concerning that some naturopathic authors rely on romantic representations of Islanders to promote their work rather than foster sustained, reciprocal relationships with us.

The implication of Islanders in health discourse is problematic and inaccurate in multiple ways. To frame this discussion, I addressed health through three rationales. These include a mechanical body rationale, which *ideally* views the body solely through its biological function and appeals more to a naturalist-realist epistemology; an affective body rationale, which considers the way bodies are understood through a metaphysical lens and appeals more to constructivist or relativist epistemologies; and a habitual body rationale, which relates to Bourdieu’s (1987; 2007) theories of ‘habitus’ and ‘practice’ and accounts for a person’s behavior rather than just their knowledge or ideals (see also Asimaki & Koustourakis, 2014). Though these rationales are certainly interrelated, categorizing each as distinct offers a helpful way to approach analyzing health discourse. Specifically, this framework accounts for how a person’s affective body—how they understand themselves—and their mechanical body—how their body is genetically ‘programmed’—often conflicts.

As coconut oil marketing material implicates Pacific peoples, it’s important to recognize that many affective Pacific bodies (persons who identify as Pacific) are ancestrally mixed. This is especially true in diaspora, where Islanders, more than many other racial groups, are likely to be ancestrally mixed (Duncan, 2012). Of the twenty-four Pacific participants included in this research (including Māori), sixteen had ancestries from outside the Pacific region. While considerations of genetic-linked diets do have value when discussing the health validity of ingesting coconut oil and saturated fat generally, they cannot be universally applied. There is no ‘one’ ideal Chamorro diet if there is no ‘one’ Chamorro genetic body. Secondly, the unfortunate reality is that many Pacific bodies are

mechanically and habitually unhealthy; Islanders tend to have higher than average rates of noncommunicable diseases both in the Islands and in diaspora (Carucci, 2011; Duncan, 2012; Hughes & Lawrence, 2005; Kaholokula, Okamoto & Yee, 2020). There are *a lot* of factors at play regarding this second issue. A main factor has to do with current food regimes, but cultural values and individuals' relationships to "love food" come into play as well (Alexeyeff, 2004; Bruch, 2008; Carucci, 2011; Duncan, 2012; Hughes & Lawrence, 2005; Jetnil-Kijiner, 17 December 2013). Although Fife (1999) states that good health is reserved to Islanders who live on their traditional diets, what constitutes a 'traditional' Pacific diet is debatable. Additionally, the insistence that Islanders should adhere to a traditional diet also reifies a type of condescending external control over our bodies and food culture. While food culture and health do urgently need to be addressed in our communities, these topics must be addressed by us, on our terms.

In this research, I have found that naturopathic literature which promotes coconut oil based on romantic representations of Islanders' assumed natural health is, for the most part, misinformed and misleading. Still though, the result of this claim has affected the consumption habits of many of the consumers I have interviewed. This is an especially interesting finding given that some Pacific participants are renegotiating their relationships with coconut oil from a topical product to a health food as a result of their mostly non-Pacific information networks. Some Pacific participants have even shared that within the last decade they have come to believe that extracted coconut oil *is* a part of a traditional Pacific diet and have begun ingesting it as a way to promote a decolonized health regime which they believe is better suited to their specific Pacific genetic needs. This includes some Pacific participants who are ancestrally mixed but identified primarily through their Pacific lineage. This shift in use reflects how information about coconut oil tends to be sourced by consumers secondhand, rather than from medical reviews or ethnographic literature directly. In fact, as discussed in chapter six, most Pacific Islander survey respondents reported that their main source of information about coconut oil came from relatives compared to most Māori and non-Pacific respondents who learned about coconut oil from a friend or peer group. The data reflect how knowledge is alive—how it flows has to do with power, ideology and group belonging.

## Situated Knowledge and Informational Flows

As I have addressed throughout this thesis, popular knowledge about coconut oil tends to deviate from medical dietary research related to the product (Lima & Block, 2019). In this project, I explored potential reasons for why this deviation in coconut oil information exists. In my online survey, I asked respondents whether they find the World Health Organization or American Heart Association's recommendations to restrict the dietary intake of saturated fat trustworthy. I found that most respondents were either unsure of these recommendations or did not trust them fully. I asked these respondents to explain their reasoning in write-in answers, and I coded these answers into four central categories: accusations of institutional corruption, scientific data misconclusions, emphasis on personal body autonomy, or beliefs about supposedly 'traditional' uses of coconut oil. Frustration over the perceived fickleness of scientific truths, as well as anti-American or pro-Aotearoa New Zealand nationalist sentiments also influenced respondents' answers. Ultimately, by challenging the authority of these mainstream medical institutions, these respondents drew attention to power and how power, 'truth' and trust are related.

