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Continental Islandness: Island-Making Through Time, Place, and Identity in Pacific
Islander Reggae in Southern California

A Dissertation submitted in partial satisfaction
of the requirements for the degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

in

Music

by

Chun-Chia Tai

September 2025

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即是無論什麼事，得之於人者太多，出之於己者太少。因為需要感謝的人太多了，就感謝天罷。

ABSTRACT OF THE DISSERTATION

Continental Islandness: Island-Making Through Time, Place, and Identity in Pacific
Islander Reggae in Southern California

By

Chun-Chia Tai

Doctor of Philosophy, Graduate Program in Music
University of California, Riverside, September 2025
Dr. Liz Przybylski, Chairperson

This dissertation examines the making of diasporic Indigeneity through island reggae music by Pacific Islander Americans in Southern California music scenes. Island reggae music draws inspiration from Black expressive culture to articulate Indigeneity and tells the imbrication of colonialism that the diasporic Pacific Islanders have endured in Oceanian ancestral lands and North American homes. As diasporic Pacific Islanders are politically marginalized due to the imposition of continental stereotypes upon Pacific islands and Indigenous people in the continental U.S. (Arvin and Teves 2018), they have developed new sound and musical styles to recontextualize and reclaim their diasporic Indigeneity within the Black-White racial norm at their continental home. The research analyzes the new sound and musical style of Southern California island reggae and renders an ethnographic account to answer the following theoretical inquiries: This dissertation asks: *How has performing island reggae music enabled diasporic Pacific Islanders in*

Southern California to recontextualize, reclaim, and redefine their Indigeneity for identity negotiation within the U.S.-based Black-White racial dichotomy? By addressing this question, I argue that diasporic Pacific Islanders—through their practices of Indigeneity in reggae music—present an identity that reflects the Southern Californian context of race, ethnicity, gender, and class that still stems from an Indigenous worldview.

My theoretical framework consults literature on Black, Indigenous studies, and decolonial island studies. This dissertation frames the island reggae music of the diasporic Pacific Islander as the materialization of the “Black shoal” metaphor conceptualized by King (2019) and highlights the Black-Indigenous reciprocity. I argue that diasporic Pacific Islanders redefine the boundary between Blackness and Indigeneity through reggae music and performance, which critically incorporates their lives in the U.S. with their heritage in Oceania; they ultimately unsettle the presumed racial norms and continental domination across the Pacific. Two newly coined terms, “continental islandness” and “island making,” capture both the quality and the process of expressing diasporic Indigeneity through island reggae music and performance from a community-based theoretical perspective. These concepts explain how diasporic Islanders use reggae as a form of storytelling to articulate their identities as Islanders and to sustain Indigeneity in response to life on the continent. In doing so, they illuminate the continuity—and transformation—of Pacific Islander Indigeneity in diaspora, where cultural expression actively unsettles continental hegemony and colonial structures. While diasporic Pacific Islanders have long been underrepresented across multiple research fields, this dissertation foregrounds their contributions within ethnomusicological studies of popular music.

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Positionality, Permission, and Methodology

At the start of my dissertation, I want to ask for permission from all of my mentors, my friends, and the readers whose stories resonate with this dissertation to share your stories. From my mentors, “Joe “Savage” Fa’avae and Fran Lujan, and friends, I learned to always share my own stories before asking people about their stories, so please let me introduce who I am, where I am from, how I came here, and what I held in mind while writing this dissertation.

Although I have shared my story with my mentors, friends, and interlocutors many times, it is still necessary to share it here—not only because my answer kept changing as I met more people and heard more stories, but also for those who are reading this dissertation who I didn’t have a chance to introduce myself to and from whom I didn’t receive permission. As a non-Pacific Islander and often the only East Asian face in the venue, the two most common questions I have been asked in the field are, “Where are you from? Why do you want to study our culture?” During the summer of 2022, I presented my research on diaspora island reggae at the Pacific Island University Research Network conference in Rarotonga, Cook Islands. I started by introducing myself as I was one of the rare non-Islander presenters at the conference. I received a question from a Māori scholar, “How did you navigate the multiple colonialities and identities in you and come to study island culture?” These questions are what I have to answer before sharing the knowledge and stories of my mentors, interlocutors, and friends in the field, and my answers determine how my journey with people in the field has started and gone. My dissertation starts from

these three questions, and the answers create my dissertation. Therefore, I start my dissertation by answering these questions, and I hope I can have your permission to share your stories, creating more stories between you, my mentors, friends, and me.

I am a non-Indigenous, non-Pacific Islander, East Asian, and Asian woman in the U.S. I am Hokkien-Taiwanese, a Han-Taiwanese settler-colonizer on the land of Taiwanese Indigenous people, who share Austronesian heritage with Pacific Islanders. I come from a southern county, Pingtung, the land of many Taiwanese Indigenous groups, including the Makatao, Paiwan, and Drekey. I am the seventh generation of the Tai family in Taiwan. My grandfather's grandfather moved from Southern China to Taiwan with his father and settled in my hometown, Pingtung City. My ancestors settled on the land of the Makatao people, the Taiwanese Indigenous group who guarded the Pingtung plain before Han settler colonization. During the Japanese occupation, my great-great-grandfather ran a grocery business and worked with the Japanese government in the opium business. As his descendants grew, many of them became scholars, doctors, and lawyers and left the small town. Unlike his successful brothers, my great-grandfather was the youngest child who failed in every business, making his family the only branch of the clan that stayed in Pingtung City. My grandfather spent his whole life in Pingtung City, and the house I grew up in was only 0.3 miles away from where my ancestors first settled in Pingtung City.

While my ancestors were settler-colonizers of the Makatao people, they also experienced a hundred years of repression under the Japanese occupation (1895-1945) and the Republic of China (1945 to the present). However, I didn't fully grasp the profound impact of my family's history on both my family and myself until the 2014 Sunflower

Movement. This movement emerged as a confrontation against the proposed Cross-Strait Service Trade Agreement (CSSTA) with China, which was pushed by the ruling party, the Kuomintang Party (KMT). During the month-long occupation movement, hundreds of thousands of participants physically endured exhaustion, fear, anxiety, pain, tears, and bloodshed—and so did I. These experiences, once distant tales from the era of the KMT dictatorship (1947-1989), became our immediate reality. Little did I know that this movement would later mark a pivotal moment in challenging Chinese centrism and the KMT legacy and in unveiling the enduring colonial influences in Taiwanese society. I only realized then that colonialism wasn't merely a historical event but an ongoing process, and it hurt like a torn heart. During this time, my grandfather's warning for me to remain silent on political matters became even more poignant and significant. Due to my grandfather's expressions of fear and caution, I became aware of my reluctance to engage in politics and my limited Hokkien-speaking skills, which created a barrier between us. I soon realized that these aspects of myself were all interconnected with the legacy of colonialism. This revelation set me on the path to decolonization and self-healing, propelling me toward a profound interest in decolonial studies.

As I delved into the complexities of dual colonialisms and the impact they had on my grandfather, I observed how his experience compelled him to emphasize his identity with his small town while distancing himself from imposed and unstable national identities. This realization shed light on my strong attachment to the land of Pingtung, which has been perceived as “quite weird” by some of my friends. My love for my hometown motivated

me to explore its history along with my family history, leading me to confront the undeniable truth of my settler-colonizer background.

Reviewing my family's history as my decolonial practice has brought me face-to-face with the privilege I inherited from my settler-colonizer ancestors. The resources that I have benefited from are rooted in the exploitation of Taiwanese Indigenous people who have been enduring oppression for hundreds of years. Over the course of my life, some of these individuals have become my peers, friends, housemates, or classmates. Confronting the wounds my ancestors caused them has become my responsibility—and a way to give back the care and love I've received through their friendship.

From 2015 to 2017, I worked as an assistant for Taiwanese Indigenous singer Suming Rupi. Even though I had been aware of my settler-colonial position long before working with Suming, I must acknowledge that while I intellectually “knew” about the marginalization faced by Indigenous people, I had not fully *understood* it on a deeply felt, embodied level. I hadn't experienced the constant insecurity of living in a society not designed for my body—a comfort quietly granted by Han Taiwanese societal norms. Working with Suming Rupi and my Indigenous colleagues revealed my blind spot. In the summer of 2016, Suming brought me to the Festival of Pacific Arts in Guam, where most of the attendees were Pacific Islanders sharing cultures and ancestries that I was not part of. I felt like an alien at the festival, while, in contrast, Suming and my colleagues were so excited to meet so many people with similar struggles and resistance. I realized that living in Han-centric Taiwan was a suffocation of who they were, and I could never understand such feelings.

After I moved to the U.S., I started to understand such pressure of being a minority. I lost my sense of belonging in this country and never inherently felt safe in any space here. The unrecognized identity also made me lonely in this country. The U.S. racial norms dismissed my Taiwanese identity and imposed on me the identities of an international student and an Asian woman. My U.S. experience exposed me to the realities of racialization, immigration, and the challenges faced by minority communities, leading me to understand the significance of building alliances to find strength and certainty in our lives. However, this experience doesn't mean I equate my position in the U.S. with Taiwanese Indigenous people's experiences; in contrast, my U.S. experience is evidence of my privilege—I have to be in a white-dominated country to experience such discrimination, and I have a comfortable place to go back to.

I am conscious of the fact that my journey is distinct from theirs, and the colonial relationship entangled with my ancestry is what I have to carry with me no matter where I go or what I do—including in this dissertation. I approach my U.S. experience with humility, understanding that I should never take any aspect of my own life for granted or make inappropriate comparisons. I aim to learn, support, and advocate with respect and sensitivity, recognizing the unique and profound experiences of others, with permission.

Carrying such ancestry, I position myself in my dissertation project with diasporic Pacific Islanders in Southern California as an Asian/Taiwanese woman working with them with their permission. The story between them and me started at the same Festival of Pacific Arts in Guam. I heard reggae everywhere in the festival venue; performers on stages were all playing reggae, and attendees were playing reggae through portable speakers in

every corner. Even when I turned on the local radio channel, I heard hosts celebrating the festival by playing reggae songs. I quickly fell in love with the music. Furthermore, seeing how reggae connected those Pacific Islander attendees and performers, Suming told me that he wanted to have contemporary music that could bond Taiwanese Indigenous people together as reggae did for Pacific Islanders. He also shared his desire to participate in this Pacific Islander reggae scene.

Suming's perspective on reggae reflects the position of Taiwanese Indigenous people, who have endured severed connections with Pacific Islanders for years under Han settler-colonialism, yet have actively sought contemporary self-determination and reestablished these connections. His heartfelt desire for change has inspired me and pointed me toward how I can contribute to him, my colleagues, and, hopefully, his community. As someone fortunate enough to pursue a doctoral degree, I recognize the privilege that comes with it. Therefore, I have decided to utilize this privilege to delve into the study of Pacific reggae music, driven not only by my love for this genre and my care for the stories and issues it embodies but also by my intention to share this knowledge with Suming and my colleagues.

After this goal brought me to Southern California as an international student, I worked hard to locate myself in a community to regain a sense of belonging. Coming from a middle-class family rooted in Pingtung for seven generations, stability is instilled in my mind and body. The instability and mobility in the diaspora are not a yearned-for adventure but an inevitable side effect of my doctoral degree. The struggles of seeking stability evoked my research interest in diaspora, leading me to study Pacific Islanders' diaspora

and its relationship with reggae music. In the summer of 2021, I contacted Joe “Savage” Fa’avae, the Samoan founder of Island Block Network, the media and concert promotion company serving Islander audiences in the U.S. He became my mentor in the field and introduced me to another mentor I call Aunty, Fran Lujan, the director of the Pacific Island Ethnic Art Museum, the only museum of Pacific cultures in the continental U.S. Since 2021, I have volunteered with two organizations to understand the music and the scene through work. I assisted with merchandise sales at concerts for Island Block Network. At the Pacific Island Ethnic Art Museum, I volunteered for everything from event registration to library establishment.

I am consistently mindful of Asian Americans’ misrepresentation of Pacific Islanders and the issue of Asian settler-colonialism in the Pacific Islands. Despite not being born and raised as an Asian American, I have been fortunate to enjoy the privileges that the Taiwanese American community generously shares with newcomers. Such privilege is hard to deny; Fran Lujan sometimes humorously remarks on my Taiwanese identity, jokingly saying, “I never met a poor Taiwanese.” Indeed, my Taiwanese identity has granted me certain access to resources, even though I may not personally possess considerable wealth in the U.S. Ironically, while I am a settler in Taiwan, the Taiwanese Indigenous people’s genealogy opened the door for me to enter the Pacific Island Ethnic Art Museum. The first time I met Fran Lujan, she enthusiastically called me a relative from Taiwan because of our shared Austronesian ancestry. I felt guilty. Even though I explained my position and she understood it, she still saw me as the connection between them and their Taiwanese relatives. This again reminded me of my privilege and the responsibility

that my ancestors have entrusted to me. As I write about Pacific Islanders' stories, I need to be aware of my settler position and the Taiwanese Indigenous perspectives in my work. Coming from such a background, I am also conscious that I cannot presume to write Pacific Islanders' stories.

Methodology

In what follows, I would like to explain my methodology—how I conducted my fieldwork and the thought processes that guided me throughout. Even though many of my interlocutors have become my friends, I do not share the same experiences and genealogy as they do. Hence, the fundamental principle in my fieldwork and ethnographic methods is “asking permission,” a concept I learned from the Pacific Island Ethnic Art Museum. This notion is embodied by a sign that reads “Asking Permission” on the floor in front of the community house in the museum. Visitors are required to seek the ancestors' permission before entering the house, reflecting the practice of seeking permission in all aspects of the museum space and the community. For instance, Fran Lujan always seeks permission from the Tongva people to use their land where the museum is located, acknowledging the privilege of using the Tongva's land and respecting the Tongva people's guardianship of the area. Additionally, she honors her ancestors by seeking their permission before moving any exhibition pieces, recognizing the importance of honoring their presence and history in the museum space. From Fran Lujan's practices, I have come to understand that “asking permission” entails approaching with respect, an intention to foster an equal, reciprocal, and long-term relationship, and a genuine acknowledgment of who I am and where I come

from. Moreover, obtaining permission is not a one-time occurrence but an ongoing process throughout my fieldwork and ethnographic writing. As you read my work, I continue to seek permission from my mentors, friends, and everyone whose experiences and genealogy I mention here to share their stories. Therefore, before commencing my ethnography, I must introduce myself, acknowledging my position as the first step in seeking permission to represent their narratives and perspectives.

Asking for permission continually reminds me to reflect on my relationships with the people I meet and work alongside in the field, and it is closely tied to how I experience time and space. I refer to my methodology as an everyday relational method—a process grounded in the ongoing, day-to-day learning that emerges from my relationships with interlocutors. Since 2021, I have remained involved with the Island Block Network and the Pacific Island Ethnic Art Museum, even throughout my dissertation writing. Although this fieldwork has spanned four years and remains ongoing as I write, its pace has been relatively slow, with concerts and events usually happening only once or twice a month, or even less frequently. As a result, I see my interlocutors only occasionally. This is even more true for the Island Block Network team, as all members hold full-time jobs, and we usually only gather for concerts. In this context, fieldwork does not resemble what Michelle Kisliuk describes as “often an intensified life” (2008: 184). Instead, it follows the slow rhythm of everyday life, allowing relationships to develop slowly but gradually, like making friends over time. Sometimes, I even stop by the museum simply because I haven’t seen my mentor, Fran Lujan, in a while, just as I would visit my aunts and uncles back in Taiwan. Our conversations have also extended beyond research, often touching on

everyday matters such as my car or my family trips. Still, I find that this slow, sustained engagement resonates with Kisliuk's insight that fieldwork "is part of a life-flow all the same, and it is inseparable from who we are" (ibid.).

Under this slow pace, this fieldwork takes place where I live—Southern California, the first and only place I have lived in the U.S. As a resident of the same area and someone who sees my interlocutors regularly, this research has become deeply embedded in my daily life. I understand this as a way of living together—sharing the same land, the same sky, and the same water. This sense of shared residency shapes how I approach fieldwork, blurring the line between research and everyday experience. Visiting the museum and seeing the Island Block Network team has become part of my Southern California life. Given this experience of time and space in the field, I find that both fieldwork and ethnographic writing have deeply shaped my life in the U.S.—not only as a researcher, but as a person. As Kay Kaufman Shelemay writes, "ethnography in fact becomes a way of life, emerging from the subjectivities of separate yet shared life experiences. It becomes much more than a venerable research method—over time, it becomes a form of habitus" (Shelemay 2020: 2).

While this fieldwork has become part of my daily life in the U.S., I've also come to realize that I've taken on responsibilities that go beyond the usual ethics and obligations of research. More precisely, the permission I received to enter the field came with expectations: folding T-shirts, setting up tables, and making sure the merchandise ran smoothly. During events, my focus was often on how to carry out these tasks effectively and collaboratively with my interlocutors. Sometimes, I was even the only person running

the merchandise table—if I didn’t do it, it simply wouldn’t get done. I wasn’t just documenting the event—I was part of it, shaped by responsibilities that had become intertwined with my sense of self. I felt pride, satisfaction, and a sense of accomplishment when our team succeeded, just as I felt frustration, disappointment, or even defensiveness when I failed to complete a task or when things didn’t go as planned. At times, I also felt the fatigue of physical and emotional labor. On especially exhausting days, I found myself withdrawing, turning to my phone instead of attending closely to the field around me.

At the end of 2023, as I was struggling to finish my dissertation, these responsibilities began to feel like an obstacle to my academic progress, leading to frustration and self-doubt. I often worried that I wasn’t collecting enough information, or that my experiences were too limited, because I frequently occupied the same role at events. I also felt guilty for having emotions and for mentally drifting off during fieldwork, as if these moments compromised my objectivity and professionalism as a researcher. I felt pressured to attain a more “holistic” understanding of the field—and that pressure often left me feeling anxious. In these moments, it was also my mentors and friends in the field who acknowledged my concerns but also reminded me that, before being a researcher, I am a human being. I came to understand this as an invitation to embrace my own vulnerability and limitations, to recognize the complexity and complicity within individuals and communities, and to interact with people with humility and multiple responsibilities.

I began to ask myself: If I focused on “collecting” knowledge, was I engaging in an act of extraction—one that risked betraying the trust granted to me through their

permission to be there? Was I viewing my interlocutors as data sources meant to fulfill the requirements of my doctoral program, or as mentors and peers in relationships grounded in mutual respect—relationships that carry the full responsibilities of being human? At the 2024 ICTMD Oceania Chapter Conference, Fran Lujan, after attending my presentation, turned to the audience of scholars—many of whom study the music of Oceania—and said, “We Pacific Islanders are not your metadata.” Her words reminded me once again of the centrality of relationships. As Shawn Wilson writes in building an Indigenous research paradigm, Indigenous axiology is rooted in relationship: “What is more important and meaningful is fulfilling a role and obligations in the research relationship—that is, being accountable to your relations” (Wilson 2008: 113). Taken together, these reflections and the guidance of my mentors and friends pulled me back to the everyday relationships and responsibilities that emerged through these daily interactions.

Focusing on everyday relationality has helped me show up as a whole person—someone who carries multiple identities and responsibilities: an East Asian, settler-colonizer Han-Taiwanese woman working alongside Pacific Islander individuals and communities in Southern California; a team member engaged through shared labor, care, and responsibility; and a researcher accountable to the ethical demands of academic work. Importantly, this does not mean I am merely a friend or mentee to my interlocutors—such a framing would obscure the power I carry as a researcher. Rather, being aware of the multiple roles I inhabit enables me to recognize the structural inequities between researcher and researched, and to take seriously my responsibilities as a human being within the research relationship. This relational approach also allows me to carry the responsibilities

of being a Han settler-colonizer in Taiwan into my fieldwork, prompting me to ask how what I've learned in the U.S. might contribute meaningfully to Taiwan. I navigate the tensions among these roles in my everyday practice, continually balancing their responsibilities, expectations, and ethical demands as a whole human being. In recognizing this, I describe my approach as an everyday relational methodology.

Derived from this fieldwork methodology, my ethnographic approach draws from Deborah Wong's concept of performative ethnography (2008), which positions the researcher as part of the subject of study—valuing their own experiences and emotions while making transparent their position in the field. While I reveal aspects of myself in this dissertation, this does not mean I position myself as the protagonist or central narrator. Rather, I situate myself as someone who learns from and benefits from the knowledge generously shared by my interlocutors, shaped through our ongoing, everyday relationships. This intention comes from my emphasis on my interlocutors as theorists in their own right—individuals who articulate their experiences through their own terms, metaphors, and insights. I see myself as someone who learns and asks for permission to translate these forms of knowledge into academic expression. To reflect this in my writing, and following Margot Weiss's (2021) reminders of academic conventions in writing that reproduce disciplinary hierarchies, I center my interlocutors' voices as the foundation for theoretical construction and cite them by last name or stage name throughout this dissertation in the same way I cite published scholars.

This ethnographic approach also allows me to express my appreciation for scholars whose work and presence have deeply influenced me—extending beyond this fieldwork

and the boundaries of academia. Native Hawaiian ethnomusicologist Sunaina Keonaona Kale and Māori (Cook Islands) scholar Melodie Turori have offered insights that shaped both the intellectual and ethical foundations of this project. Kale's research on Hawai'i's reggae (Kale 2017; 2021; 2024) provides the historical grounding for my study, while Turori's discussion of Southern California Pacific Islanders' Indigeneity (Turori 2022a; 2022b) has informed my theorization of continental islandness. Beyond their scholarship, their support and generosity have taught me valuable lessons about what it means to be a better person. Their actions have inspired me to carry these values into both my scholarly and everyday practices.

Centering everyday relationality in my fieldwork and ethnography also brings limitations. Because this fieldwork has become part of my daily life, I have chosen not to disclose certain conflicts or stories—either because doing so could harm the community if shared outside the appropriate context, or because my interlocutors are simply not willing to share them publicly. My decision to withhold these stories may risk making this dissertation appear overly idealized. Still, I choose not to include them, as I do not have permission to share them, and I acknowledge that I may not be the right person to tell those stories. While I am confident that the parts I am able to share reflect careful analysis and scholarly engagement with both structural and individual complexities, I recognize that this research remains limited in scope. However, I do not view this as a shortcoming. My research reflects my everyday interactions with the community—it was never intended to be comprehensive or all-encompassing. I also argue that the stories that may seem idealized

are no less real; they reveal resilience and strength and reflect the wisdom that continues to guide the community.

Lastly, I must acknowledge that even though I am writing about the stories of Southern Californian Pacific Islanders, I am writing this dissertation as a Taiwanese from Taiwan, my home island, the country I will always be proud of, and an identity I will forever carry. The society and politics of my country have deeply shaped my research perspectives and the way I write. This dissertation was written amid the anxiety, insecurity, and fear over Taiwan's future under ongoing internal unrest and the omnipresent threats from China. As I wrote, I watched my friends in Taiwan return to the streets to protest, practice civil defense, and engage in political debates—while still maintaining their everyday lives—all as I continued working on this project.

This is the context in which this dissertation was born. Sometimes I feel a sense of guilt toward my interlocutors for not being able to devote myself fully to this writing, even as they generously shared their life stories with me. But I hold close the words of Fran Lujan—Auntie Fran—who reminded me: “You are not only living in academic time.” Yes, the time outside academia—the time I spent with my friends in the Island Block Network and Pacific Island Ethnic Art Museum—is more important than this dissertation, and this time will continue.

My dissertation starts from here.

Introduction

On the night of November 8, 2025, I stood in the audience pit of the largest room at the House of Blues in Anaheim, watching the show by the island reggae band Common Kings. Formed and based in Southern California, the band's members all traced their ancestries to Oceania, including Hawai'i, Samoa, Fiji, Kiribati, and Tonga. Known for their energetic blend of rock music, Common Kings ignited the crowd, who danced wildly under warm-toned and strobe stage lights. As winter approached, the night was chilly, but the massive, enthusiastic crowd made the room feel intensely warm. Suddenly, the giant screen on stage turned blue—an image of ocean water, bright and clear, with a rolling wave filled the entire screen. The atmosphere cooled for a moment, but the crowd surged with excitement and began screaming. Everyone knew what was coming. “Wade in Your Water” (2013)—one of Common Kings' most popular songs, and the second-most-streamed island reggae track on Spotify—was about to begin.

“Wade In Your Water” was a romantic song that praised a surfer woman whom the protagonist met on a beach in Hawai'i—a popular theme in island reggae music that framed a love story against the backdrop of the ocean and island life. Set to a gentle melody with a simple instrumental arrangement that highlighted the emotion in the vocals, the lyrics used a familiar metaphor to describe the woman's beauty: water. These were the first verse and chorus of the lyrics:

Sponsored by Billabong, surfer girl
Type a girl I like feel up on, in the water
Really wanna rock her boat, like a
Hurricane in a perfect storm, lawd

Ask her where she gone away to
Said a Haleiwa
Said she love the North Shore
Bikini top
Black Scotts
And them board shorts
Paddle out, paddle out
Can I wade in your water
Can I wade in your water
Can I wade in your water (can I wade)
Until I catch your wave

The terms water, hurricane, storm, sea, wave, falls, and pipeline, along with the verbs paddle out, float, and surf, constructed the image of a surfer girl and established a vivid oceanic backdrop. More importantly, they functioned as sexual metaphors to express desire and highlight the woman's allure. The lyrics also referenced several locations in Hawai'i—Hale'iwa, Laie, and Waimea—all well-known surf spots on the North Shore of O'ahu. These place names helped the listener visualize the narrative more clearly and evoked a longing for Hawai'i—its scenic beauty, ideal surfing shores, and the romantic fantasy of a love story with a Hawaiian woman. I still remembered the first time I listened to this song—my first impression had been, “Wow, so erotic.” I had assumed the live performance would follow that tone, perhaps the stage screen presenting a love story accompanied by images of women set against an island backdrop, as portrayed in the lyrics. But I was wrong.

When the band began to play, the screen displayed a continuous video of gently rippling seawater illuminated by sunlight filtering beneath the surface. Bathed in white stage lights, the entire audience seemed as if they were being embraced by the ocean. As a person walked on stage holding a large Hawaiian flag, the crowd erupted in a loud

cheehoo—a celebratory cheer rooted in Samoan expression. Almost instinctively—as if they had lived this moment a thousand times—everyone raised their hands, forming open palms or shaka gestures, and waved them in sync with the flag’s movement. The audience sang loudly in unison as the Hawaiian flag continued to wave across the stage. What had begun as an erotic love song, “Wade in Your Water” transformed into a tribute to Hawai‘i in this performance. In that moment, the “you” in “Wade in Your Water” unmistakably referred to Hawai‘i itself. The chorus became a kind of collective vow to the Kingdom of Hawai‘i. Though Common Kings did not say anything explicitly, the performance stood as a powerful assertion of Native Hawaiian sovereignty.



Image 1: The live performance of “Wade In Your Water” by Common Kings.

From Common Kings’ performance of “Wade in Your Water” at the House of Blues in Anaheim, we see that Southern California is home to a strong diasporic Pacific Islander community—one that resists the coloniality of Oceania with a deep sense of pride in their

heritage from the islands. Island reggae performances serve as a platform for expressing and affirming that identity, and as a space for practicing cultural traditions on the continent. Meanwhile, since Common Kings is the iconic Southern California band known for blending rock, hip hop, and dancehall with reggae, and for collaborating with diasporic African and Latino musicians, island reggae music also tells a story of living on the continent. Furthermore, their song, using natural elements from the islands as metaphors for love and women's beauty, can be seen as a dedication to their island identity—yet this presentation is rooted in sexualized female bodies viewed through a heterosexual male gaze. The portrayals of island scenery seem to replicate the exoticized stereotype of the island as a tourist paradise with beautiful Islander women.

My dissertation examines island reggae music to explore how diasporic Pacific Islanders perform their Indigeneity and assert sovereignty—drawing inspiration from, and forming alliances with, the musical resistance of other racially marginalized communities in the U.S. I also investigate the strategies diasporic Pacific Islanders use to resist, subvert, or collaborate with but redefine ongoing forms of colonial oppression in order to survive within a capitalist and individualist society. I argue that the identity they perform through island reggae is rooted in Indigeneity, and also shaped by their cultural, racial, ethnic, and gender identities as formed through experiences on the continent. I theorize their performance and construction of their identities in the diaspora through two concepts: “continental islandness” and “island-making.”

This dissertation asks: *How has performing island reggae music enabled diasporic Pacific Islanders in Southern California to recontextualize, reclaim, and redefine their*

Indigeneity for identity negotiation within the U.S.-based Black-White racial dichotomy?

By addressing this question, I argue that diasporic Pacific Islanders—through their practices of Indigeneity—present an identity that reflects the Southern Californian context of race, ethnicity, gender, and class that still stems from an Indigenous worldview. This identity honors ancestral practices and genealogy by opening a sonic space of island on the continent through musical performance.

Background

According to the 2020 Census,¹ California has the largest Native Hawaiian and Pacific Islander population (337,617 people) in the continental United States. In Southern California—spanning Los Angeles, San Bernardino, Orange, Riverside, and San Diego counties—148,317 individuals self-identified as Pacific Islanders, making it the largest Pacific Islander community on the continent. Within this community, Native Hawaiians, Samoans, and Chamoru people make up the three largest groups, followed by Fijians and Tongans.² Although the Fijian population is larger than the Tongan population, Tongans are relatively active in the Southern Californian island reggae scene.³ The most popular music they perform is called island reggae, which has a close relationship with the island

¹ See 2020 Census: <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2023/09/2020-census-dhc-a-nhpi-population.html>

² See California State of AANHPIs Report on June 2022: https://aapidata.com/wp-content/uploads/2024/02/CA_State_of_AANHPIs_Report_2022.pdf

³ I hypothesize that this may be related to the fact that Southern California island reggae shares the music market predominantly with the Polynesian music market. Based on an interview with my Fijian friend Miri, the reggae artists she listens to differ from those who are prominent in the island reggae scenes of Southern California and Hawai‘i.

music⁴ scene of Hawai‘i, but also has its Southern California roots. This music is a unique fusion of many popular music genres—including Hawai‘i’s island music, Oceanic popular music, roots reggae from Jamaica, rock music, hip-hop, and R&B —and reflects their diasporic experience in the continental U.S. Living away from their homelands, Pacific Islanders often perform island reggae as a way of storytelling to express their identities and build communities, helping them adapt and thrive on the continent.

The Brief History of Pacific Islanders’ Migration in California

The migration of Native Hawaiian, Samoan, and Chamoru people to the continental United States can be traced back to the 19th century, and for Native Hawaiians, even as early as the 18th century (Munoz 1979; Edinger-Marshall 2000; Gershon 2012; Bennett 2021; Barman & Watson 2006). Native Hawaiians started arriving in the Pacific Northwest as early as 1787, many recruited as seamen or fur trade laborers (Barman & Watson 2006). By the early to mid-19th century, Native Hawaiians were already working in California as sailors and laborers in fisheries, agriculture, and during the Gold Rush (Spickard et al. 2002: 2). Chamoru people also traveled to California and Hawai‘i via whaling ships in the late 19th century and early 20th century (Bennett 2021; Munoz 1979). This migration continued into the 20th century, especially as the United States expanded its settler-colonial occupation of Pacific territories—annexing Hawai‘i in 1898,

⁴ Island music refers to the mainstream reggae genre that developed in Hawai‘i. It originated from Native Hawaiians’ fusion of traditional Hawaiian musical elements with Jamaican roots reggae and was initially known as “Jawaiian music” in the 1980s (Kale 2021). The term “island music” was introduced in 1991 as a rebranding of “Jawaiian” (ibid.). I will provide a review of this history later in the first chapter.

claiming Guam from Spain in 1898, occupying the Northern Mariana Islands in 1944, and establishing control over American Samoa in 1899.

Migration to the U.S. has been driven by both push and pull factors. On the one hand, militarism, racism, economic restructuring, dispossession, forced relocation, and increasing immigration reshaped island life (Munoz 1979; Gershon 2012; Bennett 2021; Lewthwaite et al. 1973; Braun et al. 2021). On the other hand, access to higher education, better job opportunities, and healthcare in the continental U.S. drew many Islanders to migrate (ibid.). Following the land loss and resource restrictions led by military and settler occupation, many Native Hawaiians, Samoans, and Chamoru people joined the military or worked in U.S. colonial bureaucracies (Munoz 1979; Lewthwaite, Mainzer & Holland 1973; Braun, Brown, et al. 2020). After World War II, significant waves of migration from Samoa and Guam were driven by individuals who served in the military or worked in government institutions and tended to be trained in California (Munoz 1979; Gershon 2012; Bennett 2021; Braun, Brown, et al. 2020). Increased access to higher education also contributed to this movement (Munoz 1979; Gershon 2012; Bennett 2021; Braun, Brown, et al. 2020). The largest migration wave began in the 1960s, when California's growing demand for labor brought Chamoru people into agricultural work and Samoans into urban sectors such as nursing, factory labor, and dock work in Los Angeles (Munoz 1979; Gershon 2012; Bennett 2021).

All of my interviewees are either first- or second-generation⁵ Pacific Islanders born and raised in the continental U.S. Therefore, this dissertation focuses on people from the migration waves that occurred after the 1960s and 1970s, specifically on their children—the generation who experienced their teenage years in the 1980s and 1990s—and their grandchildren, now in their twenties and early thirties.

Southern Californian Island Reggae: Island Heritage on the Continent

The island reggae music scene in Southern California began with Pacific Islander youths in the 1990s. These youths grew up with the island music from their parents' collections. They were also deeply influenced by Jamaican reggae, hip-hop, and R&B—the dominant popular music genres disseminated through mass media and within their neighborhoods in Greater Los Angeles. With these early influences, their music expressed experiences of growing up in Los Angeles as Pacific Islanders—a socio-economically marginalized community striving to establish themselves amid nostalgia, underrepresentation, racial discrimination, police brutality, and gang violence. Drawing inspiration from popular musical genres that narrated Afro-diasporic struggles and resistance in urban life, these Pacific Islanders formed alliances with African American and Afro-Caribbean communities instead of with Asian American communities, despite the official racial category of AAPI (separated in the 1997 census). Combining their

⁵ My interlocutors count generations beginning with the first generation born and raised in the U.S., which differs from the common generational framework in Asian communities, where generations are typically counted from those who first immigrated and settled in the U.S.

Pacific heritage with their continental experience, island reggae became the symbol and a way of storytelling of their Indigeneity in Southern California.

The desire to perform their Indigeneity relates to the circumstances of diasporic Islanders in the U.S. Many diasporic Islanders migrated to the U.S. with their families. The family bond passes a strong identity of being Indigenous Islanders to the next generation, and many of them remain engaged in the sovereignty movements back on their islands. However, the different environment and the force of cultural assimilation also make it hard for U.S.-grown Islanders to practice their island cultures. As such, many of them are often considered “inauthentic” or “less Indigenous” because of different cultural practices or merely because of their diasporic position. From the interview with Samoan artist Kiana “Kiki” Rivera⁶, they told me that when they first moved to California, they noticed that identifying and proving their Pacificanness became important—something they had never needed to do while living in Hawai‘i, where they had simply “lived through it.”

Furthermore, the high travel expenses make it hard to return to their islands frequently, and many U.S.-born Islanders have never been to their islands. Therefore, performing Indigeneity in island reggae helps them feel connected to their islands, not only easing their nostalgia but also creating a sense of belonging for their descendants in the diaspora. This island reggae scene offers a public space that is shared among all Pacific Islanders from different islands. Although they come from diverse backgrounds, the shared marginalized experiences in U.S. racial politics urge them to ally as Pacific

⁶ Kiana “Kiki” Rivera, interview by the author, April 4, 2023.

Islanders. In this context, performing island reggae becomes a means of empowerment in both their lives in the U.S. and their bonds with their people in/from the Pacific.

Island reggae was initially performed in Pacific Islander-owned lounge bars for their communities. As the local spaces were gradually replaced by professionally operated live music venues and with the explosion of Hawai'i's island reggae scene in Southern California between the 2000s and 2010s, these musicians also gained more access to for-profit live music venues, including major reggae festivals and House of Blues, the national live venue chain owned by a large international live music corporation, namely Live Nation. Moreover, this resulted in a growing number of Pacific Islander-themed music festivals, such as the *Island Vibe Festival* (since 2010).

This transition from local clubs to chain live venues and large-scale festivals conforms to Fabian Holt's (2020) concept of the commercial institutionalization of live music spaces, moving from community-based to commercial-based environments. Holt states, "The institutionalization of musical performance as a commodity is an outcome of capitalism" (ibid.: 2). Indeed, in order to schedule performances in commercial spaces, cultural commodification is common within the island reggae scene—even in broader cultural businesses such as dance schools. However, this serves as a strategy for survival in the continental U.S., allowing Pacific Islanders to support their families and maintain their cultural practices.

The use of reggae in commercial contexts is often criticized as apolitical, inauthentic, or culturally appropriative, rather than being seen as a practice of alliance with Black communities. However, through community service and the concerts they organize,

diasporic Pacific Islanders demonstrate that they continue to maintain strong connections with Black communities. Island reggae remains political—“Wade in Your Water,” for example, conveys a political message even when framed as an erotic love song. The genealogical praxis of Pacific Islanders is a prominent feature of their reggae performances. Their dedication to and prioritization of their communities are consistently at the forefront, and their involvement in asserting sovereignty in their homelands remains ongoing.

The Scholarship of Southern California Pacific Islander Studies

While many studies on the Pacific Islander diaspora have focused on migration within Oceania—particularly to Hawai‘i, Aotearoa New Zealand, and Australia—the role of the continental U.S., especially Southern California, as a key destination has received attention slowly but gradually. An early example of ethnographic work on Pacific Islanders in the U.S. is Cathy A. Small’s *Voyages: From Tongan Villages to American Suburbs* (1997 [2011]), which examines the Tongan diaspora in Northern California. Although this scholarship is limited, Pacific Islanders in California have often been highlighted for rethinking Pacific Indigeneity through mobility (Diaz & Kauanui 2001; Kauanui 2007; White & Tengan 2001; Hall 2015). The U.S. diaspora has also been used in case studies, often addressed as one node within broader trans-Pacific migratory routes, rather than being the central geographic focus of a single study (Henderson 2010; 2016; Lee, H. & Francis 2009; Lee, H. 2019; Camacho 2021). Studies focusing on the U.S. also tend to be article-length. An early collection dedicated to Pacific Islander Americans, *Pacific Diaspora: Island Peoples in the United States and Across the Pacific*,

edited by Paul Spickard, Joanne L. Rondilla, and Debbie Hippolite Wright, was published in 2002 (Spickard et al. 2002). Other works appear primarily as journal articles or as chapters in edited volumes on global Pacific Islander migration or Asian American studies.

Moreover, existing studies on diasporic Pacific Islanders in the continental U.S. often focus on a single ethnic group. A significant portion centers on Native Hawaiian migration, typically framed within a U.S.-wide context rather than focusing specifically on California, although California is frequently acknowledged as an important site (Edinger-Marshall 2000; Barman & Watson 2006; Aikau 2010; Troutman 2016). Research on the Samoan diaspora represents a significant area within Pacific Island studies, with much of this research highlighting California, particularly Southern California, as a key site (Lilomaiaava-Doktor 2009; Henderson 2010; 2016; Gershon 2012; Uperesa 2022).

Although limited in quantity, existing research has been conducted from rich and diverse perspectives across various disciplines, including ethnomusicology, history, anthropology, Indigenous studies, ethnic studies, and gender and sexuality studies. This body of scholarship explores themes including community formation, the continuity of Indigenous cultural practices in new environments, and resistance to and navigation of colonial and social oppression—both in Oceania and the U.S.—particularly in relation to health, politics, religion, sports, and cultural expression. Fuifuiupe Niumeitolu (2019) offers a sustained, dissertation-length study of how colonial constructions of gender normativity instilled in religious institutions continue to shape the Tongan American

community in California. Similarly, Fa‘anofo Lisacaire (Lisa) Uperesa’s *Gridiron Capital: How American Football Became a Samoan Game* (2022) stands out as a book-length ethnography that examines how the Samoan body is shaped by sport and colonial legacies both in Samoa and in diaspora. While her research spans multiple regions across the U.S., Southern California emerges as one of the key sites where these narratives unfold.

Among this scholarship, a specific focus on Southern California has grown. Native Hawaiian scholar Kēhaulani Vaughn (2019) uses the treaty between Native Hawaiians and Native Americans in Southern California to argue for the continual practices of Native Hawaiians’ kuleana—positionality and obligations—in diaspora. Cook Islands Māori researcher Melodie Turori (Turori 2022a; 2022b) conducts research specifically on the continual practice of Indigeneity from the Pacific Islands to Southern California. Through the autoethnography of her own migration and art experience, she examines how Pacific temporal and spatial concepts are carried forward in the lives of Pacific Islander immigrants.

Building on the work of previous scholars, my music research contributes a new perspective by centering Pacific Islanders as a community and foregrounding how the specific locality of Southern California informs and shapes their ongoing practices of Indigeneity. This focus on place allows for a deeper understanding of how diasporic Indigeneity is practiced and negotiated within particular settler-colonial geographies. Additionally, this research focuses on how Pacific Islander immigrants use a Pacific-centered perspective to understand the U.S., engaging with it not merely as a context or

destination but as a continuity of home. Rather than framing their experiences solely as reactions or adaptations to a new place, this perspective highlights critical and agentic engagements rooted in Pacific ways of knowing—challenging dominant narratives of the U.S. and contributing meaningfully to American studies.

Furthermore, beginning with Pacific Islanders as a community helps explain how settler-colonial geographies shape their identities, and reveals how diaspora serves as a site for forming Pacific Islander identity in ways that contribute to the broader solidarity sought across Oceania. As Pacific Islander migration continues to grow in the continental U.S., where Pacific Islanders are not the majority in population size or racial hierarchy, their cross-ethnic connections to build a larger Pacific Islander community in the diaspora have become increasingly significant. For example, in my interviews with Kiana “Kiki” Rivera⁷ and Ryan “Jah Gumby” Murakami,⁸ the founder of Hawaiian reggae band Ooklah The Moc, they both told me that they never had to identify themselves as “Pacific Islanders” while living in Hawai‘i; they simply identified as Samoan or Hawaiian. It wasn’t until Kiki moved to Southern California that they felt the need to adopt a broader Pacific Islander identity—and to assert their cultural knowledge as a means of self-determination and community empowerment. Kiki’s experience illustrates how the formation of a Pacific Islander community can emerge as a response to the pressures of navigating Southern California’s racial demographics. Simultaneously, this solidarity, built through the formation of Pacific Islander identity, contributes to a powerful

⁷ Kiana “Kiki” Rivera, interview by the author, April 4, 2023.

⁸ Ryan “Jah Gumby” Murakami, interview by the author, July 28, 2022.

engagement with Oceania—such as Common Kings’ performance of “Wade in Your Water,” which can be seen as part of the growing momentum for Hawaiian sovereignty. This underscores the importance of examining the region’s environmental and social dynamics to understand how geographic, political, and cultural landscapes shape Pacific Islander diasporic experiences and their impact back home.

My music research emphasizes the importance of music within the scholarship on Pacific Islanders in California. Music remains underexamined in this field, and even within broader scholarship focused on Pacific Islanders in the U.S. One notable exception is Kevin Fellezs’s article, “From the Island of Berkeley: Hawaiian Belonging in California” (2020), which examines Hawaiian slack key guitar music in Northern California. His work demonstrates how music can serve as a means to contextualize Native Hawaiian Indigeneity in the continental U.S. Despite the limited scope of this scholarship, popular culture—especially music—is, as Fellezs argues, crucial for Native Hawaiian immigrants, specifically for Californian-born descendants, to access and reconnect with their cultural roots.

Building on Fellezs’s argument and extending it to the broader Pacific Islander community, I argue that popular music not only provides a means for Pacific Islanders to access their cultures but also serves as a unifying force. While embracing their cultural multiplicity, Pacific Islanders find in popular music—especially genres with strong ties to the Pacific Islands, such as island reggae—a form that evokes a sense of home. Island reggae, in particular, offers a unique space for identification because it derives from Afro-Jamaicans’ expressive culture. This origin allows island reggae to serve as a flexible

and inclusive form of cultural expression—one that enables Pacific Islanders from diverse ethnic backgrounds to articulate their own senses of home and belonging. In this way, popular music becomes a shared space where Pacific Islanders can connect across differences and celebrate their multiplicity.

Moreover, the accessibility of popular music fosters broader participation across Pacific Islander communities. Unlike traditional practices that may require specific cultural, linguistic, or religious knowledge, popular music—particularly island reggae—does not carry such prerequisites. Island reggae performances, usually held in public formats at commercial venues, typically cost less than \$50 to attend and require no prior cultural familiarity. These events provide welcoming and inclusive spaces where Southern California Pacific Islanders can gather, participate, and celebrate a shared sense of identity. Therefore, through this dissertation, I contend that studying popular music offers a lens to examine how diasporic Pacific Islanders come together to foster a shared identity and community to engage with the settler-colonial geography of Southern California—and how this diasporic identity, in turn, engages with the ongoing coloniality in Oceania.

The Black Pacific

Reggae arrived in Oceania in the late 1970s as part of its global circulation (Clough 2012; Cattermole 2014). Its popularity in the region created a space for Indigenous musical resistance and laid the groundwork for the later embrace of hip hop (White 2009). Scholars discussing reggae's transnational circulation often contextualize the

genre within a global resonance with African struggles. Oceanic reggae, in particular, functions as a transnational conversation between the struggles of Indigenous peoples, Africans, and diasporic communities (Lipsitz 1994; Alvarez 2008; Shilliam 2015).

To address the cultural intersections and interactions between Indigenous and Black communities, Pacific studies scholars have adopted the term Black Pacific⁹, drawing inspiration from Paul Gilroy's concept of Black Atlantic (1993). This concept has been used to describe the interactions between Pacific Islanders and diasporic Black communities across various geopolitical and historical contexts in Oceania, and to articulate forms of political power capable of challenging colonial hegemony (Shilliam 2012; 2015; Solis 2015; Webb-Gannon, Webb, and Solis 2018; Sharma 2021). In these discussions, Black Pacific has been employed to foreground Black political influences on Indigenous activism, Indigenous communities' engagements with global Black movements, and the situated racial experiences of diasporic African-descended peoples in Oceania.

In the studies of Oceanic reggae, ethnomusicologists have primarily used the term Black Pacific to examine how Blackness is articulated through the adoption of Black musical expressions by Indigenous communities. Given the varying forms of colonization and the imposed Black–White racial hierarchy in Oceania, Pacific Islander communities

⁹ The concept of the Black Pacific is not only enacted within the Oceanic realm but has also been widely applied across the broader Pacific region—including the Asian Pacific and Latin American Pacific—to address various discourses on diasporic African influence in historical, political, and sociocultural contexts. For instance, in the North Asian Pacific, the Black Pacific has been invoked to imagine a decolonial and antiracist space emerging from Asia–Africa connections (Taketani 2007). In South America, scholars have employed the concept of the Black Pacific to expand the Black Atlantic's focus on dual affiliations with Africa and the West, using it to theorize the complex relationships among Creole communities, Indigenous cultures, and the Black Atlantic (Ritter 2011; Feldman 2005).

have undergone distinct colonial and racial trajectories. This body of scholarship underscores how these differences shape diverse and situated articulations of diasporic African music. In Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand, reggae has served as a medium for expressing Pan-Africanism and forging connections with global solidarities among colonized and migrant peoples (Dunbar-Hall & Gibson 2004; Cattermole 2013, 2014; White 2009; Belich, T. S. 2024). In Melanesia, reggae is understood as a form of resistance to colonialism and as a platform for articulating a pan-Melanesian identity—one that increasingly resonates with Black identity (Webb-Gannon & Webb 2019, 2020). Regarding the racial meaning and function of Black music for Pacific Islanders, Gabriel Solis's (2015) research traces the colonial racial formation in Oceania and argues that Pacific Islanders borrow Black music as a way of racial self-identification for engaging with modernity, either to address ongoing colonial oppression or to facilitate postcolonial national construction.

In California, while diasporic Pacific Islanders resonate with African struggles in a different form, racial identification remains a vital means of engaging with modernity, as Solis argues (*ibid.*). Through everyday interactions, Pacific Islanders have formed close relationships with African American and Afro-Caribbean communities, becoming neighbors, friends, and family. However, under the racial norms of the U.S., Blackness is not the racial identity ascribed to them; thus, the nature of their resonance and engagement with Black communities differs from that of their peers in Oceania. Still, the alliances with Blackness forged through these friendships and neighborhood ties continue to serve as a mode of engaging with modernity and a form of anti-colonial resistance in

their U.S. experiences—echoing Solis’s insights of Black Pacific. By examining the dynamics and alliances formed between Pacific Islanders and Black communities in Southern California, my dissertation offers a new perspective on the Black Pacific—one that moves in the opposite direction, as it takes shape within the home of African American communities: the United States.

The Oceanic Reggae Scholarship

As with other research fields on the Pacific Islander diaspora, current research on Pacific Islanders’ reggae and broader popular music primarily focuses on cases within Oceania and often centers on a single ethnic group. In the continental U.S., where Pacific Islander migration continues to grow yet remains a minority within the overall population and racial hierarchy, their pan-Pacific Islander musical expressions and the trans-Pacific circulation of their music have become increasingly significant for self-determination and political engagement. Hence, my research extends the genealogy of Oceanic reggae scholarship by examining the broader formation of Pacific Islander identity (White 2009; Alvarez 2008; Cattermole 2013; Kale 2021), while also engaging with literature on diaspora and trans-Pacific circulation in Oceanic popular music studies (Henderson 2010; Troutman 2016; Diettrich 2016; Fellezs 2019; 2020).

Given the close relationship between the Southern California island reggae scene and the island music scene in Hawai‘i, this dissertation specifically follows existing scholarship on Hawai‘i’s reggae, which argues Native Hawaiians negotiate with locality and perform Indigeneity through the form of popular music (Stillman 1998; Weintraub

1998; Ho‘omanawanui 2006; Kale 2021; 2024). I build upon Sunaina Keonaona Kale’s (2021) groundbreaking dissertation on reggae in Hawai‘i, the first comprehensive academic study of Hawai‘i’s reggae. Her insights into the performance of Indigeneity through popular music, along with the foundation she established in documenting Hawaiian reggae history, serve as a crucial reference point for my work. This research would not have been possible without her generosity in sharing her dissertation with me before it was made publicly available.

This dissertation responds to Kale’s (2021) work by asking: What happens when Hawai‘i’s reggae music travels to Southern California and merges with the musical expressions of diasporic Pacific Islanders there? This study represents the first written documentation of Southern California Pacific Islanders’ popular music, examining how Indigeneity has been shaped and transformed by Islanders’ connections to both Oceania and the U.S. continent—and, more specifically, by the intersections between Indigeneity and Blackness within island reggae.

Research Method

Within an emphasis on the everyday relationship with the Pacific Islander community in Southern California, my fieldwork heavily relies on anthropological research methods such as participant observation, interviews, oral history, storytelling, and multi-sited ethnographic fieldwork to understand how, what, and why diasporic Pacific Islanders are singing, listening, talking, sensing, and thinking within Southern

California's island reggae music scene. Over the past four years of conducting fieldwork in Southern California—including counties of Los Angeles, Orange, and Riverside, and San Diego—as well as six weeks in O'ahu, Hawai'i, I have collected thirty-five interviews with musicians, audience members, and music industry workers, including managers, concert promoters, artists, cultural workers, curators, and museum staff and directors.

Since September 2021, I have been voluntarily working in multiple positions to engage with the Islander community. I work as a concert assistant at *Island Block Network*, a media and entertainment company in Carson that broadcasts for Pacific Islander communities and constantly supports emerging Pacific musicians. From this assistant position, I have assisted in concerts approximately once a month and participated in multiple festivals, such as the *Mai Thai Festival* in Long Beach, the *Samoan Heritage Day* in Carson, and the *Pacific Island Festival* in San Diego. Also, I attend other reggae genre concerts and music festivals, such as the *Cali Vibes Festival*, to observe the relationships between Pacific Islanders' reggae and the broader reggae scene. In order to draw a connection between the reggae scene and the Pacific Islander community, I also volunteer at the *Pacific Island Ethnic Art Museum (PIEAM)* with events and exhibitions. *PIEAM* is the community center of Southern Californian Pacific Islanders and the only museum specializing in curating Austronesian cultures on the continental U.S. I also assisted the concert series called *Jam Sessions* in *PIEAM* with *Island Block Network* from October 2022 to April 2023.

I do not speak my interlocutors' native languages, including 'Ōlelo Hawai'i, Gagana Samoa, Fino' Chamoru, and Lea Faka-Tonga. The primary language I used for communication was English, which is also the main language used by my interlocutors in their daily lives. While this did not hinder everyday communication, my lack of knowledge of their native languages posed a significant limitation during fieldwork, especially when culturally specific terms or phrases were used. This limitation also affected my ability to fully grasp my interlocutors' worldviews, as language reflects ways of thinking. Although learning these languages is a goal for my future research, for this dissertation, I shared my writings with my interlocutors to confirm the accuracy of terms and ensure that their thoughts were represented correctly. I also thank Māori (Cook Islands) scholar Melodie Turori for reviewing my dissertation and offering feedback on conceptual development.

Theoretical Framework: Continental Islandness and Island-Making

To illustrate the self-determination of diasporic Pacific Islanders in Southern California through island reggae music, my dissertation introduces two intertwined concepts: continental islandness and island-making. Continental islandness, adapted from decolonial island studies' discussions of islandness—the characteristics of islands and the condition of being an islander (Baldacchino 2004)—describes an identity formed at the intersection of diasporic Pacific Islander Indigeneity and lived experience on the continent. In this context, island reggae music and performance exemplify continental islandness. Island-making refers to the performative expression of continental islandness.

I argue that when diasporic Pacific Islanders perform continental islandness through island reggae, they are actively creating an island space on the continent—one that sustains and renews the continuity of continental islandness.

These two concepts focus on the geographic and metaphorical spaces inhabited and created by Southern California Pacific Islanders. They are inspired by a common metaphor used among diasporic Pacific Islanders, who often describe their gatherings or homes in California as “islands” within the continent. For instance, when my interlocutors mention their home city in Southern California, they tend to frame the city as “the island of Long Beach” or “the island of Carson.” California Native Hawaiian slack key guitarist, Patrick Landeza, refers to himself as being from “the island of Berkeley” (Fellezs 2020: 77), a powerful affirmation of his California Native Hawaiian identity. From these expressions, I observe that identifying as Islanders is central to their sense of self.

The geographical differences in the two terms highlight the relationality that diasporic Islanders build with the continent and islands. In contrast to colonial definitions of Indigeneity based on genomic science and blood quantum—which tend to racialize and undermine Indigenous sovereignty—my theoretical approach aligns with Indigenous scholars such as Kim TallBear (2013) and J. Kēhaulani Kauanui (2008), who emphasize cultural and political relationships among people and with the living landscape as central to defining Indigeneity. Protecting this relationship established by their ancestors, sovereignty is a set of responsibilities to human beings, non-human beings, and environments (Kimmerer 2013; Whyte 2018).

Diasporic Pacific Islanders are aware of the environmental changes brought by geographical transformation, including water, sky, animals, people, demography, and sound, and they respond with the intergenerational knowledge from their islands. One time at PIEAM, the Samoan muralist and graphic artist Jason Pereira explained the design of his project called *Sister Mat*.¹⁰ Drawing on Samoan weaving techniques he learned from a mat preserved by his family, he wove his paintings—depicting California’s native plants and animals, whales, and the ocean—into seating mats intended for community gatherings. My favorite piece featured a painting of California Highway 110 woven together with another piece of native Californian plants. This is how diasporic Pacific Islander artists respond to their Indigenous ancestry in relation to the continent—a performance of continental islandness—with island reggae serving as a parallel response in musical form. For diasporic Islanders, maintaining their genealogy from Oceania and using their ancestral knowledge to build a relationship with the new place is how they practice their Indigeneity, and the responsibility to keep such ancestral knowledge in relationships is their assertion of sovereignty.

Grounded in a framework of relationality, the concepts of continental islandness and island-making aim to reclaim the Indigenous temporality and spatiality of Pacific Islanders on the continent. As queer studies scholar Elizabeth Freeman (2021) notes, “the term temporality registers the collective patterning of stasis and change according to various regimes of power: the politics of our experience of time” (ibid: 234). Drawing on

¹⁰ The images of the *Sister Mat* on Jason Pereira’s Instagram: <https://www.instagram.com/p/CyydimKxnXf/>

Indigenous studies scholars' notions of temporal sovereignty (Lyons 2010; Gniadek 2017; Rifkin 2017; De Vos 2020; Blackwell 2023), this dissertation seeks to use these two concepts to reclaim the right to interpret and experience time and history from the perspective of diasporic Pacific Islanders. Following Indigenous scholar Kim Anderson's (2016) assertion that "what is distinctly Indigenous is the way in which past, present, and future are understood to be inextricably connected" (ibid.: xxvi), I incorporate Māori (Cook Islands) scholar Melodie Turori's (2022b) concept that she created for diasporic Pacific Islanders, *relational time*—a temporality used by Pacific Islander ancestors in their daily lives and life cycles, grounded in multiple, interrelated natural time cycles. I use this framework to theorize continental islandness, arguing that island reggae is where diasporic Pacific Islanders express their interpretation of time—singing stories of family and ancestry that connect the past, present, and future within a relational temporal framework. I will theorize these terms with scholarly discussions of Indigenous temporality in Chapter One.

In my discussion of spatiality, I focus on diasporic Pacific Islanders' understanding of space in Los Angeles and argue that Pacific Islander spatiality shapes how they navigate multiracial environments to assert their Indigeneity and racial identities, build alliances, and create both virtual and physical spaces that I conceptualize as "islands." This island-making process is crucial to their experiences of settlement and to sustaining Pacific Indigeneity within the continental U.S. The discussion of spatiality allows me to examine how Pacific Islanders uphold their island genealogy while engaging with dominant racial

norms in the new environment—an engagement that constitutes their continental islandness—using reggae as a vehicle for cultural and political expression.