These skepticisms invoke what Donna Haraway (1988) has termed "situated knowledges"—a concept which addresses how 'truths' are socially accepted, rejected, produced, disseminated and dismantled. Haraway's work draws on feminist epistemologies and an overall constructivist ontology. Her approach recognizes all perspectives—including phenomenological understandings of the 'Real World'—to be partial as they are limited by a perceiver's positionality. She therefore calls for a multiplicity of "webbed accounts" of understandings of the world. Collecting webbed accounts offers multifaceted ways of knowing and can incorporate alternative types of knowledges, especially those which are often excluded from mainstream representation (i.e. the perspectives of women, queer people, people of color and indigenous peoples). To *situate* knowledge means that a researcher ensures that it can "be called into account" (p. 583). This means that a researcher acknowledges *whose* knowledge is taken into consideration and why. This thesis has, to an extent, recognized representations of health as situated knowledge. This means that I have addressed how health standards are

influenced by contemporary power structures and cultural values. Specifically, I have addressed how perceptions of health are influenced by dominant Western beauty standards and by fatphobia especially. For this reason, the politics of fat and fatness especially come into consideration as it relates to coconut oil consumption.

Coconut oil is classified as a saturated fat and this draws it into a vicious debate in which mainstream medical institutions and alternative naturopathic literature vie for authoritative power (Gunnarsson & Elam, 2012; Lima & Block, 2019). There is strong, established medical research that has correlated high intake of saturated fat with an increased risk of developing cardiovascular disease, though alternative naturopathic literature and media dispute this claim. What is important to consider here in relation to the politics of fat and fatness is that there is evidence to show that dietary consumption of saturated fat ingested as a caloric substitute for carbohydrates *may* decrease a person's overall body fat percentage (Yancy et al., 2004). By eating fat, a person may in fact 'get thin' (Hyman, 2016). This dietary practice is the foundation of trendy, high-fat, low-carbohydrate diets such as the Atkins diet, the ketogenic diet and the paleo diet. But the danger that lies in this dietary trend is that it simplistically equates thinness with health. Although this diet may be appropriate for some individuals and for specific medical purposes, when it's advertised as the best diet for the general public, the results can have serious ramifications. It's a public health triumph that cardiovascular-related deaths have decreased in Aotearoa New Zealand and the United States as a result of dietary shifts which have responded to mainstream medical institutions' recommendations to reduce the intake of saturated fat (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 24 October, 2019; Gunnarsson & Elam, 2012; Health Promotion Agency, 2019; Heart Research Institute New Zealand, n.d.; Keys, 1970; Keys et al., 1986; Lima & Block, 2019; Ministry of Health, 2003; 16 December 2021; RNZ, 30 July 2014; Sacks et al., 2017). Naturopathic literature that rejects these recommendations and calls for a re-uptake of saturated fat consumption in mainstream diets therefore threatens decades of public health progress.

Although the mainstream medical institutions that make these recommendations against ingesting saturated fat are situated within their own political and cultural fields, the ways these institutions are critiqued in some naturopathic literature and by some coconut oil consumers is concerning. This is especially at the forefront of my mind now. As any



work is situated within the political context of its time, my thesis is situated in the time of a global pandemic that has already claimed the lives of millions—over one million in the United States alone. From the outset of this project, I have found it troubling that anti-vaccination sentiment and coconut oil consumption share a significant overlap through online platforms, published literature and naturopathic spokespersons. As my research engages with social information networks, it's important to address the dangers of this overlap in my thesis.

My concern over the relationship between coconut oil promotional material and anti-vaccination rhetoric first came about during the measles outbreak that struck Sāmoa in 2019. I attentively followed the news as the once MMR vaccine hesitant Samoan government scrambled to vaccinate children faster than the virus could spread. Tragically for too many the vaccines didn't arrive fast enough. Amongst the chaos and grief, some self-proclaimed taulasea (traditional Samoan healers) capitalized on the epidemic as an opportunity to push non-effective treatments (many of which included coconut oil) as an alternative to vaccinations. These so-called healers' efforts to invalidate the efficacy of vaccines under the guise of 'indigenous medicine' was unethical and the loss of life in Sāmoa was preventable. This relationship between anti-vaccination rhetoric and coconut oil advocacy is of course even more problematic now with the devastating impacts of COVID-19 and the ensuing, and frustratingly fatiguing, public opposition to vaccination uptake, both in Aotearoa New Zealand and especially in the United States.

Although the relationship between coconut oil consumption and anti-vaccination sentiment wasn't as strong in interviews and surveys as I had anticipated (it was present though), the rhetorical overlap between coconut oil and anti-vaccination sentiment in media and literature is well-established. Some naturopathic writers who promote coconut oil also produce work that disputes the efficacy of vaccines, or perpetuate false claims that vaccines cause certain conditions such as autism. Fife, for example, who authored *The Coconut Oil Miracle* (1999) and *Coconut Cures* (2005) which have been powerfully influential in popularizing coconut oil in Western markets, is also the author of *Stop Autism Now!* (2012) in which he advertises coconut oil as a treatment, even potential 'cure,' for the condition. Additionally, many websites which disseminate vaccination disinformation also promote coconut oil as an alternative medicinal product. These include

NaturalNews.com, Mercola.com, and Mothering.com which were identified by Anna Kata (2012) as three central online agents in vaccination disinformation networks. There is a risk, given these overlapping information sources, that anti-vaccination views may become more prevalent in communities of coconut oil consumers. This is because the foundational overlap between pro-coconut oil consumption and anti-vaccination rhetoric is an ideological distrust of mainstream institutional power.

Within the past several decades, institutionally supported health claims, such as the recommendation to restrict saturated fat intake or the recommendation to be vaccinated, have increasingly been disputed in alternative health discourse. This is a result of what Kata (2012) has called the “postmodern medical paradigm.” In this paradigm, postmodernism—which aims to understand the relationships between truth claims and power—is evoked, and in some cases intentionally manipulated, by health consumers in a way that radically reconceptualizes the meanings of medical ‘expertise’ altogether. This means that, for some, ‘expertise’ has shifted from the authority of few entrusted individuals, such as professional healthcare workers, and institutions, like the World Health Organization or American Heart Association, to a decentralized populist body of health consumers or underqualified ‘specialists.’ In this process, health recommendations made by professional healthcare workers or mainstream medical institutions are demoted to *situated* ‘opinions’ among many other opinions and ways of knowing (Kata, 2012). While a healthy distrust of institutional power is useful and shared-decision making is often essential in providing appropriate healthcare (Wilson, 2000), power, including institutional power, in and of itself is not necessarily a negative force that needs to be resisted at all costs. Rather, power is anyone or anything’s agency, agency that will have varied consequences. What matters is how power is used. When it comes to the ingestion of coconut oil as a health product, my research has found that coconut oil consumers’ counter-hegemonic values are likely misplaced. That said, I cannot deny that representations of science are influenced by power relations, and I acknowledge that trusting mainstream medical organizations is difficult, especially for those who had negative experiences of institutionalized power.

In order to understand this particular social life of coconut oil as a marketed health product, it’s necessary to account for consumers’ lack of trust in institutional power rather

than solely relying on ontologically natural-realist medical reviews—or as Alice Julier (2008) writes, just “more science.” As I addressed in chapter six, consuming coconut oil isn’t simply a matter of ‘weighing out’ data found in medical reviews. Consuming coconut oil, as well as acquiring information about it, is a deeply social practice. As non-Pacific participants in particular have demonstrated, consuming coconut oil itself is a “consumer fetishist” practice, meaning that it conveys a sense of group belonging (Eden, 2010). By consuming coconut oil, participants form their identities in contrast to the values of mainstream Western culture. For Quinn Miller (Bay Area, non-Pacific), the community spaces in which she developed a relationship with coconut oil were also spaces that she found liberation from the conservative values she was raised with. As I have addressed in this thesis, health should be approached in a multitude of ways. Assessing health should also take into consideration a person’s emotional state and sense of group belonging. Labeling coconut oil ingestion as an unhealthy practice in a black and white sense reduces how health can be and should be accounted for. We all need to find ways to strike a balance in our lives, and all of us deserve to pursue that which helps us achieve this balance. I hope that this thesis provided a constructivist critique of coconut oil consumption that complements natural-realist ontological reviews (Lima & Block, 2019), and that from my critique, consumers will reconsider their decision to ingest coconut oil if their intentions are purely for mechanical health.



## Conclusion 7.5

### **What Coconut Oil Reflects**

This thesis addressed questions relating to where the Pacific is, who the Pacific is, and what the Pacific is and can be. While there is no way to account for its totality in any limited ethnographic work, I do hope that this thesis has pushed boundaries of Pacific representations. My research has shown how coconut oil is marketed in naturopathic material draws on romantic depictions of Islanders’ innate bodily connections to the natural environment. These representations do not adequately portray Pacific peoples’ nuanced relationships with coconut oil, especially the spiritual relationships that are informed by indigenous worldviews. The desire to consume coconut oil as a health food consciously

subverts the authoritative power of mainstream medical institutions and demonstrates how counter-hegemonic views are articulated into specific alternative subcultural communities. While rejecting health ‘expertise’ entirely is problematic and potentially dangerous, recognizing that communities who identify with coconut oil do so in a way that sets them apart from the norms and values of mainstream Western culture provides insight into their motivations and opens opportunities for dialogue. In these spaces, consumers can foster a sense of individuality and freedom from oppressive elements they seek to challenge. Despite the complex origins of its health reputation, coconut oil undeniably provides a sense of comfort to those who draw meaning from it, and that dynamic, in some sense, complicates how health can be qualified.