This theoretical expansion draws from theories of globalization, cosmopolitanism, urban music studies, and Indigenous spatiality. I apply theories of globalization to frame Los Angeles as a contested zone of multiple identities (Lipsitz 1999; Alvarez 2022), providing a lens through which to examine how diasporic Pacific Islanders have built musical spaces through shared soundscapes and geographic proximity with diasporic African communities—connections shaped by both spatial closeness and common experiences of racial oppression. Drawing on urban spatial research (Johnson, G. T. 2013; Cohen 2012), I analyze how these communities developed sonic engagements with African diasporic popular music by participating in shared sonic spaces, such as radio stations and reggae concerts, alongside African diasporic artists. I turn to studies of Indigenous spatiality and sovereignty (Roth 2009; Robinson 2022) to highlight how diasporic Pacific Islanders navigate these challenges by engaging Indigenous protocols rooted in respect for, and acknowledgment of, the original stewards of the music genres and land. Through this engagement, they continue to affirm their Indigeneity while adapting to new cultural and spatial contexts. Finally, I apply Melodie Turori’s (2022a) concepts of *land within*—which contends that diasporic Pacific Islanders carry the island in their bodies—and *vā*, a Tongan and Samoan term denoting relational space, a concept that has also been described in some other Pacific Island traditions. Turori describes *vā* as the link between ancestral lands and new dwelling places for diasporic Islanders. Together, these concepts reimagine islandness and Indigenous spatiality in diaspora, particularly in Los Angeles. Chapter Two provides

a thorough discussion of the spatiality in the concepts of continental islandness and island-making.

Given the multiplicity of Oceania, the creation of the two concepts—continental islandness and island-making—aims to offer Pacific Islanders living on the continent a theoretical and descriptive framework to articulate their experiences of migration outside Oceania, particularly in regions where they are not the majority. I propose these terms as tools to support the assertion of Pacific Indigeneity in the U.S. context. Since both concepts are rooted in geographic frameworks that address environmental transformation, they are intended to trace the continuity of identity from island to continent. This is especially important for Pacific Islanders whose home islands are not settler colonial states, and whose identities may not always be categorized as Indigenous in conventional terms. At the same time, these concepts help articulate the complexity of Pacific Islander experiences in the continental U.S., where they are not Indigenous to the land, yet their practices remain deeply rooted in their own Indigeneity. Continental islandness in particular provides a way to hold both their rootedness in Pacific epistemologies and their emerging local identities in diaspora. Its geographic foundation also challenges the colonial boundaries of the nation-state by enabling narratives of relationality with the land — both with their ancestral lands, where relational knowledge originates, and with the new lands where that knowledge is practiced.

Moreover, I envision these terms extending beyond Oceania. They may resonate with Islanders who have migrated to continental regions, as well as those who remain on their home islands but live under colonial rule imposed by continental powers and shaped by

continent-centric ideologies. Taiwan is one such case that shaped my thinking: while it is an island, it has long been governed by continental frameworks that disturb its island environment and Indigenous relationships to land. Finally, by focusing on environmental change and spatial discontinuity, these terms may inspire other diasporic communities to substitute “continent” and “island” with geographic metaphors relevant to their own experiences of displacement and belonging.

Literature Review and Contributions

This interdisciplinary and inter-area dissertation contributes to several interrelated fields across Indigenous studies, decolonial island studies, Native Pacific cultural Black studies, critical studies of race, ethnic studies, area studies in Oceania and North America, and Indigenous studies in Taiwan. This section is subdivided into several portions, and finally, I summarize the research outcome of this dissertation as recentering Pacific Islanders in the refusal of subordination to continental centrism.

Indigenous Studies in Taiwan

As a Taiwanese researcher, I consider how my study might contribute to my home. My dissertation broadens Indigenous Studies in Taiwan by focusing on Pacific Islanders, diaspora, Indigenous racialization, and Black-Indigenous alliance. Indigenous studies in Taiwan emphasize the political-cultural alliances between Austronesian communities (Tsai

2011; Acabado & Kuan 2021). This study contributes to creating a dialogue between diasporic Islanders and Taiwanese Indigenous people, broadening the discussion of relationality with the ocean and land in understanding Taiwanese Indigenous cultural sovereignty.

Since the urban Taiwanese Indigenous population exceeds the population in tribes, the mobility and resilience highlighted in diasporic Indigeneity help advance Taiwanese Indigenous studies by theorizing their Indigeneity within the context of diaspora. Additionally, my research into cultural interactions and identity negotiations between islands and the mainland enriches the discussion of the settler-colonial relationship among Taiwanese Indigenous people, Han-Taiwanese islanders, and Han-Taiwanese mainlanders. My discussion of racialization can also provide a racial perspective to investigate the ongoing racialized discrimination toward Taiwanese Indigenous people. Furthermore, the Black-Indigenous alliance emphasized in my dissertation can be a valuable approach to understanding the popularity of hip-hop, R&B, gospel, and reggae in Taiwanese Indigenous music.

Indigenous Studies: Ontological Turn in Defining Indigeneity

My research draws on Indigenous studies to explore how Southern California island reggae music challenges the essentialized notions of Indigeneity and claims their Pacific Indigenous sovereignty away from their homeland. In early scholarship, Indigeneity, broadly defined as the quality and the status of being Indigenous, was essentialized by settler-colonial ontology as “racial, feminine, and primitive” (Kauanui 2008; Hokowhitu

2009; Arvin, Tuck, & Morrill 2013). Such a colonial perspective dismissed Indigenous sovereignty and naturalized settler-colonialism. To reclaim sovereignty, current Indigenous scholarship advocates for an ontological turn to define Indigeneity from Indigenous peoples' self-determination (Tuck & Yang 2012; Smith 2012). It rethinks Indigenous views about land, which are based on the relationship between humans and nonhumans, the material and the spiritual, challenging the settler colonizers' idea of land as just an object and resource to own and exploit (Coulthard 2014; Burow, Brock, & Dove 2018; Robinson 2020).

Scholarship on Indigenous temporality revitalizes the temporal frameworks of Indigenous worlds to decolonize settler-imposed temporalities (Lyons 2010; Gniadek 2017; Rifkin 2017; De Vos 2020; Blackwell 2023). The concept of time is essential for establishing Indigenous ontologies, ensuring that Indigenous peoples are not erased by settler narratives. These ontological turns also lead to the idea of “pluriverse”—highlighting the co-existence of multiple knowledge systems and ways of being without overarching each other to oppose the domination of Western ontology (Blaser 2010; Firmino Castillo 2016; Mignolo 2020). I build my research upon these scholars, then I ask: since these studies primarily examine Indigenous ontologies from the relationship with their own land, how do we examine the human-land relationship and the pluriverse when the diasporic Indigenous people reside in another Indigenous people's land as guests? To answer this question, I explore how diasporic Islanders narrate their stories, both on the continent and within marginalized communities, through the performance of their Indigeneity and sovereignty.

This dissertation enriches the current discussion of the Indigenous diaspora. Diasporic Indigenous people's stories are underexamined in both diasporic studies and Indigenous studies, but the scholarship on diasporic Indigenous people has been growing since the mid-2010s. The discourse discusses globalized Indigeneity (Fox Tree 2015), mobility in Indigeneity (Huang 2015), self-determination in the diaspora (Uzawa 2018; Perez 2021), and the Indigenous alliances with the local in the new place (Herrick 2022). My dissertation engages with these discussions, and it further enriches current scholarship by highlighting the continued decolonial praxis of diasporic Indigenous people despite being away from their homeland. Lastly, my trans-Pacific research, which centers on Pacific Islander mobility and relationality beyond national borders, resonates with Chadwick Allen's (2012) concept of trans-Indigenous studies, which challenges the confinement of Indigenous studies within colonial nation-state boundaries and instead envisions a decolonial approach to Indigenous studies.

Native Pacific Cultural Studies: Oceanic Mobility

This dissertation also critically engages in the interdisciplinary field of Native Pacific cultural studies, which connects cultural studies and Pacific Native studies to expand the scope and depth of Pacific Islanders' Indigeneity. Using Tongan scholar Epeli Hau'ofa's (1994) concept of "we are the sea, we are the ocean," scholars from Native Pacific cultural studies highlight that Oceanic mobility is part of Islanders' Indigeneity (Diaz & Kauanui 2001). The emphasis on Oceanic mobility challenges the fixed concept of land with

Indigeneity— providing the displaced diasporic Pacific Islanders a space to claim their Indigeneity and sovereignty.

Diasporic Islanders are often diminished by the narrative that they are not Indigenous people because they have left the land, have not practiced traditional cultures, or have not fulfilled the blood quantum due to interracial marriage (Kauanui 2007; Hall 2015). To oppose this narrative, this scholarship uses Oceanic mobility to state that Indigeneity is defined by the constant praxis of genealogy (Kauanui 2007) and continual dialogue between Islanders (Jolly 2001; Clifford 2001). Native Hawaiian scholar Stephanie Nohelani Teves, in her concept of “defiant Indigeneity” (2018), defines Indigeneity as a constantly changing concept of being Indigenous, which is performed by Indigenous people to celebrate their resistance and survival. Coming from this scholarship, I examine diasporic Islanders’ Indigeneity by investigating how Oceanic mobility allows them to understand their genealogy from both their specific home-island contexts and the broader cross-island Pacific perspective, leading to the development of a Pacific Islander identity in the U.S. The consideration of Pacific Islanders in the U.S. in this dissertation also allows me to ask: when Native Pacific cultural studies advocates defining Indigenous people by genealogy instead of racializing them by blood, how can we understand diasporic Islanders’ Indigeneity with the racial category of Pacific Islander in the U.S.?

Decolonial Island Studies: Islander Ideology

My research engages critically with foundational understandings of decolonial island studies and offers new insights into decolonial island studies, originating from the

motivation of liberating islanders from the constraints of continental ideology (Nadarajah & Grydehøj 2016; Grydehøj 2017; Grydehøj, Nadarajah, & Markussen 2020; Nimführ & Meloni 2021; Foley et al. 2023). Island studies emerged from a continental gaze of the Western colonizers, who defined islands as relatively isolated communities or cultures from the continental perspective (Eriksen 1993; McCall 1994). Islandness, as defined by Godfrey Baldacchino (2004), refers to the characteristics of islands and island cultures. The term was introduced as a conceptual alternative to “insularity,” which often carries connotations of isolation and backwardness (ibid.: 272). In efforts to decolonize island studies, Pacific scholars have played a significant role in highlighting how Pacific Islands have long endured colonialism, serving as “ethnologic laboratories during the late eighteenth century” (Agnew 2003: 83). The influential Tongan scholar Epeli Hau‘ofa’s “sea of islands” (2008) highlights how Pacific Islanders have always explored new places to challenge the colonial perspectives that sees islands as disconnected dots on the maps. His concept has inspired island studies scholars to define islandness as an in-betweenness of isolation and connection (King & Connell 1999; Baldacchino 2006).

Based on the application of diasporic Indigeneity, my concept of continental islandness centers on Islanders’ ideology to re-interpret the continent. This word “continental” enhances the continental factor in their islandness and underscores their cultural-political intervention in the continent. This concept incorporates diasporic Islanders’ new relationship with the continent, emphasizing the motivation in creating venues and events, such as island reggae concerts, community events, and churches — they recreate their home, their islands, on the continent. Following the ontological turn in

Indigenous studies, continental islandness advances the decolonial approach in this field by switching subjectivities in discussing island versus continent. While prior studies mainly focus on the continental and settler-colonial impact on islands, my research concentrates on how Islanders in diaspora influence the continent. My research draws inspiration from music studies of the diaspora, which subjects the diaspora to interrogate music adaptation and its influence in the new place (Troutman 2016; Fellezs 2020). By doing so, I highlight the agency of Islanders in turning the continent into islands.

Critical Race Studies: Multi-layered Racial Intersections

Centering on diasporic Islanders' Indigeneity practiced in the continental and racial context, this dissertation contributes to critical race studies by exploring the multi-layered racial interactions across the Pacific. Firstly, my research is in dialogue with the studies of racialized Indigenous bodies. To naturalize settler-colonialism, Indigenous bodies are sexualized and racialized into a feminized race, legitimizing the domination of the masculine white bodies (Byrd 2011; Arvin, Tuck, & Morrill 2013; Anderson & Innes 2015; Anderson 2016; De Vos & Willman 2021). This conquest process also happens in Oceania, where Indigenous people are imposed into the racial tripartition (Thomas et al. 1989; Arvin 2019), and their islands are fetishized into a tourist paradise (Alexeyeff & Taylor 2016). The discussion of the sexual racialization of Pacific Islanders' bodies results in their marginalization in the U.S., where Hawaiian hula is fetishized by Asian American feminists for their use of self-empowerment (Arvin & Teves 2018), where Polynesian bodies are racialized as a genetic suit of football (Guinness & Besnier 2016; Uperesa 2022),

where darker-skinned Melanesians and Polynesians are associated with Blackness in police brutality (Uperesa 2022; private conversation). While case studies of the racialized diasporic Islanders' bodies are underrepresented and mainly focus on one specific Island ethnic group's experience, my research enriches this scholarship by bringing more cases and revealing the racial dialogue between specific island bodies and Pacific Islander bodies in general.

Since racialization, which represents the Western conquest ideology, is imposed on both Indigenous and Black bodies, Island reggae music in Southern California serves as a multipolitious medium that establishes an alliance between Pacific Islanders and Black communities in resisting racialization. My research deepens the intersectional research on Blackness and Indigeneity by connecting Black Pacific Studies and the intersectional Indigenous-Black Studies in the U.S. As Islanders migrate, the boundaries of the Black Pacific concept expand; thus, my dissertation examines how the Black Pacific alliance is transplanted in the U.S. and interacts with Black-Native studies in North America.

The island reggae in Southern California layered this alliance with interactions with African Americans to fight against settler-colonial structure of the U.S. Emerging from the attention to racial and sexual violence, scholars from Black and Indigenous studies in North America (Miles & Holland 2006; Wilderson III 2010; Rifkin 2019) seek interconnections to fight against the logic of Western conquest collectively while still acknowledging their distinct histories and struggles of Black and Indigenous people. These studies refuse to put settler-colonizers as the subject to study colonialism (King, Navarro, and Smith 2020); they challenge the disciplinary boundaries in discussions of bodies, ontologies, oppressions, and

kinships and advocate for an ontological turn from settler-colonizer to Indigenous people and Black people in academia (King 2019). I bridge Black Pacific studies with interdisciplinary studies of Blackness and Indigeneity in North America by highlighting the multiple Black-Indigenous alliances that diasporic Islanders have been involved in music and politics across the Pacific.

Furthermore, connecting Pacific Islanders' racial experiences and their decolonial alliances from both sides of the Pacific, my dissertation and the concept of continental islandness serve as a theoretical bridge between area studies, which traditionally categorize Oceania as a fixed geographical area, and ethnic studies, which are grounded in the racial politics of the United States. By doing so, I aim to highlight the global racial impact that necessitates interrogation from a trans-Pacific perspective.

Recentering Pacific Islanders

Home is wherever the family is located, where Islanders live is an island. Integrating the three fields of research mentioned above, my dissertation underscores the subjectivity of Pacific Islanders in Southern California beyond merely viewing them as “a diasporic group of racialized, feminized minority” on the continent of the U.S. It refuses subordination to the continental ideology and dismantles the mono-ethnicity imagination that is closely associated with the formation of nationalism by an emphasis on Indigenous genealogy, communal-based relationality, and alliance with African American people.

To articulate such relationality and alliance, I draw on Black-Native studies scholar Tiffany Lethabo King's (2019) Black shoal theory to highlight the transnational landscape

in diasporic Islanders' island reggae music. King combines discussions of sexual racialization and the intersection of Blackness and Indigeneity to envision a Black-Native coalition that resists the logic of Western conquest. Under this logic, Black people are dehumanized by the metaphor of the sea, suggesting their rootlessness, while Indigenous people are eliminated by the metaphor of land, marking their antiquity. This essentialization hinders the Black-Native coalition. In the North American context, King uses the shoal—a geological term for a place with shallow water or where land and sea meet—as a metaphor to disrupt the imposed Western racialization that separates African Americans and Native Americans from forming a coalition. Drawing from her theory, I see diasporic Islanders' island reggae as a shoal, representing a multiplied Black-Native coalition across the Pacific. My examination of this coalition centers on Indigenous bodies in interactions with Black communities that break the boundaries between the two communities and the borders of the nation-state created by Western conquest logic and its product, the U.S.

To deconstruct continental hegemony, this research and the concept of island-making echo with the advocacy from concepts of aquapelagic assemblages and archipelagic America, which challenge the continental centrism in global politics. Aquapelagic assemblages emphasize the impact of aqua spaces connecting with islands on Islanders' cultures (Hayward 2012), while archipelagic America views America as an assemblage of islands and oceans (Roberts & Stephens 2017). The emphasis on island and aqua spaces from these concepts rearticulates these landscapes with diasporic Islanders' multi-locale and racial identities, both symbolically and materially. Building on their intention to

decolonize continental centrism in reframing U.S. islands, my island-making theorizes such a process of decolonization. I contend that this decolonization must be enacted through daily life practices and performances of Islander identity on the continent, and argue for the crucial role of diasporic Pacific Islanders in this process.

To sum, my discussions of continental islandness and island-making advance King's theory and related fields by adding the layer of continent and island, focused on island studies and archipelago studies. This approach unfolds the intertwinement between imperialism and American continentalism and multiplies perspectives of Blackness and Indigeneity in various geopolitical and multi-racial contexts.

Chapter Overview

The first chapter, *Ocean Time on the Continent: The History of Island Reggae in Southern California*, focuses on the emergence of island reggae in Southern California from the 1990s to the early 2000s. This musical movement began with Pacific Islanders who were teenagers or young adults during the 1980s and 1990s. Many of them were either born and raised in the continental U.S. or had migrated as young children, witnessing firsthand their parents' financial and social struggles while settling their families on the continent. Growing up, this generation also faced gang violence and racial discrimination, and many found emotional resonance and a form of expression in Black popular music, which spoke to their struggles and identity confusion. This chapter traces the history of Southern California's island reggae through the oral history of Local

Culture,¹¹ a Samoan reggae band and one of the earliest island reggae groups in the region. Drawing from their narratives, the chapter explores how diasporic Pacific Islanders blended elements of island music with Black popular music to maintain their island genealogy, while simultaneously expressing their experiences on the continent. I argue that these artists sustain a sense of islandness within a continental context, and I engage Indigenous temporal scholarship (Gniadek 2017; Rifkin 2017; De Vos 2020) to frame this musical continuity as a restoration of Oceanic time. By linking their ancestral roots in the islands to their lives in the diaspora and using island reggae to tell stories to future generations, these musicians envision an “island future” in California—one that is grounded in their memories from both sides of the Pacific.

The second chapter, *Island-Space in the Continent: Diasporic Pacific Islanders’ Interracial Interaction in Los Angeles*, traces the history of island reggae from the 2010s to the 2020s, a period in which the genre evolved from a community-based music within Pacific Islander circles into a broader scene that shared space with other reggae subgenres, such as roots reggae and reggae rock. While the previous chapter focuses on the continuity of Indigenous temporality, this chapter shifts to examine the formation of Indigenous island space within the multi-racial spatiality in Los Angeles. Drawing on theories of spatiality (Lipsitz 1994; Cohen 1995; Johnson, G. T. 2013), this chapter centers on the development of Island Block Radio—a Pacific Islander-founded radio station that also functions as a concert organizer and promoter in Los Angeles. The story of Island Block Radio reflects how diasporic Pacific Islanders have engaged with African

¹¹ Local Culture, interview by author, January 28, 2024.

diasporic musical spaces and built alliances with African American communities. These collaborations have empowered Pacific Islanders to create their own spaces where they can freely express themselves and strengthen their sense of islandness amid ongoing racial and anti-Indigenous discrimination. Moreover, the rapid growth of Island Block Radio signals a turning point when island reggae entered the mainstream space and began to negotiate its place within Euro-dominated industries such as commercial entertainment. This chapter examines how this transition challenges Pacific Islander musicians to navigate questions of authenticity, visibility, and control over their cultural narratives in an increasingly globalized and commercialized music landscape.

The third chapter, *Making an Island Across the Pacific: Telling a Trans-Pacific Story in the ONE LOVE TONGA Benefit Concert*, continues the spatial discussion from Chapter Two, shifting from a focus on interracial spatial interactions to an ethnographic account of how Pacific Islanders create an island space dedicated to themselves. This chapter presents an ethnography of the ONE LOVE TONGA Benefit Concert as a case study of the performance of continental islandness and island-making in Los Angeles. Engaging with scholarships on neoliberalism and the live music industry (Holt 2020; MacDonald 2011; Thomas & Clarke 2013), this chapter addresses how diasporic Pacific Islanders transform a commercial space into an island space. By examining the ONE LOVE TONGA concert—held at House of Blues, a national live music venue chain, and backed by the global concert promoter Live Nation—I return to theories of Indigenous temporality and spatiality to analyze how diasporic Pacific Islanders create island space

and time. I illustrate how Indigenous expressions and community-building persist, even within the structures of global capitalism and mainstream entertainment.

In chapter four, *Tiki Time? Relational Time? Oceanic Tourism and Cultural Commodification Landscape of Island Reggae in Festivals*, I examine how Pacific Islanders both utilize and confront tourism and exoticism through music festivals—specifically the Mai Tai Festival and the Samoan Heritage Festival—as forms of coloniality embedded within the festival industry. While I have previously shown how Pacific Islanders create island spaces within commercial institutions through island reggae concerts, festivals represent a distinct approach to island-making. These events tend to attract broader audiences unfamiliar with Pacific cultures and music—some of whom may hold stereotypical or exoticized views of island life. Moreover, organizing such festivals often requires collaborations with municipal bureaucracies, which represent colonial infrastructures that contribute to exoticism and cultural commodification. These interactions extend beyond negotiating permits, venue rentals, and public space usage; they also involve official speeches, government oversight, and the dissemination of state-sanctioned messages within the island space. These logistical demands introduce another layer of negotiation, as Pacific Islander communities must work within institutional frameworks that may not fully recognize or align with Indigenous practices. Therefore, this chapter shifts focus to the island spaces shaped through Pacific Islanders’ institution-negotiation efforts, examining how communities coordinate yet confront these external forces on their own terms.

Southern California's island reggae community is male-dominated. However, Pacific Islander women remain deeply engaged in the broader community, even if their visibility within the music scene itself is limited. In chapter five, *Performing a Feminized Islandness? Pacific Islander Femininity, Masculinity, and Resistance in Island Reggae*, I focus on the representation of femininity and masculinity in island reggae, exemplified by J Boog's "Let's Do It Again" (2011), to examine how both female and male bodies are constrained by the structure of heteropatriarchy under colonialism. I also draw on the stories of two Samoan female artists, Nina Sosefina and Nichola, to explore two central questions: What accounts for the absence of Pacific Islander women and their narratives in Southern California's island reggae scene? And how do Pacific Islander women express their continental islandness within the music industry? Engaging with Indigenous feminist scholarship from Oceania (Arvin 2019; Arvin & Teves 2018; Niumeitolu 2019), this chapter examines the systemic challenges diasporic Pacific Islander women face, both within society and the music industry. I also draw on the scholarship of the music industry (Meintjes 2005; Holt 2020) and gender and sexuality studies on reggae (Cooper 2004) to examine how heteropatriarchal structures across these fields intersect to marginalize Pacific Islander women in the Southern Californian reggae scene. Concluding the chapter with Nina and Nichola's art project, *The Sanctuary*, this chapter highlights how they navigate and challenge gendered barriers in the island reggae scene. Their experiences demonstrate how Pacific Islander women articulate their Indigeneity through a feminist lens, asserting their voices and identities within the continental U.S. context.

Chapter 1: The Relational Time on the Continent: Island Reggae Music History in Southern California

Follow Me Home

This dissertation on Southern California's island reggae music is a story of Pacific Indigeneity in time and space within the continental United States. To open this journey, told through stories of time and space voiced by diasporic Pacific Islanders, I begin with the documentary *Follow Me Home* (2023). Their migration experience is central to the emergence of island reggae, a music genre that represents “home” away from home.

Directed by Derek Felipe, Fa'avae Fa'avae, and Michael Gray, *Follow Me Home* (2023)¹² is a six-minute piece about Fa'avae Fa'avae's family stories in Los Angeles in the 1990s. It traces the journey, as Fa'avae Fa'avae shares, from the islands to the continent, from Oceania to North America, and from his homeland of Samoa to his home in Carson, California. This short documentary was created to promote a new collection for a clothing brand called *Island Avenue*,¹³ founded by Fa'avae Fa'avae. *Follow Me Home* is one of the relatively recent narratives that highlight the stories of diasporic Pacific Islanders in Southern California, especially their multilayered sense of belonging across the Pacific.¹⁴ Later on, in my journey of learning from the community, Fran Lujan, who is my mentor and the director of the Pacific Island Ethnic Art Museum, told me that

¹² Follow Me Home (2023): <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8EHG8rX6Wnk>

¹³ Island Avenue: <https://islandavela.com/>

¹⁴ This documentary was introduced by the Māori (Cook Islands) scholar Melodie Turori in the summer 2023 when we were together in Rarotonga, Cook Island to attend to the Pacific Islands Universities Regional Network Conference.

Follow Me Home narrates exactly the family story of my other mentor—Joe “Savage” Fa’avae, who is Fa’avae Fa’avae’s brother and who founded Island Block Radio and Island Block Network, which develops, cultivates, and nurtures the island reggae music community in Southern California.

Follow Me Home narrates how Southern California Pacific Islanders enact their Indigeneity through everyday life practices on the continental U.S., grounded in their unique sense of temporality. According to the Indigenous studies scholar Mark Rifkin (2017), Indigenous temporality is restored through storytelling, which is rooted in Indigenous people’s sense of time and history. Through Fa’avae’s tracing of his family genealogy, *Follow Me Home* reclaims an Indigenous temporality to illustrate how diasporic Pacific Islanders remain connected to their ancestry and ancestral islands while envisioning and creating an Indigenous future within the continent.

“E lele le toloa ae maau lava i le vai.” Fa’avae Fa’avae starts this film with this Samoan phrase, following his translation, “For the bird flies over the water, sooner or later returns home in the journey.” He elaborates, “No matter where you go in the world, you always return home to your roots, your foundation.” The documentary starts with black-white clips of coconut trees and ocean scenes of where his parents came from. With Fa’avae’s narration, *Follow Me Home* illustrates how his parents transplanted their Samoan heritage to Southern California through migration. In this phrase, Fa’avae does not refer to a physical return to his Samoan home; it is, rather, a conceptual foundation that has become a multi-layered sense of home emerging alongside the Fa’avae family settling in Los Angeles. After this phrase, scenes of highways, condo houses, and a huge

sign of “CARSON” appear suddenly and transport the story to where Fa’avae was born and raised. Photos fill the background as Fa’avae introduces himself and the street in Carson, where his parents and ten other Samoan families made a home, ironically named Island Avenue. This is where he calls “a home away from home.”

Fa’avae’s parent moved to California to provide better opportunities for their children, yet life in California was challenging. Accompanied by family photos and video clips depicting life in Carson, Fa’avae recalls the financial struggles and the socio-cultural disparities his parents faced. Moved from Samoa, Fa’avae’s parents relocated themselves and their ten children to a small two-bedroom house and worked tirelessly to support their children. Also, raised within the collective society operated in the Samoan chief system, the Fa’amatai, his parents had to adapt to the individualistic values emphasized in the U.S. while raising their children.

Despite these difficulties, *Follow Me Home* expresses the resilience deeply rooted in collectivism and love, which are essential Samoan Indigenous practices, and shows how they created their future and overcame the bitterness of displacement and dispossession. In addition to his parents, the oldest brother, TUT, helped raise the younger siblings with care, shielding them from the turbulence of street gangster life in 1990s Los Angeles. Growing up alongside nine siblings in a close-knit household, Fa’avae was gifted with a sense of security and cultural roots, as Island Avenue became home, surrounded by Samoan families and cultural values. However, street violence, which is rooted in systemic racism, along with territorial conflicts, grew rapidly in this metropolis, eventually reaching the family. TUT did not survive the series of

police brutalities in the 1992 Los Angeles uprising. On a day in December 1992, He was murdered by a police officer, and that year, Fa'avae was only fourteen. This tragedy hit the family hard and pushed Fa'avae to carry on the leadership role of TUT. Recollecting his brother, *Fellow Me Home* ends with Fa'avae's commitment to the community, as this tragedy has turned into strength and a power of will.

Honoring his big brother, Fa'avae Fa'avae founded the TUT Foundation to support Islander communities and his hometown of Carson. Inspired by TUT's care and leadership, Fa'avae came to understand the importance of guiding others, as he recognized a critical lack of Pacific Islander mentors and role models across various industries, including fashion. Fa'avae is deeply committed to becoming a mentor and leader, paving the way for the community where such representation was lacking.

This performance of Indigeneity stems from Fa'avae's intergenerational practices, helps him overcome difficulties, and forge an Indigenous future in the continental U.S. Although Fa'avae has never lived in Samoa, Samoa remains based on his ancestral roots from his parents. To Fa'avae, Island Avenue is "Samoa in the U.S.," where Samoan cultural values and community continue to nurture him. "Island Avenue isn't just a street. It's where I first experienced community and culture, sports and leadership, fashion, and self-confidence—sadly, also violence and loss," He describes. Samoa and Carson are two inseparable places that forge Fa'avae's identity. They carry the idea of "island" and construct their sense of home on the continent.

"Emulating our ancestors, we have navigated the oceans of the world, but have returned back home to our roots, our foundations, our home," Fa'avae reflects at the end

of the documentary. These words are paired with juxtapositional photos of Samoa and Carson, visually demonstrating his roots. Despite being far away from Samoa, Fa'avae's clothing brand, *Island Avenue*, underscores the significance of this street, where he first came to understand belonging through Samoan culture and community.

Follow Me Home demonstrates the spontaneous process of redefining islandness within a continental context. Fa'avae's story resonates deeply with many diasporic Pacific Islanders of his generation. They witness their parents' efforts to survive in the U.S. and navigate a delicate balance between island heritage and dominant American culture, while confronting racial discrimination, gang violence, and police brutality. Also, as many of my interlocutors shared, they often face critique, as they are unfairly deemed as "lacking cultural roots, inauthentic, or no longer truly Islanders" due to their adaptation of the individualistic, capitalist urban cultures in the U.S.

Fa'avae and all diasporic Pacific Islanders' works redefining their islandness within the continental U.S. are best understood as their critical response to these critiques, laying a firm foundation for future generations to continue practicing their island genealogy on the continent. This is the genesis of the island reggae music scene in Southern California, as this music emerged in the hands of musicians in Fa'avae's generation, who shared all these hardships. Island reggae is inherently the sound of their continental islandness and the process of island-making on the continent.

Untold Stories: From Urban Island to Island Reggae

Southern California hosts the largest Pacific Islander community in the continental U.S., yet their migration and music have not been fully explored and documented. The deeper I engaged with the community and learned from them, the clearer I understood that unfolding the history of island reggae music in Southern California is inseparable from their shared stories narrated in *Follow Me Home*. This history of island reggae music is about the resilience of the community and self-identity of the diasporic Islander Americans today. It reinterprets the dominant historical narratives of the Black-White-Asian relations in the LA riots and challenges the colonial legacy of the American Dream in the context of immigration.

Within the community, I noticed that many artists and audience members believed island reggae originated solely from Hawai‘i’s island music, formerly known as “Jawaiian music,” which emerged in the 1980s. Hawai‘i’s island music later developed and diverged into the pan-Oceanic reggae practices known as island reggae in the 1990s, eventually disseminating to the continent in the late 1990s (Kale 2021). However, with a thorough examination, I argue that the island reggae we listen to nowadays also has its roots in Southern California. This root grew from its stylistic predecessor, urban island music, whose history has also yet to be recorded. Urban island music emerged in the Southern Californian Islander community in the early 1990s. Integrating musical stories from islands, including but not limited to Hawai‘i, Samoa, Tonga, and Guam, urban island music is a fusion with Afro-American popular music, including reggae, R&B, and hip hop, reflecting their experiences on the continent. Later in the 1990s, urban island

music adopted the name of “island reggae/island music” from Hawai‘i due to the latter’s commercial success in the late 1990s; however, the urban island sound also profoundly impacted the sound of island reggae.

My intention is not to diminish the contributions of Native Hawaiians to Southern California’s island reggae scene or the history of this music; rather, I aim to show that documenting this history helps us understand the multidirectional migrations and cultural disseminations of Pacific Islanders and the resurgence of Indigenous cultures across multiple locations. Framing island reggae within this diasporic context contributes to the growing attention to Oceanic diasporas and affirms that these migrations are also acts of Indigenous resilience in the face of dispossession and displacement brought on by colonialism, capitalism, militarism, and climate change.

By tracing the music history, this research reflects the multiplicities of diaspora: Pacific Islanders’ migrations do not only occur among Oceanic countries, nor do they conclude at a single destination. Trans-Pacific migration between Oceania and the continental U.S. is significant, with many Islanders relocating to Hawai‘i or Aotearoa New Zealand before moving to the continental U.S.—or vice versa. Furthermore, many Islander families and clans are situated in multiple locations, making their diaspora inherently multi-sited and trans-Pacific. Therefore, the migration stories in the continental U.S. not only continue the narrative of Oceania’s diaspora but also begin a new chapter that remains interconnected with it.

This chapter focuses on the history of island reggae in Southern California, with a focus on temporality. It explores how Southern Californian Pacific Islanders have turned

reggae and other popular music genres into their expressions of islandness. It also explores how this generation performs their understanding of Indigeneity through island reggae. Despite being far from their home islands in Oceania, these artists use music to sustain their connections to Pacific Indigenous genealogies. I will illustrate how musicians and artists of this generation carry forward the legacy of their ancestors while living in the diaspora and practice an Indigenous temporality in daily musical lives on the continent.

In doing so, this chapter demonstrates how they transform their island heritage into a form of continental islandness—one that preserves their cultural identity in the new environment. This identity transformation is guided by their Indigenous knowledge systems passed down through ancestral lineage from their island home. Most importantly, I contend that the idea of viewing Islander Americans as “inauthentic, lacking cultural roots, and overly assimilated into capitalism” is an unfair and arbitrary critique. They are Pacific Islanders who carry the Indigeneity of their ancestral homelands. They are cultural and knowledge bearers, just like their peers who reside on the islands. They are Pacific Islanders living in the continental United States.

This chapter is organized into three sections to trace the inception and development of island reggae in Southern California. The first section introduces the concepts of continental islandness and island-making within the scholarly discussion of Indigenous temporality. I argue that island reggae serves as a medium through which Pacific Islanders on the continent reclaim relational time—a polychronic temporality grounded in natural relational cycles that interconnect environments, ancestry, communities, and

individuals (Turori 2022b). The second section offers an analysis to compare island reggae with Jamaican roots reggae and Hawai‘i island reggae to discuss the island sound of California. The last section delves into the early history of island reggae in Southern California by highlighting a pioneering group called Local Culture. From the stories of Local Culture, I present how diasporic Pacific Islanders told the stories of the community, served the communities, and continued the intergenerational work of cultural survival and expression on the continent.

Continental Islandness and Island Making

The island reggae of diasporic Pacific Islanders expresses what I call continental islandness and the process of island-making. Continental islandness theorizes the nature of their Indigeneity as diasporic Pacific Islanders living on the continent. Island-making describes the process of asserting and performing this Indigeneity within their temporality. I use “island” and “islandness” instead of Indigeneity, and “continent” rather than diaspora, to describe the transformations and constructions of identity performances under the drastic environmental changes. Also, Pacific Islanders in Southern California often refer to themselves as “Islands in (a specific city of) California. They understand Indigeneity through the characteristics of being an Islander, framing their migration as an environmental shift from the islands to the continent—and a process of transforming the continent into an island-like space.

The creation of these two terms aims to highlight diasporic Pacific Islanders’ practice of Indigeneity, which they continue to carry away from their home islands as

they adapt to the new landscape. Pacific cultural studies scholars have argued for recognizing diasporic Islanders' Indigeneity. J Kēhaulani Kauanui (2007) argues that the praxis of Indigenous genealogy is fundamental to claiming Indigeneity and sovereignty despite being outside of their homeland. Building on Kauanui, I suggest that island reggae performances function as a praxis of Indigenous genealogy—an approach that also aligns with Stephanie Nohelani Teves's (2018) emphasis on Indigeneity as performative rather than fixed. I frame the island reggae performances as acts of island-making that express continental islandness and assert the sovereignty of diasporic Pacific Islanders.

Living on Native Americans' land, diasporic Pacific Islanders do not seek to assert sovereignty over Native Americans; rather, their assertion of sovereignty points back to their ancestral islands and their practice of Indigenous temporality in the continental U.S. The following discussion illustrates the terminology of these concepts in detail:

Continental Islandness

This concept emerges from diasporic Islanders' environmental shift from the island to the continent, with the space in between—the Pacific Ocean—signaling the ongoing connection between islands and continental lands. I have collected my interlocutors' definitions of being an Islander to define islandness, which consists of a cluster of interrelated moments that includes family, ancestry, community, cultures, relationality, interconnectivity, and voyaging (conceptualized as adventuring and exploring in various careers or industries in the continental context). To them, islandness means the practical

quality of such islandness manifested in the continental new home, which is equally meaningful to their ancestral islands.

I deliberately use the term continental islandness rather than diasporic Indigeneity. While Indigeneity is firmly grounded in an identity of being Indigenous—and I fully affirm and advocate for the Indigeneity of diasporic Pacific Islanders—I aim to focus on the shifts that occur in diasporic contexts like Southern California. My focus on change or the emergence of new identities in the continental setting through using a different term reflects my intention to avoid creating a discourse that might, even unintentionally, undermine diasporic Pacific Islanders' Indigeneity. Among Pacific Islander Americans, some retain a sole and strong identification with their Indigenous roots, while others also develop a layered identity that includes a sense of American belonging that intersects with race, gender, and regional identities, even when, as I will explain throughout the dissertation, this identity stems from their practices of Indigeneity. Thus, in order to acknowledge the multiple identifications of Indigeneity practiced by Pacific Islanders, I reframe “being Indigenous” as “being an Islander,” using this shift as a lens to emphasize their agency in environmental and cultural transformations that shape these identities. I emphasize, once again, that continental islandness is always grounded in Pacific Islanders' Indigeneity.

I use “continental” rather than “diaspora” to highlight that geographically and physically they are on the continent, instead of emphasizing their immigrant status in the diaspora, because mobility is also part of Pacific Islanders' indigeneity (Hau'ofa 1994; Diaz & Kauanui 2001). This approach allows space for multiplicity in understanding the

positionality of diasporic Pacific Islanders. The term “diaspora” often emphasizes displacement in an unfamiliar country, cultural retention as a group, and a longing for home and belonging (Ortíz 2017; Gopinath 2021). These aspects indeed resonate with diasporic Pacific Islanders’ stories; however, since mobility itself is integral to their Indigeneity, some interlocutors reject diaspora as part of their identity, whereas others actively embrace it. Additionally, by emphasizing geographic specificity, I can explore how the new land shapes their performance of identity.

The use of the term islandness, which refers to the qualities and characteristics of islands, is mobilized here to understand an island framework grounded in Islanders’ perceptions. This terminology aims to better serve the community and was designed to be as straightforward and accessible as possible for the community members. Islandness has long been imposed with a continental perspective that views islands as being small and isolated. The idea of decolonization later challenges the continental framework by suggesting that islandness is best defined as inherently fluid, hybrid, and in-between, countering the dominant continental narrative (Baldacchino 2004; 2008; Hayward 2012). Seeing such continental gaze tight with colonialism, island studies scholars also politicize the term “islandness” by considering its colonial legacy and current socio-political contexts, framing it as “a contested concept, not just between disciplines but also cultures, entangled with evolving understandings of islands, island studies, and island identity” (Foley et al., 2023: 1800) I follow this view of islandness as a contested concept to assert that the power to define islandness should reside in the hands of Pacific Islanders themselves. Thus, continental islandness takes the inspiration from Tongan

anthropologist Epeli Hau'ofa's (2008) influential notion of the Pacific as a "sea of islands"—a vast, interconnected oceanic world—to redefine the idea of "islandness" by Pacific Islander and for diasporic Islander in the continental U.S.

The notion of continental islandness also challenges continental centrism by reframing "continent" through the perspectives of diasporic Islanders. Continental centrism sustains a colonial legacy, particularly in its historically extractive and oppositional relationship with colonized islands. Vicente Diaz (2015) underscores these dynamics and suggests that "Islands and 'Islanders' are, in a fundamental and fundamentally disturbing way, products of continental and imperialist thinking; continuing to treat these as natural, unproblematic categories obscures the histories through which imperialism and colonialism in insular places like the Pacific have been reinforced through narratives about islands" (ibid.:101). Echoing Diaz's call to reframe islandness through Indigenous storytelling, I extend such critique to continental centrism.

While Native Americans refer to the U.S. as the "Turtle Island" and American studies scholars suggest reimagining America as an archipelago to subvert continental centrism (Roberts & Stephens 2017), my use of the term continental is intentional. It reflects the concrete realities experienced by diasporic Pacific Islanders that were opposite to islands upon arrival in the United States: a massive landmass marked by cultural heterogeneity, colonial violence, racial discrimination, and urban infrastructures like concrete jungles and highways. By centering Pacific Islanders' perspectives, continental islandness reclaims and repurposes the language of the continent to

foreground the cultural density, trauma, and creativity forged in diasporic life, thereby critically reversing the authority of continental frameworks.

Island-Making

Island-making refers to the agency of diasporic Islanders in defining and performing their Indigeneity amidst environmental change under the continental structure. It occurs and operates within the ocean space that connects Turtle Island and the ancestral islands of diasporic islander Americans as a formative process of continental islandness. Island-making emphasizes the active, expressive storytelling, embodying, musicking, enacting, and reinforcing continental islandness. To make island in action follows Teresia Kieuea Teaiwa's (2022) concept of making island a verb:

“Let us ‘island’ the world! Let us teach the inhabitants of planet Earth how to behave as if we were all living on islands! For what is Earth but an island in our solar system? An island of precious ecosystems and finite resources. Finite resources. Limited space. The islanded must understand that to live long and well, they need to take care. Care for other humans, care for plants, animals; care for soil, care for water. Once islanded, humans are awakened from the stupor of continental fantasies. The islanded can choose to understand that there is nothing but more islands to look forward to. Continents do not exist, metaphysically speaking. It is islands all the way up, islands all the way down. Islands to the right of us, islands to the left” (ibid.: 127).¹⁵

This performance of Indigeneity resonates with Teves's (2018) concept of performativity in *Defiant Indigeneity*, which posits that Indigeneity is defined through how Indigenous people perform themselves in response to changing contexts. In the

¹⁵ This text was recommended by Melodie Turori.

diasporic context, Southern Californian Islanders' performance of Indigeneity involves creating an island, a reconstructed home space on the continent. Through this, they express their idea of continental islandness, anchoring themselves on the continent and sustaining Pacific heritage in the face of new environments. This process draws on ancestral relationality to interpret their experiences and realities on the continent.

Notably, island-making fosters a sense of home, both mentally and physically, and both temporally and permanently. "My parents moved the island (Guam) to San Diego,"¹⁶ CHamoru¹⁷ music producer David "RND" Duenas once remarked and illustrated how his family preserved their intergenerational practices of ancestral cultures in the new home, and this story inspired my creation of island-making. Duenas's story presents that performing Indigenous ancestry and culture serves as a connection with their ancestral islands, as the performance of the islands is passed down through the family. Home is often one of the few places for the diasporic Pacific Islanders to learn island culture on the continent, especially for those who have never visited their ancestral islands. Hence, home and family memories equate to an island space that they seek to recreate on the continent to maintain their Indigenous lineage. As such, Island-making is a performative process that allows Pacific Islanders to feel at home.

¹⁶ David "RND" Duenas, interview by the author, August 22, 2023.

¹⁷ The capitalization of CH in the term CHamoru is used by many CHamoru people from Guam and her diaspora.

Relational Time in the Pacific—Indigenous Temporality

Continental islandness and island-making are contextualized within the Indigenous temporality of Pacific Islanders living in the continental U.S. These concepts reflect the active efforts of diasporic Pacific Islanders to restore Indigenous temporality—a way of experiencing and interpreting physical and historical time that, as Mark Rifkin (2017) explains, is rooted in memory, environmental perception, and relationships between human and non-human beings. This temporality has long been dismissed by settler time, which Rifkin describes as an imposed temporal and historical framework of coloniality. As Rifkin and Melissa Gniadek (2017) argue, settler colonialism erases Indigenous peoples by severing them from their own temporalities—disrupting their connections to past, present, and future—and replacing them with Western concepts of time and history. Māori scholar Linda Tuhiwai Smith (2012) similarly emphasizes that the erasure of Indigenous peoples from history is not merely a narrative exclusion but a removal of justice itself:

“History is also about power. In fact, history is mostly about power. It is the story of the powerful and how they became powerful, and then how they use their power to keep them in positions in which they can continue to dominate others. It is because of this relationship with power that we have been excluded, marginalized and ‘Othered’. In this sense history is not important for indigenous peoples because a thousand accounts of the ‘truth’ will not alter the ‘fact’ that indigenous peoples are still marginal and do not possess the power to transform history into justice (ibid.: 34).”

Disrupting Indigenous time equates to erasing Indigenous ontology, and reclaiming their temporality is necessary for reasserting Indigenous sovereignty. This assertion of temporal sovereignty is significantly crucial for diasporic Islanders. Pacific Islanders face numerous challenges imposed by settler colonial temporality, which disrupts their

connection to Indigenous time and identity in Oceania and in the U.S. Along with the dehumanizing process of Pacific Islanders, the Western colonial gaze materializes Pacific islands into an illusion of a Pacific tropical paradise (Alexeyeff 2016; Arvin 2019). Pacific Islanders' temporality was, therefore, diminished into the temporal stereotype of the leisure, slowness, and belatedness of preconceived "island time," neglecting the colonial forces that have led to forced migration and dispossession. The invention of such a tropical paradise and island time is a by-product of the settler-industrial temporality.

Originating from Southern California, Americans have amplified the leisure aspect of island time in Tiki bar culture, characterized by its iconic cocktails, tropical decorations, and Tiki statue-adorned bars, emerging as a leisure trend that romanticized Polynesian culture (Pilsch 2020; Tichi 2022). Tiki culture exoticized and commodified Polynesian traditions, stripping them of self-determination by decontextualizing their cultures for Western leisure (Pilsch 2020). This culture further obscures the struggles of diasporic Islanders, particularly Polynesians, the most prominent Pacific Islander population in Southern California. These Islander immigrants were forced to adapt to industrial times and even self-commodify to cater to Tiki culture to support their families on the continent. Simultaneously, they endured racialization, socio-political marginalization, and economic hardship in the U.S., all consequences of settler colonial temporality. Furthermore, the physical and cultural distance from their homelands unsettles their sense of Indigeneity too, forcing them to navigate the tension between settler colonial and Indigenous temporality.

Storytelling is the key to asserting Indigenous temporality in Oceania. To restore Indigenous temporality, Rifkin (2017) emphasizes the importance of narrating Indigenous stories within Indigenous temporal frameworks. Similarly, Laura De Vos (2020) highlights storytelling's role in reconnecting the past, specifically the achievements and experiences of ancestors, with the present, allowing Indigenous people to envision an Indigenous future. Oceanic scholars are involved in telling stories from the past, present, and future, following the call of Epeli Hau'ofa (2008):

“That the past is ahead, in front of us, is a conception of time that helps us retain our memories and to be aware of its presence. What is behind us cannot be seen and is liable to be forgotten readily. What is ahead of us cannot be forgotten so readily or ignored, for it is in front of our minds' eyes, always reminding us of its presence. The past is alive in us, so in more than a metaphorical sense the dead are alive—we are our history” (ibid.: 67).

As history functions as a battleground of temporality, historians and archaeologists challenge colonial narratives by centering Indigenous voices, deconstructing imposed concepts such as race, and dismantling the colonial division between “prehistory” and “history”—a framework that suggests Pacific Islander histories only began with colonization (J. Belich 1996; Howe 2003; Banivanua-Mar 2007; 2016; N. Thomas 2010; Diaz 2010; Douglas 2014; Liston, Clark, & Alexander 2011; Borofsky 2000; Matsuda 2023). A wide range of disciplines connects this historical reckoning to the narration of contemporary stories on issues such as identity, diaspora, climate justice, and Indigenous rights, which intersect with diverse sociocultural practices including performance, literacy, art, and community life (Perez 2021; H. Lee & Francis 2009; McGavin 2017; J. Taylor & Lee 2017; Camacho 2021; Grant 2019; Diettrich 2018). While these works have paved the way toward a Pacific future, youths are placed at the center of this vision,

as exemplified by the studies focusing on Pacific Youth (Lee 2019; Camacho 2021). Damon Salesa (2023) introduces the notion of Indigenous time, rooted in Polynesian epistemology and connected through ancestors and descendants, as a way to rethink the Pacific. In this time framework, Damon Salesa (2017) argues that the Pacific future in New Zealand has already arrived, as evidenced by the growing Pacific Islander population. Building on Salesa and Lee's visions, this dissertation positions the Pacific future as a diasporic and young one, aiming to share the stories of young diasporic Islanders from the 1990s to the present and to imagine a Pacific future rooted in California.

Continental islandness represents a dialogue among Pacific ancestry, Californian presence, and Pacific futures in California, with island-making serving as a space for practicing and asserting such temporality. My understanding of this Pacific Indigenous temporality on the continent draws on Māori (Cook Islands) scholar Melodie Turori's (2022b) concept of relational time, as she introduced to me during the exhibition *Te 'Iti Nei Te Marama* she curated with Fran Lujan in the Pacific Island Ethnic Art Museum (PIEAM) from 2022 to 2023. Turori's notion of relational time challenges linear and industrial Western conceptions of time by referencing the Māori Aotearoa lunar calendar, maramataka, a polychronic system interconnected with the movements of the sun, constellations, stars, and observed patterns in animal life (ibid.: 4). Because maramataka is relational, it fosters connections among regions and communities, integrating environmental rhythms with human emotions, which Turori identifies as a pathway for diasporic Pacific Islanders to resist linear temporality.

Within the Los Angeles context, Turori (ibid.) reminds diasporic Pacific Islanders that they carry relational time within their bodies and in their relationships with the environment—relationships shaped by ancestral knowledges. She views storytelling as a restorative practice of relational time, articulating that “stories live outside the bounds of past-present-future linear time, becoming entities with their own power through the exchange of energies during the intuitive practice of storytelling” (ibid.: 5).

Conceptualized through the framework of relational time, continental islandness refers to the stories told by diasporic Pacific Islanders. This term reflects their self-determination as Islanders as they navigate diasporic shifts, affirm their Indigeneity, and assert their sovereignty—particularly their temporal sovereignty, which is often obscured by the continent’s industrial time—envisioning a Pacific future in California. Island-making captures the process of storytelling that restores relational time, enabling continental islandness to take form and be lived out. With these two theoretical concepts, I argue that island reggae music and performances function as a process of island-making. Through these expressions, diasporic Islanders define and embody their Indigeneity, creating a sense of continental islandness as they construct an island presence on the continent.

The Sounds of Southern California’s Island Reggae

Southern California’s island reggae is the music where the ancestors and descendants meet in relational time. When reggae from Hawai‘i also preserves Native Hawaiians’ worldview (Kale 2021), what does this unique Californian island sound like?

Considering reggae as an embodiment of Jamaican time and island reggae as a reflection of relational time, how do these temporalities negotiate within sound?

Reggae in Jamaica

As broadly defined, reggae refers to Jamaican popular music since the 1960s, including ska, rocksteady, reggae, and dancehall as a whole (Chang & Chen 1998: x). Specifically, reggae refers to the particular beat that was popular in Jamaica from about 1969 to 1983 (ibid.: x), which took deep influence from Rastafarianism and possesses a strong pan-African and revolutionary message, and was popularized around the globe by Bob Marley. This particular reggae has two phases, “early reggae” from about 1969 to 1974, and “roots reggae” from about 1975 to 1983 (ibid.: x). In this dissertation, I focus on roots reggae, specifically.

Reggae preserves and conveys the memory of African Jamaicans (Daynes 2010). The popular music of Jamaica draws from African musical heritage and is mixed with the melody of Europe (Reckord 1997; Chang & Chen 1998). Its musical practices developed during the slavery era—including work songs and Maroon music—as well as African-Jamaican religious forms such as Kumina¹⁸ and Rasta music, alongside European-derived dances like quadrille, Cuban rumba, and Trinidadian calypso. These influences came

¹⁸ Kumina is the musical aspect of Pocomania, an African ancestor worship cult that emphasizes both singing and dancing that originated in Ghana and survived slavery in Jamaica (Bradley 2000: 69; Chang & Chen 1998).

together in the folk genre known as mento (Chang & Chen 1998; Manuel & Largey 2016).

While mento declined as the Jamaican population shifted from villages to cities, its roots remain in the popular music styles, ska, rocksteady, and reggae, which derived from playing the African American music genres like R&B in sound systems (Chang & Chen 1998; Manuel & Largey 2016; Stolzoff 2000). Sound systems, invented in Jamaica in the forties, were mobile large-scale discotheques, bringing music to house parties, fairs, and outdoor gatherings, creating dancehalls where audiences gathered to move to the beat (Chang & Chen 1998; Daynes 2010; Cooper 2004; Henriques 2011; Manuel & Largey 2016; Stolzoff 2000). Since many Jamaicans could not afford personal record players or albums, sound systems became a vital way to access and share music, helping to popularize Jamaican music and drive its development, and most importantly, accompanying Jamaicans to live through historical, financial, and social struggles (ibids.; Chude-Sokei 1994).

In reggae, the riddim—the instrumental section of a song (Stolzoff 2020: 91)—is central, as the primary aim of the music is to make the audience dance (Chang & Chen 1998; Daynes 2010; Henriques 2011). When Jamaican folk and traditional music are involved in dance movements, the drum plays an important role that provides a rich polyrhythmic base for voice instruments (Reckord 1997: 5). This tradition has been retained in popular music through the sound system. The focus on danceability heightened the importance of riddims. As Julian Henriques (2011) notes, riddims often

determine whether a track “works” or not, which explains the strong presence of instrumental sections.

The riddim in reggae drew inspiration from Rasta music, which was deeply influenced by Burru drumming, originating from West Africa. As Lloyd Bradley (2001) says, Burru drums are involved in a drum setting where “the bass drum carried the rhythm, the repeater took up a melody, while the fundeh harmonized, counterpointing where required” (ibid.: 70). Rasta music adopted this form, made subtle changes, and created Nyabinghi drumming: “the fundeh drum keep[s] the beat while the bass emphasized it, enabling a variation of tempos within a single, less-complicated rhythm, while the repeater by itself handled the melodies” (ibid.: 70). As Verena Reckord (1997) states, this Rasta music was established by Count Ossie, who learned Burru drumming and developed Rasta music. He later brought it to the urban areas and popularized it via sound systems. His drumming in the Folks Brothers’ “Oh Carolina” became a ska classic. Through this, Rasta music and Rastafarian theologies were incorporated into popular music, first into ska, then rocksteady, and eventually exploded into roots reggae (ibid.).

Reggae is a danceable rhythm set in 4/4 time, and the emphasized downbeats are not on 1 and 3, but on 2 and 4 (Chang & Chen 1998: 43). As Cattermole (2014) and Kale (2021) point out, Rasta drumming was transferred into the three key rhythmic elements in roots reggae—skank, bubble, and one-drop. The sound produced by the skank and bubble, which are played on the second and fourth beats, is the most recognizable and is often referred to as the “reggae beat” in the island reggae scene. Skank is a stroke or double stroke on the rhythm guitar or keyboard instrument on beats 2 and 4, and it

derives from the fundeh drum pattern (Cattermole 2014: 22; Kale 2021: xiv, 73). The bubble is a rhythmic harmonization emphasized on beats 2 and 4, played on the keyboard—often with an organ setting (Kale 2021: 73). The one-drop, named because the bass drum “drops” the downbeat, is produced on the drum kit and highlights the third beat while omitting the first (Kale 2021: 73; Manuel & Largey 2016: 192). Besides the rhythmic patterns, a melodic bassline serves as the foundation.

Due to its focus on Rastafarianism, roots reggae places greater emphasis on lyrical content, becoming a vehicle for political and religious expression, and in doing so, it drifted away from the everyday entertainment of young Jamaicans (Chang & Chen 1998; Manuel & Largey 2016). In the 1970s, young Jamaicans began to view roots reggae as old-fashioned, and major reggae stars such as Bob Marley created their music in studios and mostly toured in foreign countries, while sound systems continued to be the center of entertainment for young Jamaicans (*ibid.*). Thus, dancehall emerged—and instead of expressing a yearning for Africa or faith in Jah, as many roots reggae songs did, most dancehall songs are “firmly grounded in the material world of daily life, whether the pleasures of punanny or the vicissitudes of the urban ghetto” (Manuel & Largey 2016: 199). This brief history of broadly defined reggae and roots reggae in Jamaica supports what Sarah Daynes (2010) observes: reggae is rooted in Jamaican temporality. She states, “reggae music succeeds in building a strong temporal continuity that plays an essential role in the maintenance of collective identity and builds homogeneity, within the group as much as in the eyes of the rest of the world” (2010: 81).

Let us now turn our attention to roots reggae on the global stage, which profoundly shaped the sound of island reggae in Oceania and Southern California. The international style of roots reggae predominantly shapes the musical characteristics of Southern California island reggae. Oceanic reggae scholars have pointed out that the reggae sound disseminated to Oceania is this international style, a version shaped by commercialization and globalization (Cattermole 2014; Kale 2021). As Mike Alleyne (Alleyne 1994; 2009) notes, roots reggae was musically altered to suit European and U.S. markets during its global rise. For example, *Catch a Fire* (1973) by Bob Marley and the Wailers featured “a distinctly treble-oriented mix, which is fundamentally at odds with the instrumental and aesthetic heart of reggae, with its drum and bass lower frequency emphasis from which its essential earthy life-force energy is derived” (Alleyne 2009: 257). To reinforce this cultural recontextualization, the tracks were sped up, Marley’s voice was pushed forward in the mix, and guitar and keyboard overdubs were added by British and American session musicians who had little to no prior experience with reggae (ibid.). In addition, Marley’s compositions shifted from minor keys, commonly used in reggae in Jamaica, to major tonalities and used greater harmonic variety than earlier Jamaican roots reggae artists (Cattermole 2014: 24). Dub poet Linton Kwesi Johnson also critiqued the album, noting, “The emphasis is more on the guitar and other fillers. No other Jamaican reggae recording...had such a clear-cut attempt made to incorporate the modern electronic sounds of metropolitan music” (Chang & Chen 1998: 50). Jamaican musicians also softened revolutionary lyrics to appeal to broader markets (Alleyne 2009; Cattermole 2014).