Coconut oil is a product that reflects us. It’s a product that has, for as long as Pacific peoples have existed, cared for us, and we in turn have cared for it. In the places where coconuts cannot grow, it is remembered through language and myth. We remember our ancestors—including our plant ancestors—as we carry them with us on our skin, in our scent, and quite literally, in our heart. As the product once again establishes social lives for itself in the West, this time in supermarket grocery aisles, in cookbooks, and in alternative subcultural spaces, we—Pacific peoples born in the Islands and in diaspora, the estranged and connected, the mixed, the complicated, and the expanded—can acknowledge coconut oil’s presence and say with our own individual voice and with the collective voices of the ancestors before us, “It’s nice to see you again.”

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# Appendix

## Anonymous Online Survey Questions

Q 1 — How old are you?

Q 2 — What is your identified gender?

Q 3 — Where do you live?

If 'New Zealand' Q 3a — Where in New Zealand do you live?

If 'the United States of America' Q 3b — Where in the United States of America do you live?

If 'California' Q 3b1 — Where in California do you live?

If 'another country' Q 3c — Please specify which country.

Q 4 — What is your cultural or ethnic ancestry?

Q 5 — How would you describe your income bracket?

Q 6 — What is your highest educational qualification?

Q 7 — Does your cultural or ethnic ancestry influence how you use coconut oil?

If 'yes' Q 7a — Please explain how your cultural or ethnic ancestry influences your coconut oil use.

Q 8 — When did you start using coconut oil?

Q 9 — How did you learn about coconut oil?

If 'relative' Q 9a — What was this relative's relationship to you?

Q 10 — Where do you get your coconut oil from?

If 'relative' Q 10a — Does this relative live overseas?

If 'friend' Q 10b — Does this friend live overseas?

If 'relative' or 'friend' Q 10c — Would coconut oil have the same meaning if you bought it at a store?

If 'health foods store' or 'general grocery store' or 'cosmetic store' or 'other' Q 10d — Do you believe that coconut oil is an expensive product to buy where you live?

Q 11 — Have you ever received coconut oil as a gift?

Q 12 — Have you ever gifted coconut oil to someone in the past?

Q 13 — Do any of your relatives eat coconut oil?

Q 14 — Do any of your relatives use coconut oil for purposes other than food?

Q 15 — Do any of your friends eat coconut oil?

Q 16 — Do any of your friends use coconut oil for purposes other than food?

Q 17 — Do you identify as religious or spiritual?

If 'yes' Q 17a — Does your religious or spiritual identity influence how you use coconut oil?

If 'yes' Q 17a1 — Please explain how your religious or spiritual identity influences how you use coconut oil.

Q 18 — What purposes do you use coconut oil for?

Q 19 — Do you believe it is healthy to eat coconut oil?

Q 20 — Would you categorize coconut oil as a superfood?

Q 21 — Were you previously aware that coconut oil is classified as a saturated fat?

Q 22 — Are you aware that the American Heart Association and World Health Organization recommend restricting saturated fat intake?

Q 23 — Do you believe that the American Heart Association and World Health Organizations' recommendations are trustworthy?

If 'no' Q 23a — Please elaborate why you believe these organizations' recommendations are not trustworthy.

If 'not sure' Q 23b — Please elaborate why you are not sure that the American Heart Association and World Health Organizations' recommendations are trustworthy.

Q 24 — Do you prefer coconut produced in the Pacific Islands?

Q 25 — Would you describe New Zealand as part of the Pacific Region?

Q 26 — Would you describe the United States of America as part of the Pacific Region?

Q 27 — How important do you find these qualities for the type of coconut oil you prefer?

[Scale ranks: 'not at all preferred,' 'less preferred,' 'moderately preferred,' 'preferred,' and 'most preferred.']

[Quality list: 'fair trade,' 'sustainable,' 'raw,' 'virgin,' 'natural,' 'organic,' 'authentic,' 'Pacific Islands produced,' 'cooperative,' 'cold-pressed,' 'scentless,' 'manufactured,' 'processed,' and 'refined.']

Q 28 — What are 3-5 things you associate with coconut oil?

Q 29 — What do you use coconut oil specifically for?

Q 30 — What does coconut oil mean to you?

Q 31 — Is there anything else you would like to add about coconut oil not addressed in this survey?