Bob Marley's case is a model for the hegemonic relationships between major reggae artists and major labels (Alleyne 2009: 250). This international style became the dominant form of roots reggae outside Jamaica and shaped how Māori (Cattermole 2014), Native Hawaiians (Kale 2021), and Pacific Islanders in Southern California came to understand reggae. My interviewees often recalled listening to internationally renowned roots reggae artists such as Bob Marley, Peter Tosh, and Jimmy Cliff, further supporting the influence of the international style in shaping Pacific Islanders' reggae sensibilities.

Reggae in Hawai'i

The history of Hawai'i's reggae can be traced back to the 1970s and 1980s, when reggae began to converge with Hawaiian music through backyard jam sessions, nightclub performances, radio broadcasts, and the underground rock scene (Kale 2021). Since Sunaina Keonaona Kale's work (ibid.) offers a comprehensive and detailed account of this history, I will focus here only on its influence on Southern California's island reggae scene.

Let us begin with the term island music and island reggae, which originated in Hawai'i. Kale differentiates Hawai'i's reggae into two main trajectories: mainstream island music (previously known as Jawaiian music) and underground reggae. The term Jawaiian has multiple origin stories and interpretations, and according to Kale, it was commonly understood as either "part Jamaican, part Hawaiian" or "jamming Hawaiian"

(ibid.: 106). By the mid-1980s, Jawaiian music had become associated with a genre led primarily by Native Hawaiian musicians—many of whom were already playing Hawaiian or Hawaiian-influenced pop music. These early recordings tended to resemble contemporary Hawaiian music more than Jamaican reggae, and this new music genre started to gain commercial success (ibid.).

Following its commercial success, however, Jawaiian music faced backlash. Some Native Hawaiians criticized it for turning away from “real” Hawaiian music and for lacking political substance (ibid.). At the same time, Jamaican reggae listeners critiqued Jawaiian music as musically inauthentic due to its distinct sound and lyrics. In response to these critiques, the prominent Jawaiian promoter, KCCN radio station, rebranded the genre as island music (ibid.). According to Kale (ibid.), the term island music had been used as early as the 1890s to refer to Hawaiian music; however, by the mid-twentieth century, its meaning began to shift, coming to refer more generally to “music from Hawai‘i” or “music in Hawai‘i.” Kale notes that “at the time of the Jawaiian backlash, island music became somehow ‘less Hawaiian’ than Hawaiian music” (ibid.: 118). After being renamed to island music, the commercial success of this music genre continued.

In addition to island music, Kale (ibid.) characterizes the term island reggae as having a pan-Pacific scope. Island reggae emerged to describe reggae-influenced island music performed by Pacific Islanders in other locations, such as Katchafire in Aotearoa New Zealand, and artists from Southern California. Kale does not provide a specific origin or date for the emergence of the term island reggae in Hawai‘i, and in my research, the term is primarily remembered in relation to its arrival in Southern California from

Hawai‘i. An interview with members of Local Culture suggested that in Southern California, the term gained popularity through the influence of George “Fiji” Veikoso and the wider enthusiasm for island music/island reggae from Hawai‘i in the late 1990s. In Southern California, I also observed that the terms island music and island reggae are often used interchangeably. Additionally, island music can refer to multiple genres, with the primary criterion being that the music is performed by Pacific Islanders.

The sonic influence of Hawai‘i’s reggae on Southern California’s island reggae is rooted in the musical characteristics of the international style of reggae described above. Kale notes that in the 1990s, island music artists began incorporating more Jamaican reggae elements, which reinforced the genre’s inherent emphasis on rhythmic centrality (ibid.). This period coincides with the rise of island music’s popularity in Southern California. Kale identifies these same features in Hawai‘i’s reggae, noting that it “consistently features a one-drop beat on drum set, melodic basslines, and a bubble played on keyboard” (ibid.: 120). In defining Hawai‘i’s reggae, Kale (ibid.) argues that it blends Native Hawaiians’ musical elements with Western popular music; furthermore, the diasporic African political meaning of reggae frames Hawai‘i’s reggae as a contemporary performance of Indigeneity and sovereignty (ibid; Ho‘omanawanui 2006).

The mainstream island music and the underground reggae also have distinct sounds. Although the boundary between the two remains blurred and crossovers are very common, underground reggae remains more closely aligned with roots reggae’s musical characteristics and its political roots, often emphasizing themes of Hawaiian sovereignty. While Southern California’s island reggae draws inspiration from both mainstream island

music and underground reggae, I focus on comparing its musical characteristics with mainstream island music, as those artists have toured and collaborated more frequently with Southern California's island reggae musicians.

In comparing Jamaican roots reggae with Hawai'i's reggae, Kale (2021) points out that Hawai'i's reggae tends to be faster in tempo, with a louder skank and a preference for major keys. Many groups also incorporate toasting interludes accompanied by a dancehall rhythm, and from my observation, these artists are mostly underground reggae artists. Kale observes a strong R&B influence in island music since the 1990s, and she hypothesizes this preference is due to the R&B sounds very similar to that of the "leo ki'ekie'e (falsetto) and 'ukulele trio vocal group" (ibid.: 120), which she presumes is probably due to their shared roots in Protestant hymnody. She also hypothesizes that the overt R&B influence originated with the influential island reggae star, George "Fiji" Veikoso, as this is one of his most recognizable stylistic traits (ibid.). I extend this hypothesis to explain the prominence of R&B in Southern California as well, since George "Fiji" Veikoso is the key figure in introducing island reggae to the region.

Thematically, Kale observes that mainstream reggae in Hawai'i often focuses on romantic themes, local food, activities such as surfing, and Hawaiian topics like love of the land—with romantic relationships remaining dominant (ibid.: 85). In contrast, although underground roots reggae is not always clearly distinguished, Kale notes that artists in this scene tend to address sovereignty movements and Indigenous identities more explicitly, maintaining both thematic and sonic connections with Jamaican roots reggae (ibid.). Additionally, Kale emphasizes that even though underground reggae

retains the political meaning of reggae, Native Hawaiian artists are clear that they are telling stories from a Native Hawaiian worldview, rather than from Jamaican temporality or Rastafarian religious worldview (ibid.).

Before identifying the differences between Southern California's island reggae, roots reggae, and Hawai'i's reggae, I have to emphasize that none of my interviewees provided a fixed, universal definition of Southern California's island reggae. Instead, they emphasized that the music style may fluidly vary due to individual diasporic experiences and personal musical preferences. This response reflects their respect for the multiplicity and diversity within diasporic Pacific Islander communities, resulting in a general reluctance to speak on behalf of others. Still, I gathered a range of perspectives when I asked interviewees to describe the differences they heard between roots reggae and Southern California's island reggae, or between Hawai'i's reggae and Southern California's island reggae.

Differences with Roots Reggae

Regarding the distinction between roots reggae and Southern California's island reggae, many interviewees associated island reggae with feelings about the ocean and island life. They described this effect as rooted in the genre's melodic focus, especially its use of melismatic singing. Vocals provide another key point of contrast. While roots reggae often features relatively flat vocal lines, lower registers, and narrower ranges, island reggae is marked by vibrato, falsetto lines, and dynamic vocal ranges. Many of my

interviewees attributed this to the influence of R&B singing style and noted that vocals play a crucial role in how they appreciate music. In island reggae concerts, audiences often focus more on vocal skills than on instrumental performances, responding enthusiastically to high, melismatic vocal passages and frequently applauding or cheering at vocal climaxes. The highest praise I often heard for a good island reggae artist was, “Wow, she/he can sing!”

Differences in bodily engagement and movement with the music are also observed in dancing. The Samoan staff in Island Block Network, Joi Dwight, noted that dancing to roots reggae tends to feel more like bouncing, whereas dancing to island reggae evokes a sensation of flowing or waving, akin to the movement of the ocean. When I discussed this observation with the Samoan muralist and graphic artist, Jason Pereira, he similarly affirmed the association with an oceanic feeling. Based on my observations, when Pacific Islanders dance to island reggae, their lower bodies often move in smooth, circular motions, with the thighs and ankles gently twisting or stepping without a strong emphasis on the downbeat, while their arms wave fluidly in time with the rhythm. In contrast, during roots reggae or dancehall songs, the same audiences tend to shift toward a stronger, more grounded movement, characterized by clear stomping, or pressing into the floor aligned with a faster pulse, and some dancers even perform recognizable dancehall steps. I contend that these differences in bodily movement are closely tied to the musical structure: the interplay between melismatic vocals and the steady and simpler rhythmic patterns characteristic of island reggae fosters a flowing bodily sensation, contributing to the genre’s distinctive oceanic quality.

Between the sounds of Southern California's island reggae and roots reggae, another apparent difference lies in the treatment of the skank. Like Hawai'i's island music, Southern California island reggae features a more prominent skank, but the loudness is more about sonic clarity than volume. While roots reggae emphasizes richly layered rhythmic textures, Southern California island reggae exhibits a reduction in rhythmic complexity. While the skank and bubble often interlock and the bassline maintains a distinctive role separate from both rhythms in roots reggae, island reggae songs tend to emphasize the skank, typically played on guitar or keyboard, while the bassline is relatively understated or follows the skank rhythm, resulting in a less dense rhythmic foundation. For instance, in Common Kings' "Wade in Your Water" (2013), the bubble and the skank—played by keyboard and guitar, respectively—blend so closely that they sound like a single rhythmic line. While the one-drop rhythm remains common in island reggae, it is not unusual for the drums to occasionally emphasize both the first and third beats. This kind of instrumental minimalism allows for greater focus on the vocals. Instrumentally, Southern California's island reggae often follows a rock band format: guitar, bass, drums, and keyboard. Brass instruments, which are common in Jamaican roots reggae, are relatively rare.

In lyrics, Southern California Islander artists often sing about their admiration for reggae pioneers, reggae culture, and Rastafarianism, but this appreciation roots in their own Pacific Islander worldview. A good example of this is the song "Rastaman" (2013)¹⁹ from the Carson-born Native Hawaiian artist, Bo Napoleon. Featuring Pena Bu from the

¹⁹ "Rastaman": <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8zBM8PwA9NY>

Hawaiian reggae band Kapena, the song presents a dialogue between Bo and Rastafarianism; however, interestingly, this is not a reggae song.

Despite being a tribute to Bob Marley, “Rastaman” leans more towards a ballad song, characterized by a gentle and accessible melody. The lyrics convey a respect for Rastafarianism through his worship of Bob Marley in the song:

“Immortal is ... your legacy,
My mortal ears ... don’t question thee.
And I frequently listen ... to the sounds and descriptions,
Music like religion ... verses are the scriptures.”

In the chorus, Bo attributes his understanding of Rastafari is from Bob Marley, while also confessing that he does not follow the Rastafari regulations

“Now I know Rastafari,
Well I don’t know that lifestyle,
But I know reggae,
Because of a Rastaman, yeah”

Bo’s emphasis on not practicing the Rasta lifestyle while still appreciating Rastafarianism spread by Bob Marley is commonly shared among diasporic Pacific Islander musicians. In this view, reggae serves as the medium for Rastafarian messages, allowing them to learn the Rastafarian philosophy without converting to Rastafarianism. Furthermore, this chorus elucidates Bo’s characterization of music as a religion in the first verse: music is indeed a form of religion, yet the religion Bo believes in is not Rastafarianism, but rather Bob Marley and reggae music itself that contains Rastafarian theologies. As Kale (2021) notes, some Native Hawaiian reggae artists do not identify themselves as Rastafarians because they believe in their Native Hawaiian ontologies. She states that this emphasis on not practicing Rastafarianism or adhering to its religious worldview reflects how Native

Hawaiians root their reggae practice in their own cultural and spiritual perspectives. Bo Napoleon's statement similarly stems from his pride in who he is.

While reggae reflects Jamaican temporality, Bo and Pena Bu use Bob Marley as a bridge to connect with that sense of time, without altering his own temporality as a Native Hawaiian. In the second chorus, he sings:

“Every song he sang, and every word he said,
Was never nothing short of a prophecy,
Until thy kingdom come, until that last trumpet plays,
His love will be the light showing you the way.”

This section of the lyrics conveys a sense of prophetic admiration, aligning with the eschatological prophecy that Daynes (2010) describes as the ultimate revelation marking the future within Rastafarian temporality. In this song, Bo and Pena Bu regard Bob Marley as a prophet and express their own anticipation of the coming of the Rastafarian kingdom. Yet, by stating that they are not Rastafarian, and by referring to Bob Marley as “he” throughout the song, rather than Haile Selassie I, the Ethiopian emperor whom Rastafarians revere as God (Jah), they distance themselves from Rastafarianism while focusing their reverence specifically on Marley. Notably, this careful distancing does not indicate disrespect; rather, their choice to present the song in a ballad style instead of traditional reggae reflects a deliberate acknowledgment of reggae's cultural origins. Their motivation is further clarified in the description on the song's YouTube page:

“Bo Napoleon and Kapena De Lima's (Pena Bu) new track titled “Rastaman”, a Hawaiian island and Reggae infused tribute to Bob Marley that talks about not understanding Rastafarianism but loving Reggae music because of a rastaman, Bob Marley. We mean absolutely no disrespect to Rastafarianism or

rastas and their culture! We love the culture, people and the music and wanted to show how much we love Bob Marley through this song”²⁰

Furthermore, building on Kale’s argument (2021), I also observe that the central role of romantic stories in the theme of Southern California’s island reggae reflects how diasporic Islanders interpret and relate to reggae. In another verse, Bo sings,

“Immortal yes ... you are to me, yes,
My motto goes:
Love the life you live,
Live the life you love and frequently listen,
To the sounds and descriptions,
Music like religion ... verses are the scriptures.”

The theme of love is a concept that diasporic Islanders identify as the very heart of reggae. In my interviews with island reggae artists Siaosi²¹ and Fia²², both emphasized that love is the core of reggae itself; for them, singing about love is not merely romantic—it is reggae. Indeed, even in roots reggae, love stories are prominent (Daynes 2010). Yet, I contend that the concept of love in island reggae reflects values rooted in Pacific Islander Indigeneity. Both artists described love in terms of caring for family, partners, and community, a sentiment echoed by many of my interviewees when asked how they identify with the concept of “island.”

²⁰ Accessed on May 18, 2025 from the YouTube page of “Rastaman”:
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8zBM8PwA9NY>

²¹ Siaosi, interview by the author, October 23, 2023.

²² Fia, interview by the author, January 17, 2024.

Differences with Hawai‘i Island Music

From my fieldwork, I observe that Southern California’s island reggae scene does not exhibit the clear differentiation between mainstream and underground like what exists in Hawai‘i. The Hawai‘i reggae scene includes people from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, even though the genre is rooted in a Native Hawaiian worldview. In contrast, in the diasporic context, Southern California island reggae plays a community-building role for Pacific Islander immigrants, where the sound and even stylistic choices can be diverse as long as the performers are recognized as part of the community. Additionally, in Southern California, Pacific Islanders who perform roots reggae or lean toward the broader Jamaican reggae music, such as dancehall, often occur at gatherings predominantly attended by non-Pacific Islanders, including Rastafarians of various ethnic backgrounds, African Americans, Jamaicans, and other members of the Caribbean diaspora. Notably, many of these events often remain small-scale in Southern California, as dancehall and sound systems have not achieved the same level of popularity there as they have in Jamaica or cities with larger Jamaican populations, such as Miami or New York. These events are typically held in smaller lounge bars or live venues, as island reggae is often staged in larger commercial venues, such as the House of Blues.

The interviewees made fewer distinctions between Hawai‘i’s island music and Southern California island reggae, often noting that the two sound similar. David “RND” Duenas²³ observed that Hawai‘i island music’s lyrics frequently draw richly from the ocean environment as metaphor, while Southern Californian lyrics tend to reference

²³ David “RND” Duenas, interview by the author, August 22, 2023.

urban life and landscapes. From my interview with Local Culture,²⁴ they offered a sharper distinction, noting that Hawai‘i’s island music artists tend to move less dynamically on stage, rarely running or jumping. In contrast to the hesitations of Southern California reggae artists to differentiate themselves, Ryan “Jah Gumby” Murakami, the founder of the influential reggae band in Hawai‘i, Ooklah the Moc, clearly pointed out that Southern California island reggae sounds similar to reggae rock²⁵ and incorporates more rapping into its music.

From my observation, Hawai‘i’s reggae and Southern California’s island reggae are quite similar. I hypothesize that this resemblance may stem from the fact that many Southern Californian reggae artists have either drawn inspiration from Hawai‘i, launched their careers there, or grown up in the islands. On both sides, there is a shared emphasis on R&B vocal styles, with harmony groups playing an essential role, and a similar rhythmic approach, in which the skank forms the dominant rhythmic line. This differs from roots reggae, where all rhythmic elements are more intricately interlocked. Also notably, many Southern California island reggae artists have developed mentoring or collaborative musical relationships with George “Fiji” Veikoso, whom Kale (*ibid.*) identifies as the figure who laid the foundation for R&B in island music. These artists

²⁴ Local Culture, interview by author, January 28, 2024.

²⁵ Reggae rock, also known as Cali-reggae, is a style that fuses reggae with elements of rock, punk, ska, and hip hop. It emerged from Southern California’s alternative rock subcultures in the 1980s and 1990s and was specifically shaped by the rise of the band Sublime in the 1990s (Kale 2021). According to Kale (*ibid.*), this music has also been influenced by reggae from Hawai‘i. While reggae rock maintains a close relationship with Hawai‘i reggae and Southern Californian island reggae (which will be discussed in detail in Chapter Two), I argue that the rock sound in Southern Californian island reggae is more strongly shaped by broader U.S. rock culture, including reggae rock itself. Many of my interlocutors cited mainstream rock artists such as AC/DC as major influences.

include J Boog, who is his mentee, as well as Siaosi, Common Kings, Tenelle, and others.

The differences, though not universal, include stronger influences from rock, hip hop, and electronic dance music, as well as a broader incorporation of Jamaican reggae styles—particularly dancehall and ragga—within Southern California’s island reggae. Ragga refers to dancehall music that uses synthesized rather than acoustic instrumentation (Manuel & Largey 2016: 322). For example, Common Kings’ album *Celebration* (2023) features prominent rock chords in both the guitar and bass lines, along with synthesizer textures reminiscent of ragga. They even include a track titled “Reggaemuffin,” referencing a substyle of Jamaican dancehall that developed in the late 1980s (Manuel & Largey 2016: 322). In this context, the electric guitar plays a more prominent role, often featuring rock chords, riffs, and extended solos. Many bands open songs with metal-style intros or blues-rock licks reminiscent of Eric Clapton. In contrast to Hawai‘i’s reggae, which tends to incorporate more acoustic guitar, steel guitar, and ‘ukulele, Southern California’s island reggae leans into drum machines, electronic instrumentation and elements of electronic dance music (EDM).

Although both Hawai‘i island music and Southern Californian reggae share R&B-style vocal phrasing, I noticed subtle differences: Hawai‘i’s vocals generally feature a gentler melodic delivery, while Southern Californian reggae tends to employ a heavier vocal pulse that reflects its rock and hip hop influences. Furthermore, among earlier Southern California island reggae bands that emerged in the 1990s, I observed a strong influence from Jamaican roots reggae, shaped in part by the Jamaican population in

California. One notable characteristic is the use of singjays—a blend of toasting and singing—and frequent incorporation of patois, the creole language spoken in Jamaica. While more recent Southern California island reggae artists don’t commonly use patois or singjay styles, we can still hear traces of these elements in J Boog’s “Let’s Do It Again” (2011) and Hooliganz’s “Officer” (2009).

Lyrically, Southern California island reggae songs often share similar themes with Hawai‘i’s island music but feature fewer songs that praise island scenery or portray an island paradise. Instead, their lyrics frequently center on romantic stories, party-related themes, and expressions of admiration for reggae music and culture—though this admiration tends to focus more on reggae culture broadly, such as marijuana, rather than on Rastafarian spirituality. While the depiction of island landscapes is not popular, using island and oceanic metaphors to portray romantic stories is common in Southern California island reggae. Also, artists still express their identities through their music.

Notably, their sense of identity reflects not only their ancestral island roots but also their migration route from the islands to the continent, often marking key milestones in their career achievements by naming cities on the continent. For example, in the song “Came Up” by Common Kings, featuring Jamaican reggae artist Kabaka Pyramid and Spanish singer Spread Lof. They sing:

“From Hawai‘i to the streets of LA
We came up
To Miami where them Kings like to play
We came up
From the bottom to the top getting’ paid
Came up yeah yeah yeah
Ain’t no stopping us, so get out of the way”

Besides, their collaboration with Kabaka Pyramid and Spread Lof reflects an observation once shared with me by Joe “Savage” Fa’avae: that there is a high rate of collaboration between Southern California island reggae artists and musicians from Jamaica and other non-Islander cultures. He explained that in Southern California, the diversity of musical influences is inevitable, making such collaborations a natural part of the scene.

Additionally, the inclusion of Spread Lof highlights the frequent interactions between Latin musicians and Pacific Islanders in Southern California. This connection is not limited to “Came Up”; for example, in his classic song “Let’s Do It Again,” J Boog includes the lyric, “All me Latinos and all a me sexy mamas, Boogie, Corleone giving you a holla,” further demonstrating the cultural and musical exchanges that shape Southern California’s island reggae sound.

Furthermore, resonating with David “RND” Duenas’s observation that urban settings are prominent in Southern California island reggae, Common Kings heavily center their song themes around urban life. Their song “City of Champions” is a tribute to Los Angeles, referencing multiple locations such as Malibu, Hollywood, and Wilshire. Drawing from Cattermole’s (2014) research on Māori reggae, where she notes that Māori musicians signify places in their reggae songs much like their ancestors did, we can similarly understand Common Kings and other Southern California island musicians as singing about places that hold personal and communal meaning. Through these songs, they narrate their experiences and express their Islander identities on the continent. The following table concludes the similarities and differences between the three styles of reggae discussed above.

Genres	Roots reggae	Hawai'i's Island Music	Southern California island reggae
Stylistic inspirations	African music and religious heritage survived during slavery, such as Pocomania and Burru drums Music developed during slavery period, such as Maroon music, work songs Jamaican folk music, such as mento Rastafarian music Jamaican popular music: ska and rocksteady African American music genres like R&B, gospel, jazz blues. Latin American music, such as Trinidadian calypso	Roots reggae and the international style of roots reggae Western popular music Native Hawaiian music	Hawai'i's island music Roots reggae and the international style of roots reggae Dancehall and ragga Californian Sounds: Rock music, reggae rock, hip hop, electronic dance music (EDM)
Musical characteristics	Minor keys, Syncopated rhythms, Polyrythmic base, Riddims centrality International reggae: Major keys, upbeat rhythms, and simplified rhythmic structures, filtered lyrics	Faster in tempo Louder skank Major keys R&B and falsetto vocal	Faster in tempo Louder skank R&B falsetto vocal More rock vocal, rapping or singjays
Rhythmic components	The skank, the bubble, and the one-drop	Faster tempo than roots reggae, a similar rhythmic approach, with the skank forming the dominant rhythmic line	A similar rhythmic approach, with the skank forming the dominant rhythmic line
Melodic components	Bassline anchors	Gentler melodic delivery	Metal-style intros or blues rock licks reminiscent of Eric Clapton
Lyrical features	Rastafarian spirituality, Pan-Africanism, love stories	Romantic themes, local food, activities such as surfing, and Hawaiian topics like love of the land, praise island scenery or portray an island paradise	Romantic stories, party-related themes, and expressions of admiration for reggae music and culture, marijuana, diasporic identity, racialization, ancestral island roots, urban life

Table 1. Similarities and differences between the five styles of reggae music.

From this section, we see that Southern California island reggae preserves a unique sound that fuses elements of Hawai‘i’s island music with the diverse musical landscape in California, incorporating influences from rock, hip hop, R&B, EDM, dancehall, and ragga. These musicians maintain strong connections to their roots, as seen in Bo Napoleon’s collaboration with Pena Bu, which reflects a trans-Pacific Hawaiian collaboration. Meanwhile, they also tell the story of being Islanders on the continent, expressing identity through references to both their island heritage and their lives in Los Angeles, as Common King shows in their music. Collaborations with Jamaican and Latin musicians further highlight the interracial interactions that shape this sound, collectively presenting a musical expression of their stories on the continent.

Island reggae in Southern California is not only a platform for diasporic Islanders to express their continental islandness. The formation story itself is a story of continental islandness. Also, all of this unique sound of Southern California would not be created without the pioneers who are trying hard to tell their stories through music. The emergence of the Southern California island reggae scene represents Pacific Islanders’ active process of defining continental islandness through island-making. The next section discusses the sound of Southern California island reggae, to discuss how the concepts of continental islandness and island-making are applied to frame the creation of Southern California Pacific Islanders’ reggae, alongside the storytelling of their lived experiences in Southern California during the 1990s.

Due to the lack of documents, I rely on oral history as my main method of rebuilding this story. The protagonist in this story is a Samoan band called Local Culture, which was the pioneer of Islanders' reggae in Southern California. Local Culture emerged in the early 1990s and thrived in the 2000s, then turned its focus on families during the late 2000s and returned to the scene in the early 2020s, the time when I conducted this fieldwork. The reason I chose to write about Local Culture was not only because they are the pioneers, but their musical journey and career experiences reflect the challenges and the racial relationships that diasporic islanders have been experiencing and negotiating even nowadays. This history is Islanders' responses to the encounter of Indigenous cultures and colonial memories with the racial violence and social marginalization in the 1990s of Los Angeles.

Getting Settled on the Continent: Local Culture and Their Urban Island Music

On Saturday night, November 24th, 2023, Local Culture delivered a powerful two-hour performance at House of Blues in Anaheim. Known as “the OG” of the Southern Californian Pacific Islanders' reggae scene, the energy of Local Culture was explosive. Lole, the vocalist and keyboardist, ran across and jumped the stage energetically while Vika, lead vocalist, commanded the space with his smooth, powerful voice. The bassist John and guitarist Rob provided a solid rhythmic section, supporting their other musicians with virtuosity. Formed in 1992, Local Culture's energy remained as vibrant as when they first started, and the audience, mainly long-term fans, brought their children and danced with the same youthful spirit.

The musicians called their music “urban island music,” a term they coined in the 1990s, which refers to a blend of Pacific Islander traditional music with a diverse Afro-American popular music range, including reggae, R&B, hip hop, and rock within the urban landscape of Greater Los Angeles. The label of urban Island music is not widely used today, as it eventually merged with island reggae and island music from Hawai‘i. This shift was largely driven by the commercial success of this brand of island reggae and its embedded Native Hawaiian worldview, which resonated with and felt familiar to diasporic Islanders.

Even so, urban island music profoundly shaped the current musical style of island reggae. This urban island music is buried, reflecting how Southern California, despite having the largest Pacific Islander community and supporting a vibrant island reggae scene within the trans-Pacific market, remains largely absent in academic discussions. By telling Local Culture’s story and unfolding the history of urban island music, I advocate for greater scholarly attention to this diasporic community, as they demonstrate the sustainability of Indigeneity despite facing significant environmental changes and distance from their ancestral lands. This story focuses specifically on urban island music from the 1990s to the 2000s, drawing from my interviews with Local Culture. It highlights how the band navigated defining their Indigeneity away from their home islands, while situating their experiences within the Southern Californian urban landscape.



Image 2: Local Culture in the concert: Rob, Vika, Lole, and John (From left to right).

The Musical Background

The Southern Californian Islander reggae community emerged in the 1990s with a generation of teenagers or young adults. Most of these teenagers either moved to the continent with their parents or were born and raised there as first-generation immigrants. Some had lived both on the islands and the continent, while others may never have. Growing up with parents who grew up in Oceania, these first-generation Islanders often

shared family experiences rooted in music from the Pacific Islands (hereafter “island music,” distinct from mainstream reggae in Hawai‘i, which will be referred to as “Hawai‘i’s island music” in this dissertation) whether popular, traditional, or Christian worship songs in their native languages. Their parents not only enjoyed music from the Pacific Islands but also a wide variety of American popular music, including rock, country, and Motown. For instance, Joe “Savage” Fa’avae grew up listening to many oldies from his parents, particularly noting the significant presence of African American music in his early sonic experiences. With such inspiration, these teenagers quickly embraced the diverse soundscape constructed by their families, integrating it into their Southern California lifestyle.

Due to its global popularity, diasporic African American popular music served as a familiar tool for these Islander teenagers to adapt to the soundscape of the continental U.S. As mentioned in *Follow Me Home*, this particular generation also needed to address the cultural disparities with non-Islander peers in their school lives. They were often the only Islander student, if not one of just a few, who needed to navigate their identities when barely any of their domestic peers were familiar with them. To thrive at schools and broadly, in society, these young Islanders quickly adapted the cultures of their neighbors, the African and Latin American communities, as they absorbed American popular music culture from their domestic peers. According to David “RND” Duenas, living in a diverse neighborhood in San Diego allowed him to interact with various people, especially Black and Latinx friends. Influenced by these interactions, his friends and cousin in their neighborhood established Pau Hana, one of the island reggae pioneers, in the late 1990s.

In the genesis of island reggae music, three particular music genres—including R&B, reggae, and hip hop—were what Islanders mostly listened to. Based on my fieldwork experiences and interviews, R&B is the all-time favorite for Islander households. Interviewees who grew up in the 1980s and 90s recalled listening to this music via radio stations and family album collections with their parents and siblings. There are various theories about why Islanders are drawn to R&B. My interviewees, reggae artists Fia and Nina Sosefina, suggested that its popularity in mass media plays a significant role. Joe “Savage” Fa’avae also noted that the genre’s appeal lies in its melodic vocal style, which aligns with Islanders’ sonic preferences, echoing with Kale’s observation (2021). Although a solidified impulse and rationale remain unanswered, it is clear that R&B has shaped the sound of island reggae. Joe “Savage” Fa’avae even described that many island reggae artists sing “R&B with the reggae beats.” Many artists, such as Dayvid Thomas, Latasha Lee, and Sammy Johnson, are known for their R&B singing style. Joe “Savage” Fa’avae frequently includes numerous R&B artists in the line-up of Island Block concerts, and the Island Block Network DJ Aye-dee energizes the crowd with R&B songs—he never fails to make audiences dance by playing Whitney Houston. Jazmin, a reggae artist from Hawai‘i, informed me that she is aware of the preference for R&B in Southern California island reggae performances. In response to such, she always performs more R&B songs in her shows in Southern California.

Following the reggae-mania in the U.S. since the 1970s, this music has been a significant part of the soundscape among the teenage Islanders. Legends like Bob Marley and Peter Tosh, and lovers’ rock stars such as UB40, who gained popularity in mass

media, were staples on these teenagers' playlists. In the 1990s, diasporic Islanders started to form their reggae bands, such as Local Culture, One Foundation, and Pau Hana. Notably, the diasporic Islander community also contributed to the reggae scene in the islands. According to Joe "Savage" Fa'avae, whenever his cousin from Samoa visited, he would take many new albums back with him. Similarly, Ryan "Jah Gumby" Murakami recalled how a Samoan classmate in middle school would share the latest reggae albums sent by cousins from California.

Other than the popularity of reggae, hip hop dominated these young Islanders' playlists. Hip hop reflected the harsh realities resulting from police brutality, gun violence, gang culture, and the riots in Los Angeles, which were shared experiences among my interviewees who were teenagers in the 1990s. "My parents moved to Hawai'i seeking a better environment to raise children and to keep them away from street life," Fia recalled. "At school, I was always involved in sports and thinking about girls, which also kept me away from gangs," David "RND" Duenas echoed. Joe "Savage" Fa'avae once shared with me in a personal conversation, "Even when I went to college at UCR (University of California, Riverside), I still couldn't get used to the vibe there, I kept watching my back to see if anyone was behind me." While none of them were involved in gangs, the street violence and neighborhood unrest, referred to as "street life," led them to find hip hop as the music genre that most reflected their everyday lives.

The popularity of hip hop among these younger Islanders also stemmed from the geographic proximity to the West Coast hip hop scene (Shaw 2000; Viator 2020). The South Bay Area, specifically Carson, where Pacific Islanders are densely populated, is

adjacent to key sites in the emergence of West Coast hip hop. As a result, teenage Islanders were among the first to feel the influence of hip hop culture. This area later became an important region for Pacific Islander hip hop development, particularly through the contributions of artists such as Samoan hip hop groups, Boo-Yaa T.R.I.B.E, and Brownsville. Boo-Yaa T.R.I.B.E. is the first Samoan hip hop group, which emerged from Carson and released their debut album *New Funky Nation* in 1990. “We listened to all kinds of music, including reggae, but it didn’t reflect our reality. Hip hop, on the other hand, directly addressed what was happening in our neighborhoods,” as Joe “Savage” Fa’avae reflected.²⁶

From Aotearoa New Zealand to California: The Inception of Local Culture

R&B, hip hop, reggae, oldies, and island music across various genres shaped the youth of these diasporic Islanders, establishing rich sources of sonic foundation for the emergence of island reggae in Southern California. Local Culture is a pioneering band of this genre. The group’s story began with the migration of the Lolesio-Pua family from Aotearoa, New Zealand, to the United States. Before relocating, the family’s children—brothers Leo, Ray, Roy, and Lole—formed a band called *Club Notion* in Christchurch, New Zealand, in the late 1980s, performing a wide range of popular music in New Zealand, including Jamaican reggae and island music from Samoa and Tonga.

²⁶ Joe “Savage” Fa’avae, interview by the author, December 11, 2023.

After moving to Carson, California, the brothers renamed the band to Local Culture in 1992. Their parents, Ainiu and Nemaia Fiu Lolesio-Pua, managed the band as it became their primary source of income after arriving in the U.S. Ainiu also coordinated the group's show clothing, shaping their visual presence alongside their music. Over time, Local Culture brought in new members—Vika, Rob, and John—who contributed to refining and evolving the band's style. As the older brothers Leo, Ray, and Roy eventually pursued different paths, the youngest brother, Lole, continued to lead Local Culture alongside Vika, Rob, and John, who remain core members today.

At the beginning of the band formation, Local Culture started by covering songs from the Top 40 on the Billboard and some island hits to entertain the community. This band quickly gained a reputation amongst the community and performed in various communal activities, such as weddings, graduations, and family parties. Later, they performed routinely on weekends at a local Polynesian lounge bar called *Dales* in Carson. Dales was the only Polynesian bar around this area; therefore, the Polynesian community soon noticed this “cultural boys band from New Zealand”.²⁷ Gradually, the reputation of Local Culture attracted an increasing number of diasporic Polynesian coming to the concert from other cities, counties, or even Northern California.

Local Culture's music nurtured the island music community. Lole said, “we did see the growth in our crowds we started; trust me, we started playing with empty chairs, you know, the group started with empty chairs to 50, then 50 grew to 100. And then it finally

²⁷ Local Culture, interview by author, January 28, 2024.

went to the capacity of that club.”²⁸ Concurrently, as Local Culture began to attract larger audiences, Dales was purchased by the renowned professional Samoan football athlete Jesse Sapolu of the San Francisco 49ers in 1993, and its name was changed to *Point After*. Sapolu renovated this community bar to enhance its size and appeal, inviting more performers to play. As a result, this establishment soon became a venue for Islanders to proudly showcase their community and music to their non-Islander friends. The scene, therefore, expanded, and Local Culture gained more opportunities to perform for diverse audiences, laying the groundwork for their breakthrough in the reggae scene.

Merging into the Californian Musical Landscape: Local Culture and Urban Island Music

As Local Culture gained popularity within the diasporic Islander community, the musicians continuously honed their performance skills, leading to an engagement in the reggae scene in Southern California. The new members, Vika, John, and Rob, enriched the sound of the band with Vika’s soulful vocals and the lively energy of live drums, influenced by reggae shows and various bands. At the time, reggae music and Jamaican bars were thriving in Los Angeles, following the global spread of reggae from the late 1970s and 1980s, as they recalled. John, the new bassist, immersed himself deeply into reggae and introduced numerous artists to Local Culture. On their off days, they visited various lounge bars to listen to live music by other bands. It was during these outings that they fell in love with reggae at Jamaican reggae bars. As they learned more from these

²⁸ Local Culture, interview by author, January 28, 2024.

artists, their performance skills evolved from using keyboard beats and drum machines to playing live drums. Their sound transitioned to reggae as a direct result of the Jamaican influence. This shift began the fusion of island music with reggae in Southern California around 1993 to 1994. This provided them with opportunities to perform as an introductory band in concerts of internationally renowned, legendary Jamaican reggae bands such as Inner Circle, Third World, and The Wailers, as well as pop-rock band Maroon 5.

Simultaneously, this incorporation of more Jamaican musical influences coincided with a similar reggae craze in Hawai‘i in the 1980s and 1990s (Kale 2021: xii). Although Local Culture had limited exposure to Hawai‘i’s Jawaiian music (renamed to island music in 1991), knowing about this parallel development was an imperative affirmation for their unique direction of musical stylistic development. Vika recalled that “And until we did that, we were like, ‘Oh, well, okay, they’re already doing stuff like that. That’s awesome.’ That kinda also inspired us to do the same.”²⁹

The diverse musical environment of Southern California eventually shaped the music style of Local Culture into something distinct from the Jawaiian music of the same era. Aside from Jamaican reggae, Local Culture actively responded to popular music cultures prevalent around them, especially rock, which shaped many of Local Culture’s instrumental solos and riffs, often featuring a more classic metal sound than reggae. Simultaneously, they embraced Latin popular music, which was prominent in Los Angeles. Until nowadays, they perform Selena Quintanilla’s song “Como La Flor” at

²⁹ Local Culture, interview by author, January 28, 2024.

every show, as a tribute to their Mexican neighbors and friends. Rob stated that these musical influences were the reason for their distinct sound from Jawaiian music, which he described as gentler and with more utilization of Hawaiaian traditional music. “We went against the grain. You can tell by the tracks we recorded earlier—some had minor progressions. Most Jawaiian music, current stuff, it’s all major keys, all upbeat. So, we pushed boundaries, influenced by other Caribbean bands that incorporated minor keys, adding a different flavor,”³⁰ Rob suggested in our interview.

From Local Culture’s sharing of their musical interactions with other communities in Southern California and calling them friends and neighbors, I see a performance of islandness roots in such practice of reciprocity. The concept of neighbors is shared by many diasporic Islanders when describing their bonds with African American and Latin American peers. While island reggae has become a distinct subgenre with its own market, Local Culture has maintained close ties with the Jamaican reggae scene nowadays. They also advocated for a broader recognition of reggae’s influence within Southern California’s island reggae scene, beyond the typical emphasis on island music. “For us, as far as the island music scene, we were always introduced to it more on the island side, more than the reggae side. With our island backgrounds, we were always influenced by major reggae artists, you know, Bob Marley, Peter Tosh, those folks that came out back in the day,” Rob explained.³¹

³⁰ Local Culture, interview by author, January 28, 2024.

³¹ Local Culture, interview by author, January 28, 2024.

Observing the diverse influences beyond reggae in their music, I then ask about their preferred term, if not island music, which was coined as an alternative to Jawaiian music in 1991 (Kale 2021). The musicians of Local Culture respond with “urban island music.” It is a label they created before the importation of island music from Hawai‘i to California. From their perspectives, “urban island music” pinpoints the consciousness of their positions, singing island music in the urban context.

Throughout the interview, I noticed that the members of Local Culture were more excited to talk about their music as a cross-boundary expression rather than grounding it in a single genre. Without focusing specifically on a single music genre to define urban island music, these musicians revealed their aim to transcend music genre boundaries, amalgamating beloved sounds into their distinct “energy,” which they applied to describe their spirit of musical experiment. They described this energy as audacious, unapologetic, and enjoyable. Rob explained such energy as, “we were bold, in your face, and unapologetic about our music. We simply wanted to have fun, and that was evident in our performances, like when Lole and Dave (Vika) leaped onto the stage. But fundamentally, it was about fun.”³² To them, this energy is defined by being fun, inclusive, and experimental.

The energy for diasporic Islanders further means expressing and sustaining their Indigenous identity in the new environment. The term “energy” had consistently been used to articulate the distinct sound of Southern California island reggae in the interview. As they emphasized that the subsequent Southern California island reggae artists had

³² Local Culture, interview by author, January 28, 2024.

inherited this energy, I realized that this energy represented the drive to innovate new music reflective of the diverse surrounding musical landscape with their unique interpretations. Vika elaborated, “If you’ve ever been to the islands, we’ve always had similar styles. It’s kind of a mash-up of country, cultures, and reggae—all kinds of things. That’s what, we see, forms the whole island reggae.”³³ As they define, engaging and relating with the surrounding music cultures is the core value of island music, and it is an Indigenous practice they are committed to preserving.

Hearing their response and seeing their pride in their facial expressions, I understood that the term “energy” was how they expressed their strong identity toward Southern California as an Islander. The musicians’ innovative insistence on experimental energy is how they understand what it means to be a part of the diverse sound in Southern California in an Islander way—building a strong identity toward the place they call home, which, in this context, is California. Throughout the interview, Local Culture positioned themselves as being from Southern California, even when referencing island music in Oceania. They repeatedly expressed pride in the rapid growth and unique sound of the Southern California community, specifically, the increasing musical collaborations between Native Hawaiians and Californian Islanders since the 2000s, which they see as a sign of recognition from Oceania.

The strong identity of being diasporic Islanders in California also reflects on their response to the critique of not being authentic or too Americanized due to their distinct sound from other island music in the islands. Lole added, “We are a product of our

³³ Local Culture, interview by author, January 28, 2024.

environment, compared to the folks coming straight from the islands, right?”³⁴ Vika agreed and provided a full explanation, “We were born and raised here. But that doesn’t mean we’re not Samoans. It doesn’t mean that we’re not proud of where we come from.”³⁵ Local Culture makes a powerful statement by opening every concert with a Samoan song, usually prayer songs or love songs, alongside Selena Quintanilla’s “Como La Flor”, grounding their performances in their cultural heritage while embracing the diversity of their environment. From my experience in their concerts, regardless of what language or music genre Local Culture is singing, their audiences always reply to them with collective singing or Samoan dances, as if every song is an island song.

Reciprocities and Alliances Across the Pacific

The sonic experimentation of urban island music often meant navigating barriers from both the reggae and island music scenes. As Local Culture became more mature in the early 2000s, Southern California’s island music scene was not yet fully established, leading them to seek opportunities in Hawai‘i’s island music scene and the Californian Jamaican reggae scene. The musicians recalled that these two musical cultures, each deeply rooted in distinct racial and colonial histories, once had participation largely limited to members of their own communities. Although they eventually gained recognition in both scenes through their evocative performances, they initially faced exclusion. Rob suggested that “the Caribbean reggae is a very unique situation where

³⁴ Local Culture, interview by author, January 28, 2024.

³⁵ Local Culture, interview by author, January 28, 2024.

they do not respect other people outside of either Jamaica or Africa to play reggae.” He further added that they encountered the same barrier in Hawai‘i’s island music scene, “We faced a lot of those situations, not only on the Caribbean side but then on the Hawaiian side, too. So, we’re kind of like stuck in the middle.”³⁶

The feeling of being in between reflects the ambiguous social position of diasporic Pacific Islanders in Southern California due to immigration. Within U.S. racial norms, they often experience anti-Black violence as their bodies are racialized, yet they cannot and never try to identify as African Americans. They may self-identify as Brown-skinned people, but this broad category, commonly associated with multiple ethnic communities, is insufficient to reflect their distinct Indigenous identity. Officially, they are grouped with Asians under the label “Asian Americans and Pacific Islanders,” a classification that overlooks the colonial histories shaping their diasporic experiences (Arvin & Teves 2018). At the same time, they must also navigate expectations from peers in the islands, where U.S.-based Islanders are often seen as overly Americanized and must prove their Indigeneity. For example, David “RND” Duenas informed me that when he was younger, he often faced remarks questioning his ancestral knowledge or identity.

Local Culture navigates its ambiguous position by defining themselves through urban island music. While Rob and Vika both expressed feelings of discomfort and insecurity when trying to break into both the Jamaican reggae and Hawai‘i’s island music scenes, Lole spoke with a relaxed confidence. He recalled handing demos directly to venue managers without hesitation because he was “confident with our music.” This

³⁶ Local Culture, interview by author, January 28, 2024.

confidence stems from a strong identification with their Southern California Pacific Islander identity and the distinct sonic identity they've developed around it. As Lole explained, "We didn't have dreads... I mean, we didn't fall into the look of the typical reggae band. But we just, like, you know, going back to what we said, we just played what we liked playing."³⁷

Throughout our conversations, the phrase "playing the music we liked to play" consistently emerged alongside what they described as their "theory of energy". For Local Culture, "the music they like to play" encompasses a wide range of popular genres that shape their sound and reflect the artists they collaborate with across various music scenes. As they shared stories about the music and the people they played with, I sensed a genuine joy, one that extended beyond the music itself to the meaningful relationships and good times they shared with fellow artists across genres. The more they spoke, the more it became clear to me that the music they loved to play was deeply connected to their lived experiences as Islanders on the continent with other communities, as well as with their peers in the islands.

Local Culture never sought to perform Blackness or Hawai'ianess in order to fit into either scene. They sought music that speaks to them, reflects who they are, and that they genuinely love to play. They believed this combination of respect and self-assurance allowed them to be embraced by both the Californian and Hawai'i's reggae scenes. While they drew sonic influences from both, they created something new—an original sound that appealed to both audiences yet retained a distinct aesthetic rooted in the experience

³⁷ Local Culture, interview by author, January 28, 2024.

of Southern Californian Pacific Islanders. This perspective echoes what Joe “Savage” Fa’avae emphasized to me: listening to Black popular music doesn’t mean Pacific Islanders want to be Black. Rather, it reflects a deep respect for African American popular music culture and an understanding that this music provides a powerful vehicle for expressing their own stories—stories shaped by diasporic life in Los Angeles. As Joe “Savage” Fa’avae put it, Californian island music is about “performing whatever music is popular, but in our own style,” which I call a style of continental islandness.

Urban island music—the island music emerging from urban California—is Local Culture’s expression of continental islandness, an assertion of relational time within the continental U.S. As Rifkin explains (2017), the restoration of Indigenous temporal sovereignty emerges from Indigenous peoples’ storytelling of their contemporary experiences through the lens of their own historical timelines. Urban island music is a form of Indigenous storytelling to assert Indigenous temporality in California. As Local Culture drew on island musical heritage to reinterpret the popular music that symbolized their continental environment, they told stories of their ancestors’ diaspora and linked this ancestry with their contemporary stories, which offered their descendants a vision of an Indigenous future grounded in the continent.

As a form of Indigenous storytelling, urban island music also affirms their sovereignty via sound. As Liz Przybylski has described, sonic sovereignty is “about storytelling and exploring how musical expression is framed,” which includes “asserting how one should be listened to, choosing one’s audience, identifying when one does not wish to speak to certain audiences, and choosing when to be silent” (Przybylski 2023: 7).

Local Culture's urban island music asserted sonic sovereignty by defining the sound of diasporic Islanders and deciding who they wanted to perform for and perform with. They actively participated in the broader music scene to tell non-diasporic Islanders their stories, built relationships with Afro-Caribbean and African American communities, and introduced their music back to Oceania. Through their musical expressions and activities, they constructed a reciprocal relationship with all these communities with their own sound as sovereign subjects, affirming their own Indigeneity and sovereignty as a diasporic Pacific Islander community in the process.

Having Fun with The Community: The Indigenous Resilience in Urban Island Music

At first, I thought “fun” was simply their way of describing their theory of energy. But toward the end of the interview, I realized that “fun” carried a deeper meaning, reflecting their love, commitment, and sense of accompaniment with their community, which, in essence, expressed their hope for the community to find happiness despite the hardships of life on the continent. Although Local Culture has brought urban island music to broader audiences as an assertion of their sovereignty as the diaspora, their music and performances have always been created to serve their community. The band slowed down in the 2010s to focus on family life and returned to the stage in the 2020s. More than thirty years since their founding, Local Culture emphasized in our interview that their mission had remained the same: to bring happiness to their community, from supporting their early settlement in a new place to evoking shared memories of the past. Local Culture's mission resonates with Billy Ray Belcourt's theory of joy as resistance, as it

defines joy as a “durational performance of emotion, one that is caught up in an ancestral art of world-making in the most asphyxiating of conditions” (Belcourt 2021). This is evident as Rob suggested that:

“You know, our older generation they are the working class. They were either longshoremen or in the military. And so, they’re looking for a place to raise their family, [so] they moved from Samoa, you know, wherever, to Hawai‘i, California. Well, those that moved to California, ended up either being in the [military] service, or longshoremen. That was at the South Bay Area. That’s the Carson, Torrance, San Pedro mainland. So with that in mind, that was a big, huge Pacific Islander community in the South Bay Area at that time, and then they slowly moved to Long Beach or you know, wherever, Orange County, but during that time, with the whole Pacific Islander influx at that time, we were able to just be in the right place, you know, because that’s why they all came to Point After. And so that was kind of like our success in moving forward. You had the working class, who all they wanted to do was work and then have fun on the weekend. Well, where did they have fun? Dales and Point After. Well, we did a good job at having fun with them, so they just followed us. This is the older generation because remember, we’re younger than these guys. So, then we became a part of their lives, playing out their sons’, daughters’, nieces’ graduation, the weddings, so a lot of the fans, the younger fans, met at our shows. And they met their wives or spouses at our shows. So, we became more of a nostalgia thing than anything, because you know, we haven’t released anything in a long time. But people still come because it’s a moment that they were happy back. You know, right, it was a connection that they made, things are crazy now, COVID and this and that. People want to, you know, just be happy again, that’s our connection with the community was from that time developing all the way up to this time, it was a moment of time that they could go back and say, I was happy.”³⁸

After three decades of Local Culture’s presence, the Southern California island reggae scene has grown to the point of performing at major venues like the House of Blues. Despite this growth, Local Culture’s commitment remains unchanged. At their concert on March 2nd, 2024, just as it was three decades ago in Dales, the House of Blues in Anaheim was packed with an enthusiastic crowd, mostly Islanders around the band’s

³⁸ Local Culture, interview by author, January 28, 2024.

age or younger, dancing along, their faces lit up with joy. The energy Local Culture brought to the stage served as more than entertainment; it fueled a sense of joy and resilience within the community. This joyfulness echoes what De Vons (2020) theorizes in her theories of spiralic temporality about the healing abilities of Indigenous people in overcoming oppression, dispossession, and environmental challenges that disrupt Indigenous temporality. Local Culture's exploration in the Southern Californian music scene, as well as the Jamaican and Hawaiian reggae communities, underscores the sovereignty and cultural sustainability of diasporic Pacific Islanders, exemplifying the Turori's relational time (2022) and echoes the Indigenous spiralic temporality that De Vos highlights—cyclical and transformative (2020). In that joy, diasporic Islanders find the strength to thrive despite the challenges of diaspora. Their thriving becomes a continuation of islandness on the continent, and this living practice of continental islandness envisions an Oceanic future and reasserts sovereignty within the continental landscape.

Conclusion: Temporality and Sovereignty in Continental Islandness

Even though Local Culture was not active during this decade of dramatic change, their influence set the stage for this cultural surge. In interviews with key figures in the scene, they consistently cited the first generation of island music in Southern California, including Local Culture, as their initial inspiration for engaging in the music scene. The happiness, truth, and unapologetic attitude encapsulated by Local Culture's use of "energy" are also evident in the demeanor of these individuals. Joyfulness is celebrated at

every island reggae concert, with the genre often characterized as embodying joy, love, and peace. These are the values extolled in island reggae, and they align with how these island artists describe what they have gleaned from reggae.

This is not exclusively Local Culture's story but shared among Southern California Pacific Islanders. The diverse musical influences embedded in urban island music reflect the urban experiences of diasporic Islanders and their reciprocity with their neighbors, rooted in the environmental relationship their ancestors taught them to cultivate. The relationality they present in embracing various musical styles and transforming them into an island sound is a way they practice their Indigeneity, a practice they believe lies at the heart of island music. Urban island music tells the stories of diasporic Islanders, and Local Culture's musical journey embodies this narrative. Their music serves as a form of storytelling, connecting their elders' music and experiences, honoring their elders through songs, and carrying these traditions forward to their own generation and the next, paving a path toward an Indigenous future within the framework of Pacific relational time.

Chapter 2: Island in the Continent: Creating Space through Capitalism and Interracial Dynamics in Los Angeles

Introduction

In chapter one, I discussed the Southern California roots of Island Raage emerging from what Local Culture called the “urban island music” in the 1990s; urban island music is diasporic Islander’s practice of Indigeneity, in which relationality is central to their fusion between music from Island cultures and a wide variety of Afro-American popular music on the continent. As California urban island music gradually merged with island music from Hawai‘i, what became known interchangeably as island reggae or island music in California has been understood as a fusion of island music from Hawai‘i, Jamaican roots reggae, African American R&B and rock, and traditional island music. This music expresses continental islandness and represents the hardships and struggles of immigration and racialization. While the sound and history of island reggae are rooted in the Indigenous resistance that draws inspiration from the political meanings of Jamaican reggae and African American music, this chapter discusses how this music can also be seen as Pacific Islanders sharing sounds with diasporic Africans in California.

As my fieldwork continues, I become particularly curious about a critical concern that some Islander reggae musicians and listeners shared: the perceived inauthenticity and the critique of cultural appropriation. In my interview with Alfred Bordallo, a CHamoru visual artist, he shared an anecdote about critiques of the perceived authenticity of island reggae within the multiracial environment in the Great Los Angeles. Alfred Bordallo recounted that he once played an island reggae song for his Haitian friend, who

immediately remarked, “this is not reggae.” On another occasion, I played J Boog’s “Let’s Do It Again” (2013) for a Jamaican dance scholar at the University of California, Riverside. She responded, “I can tell it’s reggae from the beat.” These two responses reveal that while island reggae maintains some sonic connections to reggae, it is aesthetically distanced from its origins.

Instead of justifying whether or not island reggae should be considered “real reggae” or “authentic,” I turn to highlight the shared musical sound and spaces between diasporic Africans and Pacific Islanders in Southern California. This directly responds to the surrounding critiques of this music, since appropriation is insufficient for understanding identity formation and negotiation among non-Black communities utilizing Black cultures (Johnson, I. K. 2020). More importantly, as island reggae has developed its own unique style, independent scene, and specific market—not only sonically, but also in terms of community and individual identity—it prompts questions about how this evolution shapes Pacific Islanders’ relationships with their African diasporic neighbors. These two anecdotes remind me of a recurring concern voiced by a few Islanders³⁹: despite the growing popularity of different reggae styles in Southern California, the contributions of diasporic Africans to island reggae are often underemphasized within the scene.

Island reggae in Southern California, specifically after it is commercialized, reveals complex racial and spatial dynamics underlying the debate about authenticity. In

³⁹ I have chosen not to disclose the names of these interviewees and interlocutors in order to protect them as they critique issues within their communities.

Southern California, especially in Greater Los Angeles, island reggae allows Pacific Islanders to express their cultural identities within the diverse urban environment. Following the contribution of Islander reggae pioneers such as Local Culture and Hooliganz, the Southern California island reggae music scene has been commercialized to attract a wider non-Islander audience. Nowadays, island reggae occupies the Southern Californian music scene alongside Jamaican reggae (both roots reggae and dancehall) and reggae rock (also widely perceived as Cali-reggae).⁴⁰ The latter was mainly influenced by Anglo-American musicians; therefore, it has also been called white reggae. While this commercialization of community-serving island reggae has created a prosperous Islanders' space in the scene, it simultaneously receives critique of its perceived "not reggae" and "not aware of diasporic African contribution", as exemplified in the anecdotes. Island reggae's commercial success leads to the expansion and versatility of its musical space, that have potentially surpassed that of diasporic Africans in Los Angeles.

Chapter Two examines the spatiality of diasporic Islanders as enacted through the making of island space, analyzing island reggae as integral to the sovereign claims. This island space is a relational space that emerges through diasporic Pacific Islanders' construction of multi-racial sonic and spatial relationships, particularly those formed through shared sounds and spaces with diasporic African communities in Los Angeles. Building on their reciprocity and alliance with diasporic Africans, I follow Kēhaulani

⁴⁰ Reggae rock, also known as Cali-reggae, is a style that fuses reggae with elements of rock, punk, ska, and hip hop. It emerged from Southern California's alternative rock subcultures in the 1980s and 1990s and was specifically shaped by the rise of the band Sublime in the 1990s (Kale 2021).

Vaughn's (2019) argument that Native Hawaiians' treaty with Native Americans constitutes a practice of Indigeneity. Similarly, I argue that the cultivation of everyday relationships with diasporic Africans represents a practice of Pacific Islander islandness on the continent.

This is also a story of Los Angeles. George Lipsitz (1999) positions non-Black immigrant borrowing of Black culture as the result of the intersections of national, racial, gender, and sexual identities in Los Angeles—a city he calls a global city shaped by immigrant capital and labor. Also, Gaye Theresa Johnson (2013) theorizes Los Angeles as a multi-racial space constructed through spatial intersections and contestations amongst racial minorities and dominant groups. Both Lipsitz (1986) and Johnson (2013) conceive of music as a sonic space where spatial contestation occurs and can materialize into claims over physical spaces. Drawing theoretical inspiration from their perspectives, I contend that these Islanders' borrowing of Black expressive culture from diasporic Africans in Los Angeles expresses their intersecting identities within this global urban space. Commercialized musical activities of island reggae also constitute spatial claims and acts of sharing space with Black communities. My discussion about island reggae's relationship with reggae, therefore, is situated within a nuanced exploration of these interracial, sonic, and spatial dynamics within the construction of island space in Los Angeles.

Before beginning the exploration, I need to emphasize that from the outset of the spatial assertions of diasporic Pacific Islanders in the continental U.S., they do not intend to supplant or overshadow Native American sovereignty over Turtle Island. While

diasporic Pacific Islanders indeed view Los Angeles broadly as home, as well as specific cities like Long Beach and Carson, where they predominantly reside and establish, they are particularly mindful of respecting the land sovereignty and hospitality of Native Americans.

The island spaces explored in this chapter represent places where diasporic Islanders can assert their sovereignty and continental islandness. These spaces can be sonic and virtual, such as radio stations, or physical sonic spaces, such as churches and music venues. This space of thriving and presence takes inspiration from Ashon Crawley's notion of otherwise possibility (2017), a space full of joy that the oppressed people created by the sound, performance, and presence in the world of suppression. Making island space is how diasporic Islanders celebrate their continental islandness; the space they create becomes a site where this islandness continues to be celebrated. My ethnographic account of this island space illustrates that music and performance hold the power of resilience, imbuing meaning into the land of a larger racialized and capitalist society.

Although there is consensus among island reggae artists about the impact of interracial interactions in Los Angeles, their narratives and musical expressions remain underexplored in music and spatial studies (Lipsitz 1994; Johnson, G. T. 2013; Alvarez 2022). Moreover, the nuances of Pacific Islanders' continental lives have yet to be fully explored in Pacific studies and island studies, both of which lack research on the everyday lives of Islanders on the continent. Such a research paradigm is shaped by an area focus and a continental/island dichotomy that constructs an epistemological barrier

to understanding the transnational continuity of island heritage and identity on the continent. Confronting this barrier, Māori scholar Melodie Turori often suggests in our discussions that “we are people of mobility, but we are also the people rooted in new places.”

Following Turori’s suggestion, I ask: How do Islanders articulate their shared spaces and sounds with diasporic Africans through island reggae within the capitalist framework of Los Angeles? How do these practices construct island spaces and shape Pacific Islanders’ expression of continental islandness? By addressing these questions, I argue that the island reggae scene constitutes a sonic island space shaped by ongoing conversations between Pacific Islanders and other racial communities—particularly African Americans—within the racialized-capital dynamics of Southern California. This space layers continental islandness with the racial and geographical identities that have emerged from these interracial interactions.

My discussion is subdivided into three sections. It begins with a literature review of spatial studies scholarship relevant to my analysis, followed by a history of Island Block Radio, which created crucial spaces for preserving the legacy of Southern Californian island reggae in the 2010s and 2020s. I discuss how the island reggae community utilizes radio as a sonic island space to assert their sovereignty and build an alliance with diasporic Africans. This space was initially developed by sharing sonic and digital spaces with African American communities, and subsequent commercialization then expanded these spaces, complicating interactions among people of diverse racial, national, and gender identities. In doing so, I present a sonic island space that is constructed through

diasporic Islanders' negotiation with social structures and individual networks that are sometimes collaborative or confrontational in a capitalist and racialized society.

The second section focuses on contemporary developments, exploring island reggae's maturation as a commercialized music scene. I analyze how diasporic Islanders navigate and sustain coalitions between Blackness and Indigeneity through practices of space-making. This discussion is grounded in two ethnographic case studies and two song analyses. The ethnographic studies center on the 2022 Cali Vibes Festival and the 2025 Marley Festival, both held in Long Beach. Both festivals featured roots reggae, reggae rock, and island reggae performances. While Cali Vibes catered to a more mainstream audience that entangled with the racialized capitalism in the United States, resulting in a diminished visibility of Black influences, Marley Festival was more locally oriented and expressed a profound egalitarianism that resisted white and male domination. These events reveal how island reggae operates within the broader Southern Californian reggae scene, negotiating complex racial dynamics across both mainstream and underground circuits.

Following this institutional representation of racial and spatial dynamics, the third section articulates individual creation of shared space and sound between the two diasporic groups. Specifically, it discusses how the two songs—"Officer" (2009) by the Samoan reggae band Hooliganz and "Reggae Party" (2015) by the Tongan artist Siaosi—offer spatial narratives shaped by diasporic experience. "Officer" examines the identity of people of color created amongst interracial relations within the context of Los Angeles and how these dynamics contribute to island space-making. "Reggae Party," on the other

hand, constructs a pan-Island identity that links California, Hawai‘i, and Jamaica, illustrating how diasporic Islanders imagine translocal connections through music.

A Literature Review on Spatiality

The urban space of Southern California is where island-making occurs as an action of spatial claim, through which Islanders create an affective and physical space that becomes meaningful to them, fostering a sense of home and enabling them to live out a relationship to the land. Examining this urban space provides a nuanced discussion on diasporic Indigeneity intersecting with race, class, and gender in the U.S. This examination emphasizes the interactions between Islanders and diasporic African communities: African American communities with whom Pacific Islanders live as neighbors, and Afro-Caribbeans from whom they draw considerable inspiration. This racial-spatial examination is theoretically contextualized with current scholarship on globalization, cosmopolitanism, urban music studies, Indigenous spatiality, and Indigenous music studies.

I apply theories of globalization and space to frame Los Angeles as a contested zone of multiple identities shaped by global networks of capital and labor, examining diasporic Islanders’ identity formation and negotiation (Appadurai 1996; Lipsitz 1999; Massey 2001; Alvarez 2022). Drawing from Doreen Massey’s (2001) spatial theory of globalization, I view physical place as a complex construct where social structures emerge through continuous interactions and negotiations. Similarly, in the context of Los Angeles, George Lipsitz (1999) identifies Los Angeles as a global nexus where

immigrant labor and capital intersect, while Luis Alvarez (2022) characterizes Southern California—including Los Angeles and San Diego—as border spaces where immigrant, ethnic, and national identities are constantly shifting and renegotiated by border communities in response to racial and citizenship issues. This ongoing process, in turn, challenges national boundaries and bureaucratic forms of oppression. Applying these perspectives to my discussion of continental islandness, I view Los Angeles as a continental space where diasporic Pacific Islander islandness is constructed through negotiations within the intersections of multiple global forces.

Moreover, drawing on urban spatial research in music (Lipsitz 1986; Lee, T.-S. 1999; Viesca 2004; Johnson, G. T. 2013; Cohen 2012), I highlight how interracial interactions shape contested relationships and negotiations through music and cultural activities. The urban music research views music and musicking as tools for place meaning-making. Building on Martin Stokes's (1994) observation that music serves as “an arena for pushing back boundaries, exploring the border zone” (ibid.: 22) in discussions of gender and performance, Sara Cohen (2012) argues that the urban musical landscape is shaped and imbued with meaning through musicians' everyday experiences. These experiences reflect their identities in terms of genre, race, and gender, all of which are mediated by the urban material environment (ibid.: 169).

Historical music research on Los Angeles also demonstrates how the city's musical landscape is composed of racialized spaces, with boundaries continually being created, contested, and redefined through interactions between racial minorities and dominant institutional forces (Daniels 2002; Kun 2005; Macías 2008; Dickerson 2011; García

2013; Johnson, G. T. 2013; Viator 2020). Johnson (2013) introduces the concept of “spatial entitlement,” which refers to “a way in which marginalized communities have created new collectivities based not just upon eviction and exclusion from physical places, but also on new and imaginative uses of technology, creativity, and spaces” (ibid.: x). She highlights the critical role of music in spatial entitlement, noting that music, disseminated through record stores, radio, clubs, and even car spaces, emerges as a powerful medium that transcends segregated geographic boundaries and challenges Eurocentric racial discourse. Given these perspectives on music spaces as deeply interconnected with racialized geographies, I connect the concept of island-making with urban music research to frame it as a process of diasporic Islander re-imagining racial spaces, negotiating spatial boundaries, and Indigenizing spaces to island spaces.

Viewing Los Angeles as a global economic hub, I draw from the scholarship focusing on the discourse of cosmopolitan and global capitalism on music genres (Kielman 2022; Holt 2007) to explore how diasporic Pacific Islanders use the globalized reggae—a genre rooted in both island identity and the histories of colonized African diasporas—to rearticulate their continental islandness with a broader community of People of Color, colonized subjects, and global Islanders in both the U.S. and global context. As island reggae becomes more commercialized, its listenership grows to include non-Pacific Islanders and mainstream audiences, crossing boundaries of class, race, ethnicity, and gender. This scholarship also helps me examine how this expansion shows diasporic Islanders’ strategic reframing of Islander culture, which aids in navigating the racialized-capitalist structures of U.S. society. This strategy resonates with

Ilana Gershon's (2012) research on migrant Samoans in the U.S. and New Zealand, which shows how Samoan communities strategically adjust their cultural narratives to align with ethnic politics in order to access funding, while still maintaining and transmitting their cultural knowledge. This dynamic highlights a pragmatic approach to enhancing cultural sustainability in capitalist settings.

Examining island reggae as a form of cosmopolitical imagination within the interracial interactional and capitalist spaces of Los Angeles, I then revisit George Lipsitz's (1994) concept of the "dangerous crossroads" to accentuate the paradox of cultural alliances like island reggae. Such partnerships between diasporic islanders and diasporic Africans are often facilitated by transnational capital and must accommodate the demands of the commercial market in order to be heard. This framework provides a lens for analyzing how global capital networks shape racial and cultural alliances within the Southern Californian Island reggae scene. Particularly, it enables analyzing how diasporic Pacific Islanders navigate the tensions between cultural expression and market participation. Over time, the cultural alliance within the island reggae scene expanded into broader partnerships with mass media and the live entertainment industry, enabling Pacific Islanders to enter mainstream circuits and circulate their music globally. However, this increased visibility also required their self-expression to align with industrial professionalism, and a cohesive alliance with diasporic African communities has been reshaped by commercialization. Additionally, their participation in the globalized music economy further accentuated their positioning as cosmopolitan Islanders, yet also essentialized their islandness.

Finally, I turn to Indigenous spatiality and sovereignty to discuss the spatial construction of continental islandness and island-making. Indigenous scholars argue that Indigenous spatiality is shaped by human responsibilities toward the land, which are constructed through the relationship between humans and the material environment (Cornrassel 2008; 2020; Hathaway 2010). In regard to Indigenous space, Michael Hathaway (2010) states that this space is defined by “the ways that the concept of indigenous people is engaged with and used in specific locales at specific times” (ibid.: 304). This notion of spatiality stands in stark contrast to colonial views that treat land as property within the frameworks of the nation-state and capitalism (Roth 2009; D. Robinson 2020). Furthermore, the Western settler-colonial notion of Indigeneity, which is linked to land ownership, renders it vulnerable to erasure through displacement and dispossession (Coulthard 2014; Burow, Brock, & Dove 2018; Teves 2018).

To counteract these settler-colonial definitions, I follow Pacific scholars who propose Indigenous ways of mapping and place-making to revitalize Indigenous spatial practices. Emphasizing voyaging as a way of building relationships amongst the self, the island, and the world, Vicente Diaz (2011) offers an Indigenous-centered perspective that rethinks islandness, Indigeneity, and sovereignty beyond the boundaries of colonial nation-states. His formulation—Indigeneity = time/space/self/narrative (or story) (ibid.: 27)—provides this chapter with a framework for understanding time and space through Indigenous storytelling and conceptualizing California as part of an Oceanic world, not confined by U.S. national borders or by the notion of islands as small and isolated entities. I also draw on Candace Fujikane’s (2021) mapping approach of centering

Indigenous land relationships as a form of sovereignty assertion to foreground diasporic Pacific Islanders' attachments to specific cities and spaces in Los Angeles.

Connecting urban sonic space with Indigenous spatiality in Indigenous music studies, I follow the argument of Indigenous music studies scholars for listening to music from an Indigenous ontology, viewing music as integral to self-determination, sovereignty, and refusal within the colonial boundaries of the nation-state. I draw on Jessica Bissett Perea's (2021) concept of centering density and audibility for a relational way of listening to Indigeneity in music, which I see as an ontological shift in prioritizing Indigenous perspectives in listening. My analysis of urban, sonic island spaces in radio and events draws on Liz Przybylski's (2023) concept of Sonic Sovereignty—a sovereignty asserted over sonic space, where Indigenous musicians decide how, what, and to whom their sound can and should be heard. From Przybylski's application of sonic sovereignty to the Indigenous radio station Steerz in Winnipeg, Canada, I see that Indigenous radio stations present not only how radio can cross and challenge racialized geographic space like Johnson (2013) argues, but also present radio as a space that can decide how interactions with African American communities and other racial communities should be conducted, confronting the settler-colonial perspective of racial-essentialization.

Applying notions of sonic sovereignty and the relational method in listening sonic space, this research takes inspiration from and responds to Pacific scholars who argue that reggae, as a genre rooted in Jamaican expressions of roots and routes, serves as a vehicle for Pacific Islanders to articulate their sense of places (Cattermole 2014; Kale

2021; Webb-Gannon & Webb 2019). While this scholarship observes that this comes from Pacific Islanders associating their Indigeneity in the expression of Blackness, this is not the approach of diasporic Islanders, who play reggae because of their neighborhoodship with diasporic-African communities. Therefore, the case of diasporic Islanders enriches this scholarship by arguing that diasporic Islanders' island-making is grounded in spatial practices of Indigenous self-determination and neighborhood relationality. By engaging Indigenous protocols based on respect for and acknowledgment of the original stewards of both musical genres and land, they affirm their Indigeneity while adapting to new cultural and spatial contexts.

Listening to diasporic Pacific Islanders' spatiality in relation needs to theorize continental islandness and island-making in space. I theorize continental islandness and island-making through Māori (Cook Islands) scholar Melodie Turori's (2022a) spatial theory of *land within* to reimagine islandness and Indigenous spatiality in Los Angeles. This framework emphasizes that being outside of ancestral lands does not diminish Indigeneity; rather, it reflects Islander Indigeneity thriving in new contexts. Drawing from a multi-sited diasporic background, Turori (ibid.) illustrates this through her own and her father's experiences. When her father moved from the Cook Islands to New Zealand, the Pacific community there continued to nurture his Pacific values alongside adapting to Euro-Western urban environments. Similarly, when Melodie's family relocated to Valley Center in San Diego County during childhood, the rural setting strengthened her Indigenous relationship with nature. Later, her experiences in Los Angeles, where she found a significant Pacific Islander community, further nourished her

spirit in connecting to her ancestry. Turori contends that, irrespective of rural or urban contexts, whether on islands or in diasporic communities, Indigenous values persist. I see this as the persistence of island-space on the continent.

Turori also theorizes the persistence of Indigeneity by connecting the concept of Indigenous land to her theory of *land within* and *vā*. Turori (ibid.) draws inspiration from Samoan scholar Elekosi F. Lafitaga's (2021) conceptualization of "land as a spiritual and natural entity" that provides knowledge across all aspects of human life. Based on this idea, Turori introduces the concept of land within to underscore that the land, and the Indigeneity that grows from it, is carried in Islanders' bodies; she states, "the (is)land is in our bones" (2022a: 20). To make this land within occur in diaspora, she then elaborates on the concept of making "*vā*," a relational space connecting Islanders' bodies to ancestral homeland and to the land upon which they currently reside (ibid.: 22). She explains, "*vā* enables the land within to continue living while also reshaping that spiritual landscape in relation to present location and persons" (ibid.: 22).

Turori's (ibid.) ideas of land within and *vā* provide the theoretical spatial foundation for my frameworks of continental islandness and island-making. Continental islandness builds upon her notion of land within as Indigeneity carried within the body—spiritual and relational rather than bound to a specific territory—affirming that Islanders can thrive across diverse locations. From this foundation, continental islandness emphasizes how continental influence interacts with the idea of land within to construct their islandness on the continent. While continental contexts do not displace Islanders' identities or values, they introduce new environmental relationships that shape how Indigeneity is understood

and practiced—particularly through intersections with colonial structures and identities of race, gender, and class.

Island-making draws from her notion of *vā*. Island-making is the practice of continental islandness in action, and the island space it creates is where continental islandness is constructed and performed. This island space exists within the space of *vā*, where genealogies are connected, and Indigeneity is enacted. Based on the space made by *vā*, island space creates a relational space where the land within Indigenous bodies intersects with and responds to continental and colonial structures of race, gender, and class—constructing continental islandness. Furthermore, my emphasis on the present progressive tense in island-making highlights the ongoing and active process through which *vā* space is continuously performed.

The contextualization of island spaces and continental islandness through Indigenous spatiality—particularly as it manifests in interracial interactions and community networks in Los Angeles—allows me to draw from Tiffany Lethabo King's (2019) concept of the Black shoal. King proposes the Black shoal as a relational space where Blackness and Indigeneity interact and envision a solidarity. I use this framework to envision island reggae as a Black shoal: a sonic and social space constructed through the interactions between Pacific Islanders and diasporic African communities, grounded in practices of Indigeneity and relational spatiality in Southern California.

While this dissertation does not fully address it, this framing offers a pathway for future research into a shared Brownness as a racial identity among Polynesians—one shaped through the intersection of Blackness, Indigeneity, and settler racial logics in

Southern California. As New Zealand scholar Tara Ross (2021) has observed, Pacific Islanders in Aotearoa/New Zealand have embraced a Brown racial identity. In the U.S., although the term is less commonly articulated in island reggae songs, references to skin color—particularly “Brown skin”—appear in lyrics as expressions of both identity and resistance to racial discrimination. For example, African-Samoan singer Tenelle refers to herself as a “Brown skin girl” in the song “Island King” (2020), while the group Hooliganz, in their song “Officer”, identify their skin color as the reason for being targeted by police violence. These expressions echo Gabriel Solis’s (2015) emphasis on Indigenous agency that Pacific Islanders actively engage with Blackness and racialization as a way of resistance—highlighting how skin color associates with a racialized identity of diasporic Islanders and a means of claiming solidarity with other marginalized communities of color in the U.S. Yet, given that these identities often circulate through the framework of Brownness, they also point to a need for further examination of what Brownness entails, which I believe would also enrich Black Pacific scholarship.

Regarding the studies of Brownness in Pacific studies, Maile Arvin (2019) critically addresses its historical construction with Polynesians under Western ethnology. She argues that the Black-White racial dichotomy was applied to Oceania in a way that positioned Polynesia as “almost white” and Melanesia as aligned with Blackness. Polynesians were constructed as mixed-race—with a potential for whiteness that was clouded by their supposed primitiveness. This framing justified settler colonialism as a civilizing project. Arvin (*ibid.*) further draws from physical anthropologist Louis Sullivan’s view of Polynesia, which divided Polynesians into ‘Indonesian Polynesians,’

seen as brown-skinned and primitive, and ‘Polynesian Polynesians,’ viewed as more authentically Polynesian and supposedly not fundamentally brown. This division, Arvin argues, is part of a broader anti-Black logic.

Arvin also examines the work of folklorist Abraham Fornander, who described Polynesians as a mixed-race people originally capable of whiteness—despite their “colored” appearances (ibid.: 55). Fornander emphasized that Polynesians had not intermarried with Papuans, which maintains a racial boundary between Brownness and Blackness. These accounts show how Polynesians were racialized as occupying an in-between space—neither fully Black nor fully white—and often labeled as Brown. Their Brown skin, in this context, was both racialized and primitivized. Furthermore, as legal scholar Ross Dardani (2017) points out, the racialization of Polynesians as Brown bodies also shaped the legal framework for granting U.S. citizenship in the Pacific unincorporated territories.

In U.S. racial discourse, Brownness is typically studied within South Asian American and Latinx frameworks. Claire Jean Kim’s (1999) theory of racial triangulation presents a model for understanding how the notions of superiority/inferiority and insider/foreigner have been conceptualized whiteness, Blackness, and Asianness. Building from this, music scholars have explored how Asian American musicians adopt African American musical forms to resist externally imposed Asianness, challenge the model minority myth, and confront xenophobia (Wong 2004; Sharma 2010; T. Roberts 2016). This strategy parallels how Oceanic reggae scholars have described Pacific Islanders using reggae to resist colonialism and whiteness.

In a focus on Brown bodies, José Muñoz's (2020) theorization of Brownness in Latinx studies further expands this lens. He writes:

“They are brown in part because they have been devalued by the world outside their commons. Their brownness can be known by tracking the ways through which global and local forces constantly attempt to degrade their value and diminish their verve. But they are also brown insofar as they smolder with a life and persistence: they are brown because brown is a common color shared by a commons that is of and for the multitude”(ibid.: 2).

Building on these frameworks, I interpret diasporic Pacific Islanders' expressions of skin color—particularly in musical contexts—as a response to both Oceanic and U.S. racial norms and as a means of localizing Indigeneity in relation to other racialized communities. In this chapter, I examine Hooliganz's “Officer” as an entry point into how skin color is articulated in diasporic Pacific Islanders' expressions of continental islandness. While this section provides an initial engagement with Brown identity among diasporic Islanders, a more in-depth exploration of how this identity positions them within the U.S. racial order will be the focus of my future work.

Creating an Island Space on the Continent: Island Block Radio

Island Block Radio, which operates under the parent company Island Block Network that was established later to expand its broader media reach, is an online radio station that runs 24/7 on its own website and app. This radio station provides non-stop island popular music across the Pacific, predominantly but not limited to reggae, curated by DJs from diverse racial backgrounds that include but extend beyond Pacific Islanders—such as African American DJ Tony Rico and European African Japanese

American DJ Aye Dee—along with podcasts hosted by Pacific Islander hosts. Since its beginning in 2012, Island Block Radio has gone through various phases, with its format and show arrangement being modified over time. The station is currently run predominantly by Joe “Savage” Fa’avae, who is looking for a new studio to produce regular radio content that includes music and shows, as well as live streaming. Listeners can still access the podcast archive on the website, where Island Block Radio has been re-uploading content recently.

Beyond its on-air programming, Island Block's website also features a blog section, where it shares news across a wide spectrum that is not limited to Pacific Islander-related content, such as news about LeBron James becoming a partial owner of the Red Sox in 2021. This blog section announced new episodes of the podcast *Everyone Loves Lulu* yet had not been updated with posts from 2021 to 2025. Recently, Fa’avae has started uploading his journal entries, with a piece on the Samoan community in Carson uploaded on April 2nd, 2025. Additionally, Island Block is rapidly developing its live event aspects, creating livestreaming and visual content that listeners can access on its website, YouTube, and Instagram.

Before I provide my analysis, I want to reveal that I joined the Island Block Network team during a transitional period in September 2021, when I did not have sufficient experience in radio operations. Most of my observations are based on interviews and listening to Island Block Radio as part of my everyday routine, and my experiences predominantly focus on event preparations, which also explains my attention to events in this dissertation.

Given its broad media reach and workers from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, Island Block Network represents, as Przybylski's (2023) research on the Indigenous radio station Steerz points out, a sonic space—also an island space—where racial and Indigenous discourse can be conducted from a Pacific Islander perspective, allowing them to decide who, what, and how their continental islandness in music should be listened to. Furthermore, its various media platforms, specifically visual content, expand the experience from listening to seeing, giving them control over how their culture and music should be viewed. Also, as a digital platform, Island Block Radio has more flexibility and determination in content, budgets, and updating schedules than traditional terrestrial radio stations that require broadcasting licenses, offering them more power in deciding their operations.

Island Block Radio, as an island space, has been a place fostering alliance with other racial minority neighborhoods, specifically with diasporic African communities. This alliance is not a movement-wide phenomenon involving intense political actions or radical social changes; instead, I observed everyday relationships established through daily routines like DJing, hosting, or organizing events together, or simply being friends and audience. They involve themselves in each other's lives by providing each other's communities with resources and networks, or simply sharing music and concert spaces. While these daily interactions may not seem magnificent, they radically and profoundly reshape the imposed segregation and separation from the settler-colonial nation state. Such everyday interactions aren't new but foundational to Island Block Radio's identity, and its history serves as an example of this everyday relational alliance between diasporic

Pacific Islanders and diasporic African communities, constructed within the complex interplay of social structures, personal networks, community relationalities, and commercial settings.

Island Block Radio was initially founded as a radio station in 2012 by Joe “Savage” Fa’avae, a Samoan, and Joey “Q” Quenga, who is CHamoru. In this section, I will refer to them as Joe⁴¹ and Q, as commonly used by those who know them. I subdivide this section into two parts. The first part discusses the inception of Island Block Radio. Along with the contribution of Local Culture, Island Black Radio continues to nurture the Islander community through music and radio broadcasts. As Island Black Radio is crucial to the establishment of the Southern California reggae scene since the early 2000s, the second part examines reggae concerts organized by Island Black Radio from local bars to a partnership with Live Nation and its music venue House of Blues in Anaheim, presenting the process of this music community became a music scene.

The Inception of Island Block Radio

The story of Island Block Radio is a sequential episode of the story narrated through *Fellow Me Home* and the emergence of Local Culture in the 1990s, as discussed in Chapter One. The inception of Island Block Radio highlights how diasporic Pacific Islanders forge their own spaces by engaging with sounds from the African diaspora. This

⁴¹ Except for this history, I refer to Joe “Savage” Fa’avae as Fa’avae in the rest of the dissertation to highlight his contribution to the analysis and theories in this dissertation. I choose to call him Joe in this history because this is a story told by him and the Island Block Network team to me; thus, I want to preserve how everyone addressed Joe and Q when they recall this history.

part of the diasporic Pacific Islanders' music story illustrates the intricate dynamics of individuals' daily interracial interactions, marked by friendships and collaborations, while simultaneously addressing their navigation through systemic racial frameworks and the broader challenges of capitalism in the global center of the entertainment industry in Los Angeles. This dual focus exposes the complex layers of racial discourse in an urban setting, highlighting both personal experiences and larger structural forces. This history is documented by the two interviews I did with Joe "Savage" Fa'avae on December 5 and 11, 2023.

As mentioned earlier in my first chapter, the founder of Island Block Network, Joe "Savage" Fa'avae (hereafter Joe), grew up in Carson in the 1990s and listened to a wide spectrum of music, heavily influenced by the diasporic African popular music that had a significant influence on the history of American popular music. Joe listened to old popular songs from the 1950s and the 1960s, played by his parents on radio stations or from old studio albums that featured many African American artists, especially those from Motown. During his teenage years in the 1990s, R&B was popular, and the reggae-mania in the U.S. also spilled over into his music album collection. Hip hop, which represents the urban struggles of African Americans, became the background music of street life in Los Angeles, as referred to by Joe. When I asked Joe about what those African American popular music genres mean to him personally, he explained that these were the genres he heard everywhere, from radio stations to schools and parties, marking the urban spaces outside his home. These public urban spaces contrasted with the home and island spaces, where Joe engaged with music that came from the Pacific Islands.

He also grew up listening to a wide range of island music, which he considers the music of home and family, as it was played in familial contexts that celebrated their island heritage. With the emergence of island reggae, this spatial-musical division was complicated by such a hybrid genre that fuses African American popular music with Pacific Island sounds, creating a bridge between both home and urban spaces to tell the stories of diasporic Pacific Islanders in Los Angeles.

This bridging capacity of island reggae didn't emerge in isolation but was made possible by the foundational sonic and social infrastructures already established by diasporic African communities in Los Angeles. Long before island reggae became a bridge between these two musical worlds, Afro-Caribbeans and African Americans in Los Angeles had already established the sonic spaces of reggae music. These pre-existing musical networks notably supported diasporic Islanders' burgeoning careers as musicians and artists. For example, Local Culture's journey in reggae began in Jamaican lounge bars and music venues where they sharpened their musical abilities and immersed themselves in a cultural network predominantly shaped by diasporic African artists and communities. As Local Culture created the shared spaces with diasporic Africans within the reggae community and beyond, Island Block Radio further fortified this shared space by deepening the interracial interactions on an everyday relational level, specifically with Afro-diasporic artists, by bringing island reggae into the commercial realm of live entertainment and the media industry.

Island Block Radio emerged from two community organizers serving the diasporic Pacific Islander community. After graduating from the University of Colorado, Boulder,

Joe began working at a college, the census, and community non-profit organizations alongside Q in Southern California in the early 2000s. During this period, they encountered challenges echoing those observed by Gershon (2012) in her research, that Pacific Islanders often struggled to secure grants, including media-related funding. Similar to Gerson's observation that Samoan immigrants altered their narratives of Samoanness to align with ethnic-based funding structures, Joe and Q attributed these difficulties to the lack of media outlets that could provide cultural platforms for their communities—platforms that might serve as valuable leverage when engaging with institutions. Around the same time, another independent internet radio station, Betel Nut Radio, was launched by Jawaiian music enthusiasts in Arizona. This station, featuring independent Micronesian music, invited Q to host a radio show. Q then brought Joe on board to co-host, and in March 2012, they launched their first show—*The Barbecue Hour*. The show was named to reflect their commitment to the community, as Joe says, “as Islanders, we barbecue too, yeah. But it was also about us coming together over food.”⁴²

From 2012 to 2015, *The Barbecue Hour* evolved into *The Barbecue Show* as it expanded beyond an hour, adopting a more podcast-like format, but remained live. Joe and Q hosted their shows from a home studio in Baldwin Park, owned by a German contractor named Uncle Charlie, who had built recording studios on one of his properties. Despite the radio station being based in Arizona, they also hosted live shows at Mai Tai bars in Long Beach. Starting in 2012, they held weekly live shows for a year at the

⁴² Interview with Joe “Savage” Fa’avae: December 5th, 2023.

Pacific Island Ethnic Art Museum, which had opened in 2009 and was keen to attract more visitors.

From 2013 to 2014, *The Barbecue Show* relocated to a co-working space called We Labs in Long Beach, continuing their mission to create a media presence for diasporic Pacific Islanders in the U.S. Joe recalled that, alongside another radio host, Big Body Cisco, they felt like pioneers: “For a long time, it was just us; literally, we were the only game in town.”⁴³ To sustain growth, Joe and Q not only funded their show out of their own pockets but also provided free services to community activities and music events. The emergence of digital platforms like Facebook and YouTube also facilitated the creation of media spaces for them. Their strategies proved successful; *The Barbecue Show* established strong connections and networks with promoters for shows and festivals, as well as with the community itself, which provided greater access to the Los Angeles media industry.

At the end of 2014, *The Barbecue Show* reached a pivotal moment in reaching a wider audience and musicianship based in Los Angeles and beyond the Pacific Islander community. During an event they hosted for the clothing brand *Island Avenue*, owned by Joe’s brother, Fa’avae Fa’avae, Joe met African American rappers YG and Nipsey Hussle. Fa’avae Fa’avae also managed to get Joe the phone number of DJ Skee, the founder of the internationally reaching digital broadcasting platform DASH Radio, which involves many hip hop artists such as Snoop Dogg and Ice Cube. DJ Skee was then one of the few pioneers running online radio at a time when terrestrial radio, like FM and

⁴³ Interview with Joe “Savage” Fa’avae: December 5th, 2023.

AM, still dominated. DJ Skee then operated both a TV platform called Skee TV and an internet radio station called Skee 24/7, which would later evolve into DASH Radio in 2015.

Joe texted DJ Skee constantly for six months but never received a response. The opportunity finally came at the end of 2014, when *The Barbecue Show* invited Aulani—an intern from DASH Radio’s reggae station, Kingston—onto their program, and things began to change. Aulani realized that *The Barbecue Show* was exactly what Kingston had been looking for, so she recommended Joe and Q to the DASH Radio team. As a result, after six months of persistent texting, DASH Radio producer Tony Alvarez called Joe a week before Christmas in 2014, telling him to reach out again in 2015. Joe chuckled as he recalled the memory, saying, “And I called him on January 2nd.”⁴⁴ *The Barbecue Show* began airing on Kingston that February.

Since their first presentation to DASH Radio, Joe and Q had ambitions beyond merely hosting a show on the reggae station; they aimed to establish their own station within DASH Radio to create a medium space for the Pacific Islander community. At the launch party in February, they seized the opportunity to showcase their culture to the DASH Radio team by inviting artists like George “Fiji” Veikoso, Boo-Yaa T.R.I.B.E., and the Samoan rapper Drew Deezy. Their friends also helped by providing food and managing the barbecue for the guests. While recalling the event, Joe says, “We did a whole thing, like we said a prayer, you know, we brought out (DJ) Skee, and everybody was just like, ‘Hey, man, this is how we do it, you know? This is our way of thanking you

⁴⁴ Interview with Joe “Savage” Fa’avae: December 5th, 2023.

guys.’ We just wanted to bring our culture here, you know.”⁴⁵ Joe’s words strongly resonate with Przybylski’s (2023) concept of sonic sovereignty, which emphasizes Indigenous control over how they want to be heard and represented. By deciding how to present their island space to non-Pacific Islander media contacts—who would typically control the media space—Joe and Q effectively reversed the power dynamic.

Fueled by this strong ambition, Joe and Q quickly achieved their goal. In May of the same year, the DASH Radio team offered them the chance to open a new station. This marked the beginning of Island Block Radio, which launched in June 2015. Reflecting on his time at DASH Radio, Joe viewed it as a crucial moment where they truly honed their radio skills, transitioning from self-taught efforts to professional proficiency. At DASH Radio, surrounded by professionals, they underwent systematic training in operations, recordings, and programming. This experience was a significant step forward in Joe and Q’s media careers and a door opened for Pacific Islanders in the media industry. Over time, Joe and Q began to involve their friends and family in the crew, who had carved out their own paths in media and entertainment, including individuals like DJ Aye-dee, David “RND” Duenas, Nina Sosefina, and Silulu A’etonu-Grey (here after Myz Lulu, her stage name).

This creation of space through interracial interactions between racial minorities echoes Johnson’s theory of spatial entitlement (2013). However, while Johnson’s research emphasizes community interactions in examining the community as a whole, the story of Island Block Radio enriches her theory by demonstrating that the creation of

⁴⁵ Interview with Joe “Savage” Fa’avae: December 5th, 2023.

shared spaces often begins with individual networks, such as Joe's brother in this instance, and later expands into broader community involvement. Also, this emphasis on individual networks highlights multi-racial interactions that include more than just the two minority communities, and introduces other racial groups and even the dominant racial individuals, such as DJ Skee.

This story of Island Block Radio is an example of "dangerous crossroads" (Lipsitz 1994), where resistance and oppression are intricately intertwined within the urban landscape. Even though diasporic Islanders recognize that oppression stems from the existing racial hierarchy, their individual networks underscore the complexity of interracial interactions in urban spaces. Here, dominant racial groups not only participate but can also offer benefits to minorities, though these benefits may not always align with the community's initial desires. Capitalism also functions within these racial dynamics, where media often require capital, which is often controlled by the racial dominants, such as the media resources controlled by DJ Skee.

Within these media spaces, continental islandness is created in a continental site where race, Indigeneity, and capitalism intersect. This site facilitates negotiating in collective interracial experiences and individual networks involving multi-racial encounters. The minority community retains control over their modes of expression and even redirects the benefits from their collaborations and individual friendships with those capital holders, adhering to their own community protocols as demonstrated by events like the show launch party and the proposal to establish their own station. The formation

of Island Block Radio is the island space they create— centering on Indigenous subjectivities.

From Radio Broadcast to Concerts: The Inception of A Scene

With the formation of Island Block Radio, the island space expanded within the music industry's sonic landscape. Joe and Q continued to spotlight artists and organized their first West Coast tour called The Climax Tour in 2015. This tour visited twelve cities and featured island music artists like Sammy Johnson as the headliner, along with Finn Gruva and Tenelle. The tour achieved remarkable success; the tickets were sold out in ten cities, which demonstrated the audience's strong appreciation for island reggae. Besides tours, the Island Block team had consistently hosted concerts at a Mai Tai lounge bar in Long Beach in 2012 and 2013. Between 2013 and 2014, Joe and Q began to schedule island reggae performers at a larger live venue called The Observatory in Santa Ana, through their friend Vita, who was the head of security at the venue at that time.

In collaboration with The Observatory, Joe and Q were responsible for booking local island reggae artists as the openers for the weekly reggae night, which headlined well-known reggae artists such as the Jamaican reggae duo Barrington Levy & Spragga Benz, the Jamaican band Morgan Heritage, and the Bermudian artist Collie Buddz. This collaboration demonstrates the readiness of diasporic Pacific Islanders to engage proactively in the LA music industry and global music circulation, building on the groundwork laid by predecessors like Local Cultures. Joe and Q's programming garnered positive reactions from the audience and demonstrated the market value of island reggae

music to the industry. It provided artists with greater profits, nurturing the growth of the island reggae community.

The growth from the Mai Tai Bar to The Observatory expanded island reggae's presence within the broader Southern California reggae scene—a space marked by everyday interracial interactions. Within this scene, Island Block creates an island space where Pacific Islanders can shape how they engage and build relationships with diasporic African communities. Reflecting on their collaborations with Jamaican artists, Joe notes, “And honestly, that’s where a lot of that mixing came from.”⁴⁶ He explains that although individual artists had previously established connections with Jamaican artists, this period marked a crucial time for the Southern Californian island reggae community to collectively engage with Jamaican reggae artists and gain recognition within the wider reggae scene.

The commercialization of the island reggae in Southern California began to integrate into the global capital network of the live entertainment industry in 2015, when the Island Block team initiated their collaboration with Live Nation at their music venue called House of Blues (hereafter HOB). Introduced by a staff member at the House of Blues in San Diego following their other performances, Island Block began to organize island reggae concerts at the venue and gradually increased the frequency of their events. As a prominent venue chain in the U.S. live entertainment industry and owned by Live Nation—the world’s largest concert operational company—HOB provided island reggae

⁴⁶ Interview with Joe “Savage” Fa’avae: December 11th, 2023.

artists with a stepping stone to the development of their musical and artistic careers. HOB offered them a credential that opens up further performing opportunities.

From a lounge bar to a national live music chain, the growing influence of diasporic Pacific Islanders has enabled them to more clearly assert their sonic sovereignty. In 2018, HOB in Anaheim began collaborating with Island Block, empowering the team to handle promotions for all island music performers and represent the musical tastes of the Pacific Islander communities at the venue. As DJ Aye-Dee often describes, “We represent the ears of the community.” This idea of being the “ears of the community” epitomizes the core values of Island Block Radio—not only its commitment to community, but more importantly, the agency of Pacific Islanders in defining community on their own terms. This role fulfills Island Block’s initial aspirations that they are not merely a reggae station but a self-determined-community-based organization. Moreover, the partnership between Island Block Radio and the House of Blues opens more opportunities for Pacific Islander artists to engage with the mainstream space through their island-making practices; for instance, the Samoan singer Nichola was invited to perform at the HOB restaurant after the venue staff recognized her talent.

The collaboration with HOB marks the transition of island reggae from a music community to a music scene within the institutionalized commercial live entertainment sector. As defined by Will Straw (1991), the distinction between a community and a scene lies in their different relationships with geographical and historical heritage: a community seeks to preserve heritage continuity, whereas a scene encompasses a broad range of musical practices and is marked by the communication of musical alliances and

the drawing of boundaries. Straw describes “one [community] as aiming to stabilize local historical continuities, and the other [scene] working to disrupt such continuities, to cosmopolitanize and relativize them” (ibid.: 373). Building on Straw’s suggestion, I argue that through island reggae artists’ increasing interaction with the broader popular music scene and their engagement with more non-Islander artists and fans, this genre has evolved from a music community into a music scene. This shift marks a transformation from storytelling within the community to a mode of telling their stories to the public within a commercial and cosmopolitan sector.

This expansion has a dual effect. On the one hand, it fosters tangible and cohesive musical alliances for diasporic Islanders, evident in their collaborations with Jamaican and African American artists, as well as their increasing engagement with Asian artists, as theorized in George Lipsitz’s (1994) concept of the dangerous crossroads. This expansion also provides the Pacific Islander community with a platform to assert their sovereignty and continental islandness by defining their own community and deciding how to represent their stories and identities to a broader audience. It also nurtures predecessors in the media and entertainment industry for younger Pacific Islanders, equipping them with the skills to engage with and negotiate between the demands for professionalism and the power structure in the entertainment industry.

However, on the other hand, as Lipsitz (ibid.) also notes, when global capital intersects with the lives of Pacific Islander reggae artists and workers, capitalism can unsettle their understanding of culture, Indigeneity, race, and even the racial alliances they build with other minorities. The continuity in the expressions of island heritage and

community service, long central to the community, may begin to shift with this expansion. This transformation is reflected in spatial changes. As Cohen (2012) notes, the geographic articulation of music genres is constantly under negotiation. When diasporic Pacific Islanders shift their musical base from local bars to venues like the HOB in response to increased demand for performances and ticket sales, their modes of expressing identities also evolve accordingly. I do not suggest that their Indigeneity loses as the island reggae community has been commercialized and transitions into a broader scene. Rather, I argue that how diasporic communities articulate their expression of islandness has been increasingly and spontaneously influenced by continental contexts, where the U.S. racial norm has perpetuated its assertion that such diasporic Indigenous identities may differ.

The development of an island reggae scene has reshaped how diasporic Islanders navigate the balance between cultural preservation and participation in capitalist structures. As Gershon (2012) observes in her study of diasporic Samoans, they operate exchanges between cultural capital and financial capital to sustain their Indigenous cultures within capitalist settings. The expansion of island space into commercial arenas has complicated the exchanges within these shifting capitals. These concerts function simultaneously as cultural celebrations and as events embedded in capitalist structures. While the formation of the island reggae scene appears to ease tensions around the exchange between cultural and financial capital, suggesting that community contributions

can be financially sustainable, it has also introduced complex contemporary challenges related to exoticism and settler tourism.⁴⁷

The challenges of exoticism and settler tourism are closely linked to the institutional structures of the commercial live music industry in urban settings. Just as Los Angeles is a constructed urban space shaped by Eurocentrism and racial segregation, the music industry operating within it reflects these same dynamics. As Fabian Holt (2020) notes, the transition of performance venues from community-based to commercially oriented spaces marks a significant shift in live performances toward a professionalized and institutionalized commercial industry. He points out that the institutionalized commercial live music industry internalizes Eurocentrism and patriarchy in the standards of professionalism that may conflict with the practices and experiences of non-White artists. The migration from the Mai Thai bar to the Observatory, and eventually to HOB, signifies the moment when the island reggae community began to step into the industrial sphere and move toward the global capitalist spectrum. While the staff at HOB has forged a strong partnership with Island Block, creating flexibility and inclusivity for island reggae artists via individual networks, the intersection between community and commercial institutions still requires a thorough examination to scrutinize the intricate interplay of race, Indigeneity, and professionalism in the capital network.

⁴⁷ These issues will be examined in greater detail in the sections that follow and further explored in chapter four and five.

This phase has led to ongoing negotiations between self-expression and strategic self-essentialism, as artists navigate public exotic stereotypes and even racialization of Pacific Islander cultures and the expectation of White-centric professionalism in the industry. For example, the promotion of island reggae concerts often relies on portrayals of island paradises and scenic imagery to attract audiences, such as hibiscus flowers, coconut trees, cruises, and cocktails. Moreover, it is undeniable that many non-Islander audiences, specifically Anglo-American audiences, are more captivated by the fantasy of island paradise than by an understanding of the stories of diasporic Pacific Islanders.

Coming to the conclusion of this transition from community to scene, and the corresponding shifts in how islandness and interracial relationships are performed, I will now finish the story of Island Block Radio. This station's next phase leads us into a deeper discussion of how its expansion into broader systemic structures, including engagement with government institutions, intersects with issues of exoticism and tourism in the live music industry. These themes will be addressed in Chapter Four.

During the pandemic in 2020, Joe chose to relocate his office from Hollywood to Carson, his hometown, to reduce his commute and focus more on organizing performances in Southern California, including HOB and other venues in Long Beach, Carson, and surrounding areas.⁴⁸ Meanwhile, Q established another media company, Island City Media, aimed at penetrating the mainstream media industry. Based in Hollywood to access more media resources, Q also expanded his reach to Oceania,

⁴⁸ Joe also organized two music festivals, the Mai Tai Festival in Long Beach and the Samoan Heritage Festival in Carson, which we will discuss further in Chapter Four.

hosting reggae festivals in New Zealand. Both directions highlight significant paths for diasporic Pacific Islanders: engaging with the LA space and embracing their heritage in Oceania, balancing community-focused efforts and broader media engagement, all in the pursuit of creating more opportunities for their community.

Joe's dedication to his community extends beyond the Pacific Islander community to the broader Southern California region, particularly his hometown of Carson, where day-to-day relationships with other racial minority communities unfold. Since 2016, the TUT Foundation, founded by Joe's brother Fa'avae Fa'avae, has hosted an annual Christmas event in Carson to provide gifts for children from local families and neighborhoods. Over time, supporting this event has become a tradition for Island Block Network. We work alongside local volunteers—often middle school students and their families from the community—to unpack and organize large volumes of donations, and help distribute brand-new toys, clothes, and school supplies to children. Adults also receive free haircuts, massages, clothing, and pantry items. The event even offers pizza and pastries and features an inflatable playground and music performances. These efforts demonstrate that the diasporic Islander community gives back to their city with deep attention to local needs. Seeing children of all ages, genders, races, and ethnicities dragging home bags full of gifts with joyful smiles reminds me of how the spirit of neighborhoodship, rooted in their islandness, thrives on the continent. It also echoes their beginnings, when they were supported by the shared sonic spaces of African American and Latino communities who welcomed them.

In the next section, I examine two live performances, the Cali Vibes Festival and the Marley Festival, to explore how the commercialization of island reggae has shifted interracial relationships with diasporic African communities and how diasporic Pacific Islanders navigate the challenges of racialization while maintaining their everyday relational connections amidst these changes.

Island in Commercialized Spaces: Racialization of Reggae Genres

While Island Block Radio has laid the groundwork for the Southern California island reggae music scene, the genre's development also reflects its involvement in the racialized competition among reggae styles. Its rapid growth and increasing visibility place it within a competitive market alongside two other prominent reggae styles in the region: reggae rock and Jamaican reggae (includes roots reggae and dancehall music). These distinctions reveal how reggae has been articulated with race: Jamaican reggae is associated with diasporic African expression, while reggae rock is frequently racialized as "white reggae" due to its predominant association with Anglo-American musicians.

Although this dissertation does not directly address the issue of appropriation between reggae rock and roots reggae, my focus on the racial dynamics that structure the genre landscape highlights the racialization of island reggae within this Black/White racial dichotomy in American music. About the racialization of music genres, popular music scholars emphasize that these processes are socially constructed and can decontextualize music from its originating communities (Mahon 2004; 2020) or marginalize the participation and visibility of other racial groups (Fellezs 2019). Kevin

Fellezs (ibid.) further argues that the dominant Black/White racial dichotomy often renders the music created by other racial groups difficult to be heard.

In response to reggae rock's common association with Anglo-Americans, Sunaina Keonaona Kale (2021) challenges this stereotype by highlighting the significant number of Native Hawaiian musicians who use the genre to express their Hawaiian identities. Moreover, the early reggae rock scene exhibited blurred boundaries with island reggae artists. For instance, the California-based reggae rock band, Rebelution, has opened for Local Culture's concerts. Even though such evidence challenges the rigid racialization of reggae genres, the racial associations remain deeply embedded in the scene and continue to shape audience perceptions of clear boundaries among the three reggae styles. From my fieldwork, I have observed that as island reggae enters this landscape, it is positioned between these racial poles—neither Black nor White.

This in-between position has allowed island reggae artists to navigate both sides to make their island spaces, but within the dominant Black/White racial dichotomy, island reggae is often exoticized—its continental realities dismissed, while its connections to Oceania are overemphasized. It is frequently associated with an imagined island paradise and presumed to be the music solely for Pacific Islanders. Even though island reggae is indeed an Indigenous form of storytelling grounded in the lived experiences of Pacific Islanders, such exoticism and essentialization continue to obscure their expressions of Indigeneity and islandness.

While the Black/White dichotomy from Eurocentrism is rooted in the professionalized live music industry, the everyday relationships between Pacific Islanders

and African Americans are difficult to find in mainstream media. I have learned that while race is often explicitly manifested and institutionalized in mainstream reggae performances, independent events tend to foster more egalitarian and inclusive spaces—where identities of race, Indigeneity, and gender can be negotiated and redefined in relation to daily life interactions and these racialized forms of reggae. This section examines the dynamics between reggae rock, island reggae, and Jamaican reggae in both mainstream and independent music festivals. The comparison of the Cali Vibes Festival and the Marley Festival illustrates distinct racial dynamics in mainstream and underground events, indicating how racialized capitalism constrains the everyday relationships and island spaces that island reggae creates for Pacific Islander life on the continent, while also revealing Pacific Islander agency in resisting these constraints.

The Cali Vibes Festival

The Cali Vibes Festival has been a major, mainstream, commercialized, three-day-long, annual event for the Californian reggae scene. In early February 2022, it took place at Marine Green Park in Long Beach. Participating in the Cali Vibes Festival in 2022 allowed me to learn how island reggae, Jamaican reggae, and roots reggae are positioned within the Californian reggae scene. Given that reggae rock is the most popular reggae genre in California, the festival's lineup prominently features reggae rock bands. The lineup included bands such as Sublime with Rome, Rebelution, Slightly Stoopid, and Pepper. The event featured three stages: a large main stage, a medium-sized stage, and

the smallest, the BoomYard sound system stage. This section demonstrates how the racial dynamics of the reggae scene have shaped their interrelationships in performance today.

In this event, many Jamaican dancehall performances were given at the BoomYard stage. The BoomYard was a collaborative effort between the Cali Vibes Festival and Delicious Vinyl, an independent Los Angeles-based reggae record label that mainly signs Afro-Caribbean artists. While the two larger stages were mostly lined up by reggae rock bands, this stage hosted DJs, MCs, and singers from Jamaica performing dancehall music. Notably, Jamaican and diasporic African artists were not limited to the BoomYard; many were invited to perform on the two larger stages as well. However, this stage is a unique space dedicated to Jamaica, as the Cali Vibes Festival asserted on its Facebook fan page, “The stage will be reminiscent of the Caribbean island’s much-loved street dances, stage shows, and dancehall sessions.”⁴⁹

This particular space was arranged to resemble a sound system party on the streets in Jamaica. On both sides of the space, three towering stacks of speakers delivered sonic impulsion to the crowd. At the center of the stage stood a turntable, and a national flag of Jamaica hung on it. Both sides of the turntable were screens projecting videos and photos that have crucial meanings in Jamaican, Rastafarian, and reggae culture. Images such as lions, the flag of Ethiopia, and island symbols with palm trees are displayed. The space also featured two vendors specializing in reggae merchandise, offering items such as records, flags, clothing, posters, and signature accessories like beanies and blankets adorned with symbolic reggae icons. These items allowed audiences to purchase and

⁴⁹ <https://www.facebook.com/CaliVibrationsFest/photos/a.130561822658731/140715401643373/?type=3>

wear them to express their affinity for reggae, Rastafarian culture, or Jamaica. These two vendors differed from the main merchant area, which primarily showcased merchandise from the performing bands. With this spatial arrangement, the BoomYard created its own space dedicated to Jamaican life, where sound systems, reggae music, dancehall music, and dances have intertwined with Jamaican history and religious practices.

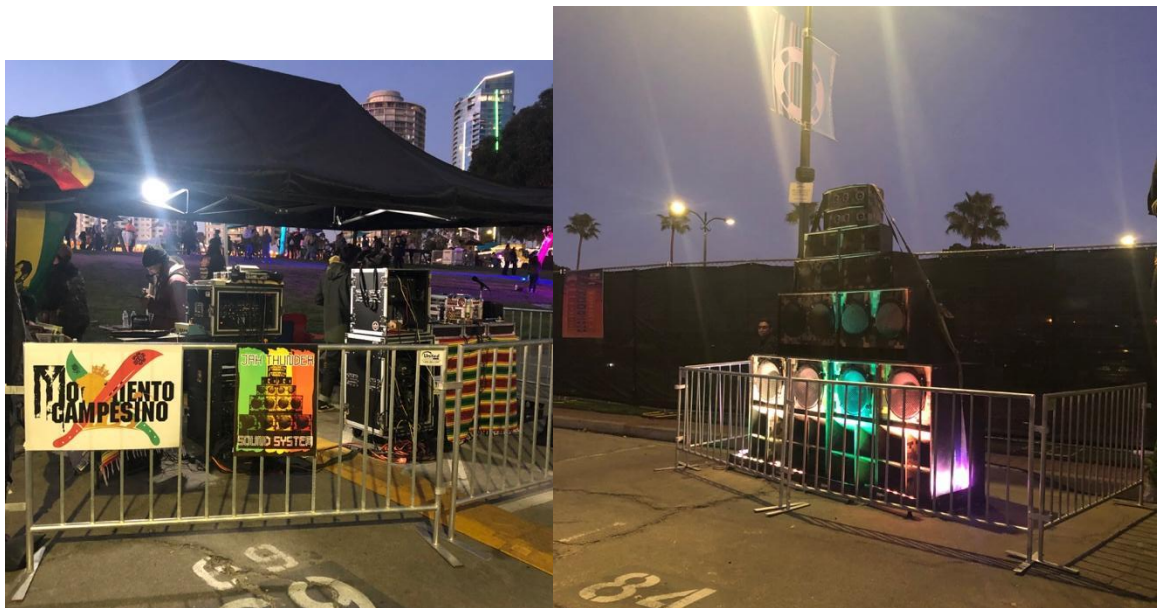


Image 3 & 4: The PA (left) and the speakers (right) of the BoomYard Stage.



Image 5 (Left): The two merchandise tents at the BoomYard Stage.

Image 6 (Right): The main merchandise area, where almost every headliner band has its own tent.

Despite its dedication to reggae's historical significance, the BoomYard Stage did not attract as much attention as I anticipated. On a Saturday evening around 6 p.m., I noticed that the crowd at the BoomYard Stage was noticeably smaller compared to those at the larger stages, though it did draw a decent amount of audience at times. This may have been partly due to its physical distance from the other two stages. While attendees near the larger stages could still hear music from both, those at the BoomYard Stage were more isolated and less aware of what was happening elsewhere.



Image 7 (Left): The size of the main stage.

Image 8 (Right): The size of the BoomYard Stage, shown with fences on both sides.



Image 9: The BoomYard stage at 6 pm on Saturday.

The stage and its audience area formed a long rectangular space, with the stage positioned at one narrow end and both longer sides enclosed by fences—one side bordering the merchant area, the other marking the edge of the festival grounds. While

this spatial arrangement may have been intended to evoke an immersive Jamaican dancehall atmosphere, the BoomYard's relative isolation and smaller audience nonetheless underscore the limited visibility of the Jamaican community within California's reggae scene. Still, it is important to emphasize that Jamaican reggae retained its cultural authority in this reggae market, as evidenced by the fact that it maintained its own dedicated stage despite drawing a smaller crowd. In contrast, island reggae artists were not provided with a dedicated stage of their own.

The low participation at the BoomYard stage reveals a clear racial dichotomy within the Southern California reggae scene. At this stage, many of the attendees who were highly engaged and familiar with dancehall music and choreography were predominantly Black or racially diverse individuals. They often wore visible markers of Rastafarian, Jamaican, or reggae affiliation—such as dreadlocks, t-shirts featuring Bob Marley or other reggae icons, tight trousers, and accessories in Rastafarian colors, including blankets and beanies. There was also a noticeably higher proportion of solo dancers who enjoyed the music independently. In contrast, the majority of festival attendees—mostly reggae rock fans—were white and typically dressed in plaid shirts over t-shirts, baggy jeans, and skateboard-style sneakers. They often arrived in pairs or groups, most commonly as heterosexual couples or groups of men. Despite being the dominant demographic at the festival overall, I observed very few of these reggae rock fans gathered at the BoomYard stage.

The racial dichotomy of the festival even shaped my own feelings of alienation. It was one of the most isolating experiences I've had at any reggae concert. While I often

attend reggae performances alone—and am usually the only East Asian face in the space, something I’ve grown used to—the sense of not belonging felt especially pronounced at this event. Ironically, this festival had more Asian attendees than any reggae concert I had previously attended. Yet the visual and sonic cues surrounding me made the space feel unfamiliar. The unified style of clothing—often socially associated with whiteness—reminded me of a Kurt Cobain aesthetic: plaid shirts, baggy jeans, and grunge-like touches, all set against a backdrop of reggae-rock music I wasn’t accustomed to. It was also the most Vans shoes I had ever seen in one place. Wearing a vintage dress I had brought from Taiwan, I felt even more out of place—the contrast in style only heightened my sense of isolation. The vastness of the venue, the cold wind, and the overall atmosphere all contributed to a subtle but persistent message that I didn’t belong there. Adding to this discomfort, the overwhelming presence of heterosexual male attendees made me feel even more out of place, as I was one of the few single women in such a large crowd. As a result, I found myself spending most of my time at the BoomYard stage, where there were more solo attendees, which made me feel like I fit in better. I only stepped away to catch performances by island reggae artists.

Among all the island reggae performances at the festival, only Common Kings were from Southern California; the rest, including Kolohe Kai and Hirie, were from Hawai‘i. I attended performances by Common Kings, Kolohe Kai, and Hirie, and based on the size and enthusiasm of their audiences, it was clear that all three are popular within the California reggae scene. While Common Kings’ performance resonated with reggae rock

audiences, the audience's reaction to Kolohe Kai and Hiries' was notably different from typical reggae rock sets.

During Kolohe Kai's set, the crowd packed the audience area so tightly that I could barely find a spot near the front, and the audience sang along to all of his hit songs. He used the opportunity to introduce Hawaiian culture to the crowd, which indicated his awareness that many attendees were unfamiliar with it. For example, he taught the crowd the meaning of hana hou and explained the significance of aloha. I also noticed a contrast between this performance and his solo concert at the HOB, promoted by Island Block Network. At that HOB event, the audience's cheehoo, a celebratory shout originating from Samoa, was so loud it nearly shook the venue. In contrast, despite the larger space and bigger crowd at the festival, the cheehoo was much more subdued. This suggests that while many audience members knew the music, they did not necessarily understand or participate in the cultural codes associated with it.

As Kolohe Kai displayed many island images on stage, such as sunsets, seashores, and coconut trees, I wondered whether this was a strategy to fulfill certain imagined expectations of island culture often associated with island reggae, or if he was simply proud to present his home. I lean toward the latter, as this is a consistent practice to honor his heritage in his performances. Still, I recognized that such imagery was easily exoticized by audiences, especially in this festival setting, and even within island reggae concerts. Occasionally, I overheard whispers about the unfamiliar behaviors of non-Islander audience members in island reggae concerts. For example, my interlocuter Alfred Bordallo once told me that many non-Islander attendees, particularly Anglo-

Americans, were “Hawai‘i lovers,” not “island music lovers.” One comment that stuck with me came from Kolohe Kai’s solo concert at the HOB. An Islander friend remarked that the more popular an island reggae artist became, the more drunk people filled the room, many of them non-Islanders just there to party. In contrast, Pacific Islander audiences did not treat these shows merely as parties; they often attended with family and relatives, embodying a different kind of engagement rooted in community.

When island reggae is essentialized through associations with a romanticized island paradise, expressions of Indigeneity and islandness can become obscured or misread. Ironically, these expressions were more readily accepted—and even normalized—during the performance of the reggae rock band Pepper, who are also from Hawai‘i. Like Kolohe Kai, Pepper incorporated videos and images to evoke their home, Hawai‘i. During their nighttime set, a large crowd gathered despite the cold wind, dancing much like they did at other reggae rock performances. A few audience members flashed the shaka hand signs, sometimes mixed with rock hand signs, yet no one appeared to emphasize these Hawaiian symbols. Instead, they seemed to blend seamlessly into the reggae rock scene, as if Hawai‘i’s cultural markers were simply part of the aesthetic.



Image 10: The flag of Hawai'i was displayed on the screen on stage during Pepper's performance.

The audience's responses to island reggae differed from those at reggae rock performances. Reggae rock fans typically crowded the front of the stage, nodding their heads heavily to the beat, whereas audiences at island reggae sets tended to sway gently or even sit toward the back. These differences helped me recognize that island reggae occupies an in-between position—between reggae rock and Jamaican reggae. Many reggae rock fans clearly enjoyed island reggae—unlike the smaller crowd at the BoomYard stage for Jamaican acts—but their engagement with island reggae was distinct

and often exoticized it with the island paradise. Yet, while Jamaican reggae was granted its own dedicated stage despite its smaller audience, island reggae was not afforded the same spatial recognition within the festival.

In this highly institutionalized commercial setting, the boundaries between the three reggae genres—Jamaican reggae, reggae rock, and island reggae—were rigidly maintained. Although all performances took place within the same time and space, meaningful interactions were difficult to find.⁵⁰ Stage times were tightly scheduled, and stage placements were meticulously arranged. Everything happened simultaneously, yet nothing truly interacted—everyone seemed to be doing their own thing. This stood in stark contrast to the organic exchanges or the layered spatial storytelling described by Joe at the Observatory. Within the structures of the institutionalized, commercialized live music industry, opportunities for cross-genre or cross-community interaction were rare, as each band was locked into a predetermined slot, like nails fixed into the machinery of the system.

Moreover, the cost of participation further discouraged interaction. With tickets priced at \$420, many attendees, including myself, focused on spending time with friends or rushing between stages to catch their favorite artists, rather than engaging with new sounds or unfamiliar cultural experiences. After the festival, I mentioned to Sam, my colleague at Island Block Network, that I had gone to Cali Vibes. She looked at me with

⁵⁰ Performers may have interacted off-stage, for example, Anuhea shared a photo of herself with Jamaican artist Koffee, but beyond such moments, I did not observe any interactions between audiences and musicians, or musical collaborations and cross-genre crossovers taking place during the festival.

little interest or recognition and simply said, “I’ve never been to that one. It’s expensive, right?”

Cali Vibes Festival demonstrates that the boundaries between the three reggae genres were clearly defined, with little interaction or overlap—each audience and musician seemed to stay within their own musical preferences. Island reggae occupied an in-between position: it was enjoyed by reggae rock audiences, but their responses to it were noticeably different; its everyday relationships with racial minorities, specifically with African American communities, were also hard to observe in this festival. This separation is a result of the professionalized, institutionalized nature of this festival (Holt 2020), which inorganically structures the scene and limits organic musical interactions. However, even within such professionalized, institutionalized, and temporal spaces, the examples of Kolohe Kai and Pepper demonstrate Pacific Islanders’ agency in creating and defining their own island spaces. From Pepper’s case, we even see an intervention of Hawaiian cultures in reggae rock, revealing their constant assertion of sovereignty beyond island reggae.

Does the Vibe Drop? The Marley Festival

In contrast to Cali Vibes, the Marley Festival in Long Beach is a smaller, grassroots, and independently hosted reggae concert in Southern California. It demonstrates a different racial dynamic when conversations between performers and audiences are more flexible and open to negotiation. On January 25th, 2025, the 8th Marley Festival took place at the well-known Gaslamp music lounge bar in Long Beach.

I attended with Samantha Olvera, who is a CHamoru person working as a program coordinator from the Pacific Island Ethnic Art Museum (hereafter PIEAM), another place I conducted my fieldwork. We attended this event to enjoy Ms. B Royal, a Samoan female reggae artist, scheduled as the second performer. Upon entering the venue, we were struck by the diversity of the audience.

A higher proportion of Black audience members were in the crowd. There was a group of men, seemingly Rastafarians of various races, identifiable by their dreadlocks and reggae attire. They appeared comfortable yet slightly judgmental of the music, as reflected in the way they occupied their seats with quiet authority, nodded their heads lightly, but never moved a toe, and remained seated until the performance of Duke of Roots, the band led by the influential Congolese reggae artist Mermans Mosengo. We also noticed an African female wearing an overcoat embroidered with “Africa” and a map of the continent. Additionally, some attendees dressed like reggae rock fans in hoodies featuring metal or punk bands, jeans, and skateboard sneakers. We even spotted a European-looking man with a punk mohawk. Many in the crowd wore everyday clothes, suggesting they might live nearby and had come just for entertainment or a drink. Yet, this casual attire did not diminish their appreciation for reggae. For instance, an African-looking woman sat alone at the bar the entire evening, holding her beer without moving, yet her serene demeanor suggested a deep familiarity with reggae. She seemed more like a music critic, not a fan.

Diasporic Pacific Islanders were also visibly present and active in the space. As we moved around, we immediately noticed two women wearing plumeria flowers in their

hair. One man wore a wide, short-sleeved shirt featuring the word “Samoa” in reggae colors across the front; on the back was a large image of Ms. B Royal, along with her name and “Long Beach,” clearly signaling a familial connection. This was something I did not witness at the Cali Vibes Festival: a clear, embodied connection between Pacific Islanders and their new home in California. At Cali Vibes, most island reggae performers were from Hawai‘i, which helped explain why their spatial identity was rooted primarily in the islands. In the broader island music scene, many of the most marketable and well-known artists are based in Hawai‘i, leading to a representation of island reggae that remains largely island-specific. In contrast, the Marley Festival created a space for more Southern California island reggae artists to participate and share their own stories of continental islandness. For example, when Ms. B Royal proudly shouted out her identity as a Samoan from Long Beach and invited her uncle, a reggae artist from Samoa, to join her onstage, the crowd responded with loud cheers, some even letting out a cheehoo on the dance floor.

Within this racially, culturally, and musically diverse crowd, their reaction to the performances was full of dynamics. Since this performance was dedicated to Bob Marley, the entire audience, including some of whom also appeared to be listening to reggae rock and punk, showed a strong interest in roots reggae. And other non-reggae rock audiences presented a strong preference or even insistence on roots reggae, which was evident from their reactions to different reggae sub-genres.

The first band was ethnically diverse, and the musicians performed a series of roots reggae hits and their own roots reggae songs, eliciting enthusiastic responses from

different groups in the crowd, with many gathering at the front to dance and bounce along. In contrast, the third band, whose members appeared more Anglo-American, started with three reggae-rock-styled songs, causing a noticeable shift in audience behavior. Fans who had been at the front began to retreat, leaving only a few behind who continued to dance to the reggae beat. Simultaneously, a new group, dressed in reggae-rock attire and previously less noticeable, moved forward as others stepped back. They seemed excited and nodded their heads so hard.

Meanwhile, I whispered to Samantha Olvera, “The vibe dropped,” and she nodded in agreement. More and more audience members went back to their seats or started to gather in front of the bar for drinks. Only the group of reggae rock fans was still nodding their heads. The vocal seemed to notice the difference. After the three songs, the vocalist shouted, “Who wants some roots?” and switched to roots reggae. Olvera and I were both surprised by the sudden change in vocal style, but the audience’s reaction shifted just as quickly. They returned to the dance floor, and the volume of screams and applause rose once again. Then we realized that the audience’s response seemed unrelated to the performers’ race, but to the sound. From this stark contrast, Olvera and I concluded that most attendees were primarily there for roots reggae.

Among the audience members who specifically came for roots reggae, Ms. B Royal’s performance demonstrated that island reggae could still elicit a highly positive reaction from these roots reggae fans. Her performance was scheduled for the second of the night, and during her setup, the DJ played several island reggae tracks, including the collaboration “Shoot Down” by Maoli and George “Fiji” Veikoso. This became even

more evident during Ms. B Royal's performance. As she began her first song, the diverse crowd erupted with enthusiasm. Their dancing reflected a wide range of movements beyond the typical bouncing or waving, expressing embodied excitement. A group of African-looking attendees, speaking a language I couldn't identify, began dancing in a circle, incorporating a few dancehall steps as they lowered their bodies in rhythm. From the other side of the crowd, another Latino-looking male attendee, dressed in reggae-rock style and dancing movements that resembled the Gully Creepa, a dancehall move, joined in.

Ms. B Royal's performance proved that island reggae artists could indeed captivate roots reggae and reggae rock fans, proving that island reggae remains the sonic resonance of its origin and its in-between position in the racially dichotomized reggae market. Olvera and I suggest that the long-standing interracial reciprocity and space sharing between diasporic Islanders and diasporic Africans in everyday life also influences how island reggae is perceived.

Besides, the audience's preference for roots reggae did not necessarily translate into blanket approval for all music in the root style. During her set, Ms. B Royal introduced a white female reggae singer to perform solo. As the singer began to sing, Olvera shouted in my ear, "this is weird." She wasn't alone in feeling this way. Although the crowd continued to dance, since her performance was technically flawless and even more lean to roots reggae than Ms. B Royal, their enthusiasm waned—they ceased screaming and their movements became smaller and lighter, as if merely being polite. Then, when the singer

sampled Lauryn Hill's "Doo Wop (That Thing)," Olvera turned to me and said, "this is Lauryn Hill, but..." leaving her sentence hanging with a wordless, confused expression.

After the show, we discussed the performance and agreed that our sense of discomfort stemmed from the singer's precise emulation of roots reggae, particularly in light of her racial identity. Olvera interpreted it as appropriation, noting that the singer was white and made no acknowledgment of her racial position—particularly significant given that the stage was provided by a Samoan woman. Olvera used the phrase "Brown female body" to emphasize the stark power imbalance at play. Furthermore, we agreed that the sense of dissonance stemmed from the intersection of race and class—particularly evident in the singer's styling and presentation. Unlike other performers who wore casual attire such as T-shirts, plaid shirts, hoodies, or jeans, this singer stood out. The singer wore well-maintained dreadlocks partially covered by a silk headscarf, along with a bright green crop top, high-waisted pants, and layered jewelry—an ensemble that likely requires a certain level of financial investment to maintain. As a result, her appearance is more closely aligned with what Minh-Ha T. Pham (2017:68) theorizes as racial plagiarism: the practice of unauthorized and uncredited fashion copying.

However, when I met with Olvera again a week later, we both acknowledged the bias in our initial reaction. While we continued to agree that race shaped audience perception, I raised the question of why we hadn't had the same response to the third band, whose members were also white, not to mention that the DJ, who was also the festival organizer, was white. Olvera agreed and admitted that, compared to white men,

white women are more often perceived as outsiders and tend to be excluded from the reggae scene, which remains largely male-dominated.

The imbalanced gender ratio was precisely what motivated Ms. B Royal to bring the white female artist on stage. While introducing her, Ms. B Royal took her hand and proclaimed, “We need more female musicians in reggae!” Although the audience did not seem fully immersed in the guest artist’s performance, the loud cheer that followed Ms. B Royal’s statement reflected a shared acknowledgment of the importance of supporting women in reggae. Indeed, Ms. B Royal was the only female performer on the performing cast, highlighting the ongoing scarcity of women in the reggae scene. For Ms. B Royal, promoting female visibility at the Marley Festival—a key gathering for reggae fans—was urgent and intentional. Her actions underscored that her identity as a woman was as vital as her Samoan and Polynesian heritage. This instance also connects back to the beginning of the chapter, highlighting Los Angeles as a site where multiple racial, gender, and social identities intersect. It has given rise to overlapping spatial contests and ongoing negotiations, illustrating the complex environment that diasporic Pacific Islanders must navigate.

Lastly, just when we thought any roots reggae sound was enough to make audiences lose themselves in the music, the reggae band Duke of Roots, led by the renowned Congolese artist Mermans Mosengo, took the stage as the fourth act and surprised us with how differently the audience responded. Those who had been seated in Rastafarian attire finally shed their judgmental expressions and moved to the dance floor, after nearly three hours of sitting motionless. More Black audience members joined them, filling the space

with energy. A man in Rastafarian attire who had just arrived even tapped my shoulder and asked, “Did I miss a lot?”

Duke of Roots played Pink Floyd’s song “Money” in a reggae version. Despite being a song outside the genre, the audience’s reaction showed no doubt about whether it was reggae. I told Olvera, “Everyone’s playing a genre called roots reggae, but I think Duke of Roots is playing whatever they like, and that becomes reggae.” Olvera agreed. We realized that this festival, not until 10 p.m., finally showed that reggae is still the music of Jamaicans, Caribbeans, and all diasporic Africans.

Sadly, we had to leave at 10 p.m. As we walked out, I began taking photos of the omnipresent signs posted on the walls, the ATM, and even the restroom door: “NO WEED PERMITTED.” At a Bob Marley event, weed was banned, yet alcohol was being sold freely because this was the crucial way to make a profit to support the venue and the musicians. This contrast was striking. Marijuana holds a crucial role in Rastafarian religious rituals, while alcohol is explicitly forbidden for Rastas. The signage served as a stark reminder that this was, ultimately, a commercial event—where even a genre known for its political messages and roots in anti-capitalist resistance relies on capitalist infrastructures to be heard.



Image 11 & 12: “NO WEED PERMITTED” signs displayed at the entrance door (left) and at the bar (right).

At the Marley Festival, we observed a dense intersection of race, gender, and class among both the audience and performers. In this space, everything was under negotiation. In the case of the third band, the racial dichotomy appeared unsettled, as the audience embraced these Anglo-American performers playing roots reggae, especially as the band also blurred the lines between reggae rock and roots reggae. Yet, less than an hour before, the same audience rejected the roots reggae performance of Ms. B Royal’s guest, whose

Anglo-female appearance and middle-class style seemed to disqualify her in their eyes.

At the same time, for these two female performers, gender temporarily overrode race, as the importance of including more female performers became apparent in a male-dominated space.

Off-stage, audiences, regardless of background, responded similarly to reggae performances, as long as the sound felt “right.” But when the sound shifted away from roots reggae, reggae rock seemed to lower the vibe, while island reggae revived it; the persistence of the racial dichotomy and the in-between position of island reggae became clear. Finally, when the band Duke of Roots took the stage, they reasserted the authority of the Black community in the genre and the worldview it represents.

Such complex, layered, and at times paradoxical identifications are central to both the reggae scene and the broader cultural landscape of Los Angeles. Southern Californian Pacific Islanders are creating their island space in such identification intersections in music to define their continental islandness. Back to Ms. B Royal, in response to this environment, her efforts—from inviting a white female artist to create space for more women in reggae, to performing with her Samoan family members, to actively engaging with the Jamaican reggae scene in Southern California—reflect a distinctly Indigenous spatiality in her everyday life. This spatiality is characterized by sharing space with cultural neighbors and honoring her genealogy of island ancestry and sound, which is her practice of continental islandness.

Sounding the Spaces

Under these institutionalized racial dynamics in Southern Californian reggae events, individual island reggae artists perform to assert their relationship to Los Angeles and to position themselves as Islanders of the world. In this section, I examine two songs—“Officer” (2009) and “Reggae Party” (2015)—to explore how capitalism and racial norms have shaped diasporic Pacific Islanders’ continental islandness, and how they respond by redefining race, space, and Indigeneity through music. Together, these works highlight their racial experiences in Los Angeles, their alliances with other minorities, and their imagined island identity refracted through Jamaican islandness.

Island Space in Los Angeles: “Officer” by Hooliganz

Parallel with Local Culture, Hooliganz, which is a Samoan reggae band formed in the 1990s, encapsulated these experiences in their song “Officer” released in 2009. This track presents a dialogue between a hooligan and police officers, as an example of the shared spatiality between Pacific Islanders and the community of color in Los Angeles:

“Tell me officer, why’d you pull me over?
Is it because the color of my skin? I wanna know
Tell me officer, why’d you pull me over
Is it because I’m a hooligan?
I stopped at every red light I see, yes I did
I even let pedestrians cross over, oh lord
But still you wanna follow me, oh why?
Said you and your partner over”

In the chorus, Hooliganz attributes police brutality to their skin color and identities as hooligans, with the addition of “rasta man” in the second chorus. Police brutality and governmental violence predominantly target African Americans and Latin Americans in

Los Angeles (Johnson, G. T. 2013; Alvarez 2022). Yet, Pacific Islanders, specifically the Samoan and Tongan communities, also face severe police brutality due to their skin color and robust physical appearances (Uperesa 2014). While the song does not explicitly mention a specific skin tone, Hooliganz integrates Pacific Islanders into the discourse on racism by highlighting their shared experiences of police brutality with African Americans and Latin Americans, particularly in the South Bay Area of Los Angeles.

The deliberate avoidance of specifying skin color also allows members of the African American and Latin American communities to see their own experiences reflected in the song, thus fostering an alliance. Pacific Islanders find resonance with it, as they often refer to themselves as “brown skin”—a term sometimes mentioned in island reggae songs. This term serves as a form of self-identification among diasporic Pacific Islanders, marking their integration into the U.S. racial framework, where race plays a vital role in shaping self-identity. Notably, the mention of “rasta man” in the second chorus links to the Rastafarian community, who experience discrimination in the U.S. rooted in anti-Blackness, thereby deepening their connection to the reggae scene. The reference to “hooligan” addresses the issue of unemployment among young adults in these communities. Through these associations, I observe that Hooliganz rearticulates their racial and Indigenous identities in solidarity with other racialized and marginalized communities who face similar forms of systemic violence in Los Angeles. This practice reflects their agency to redefine race and resist its imposed boundaries, challenging settler-colonial narratives, which I see as an assertion of sovereignty in island space.

This song exemplifies early island reggae music transitioning from roots reggae. It features a vocal style that is less vibrato and R&B-influenced, prominent skanking beats, and traditional rock band instrumentation, with the keyboard emulating various instrumental sounds. The introduction features a lively riff played by horns—though it’s unclear whether these are real horns or synthesized—while the keyboard simultaneously maintains the characteristic reggae rhythm. As with other island reggae songs, the vocalist King Solomon’s high-register vocals lead the track, initially conveying a bright and positive vibe. Later on, this tone shifts into sarcasm, teasing police officers while critiquing their violence. This juxtaposition challenges the common stereotype of island reggae as purely positive and carefree, instead highlighting the agency and subjectivity of diasporic Islanders in resisting oppression rather than passively enduring it. In the second verse, Hooliganz clearly portrays the cruelty of police violence:

“Soon as I make a turn you pull me aside
And you didn’t even do the background check.
Tell me to get out with my hands up high, oh why?
Now you got your knee up on my neck, lord help me yeah
I didn’t have a drink or no land of bread, no no
Why you wanna mess with my head, oh tell me yeah
Got me nervous, got me driving slow, oh lord
Now I don’t even know which way to go, so tell me why”

This verse portrays police violence to amplify the voices of the oppressed. It conveys their collective anger at unjust intervention and physical abuse, while its lively and satirical tone both disrupts the emotional struggles and physical pain experienced and shared by listeners. The song, therefore, offers a means of resistance against the trauma inflicted by police brutality. This approach echoes Local Culture’s mission to bring joy to support their community and help them survive in Los Angeles.

Hooliganz not only conveys the shared stories of diasporic Islanders in Los Angeles via lyrics but also manifests through the sound. As mentioned in Chapter One, island reggae is a fusion of island music with Los Angeles soundscapes, and the music carries out the shared space with African Americans and Latin Americans through elements of R&B, reggae, and hip hop. Hooliganz incorporates familiar sonic elements commonly heard in the Los Angeles soundscape to deepen the listener's connection, making the message conveyed through this song explicitly relatable. Beginning with the second chorus, the song features a voice saying, "Can I see your driver's license, please?"—delivered in a standard English accent and filtered through a sound effect resembling a police radio. This mimics a routine police interaction, a familiar and recognizable experience throughout Los Angeles." Hearing terms like 'background check' and 'driver's license' in this song can strike a nerve, especially for immigrants and racial minorities. As an immigrant who has been pulled over twice, these words trigger my anxiety, evoking the fear of getting into trouble simply because I am neither White nor a citizen.

Hooliganz narrates such sonic experiences of street life in Los Angeles, connecting their encounters with police brutality to those of African and Latin Americans who share these urban spaces. The narrative of space is deeply intertwined with that of time—the stories of roads and police interactions in Los Angeles, a city woven together by highways, are rooted in the city's post-WWII history of displacing African Americans and Latin Americans (Johnson, G. T. 2013). This history of displacement, which combines with the social and economic marginalization of diasporic Islanders, has led to

shared spaces and interconnected time among these communities. Through “Officer,” Hooliganz enacts Johnson’s (ibid.) concept of “spatial entitlement,” where alliances between minority groups reclaim urban spaces by narrating their stories.

Through enactments of spatial entitlement, this song contributes to island-making. As Cattermole (2014) shows with Māori reggae in Aotearoa, New Zealand, Hooliganz’s storytelling about their Southern Californian experience both reveals and asserts Indigenous communities’ relational ties and responsibilities to land, reaffirming sovereignty. Their account of police brutality in “Officer” portrays urban areas shared by racialized minorities as relational spaces. Like the musicians of Local Culture, who recognize other marginalized peoples as neighbors and engage with them musically as a practice of Indigeneity, “Officer” likewise grounds diasporic Pacific Islanders’ experience in Indigeneity. Performing the song ultimately affirms that the communal space created through music is, in essence, an island space.

The Inter-Island-Spacing through Reggae: “Reggae Party” by Siaosi

Another dimension of island space created through reggae is its international and cosmopolitan connections, which transcend nation-state boundaries and link reggae scenes in Jamaica, Hawai‘i, and diasporic Pacific Islander communities in Southern California. Joe noted that direct collaborations between diasporic Islanders and Jamaicans were rare during the early formation of the island reggae scene in California, but such collaborations have since increased and become more international as the scene expanded beyond the Pacific with the genre’s commercial success. These growing connections

break geographic boundaries and generate a unified island space that nurtures an Islander identity across oceans, continents, and islands.

In the term island reggae, “island” serves as the component that emphasizes Pacific Islander identity. Given that Jamaica is an island, it might seem like an awkward use of “island” in describing Pacific Islanders’ reggae; however, my interviewees offer different perspectives. For them, the term “island” does not confuse Jamaica with the Pacific Islands; instead, it resonates with and forms alliances within reggae as they are all Islanders. In our discussion of why Islanders prefer reggae, Joe suggested that “reggae gives an island vibe with such a lively tempo,” and he said, “Well, reggae is also from an island!” This explains that the strong identity of being an Islander has naturally drawn their interest in reggae. While my interviewees acknowledge the originality of roots reggae, “Jamaica is also an island” has become a phrase they use to affirm their connection to reggae and Jamaica.

This shared island identity also comes from the similar colonial experiences that islanders have experienced. For example, my interlocutor, Braddah Ash, was a Filipino reggae artist from Hawai‘i who traveled to Puerto Rico and formed a reggae band there, as he believed that Puerto Rico shared a similar U.S. settler colonial history with Hawai‘i. In his words, Jamaican reggae also came from an island and, therefore, could serve as the voice of both islands. His responses suggest that reggae has become a symbol of Islanders, which transcends the social, cultural, and geographical differences in colonialism to a shared Islander identity. Although Jamaica remains a crucial influence in the reggae scene, the genre’s evolution from being specifically Jamaican to a shared

symbol of island music exemplifies Fabian Holt's (2007) suggestion about music genres that "musical meaning is highly contingent, and the ontologies of the semantic codes that form the musical basis of generic categories are fragile" (ibid.: 5). This transition highlights the fluidity and adaptability of reggae as it blends with diverse cultural influences, thereby forming a more expansive colonized Islander identity in music.

Drawing on Adam Kielman's (2022) concept of "music cosmopolitanism"—which suggests that people engage with certain music genres because of the meanings and imaginaries associated with them as a way to express their self-positioning in the world—I argue that diasporic Islanders use reggae as a symbolic expression of islandness to situate themselves as Islanders within a global context. This assertion of Islander identity, alongside Jamaica's authoritative role in reggae and diasporic Islanders' strong ties with Hawai'i, enhances musical collaborations amongst Jamaicans, Hawai'i, and diasporic Pacific Islanders in California, forming a shared Island space.

A prominent example is J Boog, a Samoan artist raised in Compton who developed his career in Hawai'i. He was the mentee of another island reggae artist, George "Fiji" Veikoso, and he collaborated with Jamaican musicians and recorded his music in Jamaica. This partnership demonstrates an awareness of the Oceanic heritage, the reggae's ownership, and the interracial interactions that diasporic Pacific Islanders have become conscious of through their experiences in Southern California. Additionally, diasporic Islander artists like Siaosi—who grew up or remained active in Hawai'i and collaborated with Jamaican record labels or signed with international reggae labels—further deepened this shared island space created through reggae.

Siaosi is a Tongan reggae artist raised in Ontario, California, and Hawai'i. He released a single, "Reggae Party," collaborating with the Jamaican label Skinny Bwoy Records and the Hawaiian record label EKM Records. This song is produced by the Jamaican producer Henry "Sadiki" Buckley into two remix versions, dancehall and reggae hip-hop, and collected in the album *Summer Bounce Riddim & I'm Still in Love Riddim* with various Jamaican artists.

"Reggae party" merges island reggae with Jamaican dancehall music to create a shared island space between Oceania and Jamaica. Sung by Siaosi, it maintains the melismatic singing and high-registered R&B vocal characteristics that are typical of island reggae. However, the producer Sadiki multiplies rhythmic lines and amplifies the sounds of drum and bass in both versions, increasing the density of the riddims to make it sound more dancehall. While the two versions create distinct sounds, they both diverge from traditional island reggae by relying more on electronic rather than instrumental bases. The dancehall version replaces the traditional reggae beats while emphasizing the drum and bass sounds in riddims, the core of dancehall, to make people dance (Henriques 2011). It features turntables and incorporates more electronic beats, marking a shift from the typically instrumental nature of island reggae. The role of MC is pronounced in both versions, especially in the hip hop version, where the MC introduces the collaboration between the two record labels and Siaosi and intersects during the instrumental breaks. This hip hop version aligns more closely with island reggae's sound in the steady reggae beat but incorporates additional sound effects, like the children's voices saying "boombayah."

The lyrics also play a determinative role in calling the co-celebration of reggae culture and enforcing a reciprocity between the Caribbean and Oceania. From the MC's introduction, "Introducing a man called Siaosi. Straight out of the EKM family. It's a Skinny Boy Production" "Reggae Party" calls for listeners' engagement both from the Jamaican side and Hawaiian side, as it includes familiar characteristics from island reggae and Jamaican dancehall music, resonating with the lyrics that call for attendance in reggae parties:

"We gone party
Sunday to Sunday
Gotta work tomorrow
Tonight won't be no sorrow"

This shared island space is international but also remains grounded in the personal diasporic stories of Southern Californian Islanders. This song marks Siaosi's diasporic route, which is also a shared route amongst diasporic Islanders. In my interview with him, Siaosi⁵¹ emphasized how island reggae musicians' works often mirror their diasporic routes. Raised predominantly in Tongan culture, Siaosi considers himself Polynesian American or Tongan American. This is also how Siaosi presents himself in his performances; yet in our interview, he shared another side of his family's migration story, which, I believe, shed light on his work and the construction of a shared island space in "Reggae Party."

Siaosi's family heritage roots back to Tonga, Samoa, Fiji, Mali, and England, narrating a diasporic journey that disperses from Africa to America and across to Oceania

⁵¹ Siaosi, interview by the author, October 23, 2023.

and the Caribbean. His ancestor, his great great great great grandfather, a Malian prince who was taken to Louisiana as a slave with his brother, escaped to Boston. These brothers then dispersed across various islands, with Siaosi's ancestor moving to Samoa and his brother to Jamaica. Also, Siaosi himself lived in Hawai'i and Ontario, California, for his childhood and teenage years. "Reggae Party" reflects his ancestry. Drawing on James Clifford's (1997) concept of roots and routes and Cattermole's (2014) analysis of Māori reggae as a site where identity is shaped through both heritage and processes of movement and interaction, "Reggae Party" links his migration routes with the construction of a shared sonic island space within reggae, one that connects Islanders both across the Pacific and on the continent.

The song "Reggae Party" not only celebrates Siaosi's relationship with Jamaica and Hawai'i but also reflects the diasporic journeys of Islanders in Southern California. Although we did not discuss this song during our interview, I found a strong resonance between its themes and what Siaosi shared about his childhood. Siaosi moved from Hawai'i to Ontario, California, when he was nine. "When I got off the plane [in California], I didn't see my people,"⁵² he told me. "I was the only Tongan student at school, except for my sister. No one knew who I was—people only knew Hawaiians. They had no idea what Tonga was."⁵³ Growing up Tongan in California during the 1990s and 2000s, Siaosi struggled to envision a future for himself in the U.S., especially since he saw no Pacific Islander role models in mainstream media. As a Tongan and Malian

⁵² Siaosi, interview by the author, October 23, 2023.

⁵³ Siaosi, interview by the author, October 23, 2023.

descendant, Siaosi turned to African American artists as the only visible figures with whom he could relate. “Although I attended the Tongan church and had Tongan relatives in the neighborhood, I still wanted to see someone like me on TV,” he said. “Hip hop was popular when I was growing up, and those artists looked like me, so I listened to a lot of hip hop from then on.”⁵⁴

Throughout our conversation, Siaosi emphasized the importance of “seeing his people.” He recalled the moment he returned to Hawai‘i later in life, describing how stepping out of the airport and seeing the presence of his community left a lasting impact: “It was full of my people.” This desire for visibility and connection is central to his career. Siaosi aspires to be a role model for younger Tongan Americans—someone they can look to and envision a future through. Connecting this intention to “Reggae Party” and the transnational island space it creates, the song serves as a bridge between the two sides of Siaosi’s ancestry—Africa and Oceania—crafted with the hope that the next generation of diasporic Pacific Islanders, as well as all colonized Islanders, will see themselves reflected in him.

Conclusion

I intend to conclude this chapter with reflections on the Marley Festival. On the way home, I expressed to Olvera my hope of coming to resolve my questions about the relationship between island reggae and roots reggae, but instead, I found myself

⁵⁴ Siaosi, interview by the author, October 23, 2023.

grappling with even more questions. Our observations seemed reasonable yet simultaneously became blurred and uncertain. Olvera succinctly noted, “because everything intersects.” Indeed, there is no definitive answer to how diasporic Pacific Islanders perceive island reggae, roots reggae, and Rastafarianism, nor to how they interact with the Black community, as these everyday interactions remain ongoing and continually evolving. These interactions and perceptions reflect how diasporic Pacific Islanders navigate their identities within Los Angeles, a transnational metropolis where nations, races, genders, and classes all intersect, making any interaction possible and any articulation subject to change.

As the environment evolves, diasporic Pacific Islanders express changes through their spatiality in reggae, showcasing their ability to convey a cosmopolitan perspective. This Indigenous expression of temporality emerges from the intersections between Oceanic and Jamaican temporalities. This complexity was encapsulated in a question I posed to Olvera: “Do you think island reggae is building Ocean time upon reggae time, or has island reggae built its own time alongside reggae time?” Confused by my questions, Olvera still offered, “It could be both. It depends on the case you are talking about.”

Island reggae might be performed at the Cali Vibes Festival alongside reggae rock bands, or it could be celebrated by roots reggae fans at the Marley Festival. Reggae can be an inspiration and an alliance with the diasporic Africans, but it can also be the symbol of popular music and islands. Each time island reggae evolves—whether in sound, lyrics, or market presence—it reflects how diasporic Pacific Islanders respond to changes. Although these changes might shift the relationship with diasporic Africans, the

underlying respect and awareness of Jamaicans through reggae, and their friendship with neighboring African Americans from their daily lives, remain unchanged. This reciprocity, as I argue in the first chapter, is guided by their Indigenous protocols.

This chapter narrates how diasporic Pacific Islanders create their island spaces by sharing sounds and spaces with other racial groups, specifically African Americans and Jamaicans. It also reveals how diasporic Pacific Islanders expand their spaces through the negotiation and collaboration of interracial relationships within the institutionalized, commercial live music industry, while simultaneously responding to the racial norms of the continent. But how do they perform their continental islandness within their own community and the broader Oceanic community, even in a commercial venue?

While the first two chapters focus on external interactions—specifically, responses to the multiracial soundscape of Southern California and engagements with Jamaican and Hawaiian music scenes—this chapter will be followed by the chapter that shifts the dissertation’s focus from external interactions to internal connections within the diasporic Pacific Islander community and their efforts to construct island space. Centering on an ethnography of the 2022 ONE LOVE TONGA Benefit Concert, Chapter Three explores how Pacific Islanders create a sense of island space for community-building and connection with Oceania, within commercial settings.

Chapter 3: Making an Island Across the Pacific: Telling a Trans-Pacific Story in the ONE LOVE TONGA Benefit Concert

Introduction

Around late December 2021, a month-long volcanic eruption destabilized lives in the Kingdom of Tonga. Numerous news posts by Pacific Islanders on social media evoked public attention to the tragedy. Responding to this devastation in the middle of January 2022, Island Block Network announced a fundraising concert, the ONE LOVE TONGA Benefit Concert, which would be held on February 18th at House of Blues in Anaheim, California.

This event showcased the remarkable community efforts of diasporic Pacific Islanders in California. Several California-based Pacific Islander non-profit organizations, such as Anamarangi Polynesian Voice and United by An Ocean, participated in the event, with major sponsors including Alaska Airlines, Live Nation, and the House of Blues collaborating with the community to support the cause. Additionally, word-of-mouth promotion by individuals sparked a surge in ticket sales. More than ten island reggae artists volunteered to perform, including the renowned Sammy Johnson, who just had his sold-out shows at the same venue a couple of months ago. The concert featured five hours of continuous reggae music, running until midnight, as attendees, whether from Hawai‘i, Tonga, Samoa, or other Pacific Islander communities, came together in a powerful show of solidarity and support for Tonga. This

extraordinary effort successfully raised \$45,000 to aid recovery efforts in Tonga following the disaster.

Following the previous chapter's discussion of external interactions between Pacific Islanders, multiracial audiences, and the broader reggae scenes of Jamaica and Hawai'i, this chapter shifts inward to explore how diasporic Pacific Islanders construct island space for their own community. Specifically, I examine how the ONE LOVE TONGA Benefit Concert at the House of Blues (hereafter HOB) transformed this commercial venue into a shared, temporal, and performative "island," expressing Southern California Islanders' sense of continental islandness.

This interlude shows how performances of continental islandness weave diasporic experiences into Indigenous lineage, laying the foundation for an Indigenous future on the continent while strengthening connections to Oceania. It also demonstrates how diasporic Pacific Islanders can reframe commercial spaces as island spaces through shared musical and cultural practices. Finally, this chapter sets the stage for the last two chapters, which turn to how continental islandness is performed and negotiated from within the Pacific Islander reggae scene itself.

Making an Island on the Graphic



Image 13: The ONE LOVE TONGA flyer.

Before the day of the concert, the title and the flyer were the first steps of creating the island, intertwining reggae themes with island symbols within the commercial context of the event. The ‘ONE LOVE’ comes from Bob Marley’s iconic song “One Love”, evoking reggae fans’ resonance with the concert. This reggae song is also frequently covered by island reggae artists because its theme of love reflects a core value through which diasporic Islanders connect their Indigeneity to roots reggae. ‘ONE LOVE’ is a

common title for various reggae festivals, such as the ONE LOVE Cali Reggae Festival in Long Beach and the ONE LOVE Festival in New Zealand. By adding ‘TONGA’ to ‘ONE LOVE,’ the title also suggests a deep-rooted solidarity among Pacific Islanders in their support for Tonga.

The concert logo and flyer aim to evoke a sense of support for Tonga among viewers. The logo, featuring a red heart with the Tongan national flag in its top left corner, echoes the concert title ‘ONE LOVE TONGA,’ weaving Tonga’s national symbol into a broader pan-Pacific identity. On every concert flyer, this concert logo is paired with the title ‘ONE LOVE TONGA Benefit Concert’, intentionally designed to echo the Tongan national flag’s aesthetic. The phrase ‘ONE LOVE’ is rendered in white, while ‘TONGA’ stands out in red. The title’s bold font delivers a strong desire to support Tonga to the viewers. Through the heart-centric logo, coupled with the red and white palette and striking typeface, this graphic design conveys a powerful image of the Pacific Islanders’ compassion for Tonga, integrated with the reggae cultural symbol – ONE LOVE.

The concert flyer also reveals the commodification of island cultures within a performance of Indigenous solidarity, highlighting a layered intersection of self-determination and self-commodification. It features a background map highlighting Tongatapu, the main island of Tonga, along with nearby islands. Rendered in grey text on a beige backdrop with torn edges, the design evokes European marine maps that recall settler colonialism and the subsequent exploitation and dispossession of Indigenous peoples. Yet the flyer was ultimately crafted to promote the concert commercially within

the U.S. context, using a representation of Tonga that would be easily recognizable and relatable to an American audience. However, this does not imply that the graphic design merely compromises to commercialize Tonga. The central placement of the Tonga map emphasizes Tonga's subjectivity and expresses continental islandness, which can also be interpreted as aligning with decolonial mapping methods that shift perspectives away from the colonial gaze (King 2019; Fujikane 2021). Such tension between self-identification and commodifying cultures is even more prominent in the concert space—House of Blues, Anaheim.

The Venue

The island manifested in every island reggae concert emerges from the tension between the Pacific Islanders' relational time and settler time. Especially performances at the HOB highlight how island reggae's focus shifts as it becomes more integrated into the live entertainment industry. Performing on larger stages has become a key criterion for musicians, meaning island reggae is no longer played solely for the community. Instead, becoming a professional musician and performing at commercial venues is now the norm. This transition from community clubs to chain venues aligns with Fabian Holt's (2020) concept of the commercial institutionalization of live music, which shifts from community-based environments and amateur performances to commercially-driven spaces and professionalization. Holt notes, "The institutionalization of musical performance as a commodity is an outcome of capitalism" (ibid.: 2), and this process reinforces the Eurocentrism and heteropatriarchy embedded in the standards of

professionalism. Today, most island reggae performances occur in commercial venues, where this institutionalization influences how Indigeneity is performed.

Indeed, it may seem paradoxical that Pacific Islanders are cultivating continental islandness in a venue like the HOB—owned by the global entertainment giant Live Nation and situated near Disneyland—especially considering that many Pacific Islanders migrated to the U.S. due to the challenges capitalism and tourism imposed on their home islands. Yet, as the history of Island Block Radio demonstrates, its collaboration with HOB has played a crucial role in providing island reggae artists with consistent exposure. Through HOB's established reputation and network within the live music industry, greater resources and visibility have become more accessible to these artists

The relationship between the venue and Island Block has also fostered a sense of familiarity and mutual respect. The venue's team actively prioritizes collaboration with Island Block Network, requiring that all island reggae performers be promoted through Island Block—even in cases where artists are fully capable of selling out shows by themselves. Venue staff, including security personnel, have built friendships with the Island Block crew, often greeting us at the entrance and allowing access without wristbands. Over time, this long-standing partnership has helped transform the HOB Anaheim into a vibrant performance hub for island reggae musicians and a key gathering site for the Pacific Islander community—contributing significantly to the genre's expansion into mainstream visibility.

However, it is important to acknowledge that despite the friendship with HOB, the venue does not automatically become an island space. While it provides a platform for

island reggae, the space itself remains largely decontextualized from island reggae culture, or more broadly, from any specific music culture. Its design and atmosphere accommodate a wide range of musical styles, but without anchoring them in their respective cultural contexts. Indeed, the venue's name and official website emphasize its dedication to blues, particularly in the Music Hall, where the ONE LOVE TONGA concert was held. The site claims to honor blues culture and address "the traumas of slavery and systemic racism"⁵⁵ through displays of Southern vernacular art created by African American artists. Yet these artworks are presented without labels or contextual information, leaving the artists unrecognized and the historical meaning diluted.

Moreover, HOB incorporates cultural elements beyond the blues. On the same webpage, the venue states that it embraces the Sufi mantra "Unity in Diversity" as a guiding philosophy to promote musical inclusivity. This principle is visualized through the "God Wall," a display of spiritual symbols from various world religions positioned behind the stage. However, in the absence of explanatory context, these sacred images become exoticized decorations, decontextualizing both Black history and the diverse spiritual traditions they intend to represent.

This form of symbolic appropriation exemplifies the exoticism and cultural flattening that Black and Indigenous scholars identify as central to capitalist logics (King 2019; C. J. Robinson 2000; D. Robinson 2020). It also echoes the exploitative dynamics of Tiki culture and Pacific tourism, both of which have long commodified and marginalized Pacific Islander cultures—a topic explored further in Chapter Four.

⁵⁵ The "About Us" page of House of Blues on its official website: <https://www.houseofblues.com/about>



Image 14: The sign of “Unity in Diversity” hung on the stage of Music Hall

My intention is not to criticize HOB, as its partnership has meaningfully contributed to the growth of the island reggae scene. Rather, by examining the venue, I aim to foreground the sustainability and resilience of diasporic Pacific Islanders, who creatively navigate and assert their continental islandness within commercial spaces shaped by capitalist logics, especially given that such spaces are often the primary sites for gathering and visibility. Despite Southern California hosting the largest Pacific Islander population in the continental U.S., there is no centralized geographic or cultural hub for

this community, unlike Koreatown for Korean Americans or Monterey Park for Taiwanese Americans. The reasons for this vary, ranging from economic conditions to, as Samantha Olvera from the Pacific Island Ethnic Art Museum (hereafter PIEAM) suggests, the internal diversity of the community itself. Fran Lujan, the director of PIEAM, often refers to Pacific Islanders as people of mobility. As a result, Pacific Islanders rely on smaller, scattered gathering spaces such as churches, organizations, or even household backyards. Other opportunities for communal gatherings are cultural festivals, which typically occur only once a year. In contrast, commercial events are held on a monthly or weekly basis, and this consumption is affordable for many Pacific Islanders, even younger generations, because most of the island reggae concert tickets are around \$25 to \$50, and it can be even cheaper to buy via concert promoters like Island Block Network. Additionally, their commercial nature makes them accessible to all Pacific Islanders from different cultural backgrounds, which has become essential for fostering community connections. Therefore, these commercial island reggae concerts become essential for continental islandness performances and community formations. However, this does not imply that diasporic Islanders merely conform to capitalist norms when expressing their identity at concerts. On the contrary, these events reinforce and strengthen the core values of continental islandness—family, community, sharing, and collective care—that contrast with capitalism via performances.

House of Blues: An Island in California

Prep Time

At 5:30 pm on February 18th, I pulled into the parking lot of House of Blues. As a researcher who did not have any connection with the diaspora Islander community, I offered to volunteer for the Island Block Network. Responding to Island Block Network's need to have merchandise organized across shows, I stepped into the role of merch seller, which gave me a unique vantage point at shows from the merchandise table at this concert.

As I made my way, I walked past a movie theater and several restaurants, perennially bustling with tourists and Disneyland visitors from just a few blocks away. My colleague David "RND" Duenas awaited me outside the venue. Unlike our usual pre-concert routine, where we would grab dinner together, Duenas promptly led me to the merchandise table in the lobby. He introduced me to the sole merchandise for the evening—the ONE LOVE TONGA t-shirt, with the profit going to benefit Tonga.



Image 15: The ONE LOVE TONGA Benefit Concert T-shirt

Without delay, I began unpacking and sorting the shirts by size. As mentioned earlier in this chapter, non-profit organizations collaborating with major corporations orchestrated the ONE LOVE TONGA Benefit Concert. Representatives from these entities were setting up their own tables. Several workers from these groups also inquired about the concert t-shirts. I made sales as early as 5:45 pm, even though the main event was scheduled for 7:30 pm. A large display board, adorned with sponsor logos and the prominent ONE LOVE TONGA branding, stood in the lobby. Many staff members paused to take photos in front of it. My colleagues, Silulu A’etonu-Grey (hereafter Myz Lulu, her stage name) and Joi Dwight, hosts from Island Block Network, and their

filming crew, were scouting for the perfect angle to conduct interviews for the Island Block Network concert series on the MYX TV streaming platform.

As Myz Lulu and Dwight were interviewing performers, Samantha Kainoa, the head of Island Block merchandise, joined by volunteers, Britney and me, opted to wear the ONE LOVE TONGA t-shirts to promote this product. Typically, we do not buy our own products since Joe “Savage” Fa’avae often gifts them to us. However, this time, we purchased them as a show of support. By 7 pm, the lobby bar was in full swing, with early arrivals already sipping their drinks. While the concert primarily aimed to support Tonga and the diasporic Pacific Islander community, it also served as a commercial showcase for the media and general public. The entire concert preparation showcased the expertise of Island Block Network and all participants in hosting events, a skill developed through navigating settler-industrial time within the professionalized island reggae market. Yet this time, their efforts and skills were fully devoted to those whom Lulu called “their brothers and sisters in Tonga.”

Performing Family: Performing Tonga in California

At 7:30 pm, the performance started with the performance of Nancy Fifita, a fifteen-year-old Tongan dancer-singer. The audience began to walk from the lobby to the concert hall, shouting cheehoo, a Samoan celebratory yell. The House of Blues immediately became an island, where the soundscape was full of island sounds— island reggae music, cheehoo shouts, laughing, and chatting with families and friends. The scene had been changed as well. Before 7 pm, the lobby and the concert hall were empty

and quiet; one could only see the staff walking around and the sound of sound-checking. Nothing showed that the space held an Islander event except for the display board and our merchandise table. But as all attendees came in, they wore clothes with words such as Polynesian or Tongan, and some of them handed lei to each other, the omnipresent island and reggae symbols on them, including red-green-gold colors and surfing pictures, have turned the space into a continental island.

Although Fa'avae only had three weeks to arrange for this concert, he still invited ten performers and groups to volunteer for this concert, so the performances ran nonstop from 7:30 pm to 12:30 am. Amongst these performers, Nancy Fifita, Siaosi, and Siale are from Tonga, and most of the rest are diasporic Islanders from other islands. Since the line-up was already a presentation of the Pacific Islander community supporting their Tongan members, the performances affirmed this bond by framing the performance as a familial event. The performances of the family showcased the intertwined continental islandness and familial value when they emphasized their island genealogy again and again on the stage.

Nancy Fifita's performance exemplified how representing family can echo the notion of island-making in island reggae music. Nancy Fifita is an emerging star in the Pacific Islander music community. She was born in the Kingdom of Tonga, and she moved to Southern California when she was three. She became a child actress and singer at her nine years old, and she was fifteen in 2022 and had been developing her professional multi-threat entertainer career.

Nancy Fifita invited her two little cousins to dance the Tongan dance with her on the stage. Bringing family members on the stage is common in the island reggae scene, and this does not mean nepotism but presents tight familial bonds. With her family together, Nancy's performance contained her Tongan genealogy and her experiences of growing up in the diasporic community. Nancy's last song was a Tongan song, "Malie" from the Tongan reggae band—Kontiki, one of the Southern California island reggae pioneers. Nancy's two cousins came onto the stage to accompany her with dances. Nancy's outfits seemed inspired by the Tongan national flag; she wore a red furry jacket with a whole-white turtleneck bodysuit and leggings. Nancy also adapted the song to suit the gentler Tongan dance style. The original version of "Malie" features a gentle melody led by a female vocal in a chant-like style, accompanied by one male group singing in harmony and another providing a secondary chant, along with a prominent reggae skank played on the keyboard. In contrast, Nancy's rendition downplays the skank to highlight a more intricate melodic line that reflects movements from Tongan dance.

Nancy showcased her Tongan identity by sharing the reason for singing "Malie"; she said, "This really hits home for me because I was born in Tonga", and this presentation of her Tongan identity was what the concert needed to raise people's support. Her Tongan pronunciation of Tonga, "Tong-ah" instead of the English pronunciation "Ton-gah" on the stage, again both raised the audiences' islandness and Tonganness because Islanders could easily identify each other by their pronunciation of their home islands. Nancy's performance of this diasporic Tongan reggae song

showcased her diasporic identity and Tongan heritage, with her Tongan family serving as co-performers, capturing the continental islandness of diasporic Pacific Islanders.

During the concert, Nancy's performance was closely related to that of the Anaheim-based Polynesian dance group, Nonosina Polynesia. While Nancy's rendition of "Malie" introduced Tongan identity in the diaspora, Nonosina's act encapsulated the profound sense of Tongan heritage, the unity of shared island culture, and deep family bonds within the diasporic setting. Founded by the Samoan dance master, "Gram" Estella Reid, in 1965, Nonosina is a family-operated dance school of Polynesian culture and dance in Southern California, including dance sections of Tonga, Samoa, and Hawai'i. Nancy's two cousins are students from Nonosina, too.

Nonosina's Tongan dance performance at the ONE LOVE TONGA concert was a heartfelt tribute to Tonga and the diasporic Tongan community, highlighting themes of familial bonds. During the rendition of the song "Vaka Nonosina," a dancer proudly carried a large Tongan flag while moving among the ensemble performing traditional Tongan dance. The song "Vaka Nonosina," composed by Voka Mataele, a Californian Tongan artist and member of the band Kontiki, serves as a tribute to Nonosina's founder, Gram. It symbolized the deep-rooted friendship between the Samoan and Tongan communities, as well as the enduring bond between Nonosina and the Mataele family, who were instrumental in developing the Tongan dance section at Nonosina. Unfortunately, Voka Mataele passed away in 2020, and this tragedy added an even deeper emotional layer to the performance, transforming it into a powerful tribute to the memory of him and the Mataele family. By combining "Vaka Nonosina," Tongan dance,

and the presence of the Tongan flag, Nonosina's performance told a Tongan story that bridged Tonga and California, connecting diasporic Tongans to their genealogy and expressing their continental islandness. This was set within the context of the deep familial bonds between the Mataele and Nonosina.

Performing Family, Performing Island

Nancy Fifita and Nonosina's "Vaka Nonosina" represented Tongans in this diaspora, performing the Tongan continental islandness in a context of familial bonds. How about other Islander musicians who were from other islands? Bo Napoleon, a Native Hawaiian family band, showed us a great example of intertwining family values with a Native Hawaiian continental islandness in performance. The lead vocalist of the band, Bo Napoleon, was born and raised in Carson, California, and he formed his band with his father. Bo Napoleon has a musical family, and his cousins are in the band The March, who often perform with him. Whenever Bo Napoleon performs, he brings a huge family group with him. His emphasis on his family is tied to his Native Hawaiian culture and music career. Bo's manager, Ka'ai DeOcampo is his Kumu Hula (Hula teacher), and Bo and his band members and families always perform Hula at any island reggae concert. Bo often wears an aloha shirt as his performance outfit, which is always in the dust cover.

Bo danced the hula at the ONE LOVE TONGA concert. In the middle of Bo's performance, the drummer said, "Hey, I want to share a little aloha for you guys, for Tonga, and for everybody, all of our Polynesian islands. Before Bo was a songwriter and

a musician, Bo was all about hula. So, we are going to do a quick kahiko⁵⁶ for you guys, for Tonga, the name of our first Hawaiian King of Hawai‘i, King Kamehameha.” Bo, his father, and his cousins stepped forward on the stage; soon, when the drummer said, “Ho‘omākaukau (be prepared),” they bent their knees, and the drummer started to chant and played the beat by the floor drum; they started to dance. Although dancing hula becomes a regular part of Bo’s performance, the meaning of performing hula in this concert differs because it shares the identity of island kingdoms to link Hawaiian and Tongan together.

However, for an audience unfamiliar with Bo’s concerts, it can be challenging to find expressions of continental islandness in his music, which does not sound like roots reggae. Bo performed several of his songs, all of which are quintessential island reggae songs featuring gentle R&B vocals that celebrate joyful moments with loved ones and families. Compared to roots reggae, Bo’s music does not rely heavily on a booming bass line, and the guitar does not have a reverb sound effect. Instead, it takes charge of the steady reggae beat, while the piano plays a prominent role in delivering captivating melodies. Bo’s father is the MC of the band, but he harmonizes with Bo more than he does his MC job. These differences make Bo’s songs romantic ballads with a reggae beat, yet the sound of island reggae has often drawn criticism for losing the resistant spirit typically associated with reggae and Indigenous movements.

Bo’s “softened” style of island reggae does not signify a loss of Indigenous spirit; rather, it embodies a performance of continental islandness, expressed through a deep

⁵⁶ Hula Kahiko: Traditional hula.

dedication to family values in the concept of relational time. The diasporic Islander community's sense of continental islandness is fundamentally tied to family. This bond is not only rooted in the importance of genealogy within their identity and worldview but also shaped by the migration experience. Many diasporic Islanders moved to the continental U.S. with their families, fostering strong connections that pass a deep sense of Indigenous identity to future generations. Faced with the pressures of Americanization and limited community spaces, home becomes the primary place diasporic Islanders learn about and preserve their heritage, making family central to their Islander identity. This emphasis on family was echoed by my interviewees, who all answered "family" when asked, "What is the definition of 'island' for you?"

As previously mentioned, island reggae music, along with its history, serves as an expression of continental islandness. After decades of dissemination, this music has become background music in diasporic Islanders' households as a symbol of their island culture, evolving into a cherished family memory that reinforces the value of family in the essence of continental islandness. Fran Lujan even defines island reggae as "a family music" because people in island reggae concerts are "doing whatever they will do in their backyard with their family"⁵⁷. Therefore, Bo's island reggae performs his family history, spanning from Hawai'i to Carson, and embodies a praxis of genealogy. This act serves as a performance of relational time, which in turn enacts continental islandness.

Additionally, the commodification of Pacific Island culture, despite usually imposing stereotypes, has long provided diasporic Islanders with resources to learn about

⁵⁷ Fran Lujan, interview by the author, February 17, 2023.

and reconnect with their heritage. Kevin Fellezs (2020) highlights that diasporic Pacific Islanders often engage with their culture through popular culture, where island traditions have been commodified in the U.S. As a result, it is not surprising that diasporic Islanders perform their continental islandness in commercial venues and through island reggae music. This creates an island that not only eases their nostalgia but also fosters a sense of belonging for their descendants in the diaspora. It empowers them in their lives in the U.S. and strengthens their bonds with their communities in the Pacific.

Anchored by strong family bonds, Islanders have adapted their reggae music to preserve its spirit of resistance while making it marketable within the capitalist industry—a reinterpretation of Western modernity through their relational temporal framework. I argue that making their music marketable is also an expression of honoring their families and cultural heritage within the diasporic context. Lisacaire Fa’anofo (Lisa) Uperesa’s (2022) research on Samoan football players illustrates this point: the sport’s popularity and success in the U.S. motivated many Samoans to pursue football not only for financial stability but also as a way to honor their ancestry, which is a vital aspect of traditional Samoan culture. Similarly, island reggae musicians often share their achievements and pay tribute to their families and ancestors during performances, linking their success to their Indigenous roots. These examples underscore how diasporic Islanders define and express their continental islandness through their U.S. experiences while maintaining a connection to their Indigenous culture and identity.

Beyond the music, the island reggae scene embodies the value of family and serves as a representation of the continental islandness itself as well. Joi Dwight, the host of

Island Block Network, is a Samoan-Native Hawaiian. She grew up in Carson, a community with a significant Samoan population, but was primarily raised within her Native Hawaiian family. She told me in the interview⁵⁸ that working in Island Block made her start to pick island reggae back into her playlist. She didn't like island reggae before then because the omnipresent island reggae in her childhood reminded her of those negative memories of an identity crisis. She was unfamiliar with her Samoan cultural heritage, so her Samoan middle school classmates did not accept her as a Samoan. The memory of not being accepted by her people had become entangled with her memory of island reggae until she met Fa'avae.

Fa'avae invited Dwight to the Island Block Network and helped her become a podcast and TV host. Since then, she hosted several episodes of island reggae concerts for the Island Block Party TV program. Talking about this big transition, she explained it was because of the people in Island Block Network and all of the concerts made her feel at home, and this sense of belonging also encouraged her to connect with her Samoan heritage, embracing the history of her Samoan family. For Dwight, being with family and feeling accepted as part of a family are essential to her self-identification as a Pacific Islander in the diaspora. Many other diasporic Islander artists and music industry professionals share similar experiences, finding a unique sense of family in the island reggae scene that sets it apart from other music scenes. This strong sense of belonging is why they continue to engage with the island reggae community, even after achieving success in a broader market.

⁵⁸ Joi Dwight, interview by the author, March 26, 2023.

In this section, I discuss how diasporic Islanders engage in island-making as a process of performing family. Emphasizing familial bonds is their way of connecting with their Indigenous genealogy, an act that asserts their relational temporal sovereignty within the continental context. In the next section, I will explore the role of clothing, particularly as merchandise, in shaping continental islandness and making islands. Merchandise that symbolizes and commodifies island culture and music is a crucial element in constructing the island experience. This examination of human-object interactions reveals how these materials carry Indigenous Pacific heritage and Southern Californian stories, weaving them together in the concert context.

My work in Island Block Network is selling our logo t-shirts, hats, and hoodies. Thus, unlike an audience whose concert experience is filled with the vibration of the sound and the physical contact in the crowd, mine is all about the touch of the fabric, the weight of the merchandise box, and the unclear vision of the size labels in the dark concert hall. Focusing on clothes reflects my position in this field. I put the discussion of merchandise in the last section because my relationships with the people at a concert begin with selling these fabrics and conclude with packing them back.

Wearing Islands

Sonic and physical performances can transform a concert venue into an island, while the act of wearing and showcasing various symbols representing the islands serves as another way of occupying capitalist spaces and asserting the sovereignty of their homeland. Clothes, which may include merchandise sold at concerts, play a role in

shaping Pacific Islanders' identities, whether it be tied to their island cultures or their music fandom. My colleagues and I sometimes play a small game of guessing who is an island reggae fan in the entrance, and we never fail because many island reggae fans put on island symbols in their outfits, such as Aloha shirts or t-shirts with the words Hawai'i, Samoa, or Island or pictures of an island, surfing, and coconut trees. As Lynn Neal (2014) states, t-shirts are "the clothing of democracy" (ibid.: 203) that allows people to paint on their belongings. In the case of the ONE LOVE TONGA concert, not only t-shirts, but also Aloha shirts, hoodies, basketball jerseys, and hats are the canvas of their identity expressions.

While this venue space is not designed for them, their continental islandness must be visualized to occupy it with island symbols. Therefore, diasporic Islanders always wear island symbols to mark this space as theirs. By wearing cultural symbols, Pacific Islanders can easily identify each other and quickly form a community in the concert space. Clothes are also an important way for fans to express their support for performers, so I always see fans wearing t-shirts of famous island reggae stars, such as Common Kings and J Boog. Also, while Pacific Islander is the communal identity, they identify their different origins via conversation and clothing outfits in gatherings. When my colleague Sam introduces people or performers to me, she often tells me where they are from, and she introduces herself as "I am from Hawai'i." Attendees who wear hoodies and shirts that read, "We are Polynesian," or "Hawai'i," are as many as people who wear more general words like "Island." During such music gatherings, we see that island reggae concerts provide Pacific Islanders a space to perform the general identity of

Pacific Islanders and articulate a specific island identity in the continental U.S. By wearing these materials, concert audiences claim their identities; with hundreds of them wearing these materials, they occupied and turned this commercial space into a sea of islands (Hau'ofa 2008), even though it was not originally designed for them.

Because of the purpose of the ONE LOVE TONGA concert, performing continental islandness via clothing was even more obvious. Different from other island reggae concerts, where each performer would sell their own clothing merchandise, none of the performers were selling their products in this ONE LOVE TONGA concert. Such performers' actions amplified the core values of collectivism in islandness, particularly in contrast to the profit-driven capitalist society, given that concert merchandise was a significant source of income for these artists. This action presented the solidarity among Islander performers and their concern for Tonga. The audience also showed the same value by purchasing the ONE LOVE TONGA t-shirts, for which the profit would be donated to the fundraiser project.

Once the door opened at 7 pm, a hundred audience members passed the security check at the entrance, walked through a long hallway and the bar, and waited in the long line in front of the merchandise table to purchase the concert t-shirt, and most of them put on the new t-shirts right after their purchase. Even though I was very practiced in selling merchandise at concerts, I was still overwhelmed by the passionate audiences. For the entire night, I was rushing to introduce the t-shirt and looking for the right sizes for the audience. In normal circumstances, audiences tend to purchase the merchandise of their beloved performers and only pick up the right size of t-shirts; however, this time, many

audiences even purchased the t-shirts regardless of the size, and many of them bought multiple t-shirts for their family members. This was just one of the aspects to see the endeavor of all participants for subsidizing Tonga, and their action of supporting Tonga was an expression of the communal islandness of being a Pacific Islander.

While clothes are a crucial material in island making, it is undeniable that clothes in island reggae concerts are also tied to capitalism. The tight connection between clothing and capitalism comes not only from the purchase and the space of HOB but also from the production process and the commodification of cultural symbols in clothing. Clothing merchandise is an important income for performers and Islander-owned small businesses, and island reggae concerts allow these clothing merchandise to directly reach out to their target customers, while most of those products are only sold online, and their promotion relies on the algorithm of social media. For customers, purchasing clothes at the concert strengthens their experience of creating the island with their communities, and they don't have to pay taxes. This business model seems to benefit all three parties in concerts.

However, if we contextualize this clothing business to a global spectrum, we can see how it has impacted the Pacific and its islands. Deborah Wong (2019) in her research of the materials in Taiko reminds us that these materials can also be presentations of fetishism in authentic Japanese culture and the production of these materials is “embedded in the First and Third world production and consumption” (ibid.: 72). The clothing industry is one of the most polluted industries in the world. The pollution generated during the production process of industrial waste pollutes the soil and the

ocean. While the ocean and island are essential symbols of these clothing products, this business ironically impacts these spaces where Pacific Islanders' longings are.

Furthermore, island reggae today attracts a large fanbase of non-Pacific Islanders, particularly White audiences. Many of these listeners may not fully understand island cultures and histories, attending instead for the "leisure vibe." For them, the Pacific Islands are often reduced to repetitive images of coconut trees, palm trees, and hibiscus flowers on t-shirts—stereotypes rooted in island fantasy, racial tripartition, and the exploitative histories of tourism. This paradoxical situation stems from the commodification of island reggae, which both embraces diasporic Islanders and opens the space to audiences who do not practice Pacific Indigenous values. Ironically, while such audiences may undermine notions of sovereignty and island-making within the concert setting, their leisure-oriented consumption nonetheless aligns with the entertainment goals of commercial venues like the House of Blues and supports the prosperity of the island reggae scene.

Problematizing the clothing merchandise is not meant to criticize Pacific Islanders' efforts to create island spaces or perform continental islandness in the diaspora. Rather, I aim to highlight the obstacles and paradoxes they encounter while asserting their presence within capitalized spaces such as the HOB, and more broadly, within the commodified landscape of U.S. society. In Chapter Four, I will further explore how Pacific Islanders navigate these processes of commodification and continue to shape community and identity despite such constraints.

Conclusion

That night, HOB operated on relational time, not settler time. The performers continued past midnight, even after the HOB's curfew had begun, yet the venue staff did not mute the microphone as they typically would. Because of the support from HOB, the music stopped at 12:30 am. After the performance was over, hundreds of audience members gradually walked to the lobby, but still yelling "CHEEEEEEEE-HOOOOOOOO!" People called Chee with an up-rising tone, and the rest responded with a long-lasting Hoo. This call-and-response cheehoo was a shared signal to celebrate their Islander identity, and the loud and continual yelling also meant that they were comfortable shouting out their presence in this space, where they turned it into their island. As the cheehoo sound filled the entire space, some people came to the merchandise table to buy more ONE LOVE TONGA t-shirts. They stood in front of the table and said, "What size do you have?" and grabbed multiple t-shirts like they were just buying fruit. The last couple asked me, "How many t-shirts do you leave? I will take all." After five hours of the performance, the desire to help Tonga and their sense of belonging to this continental island became even stronger. The audience and the performers did not want to leave; they were chatting and taking photos with each other.

Through the presence of Islanders and their performances at the House of Blues in Anaheim, the ONE LOVE TONGA concert was transformed into an island, albeit a temporal one, where continental islandness—genealogy, history, family, memory, relationships, trans-Pacific connections—converged within the relational time. This event provided diasporic Islanders with a space that truly belonged to them within a capitalistic

and continental country. Although it was a commercial event, this temporal island allowed the younger generation of diasporic Islanders to trace their genealogy back to Oceania and walk through their grandparents, parents, or their own journey of rooting in Southern California. This concert also strengthened the cross-island Pacific Islander identity by exploring cultural and political alliances between each island, and these connections and cultures again linked them back to their ancestries and Oceania. The establishment of this shared island, even if only temporary, served as a testament to continental islandness.

Even though this temporal island faded as everyone returned to their daily lives, where they might not always feel embraced by their island roots, it stored the relational time with music and dance in their bodies, a reminder of their origins. It provides a space of memories where these diasporic Islanders can anchor as they continue to navigate the often challenging and unfamiliar unknown. Their performances of their genealogy across the Pacific mark their continental islandness, connecting their ancestry and islands, and blessing their new lives in the new place. This island enables them to assert sovereignty over their home islands and their temporal sovereignty on the continent, whether the temporary island created at that moment or their Pacific islands, all pointing to an Indigenous future.

Chapter 4: Tiki Time? Relational Time? Oceanic Tourism and Cultural Commodification Landscape of Island Reggae in Festivals

Two Festivals

On the afternoon of May 25th, 2024, numerous attendees converged at Rainbow Lagoon Park in Long Beach, California, for the annual Mai Tai Festival, an island reggae celebration that Island Block Network co-produced with another media company—Imagine Media. Nestled in the tourist-friendly city of Long Beach, Rainbow Lagoon Park is located in a bustling commercial area favored by tourists, adjacent to the Aquarium of the Pacific and the Queen Mary Hotel, surrounded by shopping malls and luxury hotels. Given its prime location, the festival drew many curious attendees. As a staff member of the Island Block Network, I was stationed in the merch tent, answering questions from many non-Pacific Islanders, such as “Where can we find more concerts like this?” and “Where can we listen to more island reggae music?”

For a moment, my colleague Samantha Kainoa and I noticed a group of attendees behaving differently than what we were used to seeing at events. A group of three to four young men and women, seemingly in their twenties, were filming videos or live-streaming using the stage as their background. Unlike other attendees who filmed the performers directly, they positioned the stage as a background and danced in front of the camera. From the distance between them and the camera, it was apparent that their faces and bodies occupied most of the screen. The main person in the video was shirtless, wearing colorful beach shorts, colorful sunglasses, and a plastic lei with sparse flowers,

the kind typically sold in souvenir stores. Even though the festival took place in a lagoon park, it was not beside the beach, so their clothing and movements stood out from the crowd and caught our attention. The man was dancing in a way I had never seen at our Island Block concerts—twisting his arms and squeezing his upper body like an earthworm with an exaggerated and funny expression. Suddenly, without any prior agreement, we both called them “tourists,” instinctively recognizing they likely were not part of the community and were treating the festival like a tropical island vacation.

A month later, on Saturday, June 29, another event—the Samoan Heritage Festival—took place at Foisia Park in Carson, with Island Block Network serving as the festival producer. The atmosphere of this festival was markedly different—there were no tourists in sight. Carson is often referred to as “Little Samoa” because it was one of the initial settlement areas for the Samoan community and is more known for transportation and logistics than tourism. Similarly, while sitting in the merch tent, I answered many questions from my colleagues’ friends and families, such as “Where is Joe?” and “Where can I say hello to Lulu (Silulu A’etonu-Grey aka Myz Lulu, the festival host)?”

Simultaneously, a group of young Samoan adults, some possibly teenagers, had gathered behind the tent. They later expanded into the empty tent next to us, sitting or standing around camping chairs and the large cube boxes. They were giggling, singing along with the music, screaming and greeting friends or relatives as they passed, and occasionally running to the front of the stage to record performances by their uncles, cousins, or friends. With them, another colleague from Island Block Network, Joi Dwight—a community-known podcaster—was excitedly showing off the makeup and

accessories she and her friend had purchased from Pacific Islander-owned vendors at the festival.

As night fell, a friend of Joi Dwight, who was wearing jeans and a green crop top printed with green monstera leaf patterns, a common pattern often seen in Pacific Islanders' fabrics in Southern California, started pulling out more fabric from her top. The crop top transformed into a long one-piece dress with a silhouette similar to the *puletasi*, the traditional Samoan two-piece dress for women, and she put on earrings she had just bought from the festival vendor. Dwight and her friend ran to the front of the stage to dance with Hooliganz. No one had delivered a tourist atmosphere at this festival; everyone seemed relaxed and joyful, as if attending a large family gathering with thousands of people. I, as an East Asian Taiwanese person, felt more like an outsider.

These two events—the former targeted to the public and the latter dedicated to the Samoan community—exemplify two common types of festivals where diasporic Islanders determine and perform their continental islandness in different strategies for different audiences. On the one hand, many public-facing festivals that celebrate Pacific Island cultures and music—such as the Island Vibe Festival in San Diego and the May-Jah Festival in the Inland Empire—are highly commercialized, similar to the Mai Tai Festival. These events target a broader audience, providing non-Islanders with opportunities to engage with the pan-Pacific Islander community, while also offering Pacific Islanders a space to celebrate their shared, collective identity.

On the other hand, festivals like the Samoan Heritage Festival are typically hosted in areas known for specific Islander communities, such as Carson for Samoans. These

events are designed to reconnect these communities with their ancestral practices and strengthen their unique Indigeneity. Notable examples include the Hâfa Adai Festival in San Diego and the Heritage of Aloha Festival in Santa Fe Springs, California. The two types of festivals—the broader, inclusive celebrations and those focused on specific island heritages—collaborate to nurture a Pacific Islander identity, both preserving the community’s multiplicity and asserting their continental islandness.

While these two types of festivals reveal how Pacific Islander identity is shaped through the tension between cultural commodification and the assertion of Indigeneity in a diasporic context, they are not oppositional in their purposes or Indigenous values. Moreover, the boundaries between commercially oriented and community-oriented festivals are fluid rather than fixed. Named from the well-known tropical island-inspired cocktail (which will be explained more later in this chapter), the Mai Tai Festival serves as a gateway for non-Pacific Islander audiences to enjoy island music and gain a glimpse into the broad Pacific Island culture in Southern California. Yet, labeling festivals like the Mai Tai as commercial-oriented does not mean they solely target the general audience; it also caters to the Pacific Islander community.

Take the venue of the Mai Tai as an example, while Rainbow Lagoon Park is a tourist place, Long Beach is also a significant hub of Pacific Islanders in the continental U.S. Many Pacific Islander performers, staff, and attendees are local Long Beach residents. Like many other Pacific Island festivals, this event is organized by individuals who are either Pacific Islanders themselves or deeply familiar with Pacific Islander music cultures. Moreover, as discussed in previous chapters, performing island reggae

inherently conveys the stories of diasporic Pacific Islanders and reflects a commitment to community—both of which serve as assertions of their continental islandness and sovereignty. Rather than viewing these festivals solely as tourist attractions, they are best understood as intersectional island spaces—where tourists’ imaginaries of island culture converge with the community’s cultural and identity practices.

On the other hand, community-oriented festivals like the Samoan Heritage Festival, which primarily serve the local community, still rely on cultural commodification and occasional partnerships with governmental institutions. Cultural commodification remains essential to sustaining these community events. Although they are free, they feature art, craft, and food vendors, most of whom are Pacific Islander-owned. Attendees are encouraged to support these vendors, which helps sustain the festival and benefits the community. At the same time, the presence of art and craft vendors illustrates the commercialization of cultural practices.

Beyond commodification, community-oriented festivals also engage with government bureaucracies at the municipal level to create and sustain island spaces. For example, the Samoan Heritage Festival is held at Foisia Park in Carson, a public venue whose reservation requires collaboration with city officials. These festivals are also spaces where government agencies promote their work to the public—tents representing the sheriff’s office are common. These community festivals also serve as municipal platforms for staging cultural variety. During the opening ceremony of the Samoan Heritage Festival, the city mayor delivered a speech that acknowledged the contributions of the Samoan community and emphasized Carson’s cultural diversity, aligning with the

city's branding efforts to promote its diverse demography. Thus, when community-oriented festivals create island spaces for continental islandness, they also become intersectional sites where cultural commercialization and governmental institutions converge. This situation—particularly through governmental recognition and cultural commodification—exemplifies the concern Glen Coulthard (2014) raises: that recognition from the nation-state often reinforces settler-colonial oppression by preserving its underlying power relations. He argues that settler colonialism is the foundation of capitalism itself, a system in which colonial, racist, and patriarchal state power continues to operate and shape Indigenous life.

While bureaucratization and cultural commodification are expected in these festivals, it's essential to acknowledge that it has become a necessary means for community profit, but the challenges and controversy they bring must also be examined. The Pacific Islander diaspora is deeply entangled with colonialism, and the ongoing systemic barriers to rights and resources remain in the hands of bureaucratic institutions. As discussed earlier in Chapter Two and noted in Gershon's (2012) observations, Pacific Islanders often face challenges when applying for grants. These difficulties persist, as the community is frequently grouped with Asian American populations whose experiences are not always compatible, making the application process more competitive and less accessible.

In regard to cultural commodification, a key example is the emphasis on Polynesian identities in festival branding. To attract a wider audience for ticket sales—or perhaps in response to the significant Polynesian population in California—these festivals often use

broad terms like “Polynesia” or “island” in their titles. On the one hand, this strategy effectively fosters solidarity within the Polynesian community; on the other hand, it can make it difficult for non-Polynesian Islander communities to feel a sense of belonging in these festivals, for example, the Chamoru community, which also has a notable presence in Southern California.

This trend reflects the larger Polynesian population in the region, yet it enforces a broader generalization of Polynesian identity as a representative of Pacific Islanders in Southern California—a legacy of colonialism across Oceania and the U.S. This oversimplification overlooks the multiplicity and cultural significance across three regions embedded in the music. Under this generalization, the unique islandness expressed through island reggae music’s ties to land and community is reduced to an obscured commodity, disrupting the reciprocal relationships that sustain these cultural practices.

While I have already demonstrated how Pacific Islanders create island spaces within commercial institutions and shared interracial reggae scenes in the previous chapters, festivals simultaneously offer a distinct mode of island-making. These festivals emerge through Pacific Islanders’ navigation of tourism, where cultural commodification and government bureaucracy intersect. In this chapter, I contextualize tourism in Oceania—along with its extension, Tiki culture in the U.S., and the over-generalization of Polynesians as representative of all Pacific Islanders—as a colonial legacy. From this framework, I ask: how do Pacific Islanders negotiate commodification and bureaucracy to subvert the stereotypes brought by colonial tourism in Oceania in order to produce a

sense of continental islandness in festivals? What is the role of island reggae in this process?

By exploring these questions, I draw on Dan Bendrups's (2008) argument that festivals function as contact zones—where forces from both colonized and colonizing contexts meet and negotiate—to argue that diasporic Pacific Islanders strategically mobilize cultural commodification and work with municipal bureaucracies to sustain their communities and challenge colonial narratives of Pacific cultures, all while upholding their protocols for practicing islandness in the diaspora. In this contact zone, Island reggae, through its enactment of Pacific relational time and island space, brings continental islandness into being within public space. Moreover, their negotiations with municipal bureaucracies create spaces to express forms of resistance against the state structures of colonial control—such as the U.S. national and military legacy that politically divides Samoa and American Samoa. Through the festival space, these divisions can be symbolically transcended, allowing Pacific Islanders to reimagine the two Samoas as a unified cultural entity. I interpret diasporic Islanders' navigation of, and agency within, these processes—even as they engage with municipal powers—as resonating with the form of recognition Glenn Coulthard advocates, not a recognition from the state and legal power, instead, a resurgent politics of recognition that he describes “more about Indigenous peoples empowering themselves through cultural practices of individual and collective self-fashioning that seek to prefigure radical alternatives to the structural and subjective dimensions of colonial power” (Coulthard 2014: 18).

This chapter begins with a discussion of how tourism in Oceania—and its extension, Tiki culture and Polynesian imagination in the U.S.—operates as a colonial legacy that erases Indigenous temporality and imposes an exoticized leisure time on Pacific Islanders and their diasporic communities. I also examine how tourism shapes public stereotypes and drives cultural commodification within the diasporic Pacific Islander community. Then I review scholarly discussions on festivals, emphasizing the intersection of tourism and self-determination in performance. The final two sections offer ethnographic accounts of the Mai Tai Festival and the Samoan Heritage Festival, illustrating how diasporic Pacific Islanders reinterpret and incorporate Tiki culture into narratives rooted in their Indigeneity. These sections also examine how they navigate municipal bureaucracies and the touristic festival industry to reclaim their continental islandness and assert their sovereignty within colonial structures.

The Colonial Legacy of Polynesia

Southern Californian festivals inevitably bring challenges such as cultural commercialization, racial stereotypes, tourist interventions, and misrepresentations of Pacific Islanders' Indigeneity. These challenges often manifest in the oversimplification of Pacific Islanders as solely Polynesian. In Southern California, non-Islanders frequently overgeneralize Polynesian culture as Pacific Islander culture. This is not only due to the sizable Polynesian population in Southern California, but also the tourist fantasies and romanticization surrounding Hawai'i and the South Pacific, as well as their representation on the continent through Tiki culture.

During a brief conversation with a climate change activist from Vanuatu based in Washington, DC, he remarked, “On the East Coast, nobody knows what Pacific Islanders are, and on the West Coast, everyone thinks of Pacific Islanders as Polynesians.” This observation resonates with the experience of many Fijians living in California, where their communities are less visible compared to their Polynesian and Micronesian counterparts. While Polynesian festivals and gatherings are plentiful, the Melanesian presence is more difficult to find. Also, when the Chamoru events are well-established, festivals targeting the larger Micronesian community are less popular in Southern California. In contrast, the Polynesian population on the West Coast is significantly larger, with a strong sense of identity, leading to the creation of events like the PolyFests in Tacoma, Washington, San Jose, and San Francisco, California.

Although there is no festival explicitly named “PolyFest” in Southern California, many festivals carry titles associated with Polynesian cultures, such as the Mayjah Festival (with ties to Hawai‘i). Notably, the website for the Mayjah Festival even labels its music as “Polynesian vibe music.” At these events, Polynesian culture and identities are prominently showcased. For instance, during his performance at the Mai Tai Festival, the Samoan artist Spawnbreezie repeatedly asked, “Where are my Polynesians?” and dedicated his performance to the great Polynesian ancestry.

My intention is not to place these three communities in competition, as Pacific Islanders generally view each other through a lens of kinship rather than through imposed racial divisions. The Polynesian community has never sought to claim the Pacific Islander identity solely for itself, either. In fact, during my fieldwork, every Pacific

Islander I spoke with emphasized that the classifications of Melanesian, Polynesian, and Micronesian were colonial constructs imposed upon them and that they regarded all Pacific Islanders as kin.

Collaboration between Polynesian and non-Polynesian Pacific Islanders is widespread, inclusive in island reggae, where social and cultural activities often serve the entire Islander community. For example, San Diego's Pacific Island Festival, the largest and oldest Pacific Islander festival on the continent, aims to serve the entire Pacific Island community. While this festival is attended by a strong Polynesian and Micronesian presence—particularly the Chamoru community, which has a significant population in San Diego—the effort to serve, and the participation from, the broader Oceanic community is evident.

Viewing the strong Polynesian presence as the reason for an overemphasis on Polynesian identity in the U.S. would be unfair. Such an assumption disregards the colonial suppressions that Polynesians have endured and overlooks the critical self-reflection within the Polynesian community regarding the colonial implications of the term “Polynesian” itself. Also, this assumption neglects the diversity within the Polynesian community itself, as Polynesian expressions of identity are often rooted in and accompanied by an emphasis on specific island affiliations. Within the Polynesian community, there are various festivals dedicated to specific Islander groups, such as the Samoan Heritage Festival, where broader Polynesian identities are not always at the forefront.

All these examples tell us that attributing the underrepresentation of other Pacific Islander groups solely to the larger size of the Polynesian population overlooks the colonial legacies that have shaped the histories of Polynesian, Micronesian, and Melanesian regions. It also disregards the pervasive island and racial stereotypes entangled with Oceanic tourism and their continued influence in the U.S. context. Therefore, it is crucial to attend to the colonial legacy entwined with tourism in Oceania, which has contributed to the widespread stereotype among non-Islanders that equates “Pacific Islander” exclusively with “Polynesian.” This conflation ultimately limits all three communities’ capacities for self-determination. It is, fundamentally, a colonial issue.

In the following section, I will review the literature on Oceanic tourism and Tiki culture to discuss how these two colonial products have contributed to the stereotyping of Polynesians as representative of all Pacific Islanders. As this dissertation discusses the time construction in diasporic Islanders’ performances of continental islandness, this section will examine these colonial products as manifestations of settler-imposed temporalities.

Leisure Time vs Relational Time: Oceanic Tourism and Tiki Culture

Tourism in the Pacific is inherently a colonial project. As Kalissa Alexeyeff notes, “the words ‘Pacific,’ ‘island,’ and ‘paradise’ are synonymous with each other in the Western imaginary” (2016: 403). This association can be traced back to sixteenth-century Spanish expeditions and the subsequent travels of explorers, missionaries, traders, and

settlers from the West in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries (ibid.). Due to its relatively late colonial occupation and the perceived isolation of its islands, Oceania became the final frontier of unspoiled paradise on earth from Westerners' perspective.

Following such stereotypes, the Pacific Islands were transformed into an ethnological laboratory where Westerners imposed a White-Black racial dichotomy and theories of racial evolution. This racializing framework categorized Oceania into a racial tripartition—Polynesia, Micronesia, and Melanesia—emphasizing the perceived whiteness of Polynesians and the Blackness of Melanesians (Agnew 2003; Arvin 2019). This racial tripartition legitimized Western colonialism and imposed stereotypical tourist tropes, the island paradise, on each region: Polynesians were associated with romanticized and beautiful women, while Melanesians were characterized as “primitive,” often depicted as childlike or cannibalistic, reflecting Western notions of modernity in contrast to native primitivism (Alexeyeff 2016; Banivanua-Mar 2016). Along with such dehumanization of Pacific Islanders, the island paradise develops into the temporal stereotype of the leisure, slowness, and belatedness of the “island time,” disrupting the Indigenous temporality and neglecting the colonial forces that have led to forced migration and dispossession.

Across the Pacific, Polynesian culture is the most well-known—and the most commodified—of the three major cultural regions in the U.S. This phenomenon is deeply rooted in the long-standing promotion of Hawai‘i as a tourist destination, a narrative closely intertwined with U.S. imperialism and militarism. Through popular culture, U.S. imperialism has constructed imagination to support its military and economic projects in

territories such as Hawai‘i, Guam, the Philippines, Cuba, and Puerto Rico (Fojas 2014; Pilsch 2020). As Camilla Fojas (2014) notes, “Pop culture locates Hawai‘i as the origin of tiki culture, volcano sacrifices, friendly and happy natives, grass skirts, hula girls, and surfer boys, thereby helping install the symbolic coordinates of one of the largest U.S. tourist industries” (ibid.: 94). Notably, the same imperial gaze of island imagination also imposed the exoticism associated with the Caribbean as a tropical tourist destination onto reggae, which then permeated the reggae production and consumption of the Western music industry (Alleyne 2009: 248). This helps explain the shared island identity amongst Hawai‘i, Puerto Rico, and Jamaica, as well as the exotic association with island reggae discussed in Chapter Two. Following the U.S. military occupation of Hawai‘i, the romanticization of Polynesian culture sparked an American yearning for Polynesia and its stereotyped notion of “island time.” To recreate this “island time” on the continental U.S., Tiki culture emerged, catering directly to this desire.

Tiki culture, and perhaps more known for its iconic cocktail drink, Mai Tai (yes, the title of Mai Tai Festival), was born in Southern California, driven by Americans’ desire for leisure time as a remedy to the pressures of industrial time, where island time comes to play (Pilsch 2020; Tichi 2022). Following American imperialism, tiki culture emerged as an escape from the hardships of the Great Depression, further fueled by the military presence in the Pacific during WWII and Hollywood’s romanticized depictions of the South Pacific. In 1934, Donn Beach, a Texan businessman who claimed to have spent years island-hopping in the South Pacific, opened the first Tiki bar, Don’s Beachcomber,

in Hollywood. By 1937, it had expanded into a restaurant called Don the Beachcomber, which grew into a chain and spread Tiki culture across the United States.

Tiki culture is “a preeminent expression of an American colonialist aesthetic” (Pilsch 2020: 230). Claiming inspiration from his Polynesian travels, Donn Beach decorated his bar with bamboo, rattan, thatched huts, and salvaged items from Hollywood movie sets (Tichi 2022: 97). He also incorporated lime and rum—ingredients originating from the Caribbean and inseparable from U.S. imperialism in the region—as the base for his cocktails and served Cantonese food that was renamed with Polynesian-inspired names. His approach of decontextualizing and blending various tropical elements created a tropical island paradise—a space where Americans could momentarily step out of industrial time and escape their daily stresses. However, this imagined paradise was far from the island space grounded in Pacific relational time and did not reflect the lived realities of Pacific Islanders.

Tiki culture reimagines island time on the continent as “tiki time.” Framing this phenomenon, Andrew Pilsch describes tiki time as rooted in a “foundational tension between modernity and Edenic paradise” (2020: 225). He argues that this cultural aesthetic emerges from a paradoxical blending of two contradictory impulses: a desire for primitivism as an escape from the competitive pressures of daily life, and a simultaneous dependence on militarism and rapid technological advancement in transportation to enable that very escape. This paradox reflects how tiki time is ultimately a colonial product of settler time. Although “island time” and “tiki time” may seem to offer alternatives to industrialized, settler temporalities, they reproduce their exploitative logic

by treating Polynesian cultures as consumable resources for American escapism. This constructed temporality flattens the diversity of island genealogies into a generalized, commodified illusion of Polynesia—selling the fantasy of leisurely tiki space under the guise of “island time.” While Polynesian culture is commercialized, Micronesian and Melanesian cultures and their people are often not even mentioned.

For diasporic Polynesians and the broader Pacific Islander community in Southern California—the birthplace of Tiki culture—constructs like tiki time and tiki space obscure their struggles to survive in the U.S. Back in Oceania, settler-colonialism has led to dispossession and exploitation, forcing many Pacific Islanders to migrate. Upon arriving in the U.S, these Islander immigrants had to adapt to industrialized times and space, even self-commodify to cater to Tiki culture in order to support their families. Moreover, they faced racialization, socio-political marginalization, and economic hardship—each a consequence of settler time. The physical and cultural distance from their homelands also unsettled their sense of Indigeneity, compelling them to navigate the tension between settler time and Indigenous temporality.

Emerging from this history, tiki culture and its symbols remain an unavoidable presence at island reggae festivals in Southern California. However, as the two festival examples show, while industrial settler time persists, Pacific relational time continues to exist in tension with it. Two temporalities encounter in diasporic Pacific Islanders’ festivals, which function as contact zones where these contrasting notions of time compete and negotiate. Pacific Islanders do not simply adapt to settler time; instead, they actively incorporate and reinterpret Tiki time within their own Indigenous temporal

framework. Through island reggae performances at festivals, they share their stories—including experiences with Tiki culture—recasting modernity through an Indigenous temporal lens. These diasporic Islanders present their narratives through various perspectives—whether pan-Pacific Islander, pan-Polynesian, or specific to their home islands—to express their unique understanding of Polynesian and Pacific Islander continental islandness.

Festivals: Tourism? Expression of Indigeneity?

As discussed in the second and third chapters, island reggae concerts at commercial live venues create spaces that foster community among attendees. However, in these settings, Indigenous practices inevitably compromise with consumer culture and the demands of professionalism to sustain performance opportunities, largely dictated by the corporate live music industry. In the venue settings, island reggae concerts function more as insider spaces, as they attract audiences who share either a connection to the community or an appreciation for the music.

In contrast, festivals create a holistic environment that welcomes both new audiences and community members, allowing cultural practices to manifest in diverse forms beyond the constraints of commercial venues. These festivals provide platforms for emerging artists and community businesses, including dance groups and creative product vendors. However, they also exacerbate island fantasies shaped by touristic illusions, which are especially pronounced in the festival setting.

According to *Merriam-Webster*, the word festival is defined as “an often periodic celebration or program of events or entertainment having a specified focus.”⁵⁹ While scholars acknowledge that festivals often foster a sense of communal unity, they also criticize the exploitation and exclusion of economic, cultural, racial, and gender minorities, along with the marginalization of small-scale venues and musicians during festival commercialization—issues often obscured by the idealized image of togetherness (Kirshenblatt-Gimblett 1995; Chrysagis 2017). These are precisely the dynamics I aim to examine within the context of island reggae festivals. Gina Arnold (2018) notes that while festivals may appear to create communal unity, this can often be a “very well-rendered illusion,” a “promise made to be broken, over and over again” (ibid.: 7).

Both Arnold (2018) and Judy Soojin Park (2015) critique how festivals often normalize whiteness under the guise of commodified values such as freedom, love, and peace. Similarly, Fabian Holt (2020) observes the cultural exploitation in festivals that “the utopian gathering is exploited not by the music industry but by the events and tourism industry” (ibid.: 275). R. Scott Hiller (2014; 2016) further argues that large music festivals, dominated by major corporate sponsors, contribute to the decline of local live venues through exclusive deals and shifts in the musical landscape.

I agree with festival scholars who problematize festivals, yet I advocate for an Indigenous-centered approach when examining their commercial and political dimensions. Regarding Indigenous musicians’ involvement, Liz Przybylski (2021) highlights that both mainstream and Indigenous-focused festivals serve as vital platforms,

⁵⁹ See Merriam-Webster: <https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/festival>

even though marginalization by non-Indigenous audiences persists. She emphasizes, “festivals focused on the needs and priorities of diverse Indigenous performers play a professional development role for an important reason: Indigenous performers continue to face structural barriers to funding and training support” (ibid.: 17). For Southern Californian Islanders, festivals provide essential exposure, particularly when mainstream resources remain insufficient.

Additionally, diasporic Islanders’ collaboration with municipalities in festivals invites us to consider the flexibility and Indigenous spaces available within the dynamic relationship between central and local government structures. Megumi Chibana’s (2018) research on Okinawan practices of Indigeneity, local community arts activities at the municipal level, offers Indigenous peoples a space to negotiate land rights and self-determination amid the denial of Indigenous identity and limited avenues for protest under the macro-level constraints of Japanese colonialism, assimilation policies, and ongoing U.S. militarism.

I also draw on Indigenous studies scholars’ discussions of festivals in Oceania to analyze how Pacific Islanders navigate colonial structures such as governmental bureaucracy and the tourism industry. In Oceania, anchored by the region’s largest event—the Festival of Pacific Arts and Culture—numerous international, regional, and local festivals serve as contested spaces where the diverse interests of local communities, national governments, global tourist industry, and international organizations intersect (Moulin 2002; Teaiwa & Vile 2016; Bendrups 2008; Mackley-Crump 2015). Scholars

view festivals as sites where decolonization, nation-building, cultural preservation, and tourism promotion are enacted.

The performance spaces within these festivals offer platforms for Indigenous peoples to assert their subjectivities and exercise self-determination in cultural representation (Teaiwa & Vile 2016). At the same time, the festivalization of Pasifika music provides a medium through which contemporary genres are contextualized within Pacific frameworks (Zemke-White 2005; Mackley-Crump 2015; Brown 2020). While global tourism is often viewed as a threat to cultural authenticity, it can also reinforce national identity and contribute to nation-building (Bossen 2000: 147), support the sustainability of cultural practices and spaces (Grant 2019: 50), and foster Indigenous resilience amid broader environmental shifts such as climate change and migration (Diettrich 2018). Ultimately, festivals become spaces for exploring new art forms and expressions to imagine the futures of Pacific cultures (Diettrich 2018; Moulin 2002).

As Pacific Islanders' migration has increased, festivals have also become a way to construct a new identity for their new lives. Mackley-Crump (2015) uses the Pacific festivals in Aotearoa New Zealand to note that these festivals signify an exploration of diasporic identity within a new Pacific homeland. In the festival set, these immigrants from different islands are "seeing, hearing, smelling, touching, and feeling the many respective parts collide and compete for festivalized space creates an organized cultural chaos, beautiful in its dizzying array" (ibid.: 162). These festivals allow Pacific Islander immigrants in New Zealand to connect their ancestral cultural practices with the

contemporary New Zealand context, negotiating a pan-Pacific identity while embracing multiplicity and contemporaneity.

The Southern Californian Island reggae festivals, where governments, communities, and audiences intersect, reflect the power dynamics identified by these scholars. To study these power dynamics operated within the process of island-making in festive settings, I frame this island space as a “contact zone” brought up by Dan Bendrups (2008), who drew on linguistic scholar Mary Louise Pratt’s (1991) concept of spaces where disparate subjects under colonialism encounter one another, forming ongoing relationships where power dynamics are constantly negotiated amid inequity and conquest. Bendrups (*ibid.*) argues that Pacific festivals, where the boundaries between curator and visitor, performer and audience, and even ages, nations, and cultures are blurred, function as contact zones where identities and Indigeneity are negotiated and explored. As these boundaries dissolve, new possibilities emerge.

Building on Bendrups’s concept (*ibid.*), I see that Southern Californian Islanders’ festivals serve as contact zones where identities are explored within encounters shaped by various colonial/colonized and global/local forces from both Oceania and the U.S, situated within the California landscape. Next, I will present two ethnographies from the Mai Tai Festival and the Samoan Heritage Festival, illustrating how Pacific Islanders recount their stories on the continent and reinterpret cultural commodities through their temporality-spatiality and celebrate their “continental islandness” by self-defining both a pan-Pacific Islander identity and specific Samoan heritage.

Mai Tai Festival

Not Your Tiki Space

When visiting the Mai Tai Festival website⁶⁰, visitors might assume that the event is designed to cater to Tiki culture. On its official website, three main banners rotate, providing visitors with a quick overview of the festival. The first banner introduces the performing cast, featuring a prominent Tiki sculpture on the right side, adorned with red plumeria flowers, coconut leaves, and rocks. The background mimics a rocky texture with a splash of red, evoking images of lava, and includes three candles at the bottom, all contributing to classic tiki bar aesthetics.

The second banner showcases a photo from the previous year's festival, depicting a group of female dancers wearing off-the-shoulder crop tops and dresses while holding feather rattles. Although it is clear they are performing Polynesian dances, the specific dance is indiscernible, especially since their attire is contemporary, seems made of polyester fabric printed with palm tree and monstera leaf patterns, set against a backdrop of red, black, and white color blocks. The third banner features another photo from the previous year, showing a diverse crowd of all ages standing or sitting on the grass, enjoying the music. Below these banners are four additional photos, displaying another group of female Polynesian dancers, a poke bowl, a group of male Polynesian dancers, and rainbow shave ice. Together, these banners and images suggest that the festival is a

⁶⁰ See the Mai Tai Festival Website:

https://maitaifestival.com/?fbclid=PAZXh0bgNhZW0CMTEAAackOv1sN19o5wa_l9w9CLa0lDd5igum20Yd1aHoN--cyk97rKWXR24c9Ou5w_aem_Z-Z_pBtTX3AhpukYRq7Hg

celebration of iconic Polynesian touristic elements, offering food, dance, and music that are inclusive and family-friendly.

The poster also conveys a similar message, evoking the impression of a large Tiki festival—particularly through the inclusion of imagery such as a cocktail in a Tiki mug and a cruise ship. This visual language echoes Fojas's (2014) and Pilsch's (2020) insight that Tiki culture embodies a paradox: it reflects Americans' yearning for primitivism as an escape from the exhaustion of modernity, yet is made possible by the very technologies of transportation that modernity provides. These visuals appear to reinforce stereotypical portrayals of Polynesian culture in the U.S., creating an idealized image of an island paradise transported to the continent.



Image 16: The poster of the Mai Tai Festival

Contrary to the website's design, which reflected an American fantasy of the Pacific Islands, the Mai Tai Festival itself was a Polynesian-centric Indigenous space organized by Pacific Islanders. Attending the festival in person revealed a different reality than what was portrayed on the event's website. The venue was circular, with tents set up by vendors and sponsors. Most of the food vendors were Pacific Islander-owned,

offering dishes that held significance within the community, such as musubi, barbecue, and ube desserts.

While some of these foods, like shave ice, were popular tourist commodities that symbolize tropical lands, they were also staples in the daily lives of community members, as evidenced by the reactions of my colleagues who were discussing which food tastes good in their standard. Meanwhile, one of the vendors, Da Hawaiian Kitchen, known for serving Hawaiian local food, also participated in the Samoan Heritage Festival and frequently attended Hawaiian events in Southern California. This demonstrates that the vendor was not limited to tourist-oriented events; rather, they participated in the Mai Tai Festival not for its tourist appeal, but because of their connections within the Pacific Islander community.

Moreover, the twenty-three craft vendors catered primarily to the community rather than to general tourists. Indeed, some vendors were selling plastic flower lei when flowers were sparse, which were often seen in tourist stores, but there were many commodities, regardless of apparel or décor, that Pacific Islanders would also wear. For instance, Polynesian Pride, a vendor at the festival, sold apparel, headwear, jewelry, accessories, handicrafts, and décor featuring Polynesian⁶¹ cultural symbols. Polynesian Pride participates in many Pacific Island-themed festivals and often displays national or Indigenous flags of Polynesian Islanders on the tent; for example, they hung the flags of Hawai‘i, Samoa, Tonga, and American Samoa on their tent in the Mai Tai Festival. The

⁶¹ In addition to catering to Polynesians, Polynesian Pride is expanding its offerings to include products for Melanesians and Micronesians.

events that Polynesian Pride participates in are not merely commercial-oriented festivals, but rather more community festivals such as the Samoan Heritage Festival and the N.E.R.U Day in Carson, a Samoan-held event that aims to bring awareness of gun violence in Pasifika communities.



Image 17: This photo was taken at the 2024 Samoan Heritage Festival, but the way the merchant tents displayed the flags was the same as in the Mai Tai Festival. I include it here as a reference.

Notably, the design aesthetic of Polynesian Pride differs significantly from that of Tiki bars,⁶² once again highlighting the people whom the brand serves. Their products feature no Tiki statue symbols. Instead, island identities take center stage. While Tiki bars often use fonts reminiscent of wood carvings and tropical themes, Polynesian Pride's designs feature urban, graffiti-style⁶³ lettering that aligns with hip hop aesthetics popular among Pacific Islanders. Many of their designs incorporate culturally significant motifs, such as barkcloth and tattoo patterns, sea turtles, and hibiscus flowers. While these symbols are also often associated with island fantasy in art and popular culture, they still frequently appear on the attire of diasporic Pacific Islanders attending festivals to present their identities. Symbols of island national or ethnic identity—like maps, terms such as “American Samoan” or “Tongan,” and national flags of Pacific Island nations—are prominently featured.

Unlike Tiki culture, which often centers on the aloha shirt, Polynesian Pride also focuses on basketball jerseys, polo shirts, and hoodies—clothing styles commonly worn in everyday life, disrupting the fantasy of the island vacation. Some designs reflect a fusion of Pacific Island cultures with hip hop cultures; for example, incorporating paisley-print-like layouts—reminiscent of the common bandana patterns—but replacing the classic paisley motifs with island-inspired symbols such as plumeria flowers.⁶⁴ Rather

⁶² See the lettering style of Tiki bars in the Don The Beachcomber website: <https://donbeachcomber.com/history/>

⁶³ See the blanket with the graffiti style lettering from the Polynesian Pride website: <https://www.polynesianpride.co/products/american-Samoa-polynesian-custom-personalised-hooded-blanket-coat-of-arm-with-hibiscus-white>

⁶⁴ See the Polynesian Pride website: https://www.polynesianpride.co/products/hawaii-bandana-polynesian-plumeria-mix-green?_pos=186&_sid=cec4c711f&_ss=r

than catering to the escapist fantasies of Tiki culture, Polynesian Pride creates products that allow Pacific Islanders to express pride in their heritage. Their presence at the Mai Tai Festival underscores the event's ongoing focus on serving Pacific Islander communities. This urban aesthetic challenges the pre-modernist ideals imposed by Tiki culture onto Pacific Islanders, disrupting the imperial gaze while simultaneously navigating and engaging with it to survive in a capitalist world.

Telling Stories of Genealogy: Island Reggae at the festival

In addition to the vendors who created a space dedicated to diasporic Pacific Islanders, island reggae performances transformed the daytime of Rainbow Lagoon Park into an island space. Since the 1990s, island reggae has embodied the collective memories of diasporic Pacific Islanders in Southern California. Singing these songs in a tourist location that is also their home becomes an act of reclaiming the power to define their own culture and lineage, challenging the misrepresentations perpetuated by Tiki culture.

The lineup itself tells a story of Pacific Islander migration. Performers include Nina Sosefina (Samoan), Siaosi (Tongan), Finn Gruva (Tongan), Eli-Mac (Filipino), Spawnbreezie (Samoan), and a surprise special guest, Sammy Johnson (Māori). Among them, only Sammy Johnson—born in Australia and raised in Aotearoa New Zealand—and Eli-Mac—born in the Philippines and raised in Hawai'i—are not U.S.-born. The rest of the artists were born in the U.S.: Nina was born and raised in Long Beach; Finn Gruva was from Phoenix, Arizona; Spawnbreezie was from Salt Lake City, Utah; and Siaosi

was born in O‘ahu, Hawai‘i, but also spent part of his childhood in Southern California. Notably, while Eli-Mac is Filipino, her music is categorized as island reggae due to her career’s beginnings in Hawai‘i. Although this dissertation does not yet fully explore the relationship between Filipinos and diasporic Pacific Islanders—a relationship shaped by the legacy of U.S. imperialism, Asian settler colonialism in Hawai‘i, and the U.S. racial framework—her presence in the island reggae scene is worth noting. It reflects not only the diversity within the genre but also the openness of the scene to non-Islanders whose music and lived experiences resonate with Pacific Islander narratives—a point I will return to later in this ethnography.

The line-up also demonstrates the festival’s deep commitment to telling the stories of the Pacific Islander community. While festivity scholars like Hiller (2016) and Holt (2020) have noted that large commercial festivals often invite high-quality, lesser-known bands to cut costs, the Mai Tai Festival’s strategy of featuring up-and-coming performers is a deliberate effort to support community musicians. Joe “Savage” Fa’avae curated the lineup to reflect his original vision for Island Block Radio, creating a Pacific Islander-owned platform dedicated to promoting and supporting Pacific Islander artists.

For example, Nina Sosefina, an emerging Samoan singer, had her first festival performance at the 2024 Mai Tai Festival. Nina is a community leader and daughter of the Long Beach Samoan community. She represents more than just rising talent—her performance on stage reflects Mai Tai Festival’s deep connection to the local Islander community. Moreover, Island Block Network’s support for Nina—including selling her merchandise at the event—offers her valuable exposure and additional income. This

support underscores the festival's broader goal of creating a Pacific Islander space within the music industry, aligning with Przybylski's (2021) vision of festivals as crucial opportunities for Indigenous musicians to break into the entertainment industry.

The musical styles of these island reggae performers collectively shape a vibrant Pacific Islander soundscape for the festival. While R&B and hip hop are popular in Southern Californian Islander communities, this Mai Tai Festival was filled with the presence of both genres, even as the reggae beat persisted in every performance. Sammy Johnson, known for his soulful blend of reggae, jazz, R&B, and virtuosic vocal style, appeared as the special guest. When the host, Silulu A'etonu-Grey (hereafter Myz Lulu, her stage name), announced his arrival, the crowd erupted with loud screaming, and suddenly all attendees rushed toward the stage, which was a reversal of the relaxed pace throughout the entire festival. During his performance of the well-known song "Don't Say Goodbye," accompanied only by guitar, the audience swayed to his voice under a forest of phones recording him, as waves of cheehoo echoed through the crowd.

This moment showed how deeply engaged the audience was, revealing a strong emotional connection and collective memories tied to R&B among diasporic Islanders. Beyond the live performers, DJ Aye-Dee of Island Block Network also ensured the presence of R&B and hip-hop throughout the festival to keep the energy high. When he played "Blow the Whistle" by West Coast hip hop artist Too \$hort, the audience shouted along—especially on the lyric "Bitch" and with loud "Ay Ay Ay" chants—just as enthusiastically as they had sung with Sammy Johnson. In response, DJ Aye-Dee joked, "Oh, I forgot I was at an island party."

Building on the discussion of the strong presence of Black music in the Pacific Islander soundscape, this festival also reflects how the island reggae scene welcomes friends and neighbors—non-Pacific Islanders who are deeply familiar with the soundscape—to participate and engage. The Filipino artist Eli-Mac performed a cover of Lauryn Hill’s “Doo Wop (That Thing)” during the festival. Her performance began with an iconic intro from Beyoncé’s “Crazy in Love”, as she danced the dance moves of the song alongside two dancers. After the intro of “Crazy in Love”, the band immediately switched to play the familiar piano riff of Lauryn Hill’s “Doo Wop (That Thing)”. All of a sudden, the audience recognized it and responded with loud cheers. They sang along to the chorus together. Eli-Mac’s cover reminded me of the same song performed by a white reggae artist at the Marley Festival, as discussed in Chapter Two, where the audience did not respond with the same enthusiastic cheers. I couldn’t help but notice the contrast in audience reactions between the two performances, even though neither performer belonged to the community they were performing for.

The contrasting audience responses to two performers covering the same song highlight the particular kind of island space being constructed within the Mai Tai Festival. The Mai Tai Festival created an island space that Filipinos also enjoyed, reflecting the close relationships they shared with diasporic Pacific Islander communities. This was unlike Marley Festival, which still centered on roots reggae along with Rastafarian and African aesthetics and identities, where a white female artist stood out. Also, Eli-Mac had already been embraced as a member of the island reggae scene from Hawai‘i, making her welcome by the diasporic Islander community. The island space

itself was inseparable from R&B influences; therefore, her cover of Lauryn Hill was not only welcomed but also reflected her familiarity with diasporic Islander audiences and their musical sensibilities.

Beyond her performance of “Doo Wop (That Thing),” which demonstrated Eli-Mac’s familiarity with the diasporic Islander community, her actions on stage also echoed the islandness that defines this island space. As mentioned earlier, islandness for diasporic Islanders is deeply rooted in family—a central value in how they define and relate to the concept of “island.” During her set, Eli-Mac invited her mother to the festival and honored her on stage for the hard work she put into raising her as an immigrant in the U.S. The audience responded with warm cheers; witnessing and recognizing their parents’ sacrifices is a shared experience among diasporic Islanders, regardless of Eli-Mac’s ethnicity.

To be clear, I am not interpreting Eli-Mac’s gesture as a strategic move to gain intimacy with the audience. Rather, I see it as a reflection of her cultural knowledge of the island reggae scene—an understanding that this is a space where honoring one’s mother resonates deeply. This level of intimacy is rarely found in Tiki bars or mainstream reggae concerts. For instance, at Kolohe Kai’s performance at the Cali Vibes Festival in 2022, he had to explain his background and culture to a largely non-Islander audience. In contrast, the Mai Tai Festival offered audiences a space to express their individual and collective identities without the need to translate or explain themselves to outsiders.

Except for covering “Doo Wop (That Thing),” Eli-Mac’s music reminded the audience of the heavy influence of roots reggae and dub music in island reggae, too. In

her well-known song, “Mr. Sensei,” the prominent saxophone presence, along with the strong drum and bass session fusing with studio effects like echoes and reverb, as well as toasting, made it different from typical island reggae. Eli-mac’s performance reminded me of the sound of the underground reggae scene in Hawai‘i, where roots reggae and dub were more popular amongst Pacific Islander communities than here in Southern California. Eli-Mac’s performance of “Mr. Sensei” complemented the Hawaiian and Jamaican roots of island reggae, contributing to a more holistic representation of the genre’s history—outlined in Chapter One—at the festival.

Through the curation of Island Block Network, the cultural knowledge of the performers, the historical background of island reggae, and the informed presence of the audience, the Mai Tai Festival shaped an island space that tells the genealogy—and reflected the values of islandness—of Southern Californian Polynesian Islanders through sound, from their own perspective. At the same time, the festival did not neglect commercial appeal: Spawnbreezie, Sammy Johnson, and Eli-Mac are well-known artists who embody the cultural multiplicity of diasporic Pacific Islanders in their music and align with mainstream expectations of island reggae. As a contact zone where the colonial and racialized legacy of tiki culture met Polynesian Islanders’ celebration of their islandness, the Mai Tai Festival navigated to create an island space in relational time—a space where Polynesian Islanders reclaimed the right to represent their cultures and celebrate their heritage, challenging and transforming the stereotypes of tiki space and time in the U.S.

A Collective Tiki Memory within the Relational Time

While island reggae creates an island space by telling the stories of diasporic Polynesian Islanders, the Polynesian dance performance, promoted on the festival's website, on the other hand, redefines the Tiki culture by reframing it within an Islander-centric space. The Mai Tai Festival invited Tupua Productions, a Polynesian dance and entertainment company, to perform between music sets throughout the event. Although their inclusion appeared to fulfill audience expectations for exotic and tropical dance—as suggested by the festival's website and promotional materials—and the performances had incorporated contemporary touristic influences, I contend that Tupua Productions' performance reinterpreted Tiki culture from a Pacific Islander perspective.

At most Pacific Islander festivals I've attended in California, Polynesian dance performances featuring dances from Hawai'i, Tonga, Samoa, and Tahiti are a staple. These performances are typically offered by local Polynesian dance schools, which are fairly common across the state. These performances are often well-staged, with live musicians and sometimes a host, providing engaging entertainment for the audience. The performances are also customized for the events. For example, to match the festive atmosphere of the festivals, the performances often include competitions or demonstrations of fast-paced bottom-shaking. The attire does not always strictly follow traditional styles, as costumes are sometimes customized for the occasion. At the OC Fair, for instance, I once saw a Polynesian dance group wearing sequin dresses in the colors of the U.S national flag.

However, despite the highly customized nature of the performances, one section I always observe is that the host, whether the festival host or the leader of the dance school, will introduce the culture behind the dance. This reveals a strong commitment from these dance schools to preserving and increasing public understanding of Polynesian culture. Therefore, their seemingly commodified cultural dance performances require a nuanced examination to highlight their strategy for practicing islandness on the continent.

Examining the service that Tupua Productions offers, I find that Tupua Productions at the Mai Tai Festival was not the exception. Based in Santa Ana, Orange County, Tupua Production teaches Polynesian dances and hosts Tiki events in Southern California, which might suggest that their performances cater to the touristic gaze of a Pacific paradise and exoticize Polynesian culture. Some dance schools, including Tupua Production, indeed offer paid classes that decontextualize these traditions, and that attire and performances have been adapted into a more presentational and performative format. For example, Tupua Production's "Hula cardio" class transforms hula into a lower-body cardio workout to attract more students. These offerings often appeal to non-Pacific Islanders and echo the scholarly critiques that hula has been primitivized into a symbol of mythicized, exoticized Pacific women, thereby distorting its cultural significance and ignoring the ongoing coloniality (Arvin and Teves 2018).

Nevertheless, as festival scholars have pointed out, commodifying culture is an unavoidable strategy for sustaining it within a capitalist society. First of all, many of Tupua Production's students are Polynesian Islanders. These dance schools offer classes for different Polynesian dance traditions—such as Samoan, Hawaiian, and Tahitian—

providing Polynesian Islanders, who often lack exposure to Island cultural environments outside of their families and churches, with opportunities to learn and reconnect with their cultural heritage within a larger community. For example, in an interview with David “RND” Duenas,⁶⁵ I asked how he encouraged his children to learn his ancestral culture, and he responded that he sent them to learn CHamoru dances. Although this is not a Polynesian example, his response highlights the importance of these dance schools. Additionally, the inclusion of diverse dance styles in these schools brings together Pacific Islanders from various island backgrounds, helping to foster a collective Polynesian identity while strengthening cultural practices within the diaspora.

The founding story of Tupua Productions reveals how diasporic Pacific Islanders engage with Tiki culture to continue their commitment to cultural preservation on the continent. Stephan Tupua Seanoa, the director of Tupua Productions, inherited the company from his parents, Pete and Portia Seanoa, who founded Tiare Productions in 1965. Originally from Samoa, Pete Seanoa moved to the U.S. five decades ago. After marrying Pete, Portia Seanoa had the opportunity to travel to Hawai‘i, where she began learning Hawaiian and various Polynesian dances in 1963. Later, in the backyard of their home, Pete and Portia founded Tiare Productions and began offering dance lessons.

Indeed, Portia’s initial motivation to learn Hawaiian dance was for exercise, and her understanding of the dance started from a touristic and gymnastic impression. In a 2011 community post titled “Want To Hula?” on a local news forum in Land O’ Lakes, Florida—shared by a member Suzanne Schmidt-Jackson—Portia Seanoa said, “I think

⁶⁵ David “RND” Duenas, interview by the author, August 22, 2023.

people will have a good time and get some exercise.”⁶⁶ She also expressed a romanticized view of Hawai‘i as an island paradise: “Hawai‘i represents romance and relaxation, nature and love. People are drawn to that. It also has a spiritual feeling for many people. It is a different experience from any other place I have been. The people there are so down to earth.”⁶⁷

However, the dance school she founded, which participated in the Tiki culture mania in Southern California during the 1960s, went on to successfully nurture generations of diasporic Islanders in learning about their cultures. In the caption for a photo series on Tupua Productions’ Instagram, which featured archival performance photos from Tiare Productions, the post read:⁶⁸

“Taking you down memory lane, where it all started in the small backyard of Pete and Portia Seanoa’s home. A lot of talented faces passed through that backyard and have brought us to where we are today. Our hope is to keep that love & passion alive and continue building that legacy! We’re thankful for our grandparents, Pete and Portia Seanoa ❤️”

The comments under the post reflect the appreciation from the diasporic Islander community. One person replied:

“Love it. I wish I can dig into my uncle’s archive. He has plenty of VHS footages when Pete was with I think the name was Royal Tahitian n some footages at graduation n wedding parties. Oh n fyi can I get some more updated videos on YouTube of Tupua please lol... much Alofas from San Diego 💙”

⁶⁶ <https://patch.com/florida/landolakes/want-to-hula>

⁶⁷ Ibid.

⁶⁸ Tupua Production Instagram:
https://www.instagram.com/tupua_productions/p/CvtAo7lvxwC/?img_index=1

This post and the comment reflect that, after decades and across generations, this dance school has become part of the collective memory and a meaningful expression of islandness in California among diasporic Islanders.

Also, according to another blog post about the Seanoa couple, their cultural work extends far beyond simply reproducing the expectations of Tiki culture and island stereotypes. Pete Seanoa was also well known for his tiki carvings within the Californian Islander community, and he was clear about his agency in navigating Tiki culture. After settling in Huntington Beach, Orange County, he continued his family tradition of carving tikis. Several of his tiki statues were displayed in public spaces. In an interview featured on a Tiki culture enthusiast blog hosted by Chris Jepson,⁶⁹ Pete Seanoa shared his reflections on Tiki culture in the U.S. context: “The tiki signifies the spiritual force within... Tikis tend to get chop-sueyed in with other cultures, like Alaskan totems, but they’re totally different. They aren’t gods, but they represent the spiritual world in general. Mostly, they represent the happy spiritual elements. The spiritual aspects of the carver go into the tiki.” Jepson adds Seanoa’s thoughts about his tiki carving, “What he feels about his culture goes into it.” Seanoa also explained that the tiki statue he carved “symbolizes me, symbolizes protection, and symbolizes our people.”

Jepson’s blog features a photo of Seanoa’s home in Huntington Beach, surrounded by several tiki statues he carved. These statues were previously displayed in a public park, and Seanoa brought them back after the park closed. This act reflects how, even

⁶⁹ <https://tikilagoon.blogspot.com/2012/09/pete-portia-seanoa.html>

though the statues served public and touristic functions within the broader Tiki culture, Seanoa viewed them as deeply personal and cultural. His retrieval of the statues after their public display underscores that tiki, to him, is not merely a decorative item, but a living symbol of his identity, heritage, and spirituality.

In the case of Tupua Productions, the incorporation of tiki culture in the festival reflects Pacific Islanders' reinterpretation of "Tiki time"—the leisurely, slow-paced temporality that commodifies and essentializes island life—into Pacific relational time, where memories and islandness can be actively performed. I also want to remind readers that Island Block Radio began by booking performers at a tiki bar, and tiki bars remain important venues for local island reggae artists. For example, the Costa Mesa Tiki Bar continues to serve as a hub for Islander musicians. In this context, rather than viewing the use of Tiki culture at the Mai Tai Festival as mere compliance with coloniality, I understand it also as an act of performing islandness through continental memory and reclaiming cultural sovereignty—a way for Polynesians to redefine Tiki culture through their own storytelling.

Re-telling Oceanic Stories beyond Tiki time

Re-telling Polynesian stories beyond the tiki time frame is an act of self-determination that asserts their sovereignty and islandness through a lens of multiplicity and relationality. Toward the end of the event, I noticed a group of teenagers covered themselves in flags from Samoa, Tonga, Fiji, American Samoa, and Hawai'i—the Hawaiian flag worn upside down as a decolonial gesture advocating for Hawaiian

sovereignty. Despite their different flags, these teenagers stood together, holding each other's shoulders and swaying to the music. Their island heritages might differ, but they shared a collective moment at the Mai Tai Festival, highlighting a powerful sense of regional solidarity in diaspora. Also, their different identities reflected the complex and multifaceted Polynesian experiences celebrated at the Mai Tai Festival. This sharply contrasts with commercialized tiki bars or tourist events, where distinct island identities are often homogenized into a singular, monolithic "Polynesian" illusion.



Image 18: A group of teenagers covered themselves in flags of Tonga, Hawai'i, American Samoa, and Samoa.

The self-determined Polynesian identities and specific island affiliations expressed in this festival challenged colonial-imposed regional classifications and instead reflected the everyday realities of Pacific Islanders in Southern California, where the forging of both specific regional identity and pan-Pacific Islander identity served as a response to the hardships of diaspora. Although explicit representations of Melanesian and Micronesian identities were limited, the presence of the Fijian national flag—a country typically categorized within the Melanesian region—signaled that the festival was not defined by strict geographic boundaries but by a broader Pacific Islander sense of community and personal connection. Finally, the festival would not have run smoothly without the efforts of David “RND” Duenas, a CHamoru producer from Island Block Network, who managed the performance stage while his children handled ticketing at the entrance throughout the day. The involvement of these Chamoru individuals highlights the significance of personal and ancestral connections that transcend imposed regional classifications, as their ancestors have long been linked across the Pacific Ocean.

In the case of the Mai Tai Festival, diasporic Polynesian Islanders retell the stories of Polynesia and Oceania through performances. Besides retelling the regional stories, diasporic Islanders also break the colonial gaze by performing the specific ethnic group identities, such as the Samoan identity. In the next section, I will use the example of the Samoan Heritage Festival to present how Pacific Islanders celebrate their specific island identities in Southern California as a way of self-determination.

The Samoan Heritage Festival

In Southern California, numerous festivals create spaces for the Samoan community to celebrate their heritage, but the Samoan Heritage Festival stands out as the primary event dedicated solely to them. Held annually at the end of June since 2022, the Samoan Heritage Festival is hosted in the City of Carson in collaboration with its Community Services and Parks and Recreation Departments. It is a one-day event celebrating Samoan heritage from Samoa and American Samoa, featuring ceremonies, performances, cultural lessons, and vendors offering food, crafts, and public services such as community, military, and health resources.

The festival commemorates the long journey of the Samoan people in the U.S., and its location in Carson holds particular significance. In California, there are approximately 63,000 Samoans, making up nearly one-third of the Samoan population in the U.S., with more than 50,000 residing in Los Angeles, close to the entire population of American Samoa. Carson is one of the main cities where Samoans reside, with a current population of around 11,000.⁷⁰ This event is held at Foisia Park, named after the Samoan community leader James M. Foisia, who worked in the Carson Parks and Recreation Department as a Recreation Leader for nearly thirty years, from 1971 to 1999. Foisia transformed the park, previously known as Scott Park, into a community center that offers services such as youth mentorship programs and new athletic activities as a protection and support for the local Samoan teenagers. Foisia also established Carson's first Asian Pacific Islander

⁷⁰According to the press released by the Carson City government:
<https://ci.carson.ca.us/citymanager/PressRelease.aspx?ID=3440>

Day in the late 1990s.⁷¹ The location of the Samoan Heritage Festival honors Foisia's contributions to the Samoan, Pacific Islander, and Carson communities.⁷²

Seeing Samoan Islandness

In this section, I examine how the festival performances allowed Samoan audiences to reflect on their journeys from Samoa to Southern California. The music celebrated the diverse sounds within island reggae and traced its roots from the islands to the early urban music scene, while also honoring the place where this history took place—Carson, often referred to as “Little Samoa.” Through musical storytelling, the festival embodied the practice of honoring ancestry, upholding the value of family, and affirming Samoan identity, all while challenging externally imposed, touristic representations of culture. Together, these elements shaped a unique sense of continental islandness—a concept grounded in the diasporic experience of Samoans, with Carson serving as a symbolic big island on the continent.

The celebration of Samoan heritage began with seeing Samoa everywhere. A month before the festival, the community was already warming up for the event online. Island Block Network, performers, and community members had begun sharing posters and reels on Instagram. Pictures and videos from the previous year flooded viewers' feeds, building anticipation for the upcoming celebration. While this festival centers the Samoan

⁷¹ See the history of James M. Foisia, offered by the Carson City government website. https://ci.carson.ca.us/content/files/Recreation/FoisiaParkBrochure_07232019.pdf

⁷² Joe Fa'avae wrote two stories about the Foisia Park on the Island Block Network Blog, and one of them recounted his memories in Foisia Park: <https://islandblocknetwork.com/2025/04/02/foisiapark/>

community, the poster clearly reflects this focus. Unlike the Mai Tai Festival's colorful design, which features commercial symbols evoking Tiki culture, the Samoan Heritage Festival poster is specifically tailored to a Samoan audience. The most obvious elements on the poster are two crossed flags: the national flag of Samoa and the American Samoan flag.



Image 19: The poster of the Samoan Heritage Festival

The poster's background is divided into two colors—beige on the top half with coconut tree silhouettes, and dark brown on the bottom half with Samoan motifs usually used in Tatau (tattoo). Unlike the Mai Tai Festival poster, which includes touristic elements like cruise ships, island imagery, or Tiki statues, the Samoan Heritage Festival poster features only photos of the performers, avoiding any touristic symbols. The only element not directly inspired by Samoan culture is the font used for the festival title, which is written in a Blackletter or Gothic-inspired style. This font, originating from medieval European Blackletter and Gothic script, has been widely used in the visual arts of hip hop and metal music, as well as in news press logos. Using the font for the festival title conveys a sense of formality, authority, and historical depth, while also connecting to the live experiences of hip hop culture.

The festival venue was filled with Samoan cultural symbols and guided by a spatial logic rooted in Samoan values. On the day of the festival, as I stepped into the park, a large “Samoa” sign beside the stage immediately caught my eye. Standing at about the height of an adult, the letters “S-A-M-O-A” are displayed in yellow and adorned with patterns from the Samoan Tatau, painted in brown. This sign, decorated with flowers and leaves, served as a photo spot for attendees. On stage, two large banners of the concert were positioned on either side. Offstage, a wide, long tent with a seating area was set up in the center of the ground, and this seating area was reserved for seniors and performers' families.

The open space between the stage and the long tents was designated for dance performances, while most attendees stood behind the long tents and vendor booths to

watch the show. This arrangement was unusual for commercial festivals, as the tent partially blocked the view from the back and occupied the best viewing spots with reserved seats. However, no one appeared to complain. For attendees, preserving the best seating area for the elders and family members was understood without any explicit instructions—people simply brought their own chairs and umbrellas, sitting comfortably behind the tent.



Image 20: The audience tent, and the ground in between the tent and the stage, is being used for rituals and dances.



Image 21: The huge SAMOA sign on the right of the stage.

Listening to Samoan Islandness in Diaspora

Although the music performances were scheduled after a series of ceremonies and dance presentations at the festival, I want to address them first to highlight how island music performs Samoan islandness in diaspora. Similar to the Mai Tai Festival, the musical arrangement reflects the historical development of island music in California—but it offers a distinct sonic map. The lineup, which included Praise Da Kid, Jerome Grey, Hooliganz, Brownzville, Local Culture, and Fia, spans generations from the 1980s to today's younger artists, highlighting the contributions of Samoan musicians to

Southern California's island music history. This lineup also reflects a strong identity of Southern Californians, specifically Carson "the Little Samoa", as all the artists are either based in California or were born and raised in Carson. While Mai Tai Festival's music is predominantly island reggae, the lineup of the Samoan Heritage Festival features a broader range of styles, including a notable presence of hip hop performers, reflecting California's important role in the trans-Pacific Samoan hip hop community (Henderson 2010; 2016). Also, influential Samoan hip hop artists—not only within Pacific Islander communities but in the broader hip-hop scene—such as Boo-Yaa T.R.I.B.E., are based in Carson. This arrangement suggests that, rather than focusing solely on island reggae, the festival's music reflects the broader musical memory of Carson Samoans—one that aligns more closely with urban island music, where Islanders express their urban experiences through a wide range of genres.

The first artist, Praise Da Kid, represented the emerging generation of Samoan musicians whose work bridged island reggae and hip hop. His latest release, "Da Joint," blends the melodic vocal style of island reggae with rap, set against a ukulele-infused reggae beat. Interestingly, while the Pacific Islander hip hop scene continued to grow, Praise Da Kid initially released two hip hop tracks in 2022 before expanding to island reggae with "Da Joint" in 2023. This music transition was welcomed; during his performance of "Da Joint" in the festival, the audience danced enthusiastically, their movements characterized by squatting to the beat, pointing their arms skyward, and rhythmically dropping their palms—typical upbeat movements seen at popular music concerts. Praise Da Kid exemplified the younger generation's fluidity in shifting between

genres, crafting authentic hip hop tracks while incorporating the quintessential elements of island reggae, such as melodic vocals, rap segments, and lively reggae beats.

Positioning Praise Da Kid as the opening act was likely a strategic choice, as emerging artists often performed first. Moreover, his music also set the stage for understanding the heritage of diasporic Samoans through music, leading to performances by Local Culture, Brownzville, and Hooliganz—artists who paved the way for the current Samoan music scene.

Local Culture and Hooliganz, both reggae bands active since the 1990s, represented the early evolution of urban island music. As noted in Chapter 1, Local Culture coined the term urban island music to capture the diverse urban influences in their island-inspired sound. Hooliganz, led by King Solomon, was another enduring reggae band deeply connected to Southern California’s Jamaican reggae scene and the island reggae scene. Together, Local Culture and Hooliganz captured the intersection of Samoans with African diasporic communities and music in the 1990s, creating a shared memory for attendees. During Local Culture’s performance of “Pua Lena”—a popular track originally released by vocalist Vika that reached number one on Hawai‘i’s music charts—audience members danced with fluid lower-body movements and wavy hand gestures reminiscent of Samoan dance. This style stood in contrast to the more upbeat dance energy seen during Praise Da Kid’s set.



Image 22: Local Culture performing.

When Brownzville, a hip hop duo active since the late 1990s, took the stage, they performed their classic track “Breezin’ (Thru My City)” (1998), a tribute to their hometown of Carson. As the song’s intro played, the audience immediately recognized it and erupted in cheers. The lyrics, particularly the chorus, “Breezin’ through my city, feelin’ fine. And everybody’s havin’ a good time. Carson City, where we chillin’ all the time. Where no troubles arise”, resonated with the festival’s strong identity in Carson. Many attendees sang along, and the song transported the audience, particularly middle-aged and older members, back to the early 2000s. Younger generations, familiar with the

duo's music either through their family members or personal family connections to them, also joined in.

While most of the music performances drew from diasporic African genres that represent the “continental side” of island music, the iconic Samoan singer Jerome Grey stood out as a representative of its “island” roots. Born and raised in Samoa, Grey's music captured the encounters between Samoan music and Western influences. He began his career in the 1970s as part of the trio The Samoa Three, drawing inspiration from artists such as Tony Bennett, Frank Sinatra, and Nat King Cole, as well as traditional songs from Hawai'i, Tahiti, and Fiji. His style was also shaped by country music icons like Kenny Rogers and Johnny Cash. These diverse influences helped form Jerome Grey's signature sound—a gentle, chant-like falsetto used to craft storytelling songs that continue to resonate deeply with his audiences.

After moving to Anaheim, California, Grey's music came to symbolize the diasporic experience of Samoans. His family story also holds an important place in the history of Southern California island reggae. Grey is the father of Tinifu Loa Grey, the bass player for Common Kings, and the father-in-law of Myz Lulu, the Island Block Radio host who also served as the host for both the Mai Tai Festival and the Samoan Heritage Festival. From the audience of Grey's, one could tell that his music was felt by senior and middle-aged Samoans in Southern California, who grew up listening to what they called “music from the island,” either in their homes in California or during their time living in Samoa.

Grey's performance expressed the sense of an intergenerational Samoan identity. Jerome Grey's most iconic song, "We Are Samoa," is often regarded as the unofficial anthem of the Samoan people. It is a stirring, emotionally charged chant that powerfully conveys the cultural values of the Samoan community. During his performance of this song, I saw many senior and middle-aged attendees stand up, link shoulders, and gently sway as they chanted together, singing as if it were their national anthem. Since the song's rise in popularity, younger attendees also joined in, singing along with Grey. Its bilingual lyrics, blending Samoan and English, welcomed everyone, regardless of language ability, to express a sense of a unified Samoan identity. The chorus, "We Are Samoa," sung in both languages, became a unifying intergenerational moment as audience members joined in song together.

Jerome Grey's performance of Samoan islandness was inseparable from the expression of family values woven throughout his set. During his performance, Myz Lulu led a group of audience members in dancing alongside Grey for the entirety of his set—a gesture of familial support that she did not extend to other performers. In our interview, Myz Lulu shared with me that "We Are Samoa" is not only a community anthem but also a family song. Having grown up in American Samoa and moved to California in her teenage years, she has always had to navigate and locate her identity within the U.S. context. Whenever she feels powerless or unsettled, she returns to the song to recharge her sense of identity and reconnect with her family roots. This moment on stage underscored the centrality of family and community tied to the identity of being Samoan.

In the next section, I will explore how Samoans use ceremonies, traditional dance performances, and vendor spaces to revive cultural practices within the diaspora while navigating power dynamics shaped by government bureaucracy, tourism, and cultural commodification, and challenging imposed colonial structures.

Centering Samoan Islandness in the Contact Zone

The Samoan Heritage Festival serves as a contact zone where Samoans engage with the intersecting forces of tourism, government bureaucracy, and cultural commodification in the construction of islandness on the continent. While island reggae performances narrate diasporic Islanders' stories to restore relational time, the ceremonies and ritual practices within the festival actively engage with institutional power, contributing to the creation of an island space within colonial structures.

The festival was opened by the 'ava ceremony, a Samoan ritual held on important occasions, serving kava to honored leaders and guests, most notably during the bestowal of a chief title in Samoa. Through this ceremony, attendees could observe whose presence was prioritized at the event, and this event showed that it was not limited to important cultural figures. As a festival dedicated to celebrating Samoan heritage, one might expect the event to focus solely on the Samoan community, rather than involving institutional representatives. However, the ceremony began with a pastor's prayer in Samoan on the stage, followed by the host, Myz Lulu, welcoming guests from the municipal government, including the mayor, a former congressman, the sheriff captain, and other officials who were seated on stage. Several guests, specifically the mayor, gave

a speech acknowledging the contributions of Samoans in the city of Carson and the importance of embracing a diverse and multicultural Carson (the mayor even counted each ethnic community in her speech) by celebrating Samoan cultures in this event.

The prioritization of pastors and municipal representatives reflects the social structure of the Samoan community life in California. The Samoan community has developed a close relationship with the Carson City government, and the festival itself was organized by the City of Carson through its Community Services and Parks and Recreation Department. Meanwhile, Churches are central institutions for daily lives in both Samoa and American Samoa, as well as their diaspora; as Myz Lulu described her memory of living in American Samoa, “There are two things for Samoans—church and home.”⁷³ Hence, since the purpose of the ’ava ceremony is to honor important occasions and welcome guests, it feels fitting to invite these guests to the ceremony.

However, this level of understanding risks overlooking the power dynamics embedded within the festival as a contact zone, where colonizer and colonized subjects intersect and negotiate institutional power. Therefore, I examine the visible presence of government officials and religious authorities at the festival as a reflection of how diasporic Samoans navigate and leverage institutional power to uphold Samoan culture in the diaspora—a necessary strategy for securing a space where islandness can be expressed and sustained, and for laying the groundwork for the kind of resurgent politics of recognition that Glen Coulthard (2014) envisions.

⁷³ Interview with Myz Lulu: May 15th, 2024.

Let's continue with the 'ava ceremony. After speeches from the municipal guests, a group of elders led a group of youths, entered the open space between the stage and the tent, chanting as they formed a circle. Following the chant, the elders took their seats while the youths sat on the ground. The elders then delivered speeches to the youths, who prepared and served kava to the elders and guests, beginning with the pastor. As the ceremony continued for around thirty minutes, I noticed that several municipal representatives had already left, and only guests who seemed to be community members remained seated on the stage. The attention of the attendees was fully focused on the participants of the 'ava ceremony. Nearly every elder seated in the open area spoke to the youths and was served kava. In that moment, I realized that although the municipal representatives spoke first and were seated in elevated positions, the true hosts of the festival were those seated in the open space. The municipal officials had become guests in this context, and through the ceremony, the city-owned Foisia Park was symbolically transformed into a Samoan island space—subtly shifting the power dynamic between the municipal government and the Samoan community.

The shifting dynamic between the municipal government and the Samoan community, reflected in the reversal of host-guest roles, granted power to the Samoan political Fa'amatai chief systems. Following the 'ava ceremony, the festival included a segment dedicated to recognizing the taupou (daughter of a high chief) and the manaia (son of a high chief) among young Samoans from chiefly families now living in California. This ceremony was not merely a revival of traditional ritual itself; rather, I observed that some of these recognized young Samoans took on leadership roles in both

the 'ava ceremony and the subsequent dance performances. Despite living within a modern bureaucratic system, this reveals that the Indigenous political structure continues to function through cultural practices that sustain community cohesion. In this context, the recognition of taupou and manaia serves to affirm the Fa'amatai system within the diasporic setting of Southern California.

The collaboration with the municipal government, framed by the promotion of diversity and the long-term collaboration, demonstrates how, as Megumi Chibana (2018) notes, the flexible space between municipal and central governments can be used to assert Indigenous rights. In this flexible space, Samoans have gained power in resisting colonial narratives that attempt to define Samoan islandness. After the recognition ceremony of taupou and manaia, the festival program transitioned to a flag-raising ceremony and the singing of the national anthems of the United States, American Samoa, and Samoa, in that order. Then, recognizing the large number of children in attendance, the festival also offered a cultural lesson taught by Creasepaul Tofa, a Samoan cultural ambassador from the Polynesian Cultural Center in Hawai'i.

This sequence, from Samoan ceremonies (the 'ava ceremony), to the recognition of Indigenous political structures (the Fa'amatai system), followed by the representation of colonial political entities (The U.S., American Samoa, and Samoa), and concluding with a cultural education session—Samoans in this contact zone skillfully leveraged their cultural practices to meet the expectations of cultural diversity and local tourism from Carson City government, and drew on their long-term relationship with the municipal government to reintroduce and assert the sovereignty of Indigenous politics that had long

been suppressed by colonial powers. In doing so, the festival subtly challenges the foundations of U.S. colonial structures through cultural assertion and strategic engagement.

The audience's distinct reactions to the anthems offered a powerful example of the shifting power dynamics between the colonial and the colonized within the festival space. The anthems of American Samoa and Samoa were met with enthusiastic cheehoo and loud applause from attendees of all ages. In contrast, the U.S. anthem received only scattered clapping and noticeably subdued responses. While most elders stood in respect, many younger attendees remained seated. These responses from younger participants should not be interpreted simply as a rejection of the U.S. or their identity as American citizens. Rather, I argue that these reactions reflected a deeper cultural and emotional attachment to Samoa and American Samoa within the context of the festival. There, Samoan cultural and political practices were centered, allowing the meanings of Samoa and American Samoa—and their anthems and flags—to transcend from a meaning of the colonial power and state boundaries to a profound sense of cultural belonging of being Samoan that remained vibrant within diasporic Samoan life.

Additionally, another institutional and colonial power presented at the festival is Christianity. As Gershon (2012) points out, Christianity and churches have been incorporated into Samoan cultural practices. The strong presence of the church at the festival reflects this integration. During my fieldwork with Island Block Network, I observed that Samoan community events—whether the Samoan Heritage Festival or a Christmas Carson gathering—consistently begin with a prayer led by a pastor.

Christianity reflects the colonial history of Samoa, but churches have become integral to sustaining Samoan culture and socio-political organization in the diaspora. In the continental U.S., Samoan churches developed alongside Samoan migration (Ablon 1970; 1971). In California, these churches often serve as both religious and political centers, closely tied to Samoan elites and frequently established by Samoan ministers themselves (Yengoyan 2006).

As Gerson points out (2012), churches function as cultural hubs for the diasporic Samoan community, providing spaces for the practice of Samoan traditions like singing and dancing. The United Samoan Church in Carson exemplified this connection in the festival; its youth actively participated in the 'ava ceremony, and their dance troupe was the first to perform afterward. This integration underscores how the colonial legacy is inseparable from the development of Samoan communities, yet it also reveals how Christianity has been adapted and incorporated to serve the needs of Samoan diasporic life. Therefore, Churches, as a colonial institution, becomes spaces where islandness is actively performed on the continent, and memories of church life are deeply tied to the narratives of continental islandness, complicating the colonized and colonial power relations embedded in both religious practice and community life. We will return to the discussion of the church in relation to gender and sexuality later in Chapter Five.

Lastly, similar to the Mai Tai Festival, the Samoan Heritage Festival must still be contextualized with the capitalist and touristic forces present in cultural commodification. At the Samoan Heritage Festival, many craft vendors, to some extent, transformed Samoan culture into marketable products, yet these commodities were more targeted

toward the Samoan community. Unlike the clothing and décor vendors commonly seen at the Mai Tai Festival, the vendors at the Samoan Heritage Festival showcased a more diverse application of Samoan culture in everyday life. For instance, Teine Cosmetics is a brand founded by Samoan-Tokelauan makeup artist Elizabeth Jennings-Schuster for her community. Another vendor, Tiare Celestial Creations, offered an array of jewelry and accessories, including lei crafted from materials like cash and ribbon, as well as accessories made from natural materials such as wood, metal, and black pearls, often shaped into patterns like sea turtles.

While items such as jewelry, handcrafted accessories, and cosmetics might have higher purchasing thresholds due to their prices or the buying behaviors, these vendors did not appear to be commercializing Polynesian or Samoan cultures for the sake of casual attendees or those unfamiliar with the Pacific Islander community. Instead, their primary customers seemed to be community members who already followed these vendors on social media, using the festival as an opportunity to see or try the products in person. Many consumers appeared to have specific occasions in mind for wearing these accessories, suggesting a deep cultural connection rather than fleeting interest.

Therefore, Fabian Holt's (2021) assertion that festivals are often extensions of the tourism industry does not fully apply to this event, which is deeply rooted in community engagement rather than external tourism. So, how should we understand the commercialization of Samoan culture through these products? I cite Fran Lujan's perspective on diasporic Islanders' self-driven commodification: "As long as they are

living a good life, just do it.”⁷⁴ She often tells me, survival on the continent is the top priority. Living, in this context, is the foundation for sustaining heritage and culture in a new environment. Lujan’s outlook highlights the balance between cultural maintenance and economic survival—revealing the adaptability and resilience of diasporic Samoan communities—and demonstrates a form of agency in her decisive engagement with capitalism. I see this as a reinterpretation of the relationship with settler-colonial structures. While diasporic Islanders continue to operate within capitalist systems, this engagement gestures toward the potential for the kind of resurgent politics that Glen Coulthard envisions.

I also draw on Bendrups’s (2008) concept of cultural festivals as “contact zones,” where he observes: “In developing a broad program of perceived traditional and non-traditional events, the organizers of Rapanui are intelligently laying broad pathways for the future development of Rapanui culture, and the inclusive format of the festival’s competitions ensures that many islanders are included in this process of cultural self-determination” (ibid.: 27). In the context of the Samoan Heritage Festival, cultural commodification becomes not only a means of survival or making a profit but also a way of serving the community and showcasing lived interpretations of Samoan culture as it adapts within the U.S. context. Cultural commercialization, in this case, manifests as diverse, self-defined approaches through which diasporic Samoans reinterpret, negotiate, and sustain their heritage.

⁷⁴ Fran Lujan, interview by the author, February 17, 2023.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I analyze two diasporic Pacific Islander festivals to explore how they navigate stereotypes and cultural commercialization within the context of Pacific tourism. In the Mai Tai Festival, I focus on how Pacific Islanders disrupt the settler-imposed narrative of time and space, such as “island time” and “Tiki culture,” by reframing them within their own concept of island space and relational time. Despite the inevitability of facing public stereotyping, Pacific Islanders at the Mai Tai Festival reclaim Polynesian subjectivity in their narratives, using island reggae music to tell their stories. They also repurpose stereotypes to generate income, supporting cultural preservation and practices within a capitalist framework. Through incorporating Tiki cultures as a part of continental islandness, Polynesian Islanders reclaim their rights of self-interpretation.

The Samoan Heritage Festival caters to a different audience and reflects distinct motivations. This festival narrates the Samoan continental islandness and affirms the Samoan political-cultural entities from the negotiation with colonial institutional powers of government and churches. The musical performances showcase a blend of island music, including island songs, island reggae, hip-hop, and R&B, alongside Hawaiian influences, telling the Samoan music stories in California. These performances embody what Local Culture describes as the diverse nature of “urban island music,” which they view as a means of practicing islandness within the continental U.S. Furthermore, the vendors and dance groups at the festival demonstrate how cultural commodification can serve the community. Although these approaches commodify cultural symbols, they also

demonstrate how Samoans adapt and sustain their cultural practices through active engagement with capitalist and state power—an engagement that, I suggest, holds the potential for a resurgence of recognition.

In conclusion, diasporic Pacific Islander festivals serve as contact zones where colonial and Indigenous forces, as well as continental and island dynamics, intersect. Through these encounters, the power dynamics between diasporic Islanders and colonial structures—whether in Oceania or the U.S.—are negotiated and reshaped. These festivals construct a sense of continental islandness in which commercialization plays a significant role, yet the reinterpretation of commercialization remains a crucial manifestation of agency.

Chapter 5: Performing A Femininized Islandness? Pacific Islander Femininity, Masculinity, and Resistance in Island Reggae

Introduction

“Hey Chun, can you also keep an eye on Nichola’s merch? I have set up everything and audiences can pay on cash apps.” Nina Sosefina, a Samoan singer, asked me, pointing to the two acrylic stands with all the merch and payment information while I was setting up the merch table for Island Block Network. It was February 24th, 2024, a few hours before the start of the Island Block concert in House of Blues, Anaheim. I did not know that Nina also worked as a manager alongside her music career. Later, I realized she was simply helping another Samoan singer, Nichola. Nichola and Nina⁷⁵ are friends who co-founded The Sanctuary, an open mic and creative events project in Long Beach. For the entire show, I only had to look for the sizes for the audience, so that the entire process was smoother and simpler than I even expected.

A month later, on March 29th, in the same venue, Nina opened for Fia, the Samoan reggae artist Fia headlining the show. Before the concert, Joe “Savage” Fa’avae texted me to ask if I could help with Fia’s merch. “Wow, I might be super busy tonight,” I thought, knowing how loyal and supportive Fia’s fans are—and how his merch designs always attract them. When I arrived at the showroom, Nina walked up to me and asked if I could also help with her merch. “Of course!” I said and started calculating in my head how I was going to handle both artists’ tables, as well as Island Block’s merch, especially

⁷⁵ I refer to them by their first name in this dissertation because it is their stage name, and I intend for readers to be able to search for their works.

with their devoted fanbases. Selling merch often means searching for sizes in a dimly lit space, digging through large, unorganized boxes crammed with shirts of all sizes. Additionally, handling multiple forms of payment requires juggling different devices, each with its own passwords and sometimes requiring charging. Even setting up the merchandise table requires creative problem-solving to make the display look right.

I was worrying too much. Nina had already set up two acrylic stands with detailed payment and merch information. “Great, that’s easier—now I can focus on Fia’s,” I thought. Meanwhile, as I started checking Fia’s merch, I realized, “This is going to be a very easy night!” Ipo Mullaney, Fia’s manager, had already arranged the merch neatly by size, with the inventory clearly listed in the payment app. I could find the correct size immediately. She had also sent me the iPad passwords, and all the devices were fully charged. The best part? Mullaney even provided a tap machine—so I didn’t have to insert cards or deal with the card swipe, which is always tricky since many people’s magnetic strips don’t work. From a merchant assistant’s perspective, Nina and Mullaney’s attentive work attitudes made the merchant experience truly enjoyable.

People like Nina and Mullaney, who are well-versed in the subtle details of multiple roles involved in running a concert, are crucial for the island reggae scene. They hold multiple positions in the island reggae scene industry and community (Mullaney runs for The Green, Fia, and Jasmin); they are the weavers who connect artists with venues, media, and the communities. However, as women, they both face misogyny while building their music careers.

Despite the significant contributions of many Pacific Islander women like Mullaney and Nina to the prosperity of the island reggae scene, female Pacific Islanders remain underrepresented compared to their male counterparts. Moreover, women in island reggae songs are sometimes objectified through romantic narratives or portrayed as symbols of the island paradise. Furthermore, female artists in Southern California's island reggae scene are fewer than their male counterparts, and these women are predominantly known as R&B singers rather than reggae artists. Island reggae music serves as a form of Indigenous storytelling, and concerts provide a platform for Pacific Islanders to perform their Indigeneity as a form of resistance against marginalization in the diaspora. However, feminist narratives are often missing in island reggae songs.

In contrast, outside the music scene, the leadership exhibited by Pacific Islander women has demonstrated a significant Indigenous feminist praxis in the Southern Californian community. For example, the Pacific Island Ethnic Art Museum is a women-led institution that provides a protective space for young people, women, and queers. The Long Beach non-profit Chamoru organization, Kutturan Chamoru Foundation, is led by Heidi Chargualaf-Quenga. While the construction of continental islandness and island space via island reggae is proven to be a decolonial Indigenous practice, examining this process through women's voices is essential.

This chapter, which is dedicated to Pacific Islander women in the scene, feminizes my concepts of continental islandness and island-making. This intention builds on Samoan artist Kiana "Kiki" Rivera's phrase, "Our body is our sovereignty,"⁷⁶ to express

⁷⁶ Interview with Kiana "Kiki" Rivera: April 3rd, 2023.

that, although Pacific Islanders have been dislocated, oppressed, and dispossessed, their bodies remain their last form of sovereignty. Drawing on Rivera's emphasis on the body, this chapter focuses on Pacific Islander women's bodies as sites of sovereignty. This also follows Indigenous scholar Kim Anderson's (2016) words, "We can talk about self-government, sovereignty, cultural recovery, and the healing path, but we will never achieve any of these things until we take a serious look at the disrespect that characterizes the lives of so many Indigenous women. We must have a vision for something better, because our future depends on it" (ibid.: xxxiv).

Given that the island reggae scene is a crucial cultural expression for the diasporic community, and the fact that Pacific Islander women have a strong engagement in the community outside the music scene, this chapter asks, what contributes to the underrepresentation of Pacific Islander women and their narratives in Southern California's island reggae scene? How are Pacific Islander women portrayed in island reggae songs? And how do female Pacific Islanders express their Indigeneity and assert their sovereignty within the music industry?

In response to these questions, I argue that the underrepresentation of diasporic Pacific Islander women in the island reggae scene stems from the colonial heteropatriarchal structure imposed in Oceania, that compounded and covered by the colonial heteropatriarchal structures in the U.S. music industry and roots reggae culture. These overlapping structures have imposed stereotypes that associate Pacific Islander women with the island and nature—stereotypes that exoticize and objectify them in island reggae songs, while the performances of Pacific Islanders' masculinity are also

confined in a colonial masculinity. Such representations are often embedded even in constructions of continental islandness and assertions of sovereignty, thereby marginalizing Pacific Islander women within both cultural and political discourses. In resistance, Pacific Islander women have reinterpreted Indigeneity in an assertion of their sonic sovereignty (Przybylski 2023) that determines how, by whom, and where their music should be listened to and understood, offering alternative narratives that reclaim voice, visibility, and agency. In doing so, they articulate a feminist vision of continental islandness—one grounded in both resistance and relational care in Native womanhood through their actions of island-making.

This chapter consists of four sections. The first section provides a scholarship review for sexual-racialized colonial project in Oceania and the broader Indigenous discourses to unfold Indigenous masculinity and Native womanhood for understanding the performances of femininity, masculinity, and Indigeneity. The second analyzes J Boog's "Let's Do It Again" as well as its music video to explore how women are portrayed in island reggae songs, how these portrayals are linked to the notion of island paradise, and how this symbolic connection to nature embeds in the construction of islandness when these songs transformed into an expression of sovereignty. The third section centers the voices and experiences of two Samoan female singers, Nina Sosefina and Nichola, to reveal the challenges of patriarchy they have faced. I also present their responses to patriarchy through their project, *The Sanctuary*, which I contend is an island-making of Native womanhood, an act of recognizing, being, and sharing experiences of being Pacific Islander women. From their Native womanhood, they then

create an island space for more Pacific Islander women, guided by the Indigenous protocol, drawing on their heritage to care for both women and the broader community.

Indigenous Femininity and Masculinity in the Oceania Context

To discuss the expressions of Pacific Islander femininity and masculinity in island reggae songs, we must begin with the entangled constructions of race and gender within colonial projects. As Indigenous feminist scholars Maile Arvin, Eve Tuck, and Angie Morrill argue, “settler colonialism effectively operates through heteropatriarchy” (Arvin, Tuck, & Morrill 2013: 22). They emphasize that settler-colonial states—such as the United States—are founded on white supremacy and heteropatriarchy, structures that continue to shape institutions like the commercial music industry. Building on this, Indigenous gender and sexuality scholars underscore how heterosexual patriarchy, embedded within colonial infrastructures, continues to constrain contemporary expressions of Indigenous femininity and masculinity—marginalizing and enacting violence upon Indigenous bodies (Anderson & Innes 2015).

In the context of Oceania, from Maile Arvin’s argument (2019), the racialization of Pacific Islanders is inherently a sexualizing process. In the context of Hawai‘i, Arvin explains that Polynesians are racialized as “almost white” to suggest the potential for becoming civilized through marriage between white men and Hawaiian women. Hawaiian Indigeneity, particularly as associated with Hawaiian men, is racialized and primitivized. The whiteness assigned to Polynesians is sexualized through its

construction of Hawaiian women, who are symbolically linked to the land. Settler colonial logic then uses this sexualized whiteness to legitimize White possession of both Indigenous land and women. Furthermore, through the trope of interracial marriage between white men and Hawaiian women, which functions to erase the uncivilized part associated with Hawaiian men, this form of possession appropriates Hawaiian Indigeneity while reinforcing white masculine dominance. Within this framework, Native Hawaiian men are feminized and weakened, their Indigeneity positioned as non-threatening. As Arvin writes, “Native Hawaiian men were conveniently displaced from the picture altogether, subtly associating the men with the Native Hawaiian race that was disappearing, dying, and vanishing, which meant that Native Hawaiian men were weak, not threatening. This allowed coverage of Hawai‘i’s hybrid future to distance itself from the ‘black’ side of the Hawaiian race” (ibid.: 118). Arvin further emphasizes how Hawaiian women were mythologized within this racial project, subjected to sexualized, nature-bound stereotypes of innocence, openness, friendliness, and sexual promiscuity, rendering them, like the land, as objects of conquest and possession.

Arvin’s analysis of racial and sexual myths in Oceania also extends to diasporic Pacific Islander women on the U.S. continent. Within the U.S. racial classification system, Pacific Islanders have often been grouped with Asian Americans. Alongside Teves (Arvin & Teves 2018), they critique how Asian American feminists invoke the Pacific as a site of sexual freedom in opposition to the Orientalist stereotype of Asian women as submissive—an effort to reclaim agency. However, this framing inadvertently reinforces colonial myths of Pacific women’s primitivism and wildness, continuing to

objectify and marginalize them within Asian American discourses, while leaving Asian settler colonialism in Oceania unexamined.

Under heteropatriarchal structures, Indigenous men internalize white, heteropatriarchal definitions of masculinity, and alongside entangled notions of nationalism, Indigenous masculinity has often emerged as a performance of sovereignty and self-determination; however, such performances frequently reinforce colonial structures and marginalize non-heterosexual Indigenous men (Morgensen 2015; Sneider 2015). The heterosexual Indigenous masculinity also constructs a confined cultural authority, search for origin, and tradition, as Hokowhitu (2015) says, “serves to conceal the genesis of that sexuality, as produced, as a cultural fiction. For Indigenous peoples, the punishment of not acceding to such fictions is disbarment through de-authenticating tactics, which serve to drive such subjectivities from communities” (ibid: 92). Kauanui (2018) also points out that Native Hawaiian feminists are neglected in the Hawaiian national movements despite their significant contribution and engagement to the community.

In Oceania, masculinity is often discussed in the context of sport, a domain shaped by colonial strategies of relegating and regulating Indigenous bodies (Hokowhitu 2004; Uperesa & Mountjoy 2014; Borell 2015; Mackay & Guinness 2019; Guinness & Besnier 2016; Uperesa 2022). From the perspective of Māori athletics, Hokowhitu (2004) and Borell (2015) argue that Pacific Islander masculinity has been shaped by colonial perspectives—defined through European ideals that stigmatize Indigenous masculinity as savage and in need of control, while redirecting it toward nationalistic competition. While

acknowledging that sport is increasingly intertwined with Indigenous cultural sensibilities, Uperesa (2022) notes that it continues to reinforce the hyper-masculinity and hyper-femininity in a construction of Samoan identity. Turning to artistic expressions, Stephanie Nohelani Teves's (2018) study of patriarchal power in Hawaiian hip hop shows how the performance of heteronormative masculinity became a means by which Indigenous men reclaimed sovereignty, further marginalizing and excluding Indigenous women.

Island reggae songs not only reproduce stereotypical Pacific Islander masculinity and femininity but also challenge those stereotypes. Given that most of the island reggae singers are men, I also apply the discussion of decolonial Indigenous masculinity in my analysis. Scholars identify forms of resistance to colonial masculinity within Indigenous communities, where positive expressions of masculinity emphasize relationality and responsibility (Innes & Anderson 2015). Leah Snider (2015) theorizes a decolonial Indigenous masculinity through the concept of *complementarity*—a social balance of roles and responsibilities between the individual and the community. This framework also helps disentangle self-determination from nationalism: “Self-determination depends on a complementary relationship between independence and interdependence in order to avoid the potential oppression or subordination of certain individuals or groups of people within a community” (ibid.: 64).

While the last section of this chapter discusses the resistance and reclamation efforts of Pacific Islander women through the lens of Native womanhood, I draw a connection to my discussion of temporality introduced in Chapter One. For Indigenous

women, living within a white supremacist, heteropatriarchal society often entails a violent and restrictive experience of time. As early feminist theory has pointed out, time is gendered. Julia Kristeva's (Kristeva, Jardine, & Blake 1981) concept of "Women's Time" critiques the masculinist structure of national time—a linear, forward-moving, progress-oriented temporality that marginalizes and confines female bodies. Building on this, Elizabeth Freeman (2010; 2021) argues that capitalist modernity imposes a life path governed by *chrononormativity*—expecting bodies to function according to logics of productivity. This heterosexual-patriarchal time structure is embedded in social norms and state operations, which organize people's lives through institutionalized timelines such as birth, marriage, and death through the lens of gender and sexuality (Halberstam 2005; Luciano 2007).

In response to the colonial foundations of heteronormativity, scholars focusing on women of color have emphasized that time is not universal but heterogeneous—shaped by collective memory, ancestral histories, and lived experiences (Freeman 2010; Lorde 1983; Hartman 1997). Building on this, Mark Rifkin (2017), in his theorization of settler time, argues that while queer time offers alternatives to heteronormativity, it may still operate within colonial frameworks. He therefore calls for Indigenous peoples to reclaim their own temporalities as a means to resist and reconfigure the gendered and temporal norms imposed by settler colonialism.

In the effort to reclaim both temporal and gendered sovereignty, Kim Anderson's (2016) articulation of Native womanhood offers a grounded framework for understanding Indigenous women's experiences and resistances, which I find useful to apply to

diasporic Pacific Islander women's assertion of continental islandness. She defines Native womanhood as an ongoing act of self-recognition—"an ongoing exercise that involves mental, physical, spiritual, and emotional elements of our being" (ibid.: xxv). This recognition of being is also deeply temporal. Anderson writes that it is "a physical, spiritual, and emotional remembering that can link us to a time when Indigenous women had positions of respect and authority in their communities. We recognize what we once were and what we still carry through the generations" (ibid.: xxv).

Regarding the creation of a Native womanhood, I also apply Liz Przybylski's (2023) concept of sonic sovereignty to theorize diasporic Pacific Islander women's island-making. In her research on Indigenous women artists in the popular music industry, Przybylski describes that "the popular music industry is structured in such a way as to amplify insider voices and to deprivilege listening to creators and creations that are too far from established norms" (ibid.:185). This results in some Indigenous women artists choosing to create their own spaces where they can define who hears their music and how it is heard—and, as importantly, ensure that it is heard by the right audience—instead of catering to an industry where their music is often not heard or even dismissed. Przybylski uses Audra Simpson's (2014) concept of refusal to disappear and refusal to be seen as citizenship to analyze such actions as acts of refusal: "Together with audiences, musicians' intent on circulating these messages access power by making their own spaces and, in them, refusing to disappear" (Przybylski 2023: 185).

In the next section, I analyze how island reggae songs perform tensions between Indigenous and Western heterosexual femininity and masculinity in Pacific Islander

communities through J Boog's "Let's Do It Again" (2011) and its music video. I ground my analysis in Indigenous scholarship on both feminist and masculinity studies, particularly their discussions of gendered relationships to land, island, and Indigeneity.

Women in the Song

In Southern California's island reggae scene and across island music, as discussed in Chapter One, romantic storytelling and praise of the islands are two central musical themes. I observe an interrelation between these themes, as artists often use the natural beauty of the islands to metaphorize women, and vice versa. In this section, I examine J Boog's "Let's Do It Again" to show how women are intricately linked with island nature in lyrical metaphors that shape the representation of men and women in island reggae. Additionally, as I have observed in live performances, songs are often presented in contexts that diverge from their original lyrical content. I therefore analyze live performances, online comments, and a rewritten version by CHamoru singer Pia Mia to demonstrate how masculinity and femininity are intricately woven into discourses of cultural identity and islandness.

"Let's Do It Again" is one of the most popular island reggae tracks in the scene, performed by Southern California-born Pacific Islander artist J Boog, and it also reflects the male dominance within the island reggae scene. According to Spotify streaming data, the five most-played island reggae songs on Spotify are "Let's Do It Again" by J Boog (230,789,881 plays), "Wade into Your Water" by Common Kings (67,086,840 plays),

“Ehu Girl” (55,423,837 plays) and “Cool Down” (51,084,309 plays) by Kolohe Kai, and “Love Me” by Fia (32,380,347 plays).⁷⁷ All these artists are male. Among them, only Kolohe Kai was born and raised in Hawai‘i. J Boog was born in Carson, California, and started his career in Hawai‘i. Common Kings are from Orange County, California, and are still based there. Fia was born in Harbor City, California, and raised in Hawai‘i. In contrast, excluding the collaboration “Don’t Say Goodbye” where Tree Vaifale features in Sammy Johnson’s song with 24,058,864 plays, the most-played song by a female island reggae artist on Spotify is Anuhea’s “Simple Love Song” with 12,753,561 plays, followed by her song “Higher than the Clouds” with 11,213,459 plays.⁷⁸ Notably, love songs are particularly popular in the island reggae scene. Except for Kolohe Kai’s “Cool Down,” which praises the scenery and culture of Hawai‘i, the other four top songs are all love songs featuring a man expressing his love for a woman.

“Let’s Do It Again” (2011) is a must-play song for DJs at island reggae performances. I attended J Boog’s concert in the summer of 2022. When he sang “Let’s Do It Again,” I heard all of the audience enthusiastically shouting the chorus: “Nice to nice to know ya, let’s do it again. How we did it on a one-night stand. Girl, I wanna be more than a friend, to you” along with J Boog. Born and raised in Long Beach, J Boog moved to Hawai‘i under George “Fiji” Veikoso’s mentorship and successfully became a major star in island reggae. His music transcended genre barriers, attracting many non-reggae and non-Islander fans. Once, during a lunch at UCR, a campus staff member who

⁷⁷ Spotify. Manually checked all artists’ accounts. Accessed on May 15, 2024.

⁷⁸ Ibid.

overheard my research mentioned that she was not familiar with island reggae but immediately recognized J Boog, as his music was the only island reggae she had heard before. Below is the lyric:

Nice to nice to know ya let's do it again
How we did it on a one night stand
Girl I wanna be more than a friend, to you
Nice to nice to know ya let's do it again
How we did it on a one night stand
Girl I wanna be more than a friend, to you
It was like food for all of my senses
Our time priceless, no expenses
Like water to all dem dry trenches
She had a theme song for her every entrance
We had a dinner and a movie, fire up di dubie
Raised vibes for this girl scoot closer to me
I call her babe, she call me boogie
Her beauty, intelligence really moves me

This isn't my first rendezvous inna relationship
Well rounded graduated with love certificates ay
She wanna a lover, a lover I'll be
Stimulate her body and mentally ay
Nuh fuss mi straight up mi no lie
Use up me shouldah if you want cry-ah
My love is no not like no dem other guys
Feel sorry for who signed up cause mi a win first prize

She lookin' pretty real nice
Lightly remote she has the perfect body type
Being with you is like being in paradise
Never seen a girl that can live up to da hype ay ay ay
She is Hawaiian, Samoan Fijian, Maori, Tahiti ma Tonga
Big ups to Caribbean girl and keep it proper
All me Latinos and all a me me sexy mamas
Boogie, Corleone giving you a holla

The lyrics show that this song centers on a man who wishes to continue a romantic relationship with a woman he shared a one-night stand with, expressing his sexual adoration for her through vivid lyrics. His affection is conveyed through three layers of lyrical content: his recollection of the good time they shared, his admiration for her beauty, and his emotional and physical desire for her. The portrayal of their time together includes lines like,

“It was like food for all of my senses.
Our time is priceless, no expenses.
Like water to all dem dry trenches”

and

“We had a dinner and a movie, fire up di dubie.
Raised vibes for this girl scoot closer to me,
I call her babe, she calls me boogie.”

In these lines, J Boog presents a heterosexual relationship in which the woman is depicted as essential to the man, likened to food and water.

The metaphor of water, particularly in the line “Like water to all dem dry trenches” that articulates thirst (which implies horniness), echoes David “RND” Duenas’s observation that island reggae from Hawai‘i often uses the ocean and water as metaphors in response to the island environment, and further takes on erotic and sexual connotations, becoming part of the symbolic portrayal of women. The erotic depiction is also used in describing the woman’s physical beauty, and this complements the man’s adoration and reinforces the theme suggested by the title, “Let’s Do It Again.” J Boog uses lines such as “Her beauty, intelligence really moves me,” “She had a theme song for her every entrance,” and “She lookin’ pretty real nice. Lightly remote she has the perfect

body type” to describe her allure. Although he briefly mentions her intelligence as part of her appeal, the focus of the lyrics remains on her physical appearance. Also, the line “She had a theme song for her every entrance” employs an erotic and sexual metaphor, linking the woman’s sensual presence with music and performance.

The lyrics convey the man’s desire for the woman by highlighting his masculinity in the qualities that make him deserve of her. On the one hand, such masculinity seems based on relationality instead of conquest ideology in heteropatriarchal masculinity. In the lines, “This isn’t my first rendezvous inna relationship. Well-rounded graduated with love certificates ay” and “Nuh fuss mi straight up mi no lie. Use up me shouldah if you want cry-ah,” he presents his emotional availability, loyalty, and experience in romantic relationships. The line “Use up me shouldah if you want cry-ah” in particular conveys a form of protective masculinity, offering comfort while asserting his role as a dependable partner.

On the other hand, his masculinity and capacity to be an ideal partner are expressed partly through competition with other men. In the lyrics, “My love is not like no dem other guys. Feel sorry for who signed up cause mi a win first prize,” romance is framed as a contest, suggesting he sees himself as the best candidate for her affection. While this rhetoric is embedded within a broader portrayal of emotional availability and mental connection—and can be read as a performative assertion of a relational masculinity, enacted through emotional depth and relational confidence—it also risks positioning the woman as a prize to be won, potentially reducing her agency.

These lyrics present a complex portrayal of gender dynamics: masculinity is emphasized through heterosexual relationships and male competitiveness, yet it is also defined relationally, through care, responsibility, and emotional connection with a partner. Masculinity here encompasses both tenderness and competition. The Pacific Islander woman is positioned as both decisive and objectified and also eroticized. While the eroticism in the lyrics could be read through Audre Lorde's (1978) notion of the erotic—as a form of sexual desire that affirms the body's vitality and sovereignty, celebrating its capacity to feel, to connect, and to envision a future, I do consider this song an example of reclaiming Indigenous sovereignty through a resurgence of Indigenous bodies. However, the lyrics' assertive masculinity and the intertwining of sexual undertones with natural metaphors also perpetuate a sexualized portrayal of Polynesian female bodies rooted in colonial logics, as noted in Arvin's work (2019).

This imposed stereotype of Pacific Islander women becomes even more apparent in the music video. The official music video of "Let's Do It Again" visualizes the intricate racial and sexual dynamics embedded in the representation of Polynesian Indigeneity. Filmed in Hawai'i and rich with island imagery, the video also constructs a gendered vision of islandness through its visual portrayal of women. This music video begins with a short intro not included in the recording track, featuring a Pasifika man dancing the fire knife dance, accompanied by the caption "Somewhere in Hawai'i," indicating that this story takes place in Hawai'i and also reinforcing the presence of Polynesian men in this story.

As the drumbeat starts with J Boog's vocal, the video transitions to aerial shots of the island, shoreline, beach, mountains, and trees. When J Boog begins singing the lyrics, the scenes switch between him standing in these natural settings, clips of a group of women in bikinis⁷⁹ walking on the beach, and a clip of a woman waking up in bed. From the attire of the group of women, who were wearing wood or shell earrings, plumeria flowers in their hair, and black pearl necklaces, the vision tells the audience these are Pacific Islander women, and from the location they are at, the beach, these women are associated with nature. These women are filmed beside the beach, resonating with J Boog's lyrical metaphor of water and nature when describing women. Additionally, the women are shown displaying their bodies, aligning with J Boog's praise of their physical attractiveness in his lyrics.

Beyond reproducing the colonial gaze through its portrayal of Pacific Islander women, this music video, aligned with its lyrics, also emphasizes Pacific Islander men's masculinity. Like Teves's observation, even though "Let's Do it Again" is not a hip hop song, this music video adopts the visual rhetoric of masculinity commonly found in hip hop music videos, specifically resembling the style of the classic African American hip hop artist Dr. Dre's "Still D.R.E." (1999) video, with its lowriders, bikini-clad women, and groups of men on a beach. Given the significant influence of hip hop on island reggae, especially in Southern California, it is interesting that this video replicates the gendered and sexualized visual codes commonly found in hip hop videos. In the second

⁷⁹ Bikini also comes from a continuing history of colonialism and ecological racism on Bikini Island and the broader Marshall Islands. See Teresia K. Teaiwa's article (1994), "bikinis and other s/pacific n/oceans".

half of the video, symbols of masculinity intensify as J Boog's physical interactions with women increase, portraying masculinity as entangled with heterosexual relationships and the possession of women.

During the second chorus, J Boog is seen holding hands with a woman in a swimsuit. As he sings "Nuh fuss mi straight up mi no lie," several lowrider cars appear behind him, amplifying his masculine image. Lowriders, often associated with masculinity, also gesture toward J Boog's Southern California background, as lowrider culture originated in the region's Chicano communities (Tatum 2011). As these symbols of masculinity emerge, J Boog begins to share the frame with groups of bikini-clad women. These women wave in front of the cars, and one kisses him on the cheek as he sits in the driver's seat. The video continues with scenes of J Boog and other men driving cars accompanied by women, including a shot of three women by the roadside, swaying their bodies and gazing into the camera.



Image 23: A screenshot of J Boog's "Let's Do It Again" music video.

These visual languages resonate with Diane Railton and Paul Watson's analysis of music videos (2011): Black masculinity is often performed around sexuality in visual languages, and this sexuality is expressed through access to women's bodies, usually not Black women. Even though J Boog's music video does not feature other non-Pacific Islander women, his lyrics mention women from other racial communities. They also note that masculinity is frequently represented not through romantic connection with an individual woman, but through the presumed availability of many women. "Whatever the genre of the video," they write, "this casual availability usually entails a social situation – the street, the neighborhood, a beach or house party, and so forth – involving groups of black men and women" (ibid.: 55). In assertion of masculinity in such visual language, this music video posits Pacific Islander women as objects to be watched, possessed, and

displayed. And thus, with the sexual-racialization in Oceania and the U.S., this framework upholds a masculinist logic that asserts male dominance through the possession of women, and in doing so, frames J Boog's and the songs' Indigeneity as something reclaimed through heterosexual conquest. As the video centers on the island, the islandness J Boog performs becomes a sexualized one—where women are symbolically aligned with the land and reduced to passive objects. In this portrayal, women's voices are notably absent.

I am not placing blame on hip hop music videos or African American communities for shaping the visual language of this music video. Rather, this example layers the racial dynamic discussed in Chapter Two: the sexual-racialized colonial violence imposed on African Americans has also shaped how Pacific Islander femininity and masculinity are constructed and performed in Southern California. This framework helps us understand that J Boog's use of similar visual language to assert Pacific Islander masculinity is embedded in the ongoing legacy of coloniality. From this perspective, I echo Indigenous studies scholars who argue that Indigenous men are also victims of imposed white supremacist, heteropatriarchal systems. Therefore, reconstructing a positive and decolonial Indigenous masculinity is essential (Innes & Anderson 2015).

Besides the colonial masculinity, the song and its music video also present an alternative portrayal of masculinity and femininity—one that, as Sneider (2015) argues, is rooted in a complementary gender relationship grounded in communal responsibility. In the lyrics, rather than reiterating a heteropatriarchal masculinity, J Boog spends more phrases emphasizing his ability to carry communal responsibilities. In the music video, a

key figure—although she appears only briefly—is the woman with whom J Boog holds hands and lies in bed, signaling her as the subject referenced in the lyrics. Unlike the other women in bikinis, her attire is more modest and does not emphasize her body in the same way. She is positioned in an equal status as J Boog, which aligns with the lyrical portrayal of her as a decisive woman, suggesting a different kind of femininity. Notably, she is also the only woman shown indoors, in a domestic setting, rather than outside in nature—disrupting the otherwise consistent symbolic association between women and the natural landscape in this music video, presenting the tensions between Indigenous and Western heterosexual masculinity and femininity.

This song offers layered portrayals of Pacific Islander femininity and masculinity; together, they reveal a complex and nuanced gender dynamic that is actively negotiated within the island reggae scene and the broader diasporic Pacific Islander community. As Diane Railton and Paul Watson (2011) remind us, “popular culture is a site where definitions of both women and feminists are produced, not simply reproduced. This impels us towards a more complex understanding of the relationships between reality and the way that reality is manifested in representation” (ibid.: 28). This music example’s intervention and re/production of Pacific Islanders’ Indigeneity, sovereignty, and islandness in relation to race and gender does not stop here.

“Let’s Do It Again” is received and remembered profoundly by Pacific Islander communities—it is a collective memory of Pacific Islanders across the Pacific. This is exemplified by a comment under the official music video on YouTube from user @lilx3089, stating, “This song is literally one of the first songs u’ll hear at every BBQ,”

which had received 5,031 likes as of May 4, 2025. Another user, @shutupandlisten4562, wrote: “Ur not pacific islander if you didn’t hear this playing at EVERY single family gathering / party 🇺🇸🇦🇺🇨🇦🇵🇭🇵🇲🇵🇲🇵🇲🇵🇲🇵🇲🇵🇲🇵🇲🇵🇲🇵🇲🇵🇲” These responses reflect the song’s deeply embedded place in Pacific Islanders’ everyday social life and its function as a marker of shared cultural identity. Furthermore, the song was one of the key tracks that brought island reggae into broader public recognition. The track has become a cultural touchstone within Pacific Islander communities, and especially for Southern Californian Islanders, J Boog is a source of pride. For many, he is not only a celebrated artist but also a symbol of communal identity. In these contexts, the islandness evoked by the song moves beyond its sexualized dimensions and instead becomes a marker of belonging, celebration, and collective pride.

Like Common Kings’ “Wade in Your Water,” discussed in the Introduction as an erotic and romantic song that becomes a near-vow of allegiance to the Kingdom of Hawai‘i during live performances, the live performances of “Let’s Do It Again” are an expression of islandness for Pacific Islanders. Both in Hawai‘i and in Southern California, I have witnessed moments when entire Pacific Islander audiences sang along to “Nice to nice to know ya let’s do it again” in unison, celebrating their shared Pacific Islander identities—one that appears to transcend gender, even though it does not. Colonial masculinity continues to function as a mechanism of colonial domination, deeply embedded in settler structures. Through lyrics that depict women—and, as in “Wade in Your Water,” symbolically feminize Hawai‘i—gender remains central to how sovereignty is imagined, negotiated, and withheld.

The colonial masculinity continues to operate as a mechanism of coloniality in Oceania and its diaspora, and also, this song remains a contested site where colonial and Indigenous masculinities struggle over cultural identity and collective memory. In 2015, Pia Mia—a female singer from Guam—rewrote this song for her single “Do It Again,”⁸⁰ featuring African American artists Chris Brown and Tyga. The track, co-written by Mia, Tyga, and George “Fiji” Veikoso, adopts a hip hop, R&B, and electronic dance music style. The music video features familiar island imagery, shorelines, beaches, and a beach party with men and women, notably without the emphasis on Pacific Islander’s masculinity.

Unlike J Boog’s video, Pia Mia’s version centers her commanding bodily presence against the backdrop of a seashore, interspersed with flashes of hula dancers and a voyager paddling a canoe. She is shown dancing with male background dancers on the beach, driving a white Jeep along the shore with her female companions, and interacting with two hip hop dancers in front of a beachside party. In these scenes, Pia Mia presents herself as a sexualized yet decisive and powerful subject, seemingly in contrast to the representation of women in J Boog’s version.

Pia Mia’s presence simultaneously aligns with and departs from the rhetoric of colonial femininity and nature. On the one hand, the video employs a blue and dark-toned filter; the beach party scenes take place at night, while the clips of the voyager and hula dancers are filmed in silhouette, all contributing to a sense of mystery. Through this

⁸⁰ Pia Mia’s “Do It Again”:
https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=cNw8A5pwbVI&list=RDcNw8A5pwbVI&start_radio=1

visual scheme, Pia Mia embodies a powerful femininity—yet this power, as Maile Arvin (2019) argues, is rooted in a mythologized and hyper-sexualized connection between femininity and nature, a trope originating from colonial discourses. On the other hand, these color tones challenge conventional representations of island nature, making it difficult for audiences to recognize the video as an island song and unsettling the colonial associations that often link Pacific Islander women with idealized, nature-bound femininity. Although the video includes various references to island life, its use of blue filters, silhouettes, sharp neon colors, and club lighting distances it from the visual language typically associated with island reggae, which tends to feature natural sunlight, warm tones, and lush landscapes. This aesthetic divergence introduces a more nuanced expression of femininity in relation to the island and presents a more complex image of Pacific Islander womanhood to the audience.



Image 24: A screenshot from Pia Mia's "Do It Again" music video.



Image 25: A screenshot from Pia Mia's "Do It Again" music video.

This aesthetic divergence in Pia Mia's video causes it to visually depart from what is commonly recognized as an island song. In doing so, it presents a form of femininity that is not immediately associated with island aesthetics and may not be legible to Islander audiences, thereby risking misreadings of Pia Mia's positionality. Pia Mia's "Do It Again" drove many online comments to criticize her for "stealing" J Boog's chorus—accusing Americans of appropriating Islander music—and questioned her qualification to sing this song, as assuming she is not a Pacific Islander. In fact, Pia Mia is CHamoru and had explicit permission from J Boog to reuse the chorus, with George "Fiji" Veikoso participating in the production. But the drastic video aesthetic and her appearance, particularly her blonde hair and her collaboration with mainstream African American

artists, led some listeners to perceive her as “American,” positioning her as an outsider or even a colonizer. One commenter @kylaaahhh, defensively wrote: “CALM DOWN ISLANDERS, Pia Mia had permission from J Boog to use that chorus, and Americans, the Islanders were just trying to tell people that these were not her own lyrics.”

This tension escalated in 2020 when both Pia Mia’s and J Boog’s versions of the song were used in TikTok dance challenges, propelling them to a new level of fame. However, the increased visibility also reignited debates around authenticity and ownership. Many Pacific Islanders took to the comments section, particularly under J Boog’s video, to assert their longstanding connection to the song, distinguishing themselves from the newer TikTok users—the outsiders. Some framed their reactions as a defense of cultural memory and authenticity. For example, a comment posted in 2020 by user @nameislani_ reads: “Islanders know this was their childhood, and we getting a bit defensive but ya know at least he getting some recognition. Other childhood faves: FIJI, sammilez, dj noiz, j boog, spawnbreezie, bob Marley.”

This debate demonstrates that J Boog’s “Let’s Do It Again” has become more than just a popular song; it has become a cultural battleground for questions of ownership, authorship, and belonging, which evokes Pacific Islanders’ resistance and resentment toward U.S. imperialism. Pia Mia, as a CHamoru woman, complicates the typical gendered association of women with nature in her music video. Yet paradoxically, despite the support from important island reggae male figures, George “Fiji” Veikoso and J Boog himself, she becomes the object of critique—her version is dismissed as not legibly “island” and, instead, read by some as emblematic of U.S. imperialism. This case

underscores how Pacific Islander women in the music industry—whether through active or passive participation, whether sexualized or not, or essentialized with nature or not—are inevitably entangled in, and often become objects and the representations of, the confluence of race, gender, Indigeneity, coloniality, and islandness across the Pacific.

Women in the Scene

In the Southern Californian and Hawai‘i’s reggae scenes, the topic of women’s underrepresentation has seldom been discussed in the scene and in the literature. Sunaina Keonaona Kale (2021) was the first scholar to address this gender issue in Hawai‘i’s reggae scene in her dissertation, noting the scarcity of female artists and the perception among female audiences that the reggae scene is comparatively less misogynistic than concerts in other genres (*ibid.*: 180). I have observed a similar situation in the Southern Californian reggae scene, as I have never encountered any harassment or felt unsafe or isolated as a worker or an audience member. Yet, the number of female workers and artists is less than their male counterparts. Every interviewee acknowledges that there are significantly fewer female artists than male artists and that women often do not achieve the same status as their male counterparts. There is a consensus amongst my interviewees that this scene needs more female artists and workers, even though they offer no clear explanation for this gender imbalance.

To explore this question, this section examines the challenges and obstacles faced by two Samoan artists, Nina and Nichola, throughout their musical journeys. I draw from the pressures they encountered within their communities, the music industry, and the

reggae scene, and argue that the underrepresentation of Pacific Islander women in the island reggae scene is a consequence of colonial heteropatriarchal structures imposed on Pacific Islander communities and their diasporas in the U.S. These structures are further compounded—and often obscured—by the heteropatriarchy embedded within both the commercial music industry and the roots reggae culture.

Island Reggae as Home

The musical paths of Nina and Nichola closely resemble those of their male counterparts, who grew up immersed in island music in family and church. Nina and Nichola, both Samoans in their late twenties to early thirties, were born and raised in Southern California—Nina in Long Beach and Nichola in Bellflower. Their early musical influences stem from the popular island music played within their families, including reggae for sure, and the worship songs sung in Samoan churches. Nina’s grandfather was a pastor, so Nina went to the church almost every day when she was a child; for her, the church is both a family space and a community space, filled with memories of music and dance. In the church, she joined the choir and acted in performances, which nurtured her interest in music and performance. Nichola’s connection to music was also deepened through family ties. Her big family has moved across the Pacific from Samoa, Aotearoa New Zealand, Australia, and then to the continental U.S. Her family has a long line of Pacific Islander artists and musicians—many of her uncles, aunties, and cousins are musicians and artists, and her uncle was a member of the renowned Samoan band Five Star.

Growing up in such an artist family, Nichola had been taught to dance Samoan dance and sing Samoan songs since her childhood, and Samoan culture and identity were passed down to her via music and dance. From church to family gatherings and important holidays, dancing, singing, and prayer were always “required”, described by Nichola. She used “engrave” and “no choice” to describe how music and dance were naturally instilled in her life and became a way to express herself. Family was how she defines island music. She said, “Because when I think about like, my childhood memories, or like just growing up, it’s like, music brings people together. Music tells the story, music tells our experiences like music carries traditions, you know, or music can just make you dance and just have good time. So, when it comes to island music, I just feel like it’s a warm hug. It just feels like something that I resonate with no matter what, even if I’m in the R&B and Neo soul genre more so.”⁸¹

Nina cited George “Fiji” Veikoso as a pivotal influence in her musical journey. Her first island reggae concert was a George “Fiji” Veikoso performance, which she attended with her family when she was five years old. This formative experience deeply shaped her sense of identity, as it was the first time she saw so many of her own people gathered in one space. She recalled, “I was four years old when I first went to my first concert ever, and my first concert ever was Fiji. ... It was like the biggest festival I’d ever been to. I still remember it today. Just how many of our own people I have seen in the scene.”⁸² George “Fiji” Veikoso’s service to the Pacific Islander community and his

⁸¹ Nichola, interview by the author, May 9, 2024.

⁸² Nina Sosefina, interview by the author, April 30, 2024.

dedication to reggae origins remained the standard for her as well. She said, “he’s always been making sure to acknowledge Indigenous people just in his movements, and how he talks, how he presents himself. ... Everything that reggae represents, he knows where he got reggae from. He’s not shy about acknowledging the truth that is within history.”⁸³ For Nina, George “Fiji” Veikoso’s performance presented the way of being Pacific Indigenous people: always acknowledging who they were and serving the community, and honoring the Afro-diasporic origins of the music. Nina recognized that she felt most connected when she sang George “Fiji” Veikoso’s songs; “just because that’s my childhood... Fiji is the standard for us,” she explained.⁸⁴

Starting with family influences, both Nina and Nichola’s musical backgrounds are inextricably linked to their Samoan Indigeneity. Both artists highlight their Samoan heritage in their Instagram bios; Nichola displays the Samoan national flag, while Nina describes herself as a “First-generation Samoan Am. (American) Woman.” Nichola’s debut post on her musician Instagram features her as a young girl, dressed in traditional Samoan attire and performing a Samoan dance. During the interview, Nichola even proudly shared that her great-grandfather participated in the independence movement against German colonization in Samoa. Recognizing the persistence of Samoan self-determination in her ancestry, Nichola described this legacy as something she carries within her character. Both Nina and Nichola expressed that uplifting and empowering their community is central to how they embody and carry their identity.

⁸³ Nina Sosefina, interview by the author, April 30, 2024.

⁸⁴ Nina Sosefina, interview by the author, April 30, 2024.

The stories of these two artists highlight musical experiences that parallel those of their male counterparts discussed in previous chapters, demonstrating that island music is shaped by meanings of sovereignty, as well as cultural and familial memory—shared across gender. However, the experiences of Pacific Islander women as professional artists differ significantly from those of Pacific Islander men. In the next part, I explore how both artists began their journeys in the music industry, along with the struggles and anxieties they face in both their careers.

The Pressure from the Community

In this discussion of community pressures, I intentionally begin with Nina’s story with Island Block Radio. This underscores the ongoing legacy of Island Block Radio and highlights her recognition of the safe spaces created by Pacific Islander men. When I asked her about sexism in the music industry, she demonstrated a clear awareness of the gender dynamics at play—but was careful not to position Pacific Islander men as adversaries to Pacific Islander women. Instead, she emphasized that the spaces fostered by Pacific Islander men were foundational in supporting the emergence of female artists in the popular music industry, grounded in a shared ethic of collaboration and community care. This ethic is also reflected in musical collaborations between male and female artists in the genre, such as J Boog and Pia Mia, and George “Fiji” Veikoso’s collaboration with the Southern California-based Samoan female artist Tenelle.

After listening to island reggae for her whole life, Nina joined Island Block Radio in 2012, introduced by Joe “Savage” Fa’avae as she was entering her twenties and

balancing college with earning an income. Recognizing Nina's interest in the scene, Joe invited her to join their "street team," responsible for promoting and selling tickets for shows and concerts on social media. Since then, Island Block Radio has been an incubator for many influential women in Southern California's island reggae scene, including Myz Lulu, the host of Island Block Network, and Ipo Mullaney, the manager of Fia and tour manager of The Green.

According to Nina, Fa'avae built his team from the community, providing opportunities that had become a launchpad for these women's careers. Mullaney recalled that she was initially just hanging out with some Southern California island reggae artists, including Lulu, while working as a teacher in Hawai'i. She was then asked to assist with their Hawai'i tours, where she discovered her passion for tour management. Eventually, Mullaney moved to Southern California and joined Island Block Radio, promoting shows alongside Myz Lulu and Nina. Mullaney soon found herself invited to more performances, with Fa'avae encouraging her to start her own career in tour management. Many artists and workers, like Mullaney and Myz Lulu, were encouraged and connected to broader networks by Fa'avae to help launch their careers. Nina is currently navigating her journey to becoming an artist with Island Block Network, too.

Nina did not start her music career immediately after her experience with Island Block Radio because she was too scared of being judged by her community. Instead, she developed a side project selling cookies to secretly pay for vocal lessons for five years. She explained in the interview that, while the Pacific Islander community was all about family, such tight bonds could empower community members but sometimes brought

pressure. Nina shared her fear of being judged for switching careers multiple times and for her singing, saying, “because everyone would be seeing my every move, everyone would be seeing, like, they know that I was a cookie girl, personal trainer, and promoter for Island Block. So, I was like, damn, everyone’s gonna be like, oh, all of a sudden you wanna sing, and I did get those whispers.”⁸⁵ Nina overcame this hesitance during the pandemic when she started to lose family members, “I realized, you know, I don’t care about what everyone thinks, I’m going to do it. Life is too short.”⁸⁶

Nichola shared similar concerns about community judgment. When discussing her music, she emphasized that it was a pursuit of joy, which she defined as feeling free. She explained, “I’ve been in survival mode for so long. And by survival mode, it’s just like a mindset of lack or a mindset of always feeling like I need something.”⁸⁷ Initially, I thought this survival mode was about being overworked to cover the cost of living, but later, I noticed a strong desire for freedom that contrasted with this survival mode, as she repeatedly mentioned it. I heard her desire for self-determination on her own terms rather than by her community’s standards, while her dedication to the community was also prominent in her goals. Then I realized that this survival mode involved feeling constrained in how she expressed herself within community expectations. She explained, “A lot of dualities in colonization. Duality in colonization is real.”⁸⁸ When I asked her to elaborate, her volume lowered, “Mormon.” Growing up in a Samoan Mormon church,

⁸⁵ Nina Sosefina, interview by the author, April 30, 2024.

⁸⁶ Nina Sosefina, interview by the author, April 30, 2024.

⁸⁷ Nichola, interview by the author, May 9, 2024.

⁸⁸ Nichola, interview by the author, May 9, 2024.

she was always required to comply with church rules, and these rules had been the persistent voice defining her identity as a Samoan woman. Nichola loved her community but also felt restricted by it.

Both Nina's and Nichola's experiences reveal that Pacific Islander women face community pressures when they deviate from conventional expectations of womanhood. As discussed in the previous chapter, diasporic Pacific Islander churches play a crucial role in building community and preserving cultural knowledge. Meanwhile, Nichola's experience shows how conservative gender ideologies—rooted in European religious systems—have also been instilled in these communities via community formation in churches. This aligns with Tongan scholar Fuifuilupe Niumeitolu's (2019) analysis of Tonga, in which she illustrates how European racial projects centered on whiteness and heteropatriarchy have shaped the formation of the modern Tongan nation. She argues that U.S. religious institutions, such as Mormon churches, embed white heteropatriarchy into the construction of Tonganness, which later influences gender norms in Tongan communities in the U.S.

Additionally, the pressures both Nina and Nichola experience from their communities reflect conventional life paths shaped by a capitalist, heteropatriarchal framework defined by *chrononormativity* (Freeman 2011). Also, the gendered community obligations and cultural authorities—often shaped by heteropatriarchal norms, as Hokowhitu (2004) argues—continue to influence gender roles within the community. Furthermore, their sense of responsibilities to the community resonates with Gershon's (2012) research on diasporic Samoans; she highlights a paradox: cultural

identity and authority are often tied to the obligation to community in practices—her example is monetary exchanges for rituals—yet fulfilling these obligations also creates pressure. This is especially true as these responsibilities are compounded by the draining effects of capitalist and individualist systems, which create tension between practicing their cultural identity while performing their individual subjectivities.

Misogyny in the Music Industry

Both artists shared that the music becomes an escape from social pressures and a window for self-expression. However, when these Pacific Islander women overcome their hesitance to become professional performers, inequity, incompatibility, and objectification are the side effects of pursuing a music career. In the capitalist music industry, the stable financial situation is always the first barrier that stops these artists from starting their journey in their early years. Nina had a full-time job, as well as being a personal trainer and a cookie baker, to pay for her living and vocal training before she started her performing career in her late twenties; at the time I interviewed her, she worked in a retail company to support her music career. Even though she had been a musician for her whole life, Nichola also did not choose to become a professional artist in her early twenties. Same as Nina, Nichola worked several jobs for college tuition and became a flight attendant in New York.

Later, once they were financially prepared to devote themselves to the music industry, unequal payment made their journey turbulent. Among all struggles, the female singers I interviewed emphasized that the most urgent and challenging skill to learn in

their careers was how to fight for fair payment. Nina, for example, pointed out the importance of claiming a feasible income from her labor, a key lesson she learned from Fa'avae. While it is already difficult for musicians to make a living from their music, female artists often face even greater challenges due to lower pay compared to their male counterparts (Kahlert, Cirisano & Oleksiyenko 2024). Jazmin, an artist managed by Mullaney, shared that while her payment was protected by Mullaney, she was aware that many female artists were underpaid. Jazmin further pointed out that female managers were crucial because they understood the micro-discriminations that female artists encountered and knew how to negotiate these challenges. However, the music industry is not welcoming to female managers, who face significant difficulties in negotiating fair payment for their artists due to a lack of equal respect. The professionalism of female managers and workers is often denied, ignored, or belittled, making it harder for them to build reputations and succeed in their roles (Holt 2020). Mullaney mentioned that to bring more resources to her artists, she had to work much harder and spend more time than male managers to earn the same respect and effectively negotiate with men.

Beyond unequal pay, Nina and Nichola frequently recount experiences of objectification in the music industry. As music scholars argue, the music industry is rooted in a Eurocentric, heteropatriarchal capitalist system in which women of color must navigate the compounded effects of racism and sexism (Meintjes 2005; Taylor 2016; Mahon 2004; 2020; Holt 2020). For Pacific Islander women performers, enduring the erotic gaze of men in the industry is inevitable. Nina shared,

“Men are the most difficult part of any industry, any industry. Every industry I’ve ever been in. I’ve had a lot of jobs and a lot of entrepreneurial

experience. But in every industry, there's always a man who's trying to use your job as a way to get in your pants. Oh, yeah. I will say men, that they're the most difficult. And then they're also the ones who downplay you the most. You know, they give you respect, but only so much.”⁸⁹

Nichola echoed, “I guess when men see me, they just be like, ‘Oh My God.’ And I’d just be like, bro, I’m here to really work. ... It’s like, damn, can I ever be your friend for real? Because now you try to flirt with me.”⁹⁰ Notably, Nina and Nichola did not directly attribute their experiences to the sexual racialization of Pacific Islander women, nor did they personally encounter racial discrimination. However, they acknowledged that discrimination against women of color was common in the industry, although it was not part of their personal experience. This issue requires further exploration, which I intend to pursue in future discussions.

A story from my experience in the field illustrates how experienced these female artists are with harassment from men. One time at an Island Block concert, a drunk male audience member, who was not from the Pacific Islander community and attending our show for the first time, kept coming to the merchandise table to talk to my colleague Juan Carlos Angel Ramos, and me. While Ramos covered most of the conversations, the man wanted to shake hands with me for no reason when Ramos was talking to another customer. Suddenly, I heard Nina’s voice, “Ah-uh, nope.” She stood between me and the man and told him not to bother the staff. The man left. That was the first and only time I encountered such a situation, as our audiences are usually polite and respectful.

⁸⁹ Nina Sosefina, interview by the author, April 30, 2024.

⁹⁰ Nichola, interview by the author, May 9, 2024.

Additionally, the man's intentions were not immediately identifiable as harassment, so I was unaware of his intentions or even my own feelings, but Nina sensed it instantly. Nina concluded the risk of working with men: "People in this industry, especially men, though, I just want to highlight that they will know who they can mess with, they will know who they can manipulate, and use." These targeted gazes from men not only make them feel insecure but also undermine their professionalism, making their journey more challenging in an industry where professionalism is emphasized.

In order to navigate such a patriarchal industry, these female artists and workers have developed ways to work with men and play the masculine game. Nina presents herself with a more masculine demeanor, which I argue is adapted from heteropatriarchal models of masculinity, evident in her assertive attitude, particularly in how she initiates requests and introduces ideas before the men do. She explained,

"So I mean, instead of it's coming to any man that I want to work with, I've come to them knowing what I want out of them, or knowing what I want and asking them, hey, how would you like to be a part of this... just coming to them knowing and always expecting that they have an ulterior motive, financially, emotionally, mentally, you know, being very upfront. That's all it is. And I'm very much like, I give masculine energy. I've been told, but it's because of my experience with men early on, that I come with such conviction."⁹¹

Nina's masculine energy is not merely a mimic of masculinity. She redefined such masculinity as a strategic approach rooted in her understanding of how to achieve her goals through her observation of men. She said,

"Men are so easy to read. So easy. Men are just like they in this industry, you could tell what they want just based conversation. So, when I talk to men in any networking industry, yeah, I make sure I do the talking. And I make

⁹¹ Nina Sosefina, interview by the author, April 30, 2024.

sure I ask the questions. And I make sure I ask questions to their questions, everything. I'm very much like, if I'm gonna have a conversation with a man, I'm gonna have full conversation, and I'm gonna hear the answers they're not giving me. I'm gonna read between the lines. And unfortunately, that's just what you have to do as a woman. But fortunately, that is a superpower, you know what I mean? Like the ball in your court. And you can choose and decide whether you want to work with that person or not. Because, again, you're coming into this with a certain expectation."⁹²

However, all interviewees acknowledged that this masculine way of working did not truly liberate or empower women in the industry. They were also aware of the need to remove social pressures placed on women by the community. As a result, creating their own space for women, both in the industry and in the community, became their mission, which led them to explore beyond the boundaries of island reggae.

From Island Reggae to R&B: Heteropatriarchy in Roots Reggae

Despite remaining passionate about island reggae and still maintaining a presence in the scene, Nina acknowledged that female artists did not receive sufficient recognition within the island reggae community. As hip hop and R&B began attracting a growing number of Pacific Islander audiences, I also observed a decline in the presence of female artists in the island reggae scene. As the scene remained predominantly male, it became increasingly challenging for women to fit in and be appreciated or signed, leading to a decrease in female reggae artists. I also noticed that while many female artists performed at Island Block Network concerts and smaller venues, it was less common to see a similar

⁹² Nina Sosefina, interview by the author, April 30, 2024.

number of female artists on larger stages or festivals compared to their male counterparts. In contrast, R&B and soul music scenes have become safe spaces for female artists; importantly, these two genres are also popular and meaningful for Pacific Islander communities, so singing in these genres still serves the communities. Nina explained that R&B had a broader and more diverse audience, offering more space for female performers and an audience more accustomed to female performers. I see this action of seeking a safe space as also being an act of island-making, which I will discuss more in the next section with The Sanctuary. Here, I want to discuss the role of reggae in this gender dynamic.

In discussions of gender within roots reggae, scholars note the presence of heteropatriarchal gender norms rooted in Rastafarianism, which, in turn, reproduce European Christian values (Rowe 1980; Lake 1994; Turner 1991; Julien 2003). Jamaican dancehall scholar Carolyn Cooper (2004) compares roots reggae with dancehall, arguing that while dancehall may appear more erotic and overtly sexual in its portrayal of women, it provides greater space for female subjectivities than roots reggae. In the diasporic context, Andrea Davis's (2006) study on Caribbean immigrant reggae and dancehall in North America highlights the emphasis on hegemonic masculinity in reggae music. She argues that this performance of masculinity often functions as a response to the racial and sexual violence, as well as the economic disenfranchisement, that diasporic Caribbean men experience within neoliberal and colonial societies.

Given that island reggae draws heavily from roots reggae, it is reasonable to hypothesize that heteropatriarchy has significantly shaped the gender dynamics of the

island reggae scene. However, Joseph Pereira (1998) notes that while reggae's gender rhetoric may persist in translation, it is often modified to align with local gender norms. In the case of California—where the reggae scene has long been male-dominated—roots reggae may help explain part of the gender imbalance. Yet, because the island reggae scene constitutes a distinct cultural ecology, one deeply rooted in the Pacific Islander community, I argue that the gender dynamics within island reggae cannot be fully understood through the lens of roots reggae alone. Thus, rather than being a direct cause, the heteropatriarchy and male domination in roots reggae provide a cultural and literal framework in which the underrepresentation of Pacific Islander women becomes difficult to detect. Drawing on Nina's and Nichola's experiences of misogyny in the music industry, and considering broader gender and sexuality discourses in Oceania, I suggest that the combination of these dynamics with the heteropatriarchal structure in roots reggae allows colonial forms of masculinity to persist largely unchecked.

In this section, I examined the struggles and challenges faced by Pacific Islander female artists, including pressures from their communities, underrepresentation in the island reggae scene, and the misogyny in the broader music industry. I argue that these experiences of sexism stem from the intersected heteropatriarchal norms in the colonality of Oceanic and its diasporas, structural inequalities within the music industry, and the European heteropatriarchy in roots reggae. Following Nina and Nichola's exploration in the R&B and Soul music scenes, an act for creating an alternative space for letting their voices be heard, in the following section, I turn to the discourse on island-making for the Indigenous womanhood to explore how Nina and Nichola enact their

Indigenous femininity to create a feminist island space—one through which they articulate and define their continental islandness.

Decolonial Indigenous Praxis of Creating an Island Space: The Sanctuary

Nina and Nichola's experiences reveal how avoiding harassment, navigating negotiations, earning respect, and being treated professionally are ongoing drains on the time and energy of Pacific Islander women in the male-dominated music industry—an industry that exploits their bodies to function according to the demands of productivity. In addition, conventional community pressures and colonial constructions of masculinity and femininity place further burdens on both Pacific Islander men and women as they navigate their life paths.

In response to these exploitations, Nina and Nichola launched The Sanctuary in Long Beach in 2023. The project offers business education, open mic practices, and performance opportunities for emerging artists, with a particular focus on supporting female and independent artists in cultivating entrepreneurial and performance skills. By sharing the story of The Sanctuary, I argue that this project—an act of island-making—embodies the four stages of Native women's self-definition outlined by Anderson, creating a feminist narrative of continental islandness in practice.

- [R]esisting negative definitions of being
- [R]eclaiming Indigenous tradition
- [C]onstructing a positive identity by translating tradition into the contemporary context

- [A]cting on that identity in a way that nourishes the overall wellbeing of our communities (2016: xxvi).

The motivation for creating The Sanctuary emerged from Nichola's resistance toward the gatekeeping and exclusion in the music industry. Nichola specifically frames her motivation for creating this project as stemming from her earlier experiences in the music industry. Before becoming an independent artist, she had signed with a label and was unfamiliar with contracts, copyright, and legal rights, often encountering industry gatekeepers. She faced significant challenges in protecting her intellectual property and advocating for herself and her music. Additionally, having grown up in a community-centered environment and being taught to think collectively, she found it difficult to navigate an industry grounded in individualism and self-promotion. These experiences taught her the critical importance of gaining operational knowledge to protect herself, as well as the value of self-trust and independent thinking in navigating the music industry. Thinking individually does not equate to embracing individualism. Rather, Nichola emphasizes individual expression within a community-centered framework in The Sanctuary. This approach allows her to resist not only the conventional expectations of collectivism and community obligation—which she has sometimes found constraining—but also the dominant model of individualism that prioritizes competition and systematically excludes women, Indigenous peoples, and people of color. Nichola explained, “The music industry is all about competition and individualism, but I want to use the knowledge I get from the industry to celebrate the collectivism of my culture,”⁹³

⁹³ Nichola, interview by the author, May 9, 2024.

when she simultaneously underscored the importance of valuing all kinds of self-expression in this community. In redefining collectivity and community in a way that no one was being excluded, Nina shared a similar motivation, stating, “The motive is to put community first and put people over profits. So, the goal is to make sure that we all win, that we make sure that everyone is covered.”⁹⁴ For both artists, The Sanctuary is envisioned as a safe space for emerging artists—one where attendees do not need to cater to the music industry to be heard, receive guidance to navigate challenges the founders themselves faced, and are empowered to thrive creatively while remaining rooted in collective care.

The Sanctuary is a redefinition of island space and a reclamation of Indigenous value by Pacific Islander women’s understanding of safe space. Nichola explained that her intention in building this space was rooted in her desire to feel safe and supported in an environment. Nina described this safe space as inspired by an important Pacific Islander woman in her life—her grandmother: “People feel like they’re at home, feel like they belong, and feel protected, respected, and supported. It’s like going over to your grandma’s house, where you can show up and be yourself, and feel safe enough to express what’s on your heart.” Nina and Nichola did make sure everyone felt comfortable in this space. When I first attended their event by myself, Nichola and Nina often checked on me by silently mouthing “doing okay?” with a thumbs-up gesture to ensure I was feeling comfortable and safe.

⁹⁴ Nina Sosefina, interview by the author, April 30, 2024.

Their vision of a safe space emerges from an understanding of family and home grounded in Pacific Islander values and Pacific Indigenous protocol—what Nichola refers to as “space law”—which resonates with Przybylski’s (2023) concept of sonic sovereignty. These familial spaces stand in contrast to the pressures and social rules imposed by Christianity and broader colonial ideologies. Instead of reproducing colonial norms, The Sanctuary dismantles them, regenerating a decolonial space centered on Pacific Indigenous notions of kinship and community. In doing so, The Sanctuary embodies what Anderson (2016) identifies as the second step in Native women’s self-definition: reclaiming Indigenous tradition.

I also see this safe space as a resistance to the misogyny in the music industry, even though Nina and Nichola both emphasized that was not their intention in creating this space. In my experience of attending The Sanctuary at the end of July 2025, it was an open-mic event that took place on the Hyatt hotel rooftop. This event was open for attendees to share their recent works or simply do karaoke. There was a European-looking man who registered to be on stage. Before he went on stage, Nina introduced him, explaining that she and Nichola met him in the hotel lobby when the man was checking out of another hotel. The man had come to attend another large music festival in Long Beach, but Nina and Nichola welcomed him to the event. The man’s short poem was more like small talk—it was still a work in progress—but attendees still greeted and cheered him. After his performance, the man stayed, enjoyed the show, and gave positive responses to every performer throughout the entire event. This attendee represented Nina and Nichola’s concept of this space: this is not a female-only space, nor a Pacific Islander

or people of color-only space; yet, this is a space that Nina and Nichola, two Samoan women, can decide who is welcomed and who is not, and their standard comes from Indigenous protocol: those who are respectful and take responsibility are welcomed, deliberately making it unwelcoming to misogyny.

The third step—constructing a positive identity by translating tradition into contemporary contexts—is reflected in Nina and Nichola’s approach to community-building. I further argue that their actions reflect an intention to reimagine capitalism through Indigenous perspectives, simultaneously challenging colonial structures and affirming Indigenous values in the present. The events at The Sanctuary are not free, but like most concerts hosted by Island Block Network, the ticket prices are accessible—for example, the one I attended only cost \$30 and included a drink. Given that it took place on the rooftop of the Hyatt Hotel near the Port of Long Beach, the event could easily have taken a more commercial approach and charged higher prices. Yet in this context, money was not treated as a profit-driven motive but rather as a tool to sustain this island space within a capitalist structure, serving the needs of their communities.

Being aware of the financial inequities that female artists often face in the music industry, Nina and Nichola critically trace these struggles to the Western ideologies of conquest, exploitation, and competition that gave rise to capitalism. In our interview, when the conversation turned to money, Nina explained, “Our first check goes to our family or goes into our family. That’s just basic knowledge. Like, we know that our people don’t have the resources and the money. So, if I have the resources, and I have the

money to spare, then I'm gonna give it to my community.”⁹⁵ Based on Nina and Nichola's intentions, even though the structure of capitalism is intricate and layered, confining Indigenous people in multiple forms, and their project sometimes had to be canceled due to a lack of funding, I still optimistically view this project as a challenge to coloniality and capitalism.

It became clear in this event that the “money” Nina referred to extended beyond financial capital—it encompassed resources, knowledge, support, and a means of survival and prosperity for the community. Following this logic, rather than framing community care through convention or monetary contribution, The Sanctuary challenges capitalist, professionalized, and heteropatriarchal logics at a deeper level, disrupting gatekeeping structures that perpetuate exclusion and exploitation. This is not a space where performers are expected to be polished or professional. For example, at the open-mic event, most performers shared works-in-progress—a hip hop artist from Riverside had only completed a minute of his lyrics, and another performer recited a personal poem about her former close friend, created without any intention of publication or industry recognition. Yet Nina and Nichola listed each performer's social media accounts in advance for the audience to follow, affirming that these expressions were recognized and valued as art. In doing so, they reinterpreted Indigenous collectivism through practices of open access and a refusal to conform to imposed Western logics of competition and professionalism. This work not only constitutes a revolutionary intervention in the

⁹⁵ Nina Sosefina, interview by the author, April 30, 2024.

capitalist norms of the music industry but also enacts Indigeneity through reciprocal, relational, and decolonial practices grounded in community care in contemporary.

Finally, the fourth step—acting on that identity to nourish the overall well-being of the community—is embodied in The Sanctuary’s mission, which uplifts Pacific Islander women and supports the broader Long Beach arts community across race, gender, and ethnicity. When I initially described The Sanctuary as a space specifically for Pacific Islander women in my early writings, Nichola gently corrected me, emphasizing that the project was created for everyone, with no intention of exclusion. At The Sanctuary event I attended, there were about twenty attendees. Most were people of color, though Pacific Islanders were not the majority. Each attendee knew Nina and Nichola for different reasons, highlighting the diverse relationships that formed this community. Rather than defining the project as a Pacific Islander-only space, it is better understood as an island space that Pacific Islander women created for a broader community of color and for those who recognize and value its purpose. In the Southern California reggae scene—where every day interracial relationships are often influenced by male-dominated power dynamics—Nina and Nichola use this project to redefine what such relationships can be: ongoing, safe, and free from the pressure to perform or prove their readiness.

The island space that is ongoing, safe, and grounded in care for a broader community—where Nina and Nichola define themselves on their own terms and remain free from imposed settler-colonial and capitalist structures on the continent—embodies their expression of Native womanhood. Honoring and serving the diasporic Pacific Islander community remains central to Nina and Nichola’s purpose. She added that her

commitment to supporting the broader community was something she learned from island-based practices of collective care. Through The Sanctuary, Nina and Nichola honor their heritage by applying the principles of islandness to a wider community, embedding their Indigeneity into a new, inclusive space rooted in reciprocity and relationality to their environments and neighbors

Nina and Nichola's practice of Native womanhood resists the multiple forms of exploitation that Indigenous women face in a heteropatriarchal society. They reclaim their Indigeneity and translate it into a contemporary context by redefining collectivism and community responsibility—centering self-expressions while reinterpreting how collectivist values can navigate within capitalist structures. Through these practices, they enact a form of feminist islandness that nourishes both the Pacific Islander community and the broader artistic communities of Southern California.

Finally, I want to connect their expression of Native womanhood to the wider island music scene to show how their practices have also enriched and expanded that space. In late 2024, Nichola and Nina organized a series of performances at the House of Blues Anaheim restaurant, an opportunity that emerged after Nichola's performance at the Island Block Network concert on February 24, 2024. Impressed by her talent, venue staff invited her to return for additional shows. Rather than keeping the opportunity for herself, Nichola extended it to other artists of color, predominantly women, she and Nina had connected with through The Sanctuary, curating a recurring event titled GEM SESSIONS by Nichola, where multiple artists co-performed on the same night. Although not all the performers were Pacific Islanders, the event's origins and the strong participation of

Pacific Islander audiences signal that GEM SESSIONS continues the safe space created by Joe and the Island Block Network team at House of Blues and expands it to the broader people of color community in Southern California. In this way, Nina and Nichola carry forward that legacy as younger Pacific Islander women, telling their stories and practicing their islandness in the continental U.S.

Conclusion

In this chapter, we discuss J Boog's "Let's Do It Again" to learn how colonial sexual-racialization in Oceania has impacted the performance of Pacific Islander femininity and masculinity in island reggae music, and how island reggae, as a form of Indigenous storytelling, impacts people's understanding of Indigeneity and islandness. Simultaneously, we also see that within the same song, Pacific Islander artists still provide an Indigenous masculinity that is rooted in relationality. In Pia Mia's "Do It Again," I also present how Pacific Islander women reverse the imagined association between women and nature, yet inevitably remain the object or representative of the battles over race, gender, islandness, and sovereignty.

In the section half part of this chapter, I use the stories of the two Samoan artists, Nina Sosefina and Nichola, supplemented with accounts from other women in the scene, such as Ipo Mullaney and Myz Lulu, to reveal moments of inspiration, empowerment, struggle, and pressure that Pacific Islander women experience in the Southern California island reggae scene and the music industry. I present that the underrepresentation of

Pacific Islander women in the island reggae scene derives from the heteropatriarchal structures rooted in the coloniality of Oceania, the music industry, and the history of roots reggae. Ultimately, I use the story of The Sanctuary to demonstrate that, despite numerous obstacles, Pacific Islander women in Southern California embody Native womanhood by creating island spaces where they can self-define their Indigeneity and build ongoing, relational, and decolonial communities that resist imposed Western heteropatriarchal capitalism. Through actions such as embracing their identities as Pacific Islander women, redefining Indigeneity through feminist experience, and applying this reimagined Indigeneity to nourish their communities, they enact a form of Native womanhood that expresses their version of continental islandness.

Conclusion

In the journey of seeking continental islandness through Southern California island reggae, we walked through the history of urban island music via Local Culture and learned how diasporic Pacific Islanders connect their ancestry with their continental present, envisioning an Indigenous future on the continent. Through the story of Island Block Radio, we saw how the establishment of the scene is rooted in everyday relational interracial interactions—particularly in shared spaces with other racial minorities in Los Angeles, such as African American and Afro-Caribbean communities. In the cases of the Cali Vibes Festival and the Marley Festival, we observed how interracial conversations around race and gender continue and shift through the commercialization of island reggae. At the same time, from the example of ONE LOVE TONGA, we saw the agency of diasporic Pacific Islanders in transforming commercial space into their own island space—one that reconnects with ancestral lands in Oceania.

Focusing on diasporic Islanders' agency in events like the Mai Tai Festival and the Samoan Heritage Festival, we witnessed how they navigate Pacific tourism and colonial infrastructures by collaborating with municipal bureaucracies and engaging with cultural commodities—appearing to comply on the surface, yet subtly twisting and subverting these structures through their own interpretations and needs, remaining rooted in their Indigeneity and embodied in continental islandness. In the final chapter, we delved into the Oceanic colonial project's sexual-racialization through the essentialization of the island, particularly in its impact on Pacific Islander women—structures that continue to constrain both Pacific Islander men and women, from Oceania to the U.S. We also

examined how the music industry and reggae culture have imposed additional layers of heteropatriarchal struggle onto Pacific Islander women. Through the stories of Nina and Nichola, we saw how they root their narratives in Indigenous feminist praxis, enriching the framework of continental islandness with their voices and experiences.

In the conclusion, we return to the Pacific Island Ethnic Art Museum (hereafter PIEAM), a space that stands as an island within the continent—an intergenerational space dedicated to diasporic Pacific Islanders, where ancestral presence lives on and continues to inspire new thought and creativity among younger generations. Through the exhibition of *Te 'Iti Nei Te Marama: The Moon Is Rising* and its musical event, *Jam Session*, we see that within such an island space—where continental islandness is continually practiced and reimagined—a future is being envisioned and brought into being.

In this last ethnography, I begin by introducing the stories of PIEAM and the *Te 'Iti Nei Te Marama* exhibition to demonstrate how island space and relational time function as anchors for the diasporic community. Next, I examine the interactions between Island Block Network and PIEAM to reveal the dialogue and relationships behind the performances. Finally, I focus on the *Jam Session* performances of Siaosi, Jason J, Lea Love, and Bo Napoleon—four reggae artists from different backgrounds—to explore how they express their perceptions of continental islandness through reggae music.



Image 26: Bo Napoleon performed in Jam Session in PIEAM

A Home Outside from Home: Pacific Island Ethnic Art Museum

The Pacific Island Ethnic Art Museum is the only Pacific-themed museum in the continental U.S. The museum is located in Long Beach, where a huge Pacific Islander community resides, and is “a home outside from home”, described by many of my interviewees. This museum was established by Dr. Robert Gumbiner, a Southern Californian physician and a pioneer of health maintenance organizations who founded the FHP International Cooperation, which established healthcare centers in the western states, Guam, and the Micronesia area since the early 1970s. His great dedication to the

Micronesia area is also shown in his Pacific art collections. In 1994, he established the Ethnic Art Institute of Micronesia on the island of Yap, Micronesia. In 2008, he decided to establish the Pacific Island Ethnic Art Museum in Long Beach, California, near the Museum of Latin American Art, which he founded in 1996. More than eighty percent of the museum collections are from him.

Dr. Gumbiner's contributions to healthcare in Guam and to PIEAM are undeniable, yet the origin of PIEAM still reflects the common stories shared by all non-Western cultures, whose arts were collected by travelers, settlers, missionaries, or government workers from settler countries. Nevertheless, it is regarded as a community center and a pivotal point in community development. Since its establishment, PIEAM has served the local Pacific Island community by showcasing ancestral pieces and providing a gathering space.

Since 2019, Fran Lujan has become the first Pacific Islander director of PIEAM, and she has further restored the relational time in this space. She has offered opportunities for contemporary artists and involved more community members in curating events. Lujan broke away from the traditional academic canon and the static nature of museum art pieces by inviting musicians, dancers, and community members to host workshops within the museum space. This contrasted with the past practice, where such workshops were only held in the museum garden. This marked a shift away from the Western museologist gaze, allowing for deeper community involvement. As Samantha Olvera recalled in the interview,⁹⁶ she first visited PIEAM in 2018 after moving from San

⁹⁶ Samantha Olvera, interview by the author, March 27, 2023.

Diego to Long Beach for college. At the time, before Lujan's directorship, she described the museum as feeling "cold" and didn't yet sense a strong presence of the community during that initial visit.

Now, PIEAM is filled with deep spiritual presence. Fran Lujan always emphasizes, in this space, that the stones, shells, baskets, weaves, and art crafted by Pacific ancestors are not mere objects; they embody history and memory from nature to human beings, acting as tangible representations of the ancestors themselves. In a space filled with spiritual belief, these items are understood to actively respond and interact with their descendants. For example, at PIEAM, there is a Hawaiian pahu drum known for joining in during important conversations. The pahu often emits knocks or sounds during moments of lively or meaningful discussion. On one occasion, when Turori was speaking about colonialism in Guam, the pahu knocked. Lujan would often say with a smile, "The pahu agrees with us." Such continual interaction with the ancestors, the past, in the present, in the new environment of California, again, resonates with what we have been discussing in the first chapter, De Vos' spiralic temporality (2020), that the past, present, and the future coexist and are always in conversation.

While volunteering at PIEAM, I noticed that Fran Lujan often refers to it as a "spiritual home" when introducing the museum to visitors—many of whom are referred by university professors for course credit or by the nearby Museum of Latin American Art, also supported by the Robert Gumbiner Foundation. Fran recognizes that most visitors are unfamiliar with Pacific Island cultures and are more accustomed to conventional museum settings where artworks are treated as objects. In contrast, she

views each piece in the museum as a subject—one that carries the histories and memories of Pacific ancestors. Referring to PIEAM as a “spiritual home,” she encourages visitors to approach the space with respect and mindfulness, emphasizing that it embodies Pacific Island cultures, histories, and spiritual beliefs.

Indeed, after hearing Fran Lujan’s introduction, visitors become noticeably more attentive and reflective within the space. Moreover, her use of the term “spiritual home” signals her deep respect for the spirits and ancestors present in the museum—particularly the Tongva people, the original caretakers of the land on which PIEAM stands and where much of the Pacific Islander community now resides. In invoking the idea of a spiritual home, Lujan nuances the power dynamics among visitors, Pacific Islanders, and Native Americans, turning the subject from visitors and the broader colonial context of museology itself to Pacific Islanders and Native Americans.

Fran Lujan does not emphasize the term “spiritual home” when speaking with Pacific Islander visitors. As she explained to me, “When I call this space a spiritual home, I don’t mean it’s a church. Every Islander has their own spiritual home—that’s their home. PIEAM is a continuation of that.” She added, “Pacific Islanders just know it. I don’t have to explain. Actually, you’re the first person who’s ever asked me about ‘spiritual home.’”⁹⁷ Indeed, all of my interviewees told me they felt at home the moment they stepped into PIEAM. The space is filled with Pacific Island cultures—canoes, bark cloth, woven fabrics, bamboo, baskets, and paintings of the ocean and ancestors. But above all, it is the presence of people that makes Pacific Islanders feel at home.

⁹⁷ Fran Lujan, interview by the author, February 17, 2023.

As a home, Fran Lujan also protects the people within PIEAM. Take me as an example: once, while I was responsible for introducing the space to two visitors, they began asking me a series of questions about the histories of various Pacific Islands shown on the map. Lujan joined the conversation and stepped in to answer their questions. She later explained that she did this intentionally—she did not want visitors to assume that everyone in the space was an expert or scholar to be tested. This kind of questioning, she noted, reflected the scientific gaze often found in museums and directed at Indigenous peoples, and reinforced the false assumption that Oceania was a homogenous region, one that could be represented by a single “expert.” Moreover, since many volunteers at PIEAM were themselves members of the diaspora who were actively learning, Lujan did not want them to feel inadequate for not knowing everything. In this way, she protects the descendants of the ancestors, helping to create and sustain a home space for the Pacific Islander community.

Fran Lujan’s practices are rooted in relationality, with her genealogy, her island homeland, her current home, and the Indigenous people of that land, which are central to the process of island-making: a practice that transforms PIEAM into an island space where Pacific Islanders can express their continental islandness. Her actions demonstrate that island-space is not something created all at once; rather, it is continually built and sustained through careful attention, relational care, and ongoing resistance to colonial structures. After laying the groundwork for this island space, the following paragraph will discuss the *Te ‘Iti Nei Te Marama: The Moon Is Rising* exhibition to illustrate how young artists and local communities collaborated with Lujan to define this island space.

Te ‘Iti Nei Te Marama and Jam Session

From October 2022 to April 2023, for the exhibition *Te ‘Iti Nei Te Marama: The Moon Is Rising* curated by Fran Lujan and Melodi Turori, Island Block Network collaborated with Pacific Island Ethnic Art Museum to launch the *Jam Sessions*—comprising six acoustic concerts by six diasporic Islander groups—at the Pacific Island Ethnic Art Museum (PIEAM) in Long Beach, California. The six performers were Dayvid Thomas, FAIVA, Bo Napoleon, Siaosi, Jason J, and Lea Love. Except for FAIVA, the string trio played Samoan ballads; the rest of the performers played predominantly reggae and R&B. The performances followed by the backyard party in the garden, serving attendees food provided by local Pacific Islander restaurants, and island reggae.

Te ‘Iti Nei Te Marama challenged Western perceptions of time by reviewing the time concept in the Māori Aotearoa lunar calendar. In *Te ‘Iti Nei Te Marama*, Turori reflected the impact of the shifted time notion in capitalist and industrial societies on the bodies of Islanders. It sought to restore the relational time and remind diasporic Islanders of the reciprocity between the environment and their bodies. As a part of the *Te ‘Iti Nei Te Marama*, the *Jam Session* had multiple meanings. It served as a celebration of the ancestral wisdom of time in the relationship with the environment and symbolized the rest time from work and the reunited time for diasporic Islanders together. Furthermore, Fran Lujan described the *Jam Session* as a familial gathering that Pacific Islander descendants celebrated with their ancestors. The participants of these sessions

encompassed not only the registered attendees who were physically present but also the ancestral spirits in the ancestral artifacts housed within PIEAM.

Performing in front of the ancestors in *Te 'Iti Nei Te Marama* that grounded in relational time, the *Jam Session* became more than an event—it functioned as a cross-temporal reunion. It allowed ancestors to witness the accomplishments of their descendants, while offering the performers a moment to connect with a lineage that stretches back to Oceania. One day, these musicians themselves will become the ancestors of this space. This event and exhibition embody what Mark Rifkin (2017) describes as expressions of temporal sovereignty: “Everyday participation within such storying produces emotional and sensory investments in placemaking that give shape to and help animate collective processes of becoming and ways of being-in-time that can be understood as expressions of temporal sovereignty” (ibid.: 45).

In the *Jam Session*, I am both a volunteer for the Island Block Network and the Pacific Island Ethnic Art Museum. I often arrived in PIEAM around 11 am, and I worked at the registration table, located right beside the museum entrance. My mission was to welcome the audience and count the population. After the performance, I would move to the backyard to take care of attendees for lunch, and then I would help clean up the venue after the attendees left. I always stayed after the Island Block colleagues left until the museum closed at 4 pm. These two organizations had very distinct working protocols and attitudes toward performances, so the six sessions were a constant dialogue between the two organizations in experimenting with the balance between honoring ancestors and hosting a party for attendees. Those performers also had their unique ways of performing

their works and addressing cultures. Hence, my position allowed me to observe the dialogue and the relationships built/re-built between Islander ancestors and their descendants from the dialogue among the two organizations and artists in PIEAM.

Te 'Iti Nei Te Marama: The Moon Is Rising

In *Te 'Iti Nei Te Marama: The Moon Is Rising*,⁹⁸ Turori and Lujan invited visitors to rethink the relationship between work and rest in the industrial society and re-construct the relational time by circulating natural materials in the space. Right beside the museum entrance, a big square board with the golden words “REST” with a lotus and the pink and purple dawn background, told the most important message to the visitors. The painting was created by Jason “JP” Pereira, the Samoan graffiti and mural artist who was the artist-in-residence at the PIEAM. In addition to the REST board, a handwritten paragraph by Pereira on a palm tree leaf read:⁹⁹

A rising story, exploring the Industrialization of time that has characterized work and rest as opposing forces. Industry values rest as a tool to improve productivity and efficiency, giving rise to a self-care industry that commercializes rest as an individual practice. Our [Pacific Islanders] ancestors were children of the ocean and islands, how did they understand what it is to work and rest in community? Rest in the intergenerational conversations between Pacific Indigenous ancestor pieces, lands, ocean, and artists living in the diaspora. Ancestors moved within space as we entered moon phases, *Te 'Iti Nei Te Marama* grew to its fullness toward a Living Handbook.

⁹⁸ Please read this section with the exhibition handbook that can be downloaded from the exhibition website: <https://www.pieam.org/te-iti-nei-te-marama>

⁹⁹ Page 2 in the handbook.

This narrative pointed out that the Pacific relational time is constructed in the connections among the ancestors, the environment, and the diasporic artists and audiences. A few steps forward from this board, Lujan put a section that functioned as a reminder to the audience that the Oceanic understanding of time was cyclical and fluid, which was based on the observation of nature. Hence, she used three art pieces related to weaving, a technique that combines natural materials, ancestral skills, and time, to demonstrate the Oceanic wisdom of time. The three pieces included the painting *Fala Fe'e* from the Samoan American artist Dan Tualapapa McMullin, sided with a weaved turtle shell tray, and a photo of a hand-woven fan posited on coconut tree leaves¹⁰⁰. In *Fala Fe'e*, the Samoan American artist Dan Tualapapa McMullin draws an abstract octopus with intersected tentacles, symbolizing the weaving and the ravel of time and change. This piece is also a presentation of the entangled natural observation and ancestral knowledge of time because octopuses in Samoan culture refer to wisdom, canniness, and cleverness. In every corner, Turori threw many questions about relationships, communities, and self-reflections, which the fast-paced industrial time did not allow visitors to think. The questions of this section were, “How is time moving around you right now?” and “Are you moving with or against the flow of time?”

In another section, as Gniadek (2017) states that history is the battleground where settler-colonialism eliminates Indigenous presence in time, Fran Lujan used the wall of Belauan storytelling boards to claim Pacific Islanders' subjectivity in telling the Pacific

¹⁰⁰ Page 1 in the handbook.

history.¹⁰¹ The storytelling board is a method used by the Belauan people of the Republic of Palau to narrate their histories and myths, involving the carving of stories onto wooden boards. Unlike the literal history written by the Western colonizer, these storytelling boards narrate the history from the Belauans' perspectives.

Meanwhile, the exhibition of these storytelling boards, shaped by Lujan and Turori's Pacific-centric curation, further layered Indigenous temporality into a critical reflection on Pacific tourism. Under the influence of tourism, these Belauan storyboards have become crafted art pieces for tourists in Palau. Within Turori's shared curation, which reclaimed the history within the Indigenous time, these storytelling boards regained their original function of narrating stories. This approach reasserted the Belauan people's subjectivity in telling their history on the boards, moving away from the touristic perspective that viewed these boards merely as souvenirs.

Noteworthy, next to these storyboards, a collage piece made by the Belauan youth artist-in-residence of PIEAM, Lucy Montelongo, was placed in the corner of the wall.¹⁰² Lucy's collage piece is a portrait of her great-grandmother, honoring her great-grandmother's contribution to her family and the lineage from her clan in North and South Palau. Lucy's piece with Belauan storyboards again marked the lineage of the Pacific, drawing the relational time in the museum. Through Lujan's curation, putting Lucy's work with these Belauan storytelling boards, which transitioned from historical records to touristic souvenirs and then reverted to their original functions of telling the

¹⁰¹ Page 7 and 21 in the handbook.

¹⁰² Page 21 in the handbook

island's history and genealogy, exemplified the process of reclaiming the history and the contemporary within the space of PIEAM. This process of reversion, as a means of reasserting the island narrative, is an act of reclaiming sovereignty over time and lineage in this exhibition.

Restoring the relational time to the community's own was another approach to reclaiming sovereignty in this exhibition. This relational time, which Turori defines as a time reflecting the natural cycle, allows people to rest and to try again. This idea is presented in the reflection wall.¹⁰³ Turori hung three small glass bottles of *epipremnum aureum* that marked the relation of time with nature, allowing visitors to write down their responses to her questions on the note and paste them on the wall. These questions included, "How are you caring for the sacredness around you?" "How are you moving between work and rest?", and "Where are you placing your priority?" This wall evoked visitors to re-construct their Oceanic time by reflecting on their daily lives, bringing this Oceanic time back to the community.

Restoring the relational time to Pacific Islanders' bodies also reconnected them with their ancestors. In the middle of the museum, a bamboo-built gathering house exhibited the memory of the older and newest ancestors.¹⁰⁴ In front of the house, a handwritten "Ask Permission" was on the floor to remind visitors to ask the ancestors for permission to enter, and visitors were required to take off their shoes to respect the space. While stepping in, visitors would see a long *tapa* hung on the beam to the ground in the deepest

¹⁰³ Page 9 in the handbook.

¹⁰⁴ Page 25 in the handbook.

side of the house. On the floor, several woven pads displayed items that symbolize their ancestral knowledge, such as stones, medicine bowls, amber, and shell leis. A pad closer to the entrance had a bowl of tapa butterflies, and more tapa butterflies surrounded the bowl. These tapa butterflies recorded the story and memory of the family members and friends in the community who passed away during the COVID-19 pandemic.¹⁰⁵ The pandemic severely impacted the Pacific Islander community, and these butterflies offered visitors a space for mourning and honoring the ancestors who passed. This house marked significant moments in the cycle of time when people left, but it also reflected a nonlinear sense of time—one in which ancestors remained present. It revealed the resilience of the community in creating such a beautiful space and time for healing. In the gathering house, the memories of the ancestors did not mark the end and the past; in contrast, memories were connections with ancestors, marking their present and current, echoing the cyclic idea of relational time, where the end marked the start.

The exhibition itself was an ongoing curation that followed the lunar calendar, which kept evolving and changing. The completion of the curation was not the day of opening, but the day of closing. The gathering house experienced a huge change during the exhibition. After being covered by the palm tree leaves as the roof for thirteen years, Fran Lujan decided to take these leaves off, as they normally should be replaced regularly. On the day of taking off these leaves, Patrick, the Marshallese architect who built the house in 2010, came back to finish the mission of these leaves. Turori and the

¹⁰⁵ The butterflies were created for the previous exhibition, *Toe Fo'i: The Return*, curated by Samoan artist Kiana “Kiki” Rivera. Through storytelling, the exhibition humanized the numbers behind the lives lost to COVID-19. Please see the website: <https://www.pieam.org/toe-fo-i-the-return>

CHamoru artist, roldy aguero ablao, held a ritual to honor the house and ablao redecorated it by hanging woven machi from the beams. After the leaves were off, the sunlight lit the house, and everyone was celebrating the new phase of the museum space. When the gathering house had a new start, those palm leaves also started their next journey; Jason Pereira took some of the leaves home and hung them on the wall a year later in his first personal exhibition, *Grace & Space*, in PIEAM. The end is the start.

In this section, I present the island time and space created by *Te 'Iti Nei Te Marama*. The *Jam Session* was born in such island time and space, and it also strengthened this time and space by bringing more descendants to the museum and adding the ongoing cultural transformation of the diaspora into the Oceanic lineage by performing their latest musical works to their ancestors. In the next section, I will present how the *Jam Session* honored their ancestors by island-reggae performances, and how these performances narrated the Pacific lineage that emphasized their Indigeneity in diaspora within the Oceanic time and space.

Jam Session

Same as the ongoing changes throughout the entire exhibition period, the *Jam Session* lasted for six months and kept inviting the community back to PIEAM once a month. Each *Jam Session* concert lasted for two hours, with a forty-minute performance, a ten-minute Q&A session inside the museum, and a lunch party in the garden. During every performance, Jason Pereira would paint a painting based on his feelings to the music alongside his reflections of the space and time of the day, and these paintings would be

displayed in the PIEAM during the exhibition. After each performance ended, PIEAM staff would move the exhibition pieces back, marking another time cycle. From these examples, we can see that *Jam Session* follows the two emphases of the exhibition, honoring the ancestors and reconstructing the relational time cycle. In the space and time created by *Te 'Iti Nei Te Marama*, Jam Session paused the settler time, and told Islanders' stories in the U.S.

Each *Jam Session*, held once a month, mirrored the lunar cycle. For every performance, PIEAM rearranged the exhibited pieces to make space for the performers. These practices reflected the inherent relationality of island spaces—guided by ancestral knowledge—and demonstrated diasporic Pacific Islanders' ability to adapt to their environment, whether in response to time cycles or external change. A day before each *Jam Session*, Fran Lujan and Samantha Olvera would move the pieces. Although I did not have the opportunity to witness the exact preparation for the Jam Session, I observed this practice several times before other events. Lujan and Samantha Olvera, sometimes joined by other volunteers or artists, would carefully handle the ancestral pieces with both hands. Lujan's method of arranging the pieces followed a logic rooted in their ancestral relationship to non-human objects. Once, when I assisted Lujan in relocating items from the gathering house, she meticulously placed a mat on the ground first, followed by the basket, and then the medicine bowl last. This order was significant because the medicine bowl, symbolizing the ancestors, should be placed in the container last. Moreover, since Lujan always explains her reasons for positioning certain items in the specific space, the knowledge she obtained is also passed to the younger generations through this process.

As mentioned earlier, *Jam Session* was a performance of bringing Pacific Islander descendants to their ancestors. The number of the audience was approximately thirty to forty, and the number of the crew members was around fifteen, including the teams of the performers, filming, PIEAM, and Island Block Network. Unlike the artists or curators who frequently visit the museum, the *Jam Session* created a special moment by bringing popular live music into the space. It drew in a wider audience, both workers and visitors, many of whom had never entered the museum before. Although Fran Lujan had a strong connection with Joe from Island Block Network, with whom she had collaborated for over a decade, the audience of the island reggae scene—and the broader popular music scene—still did not fully overlap with the museum visitors within the Pacific Islander community.

Some of the crew of this *Jam Session*, including Island Block staff and the filming team, had either seldom or never been to the museum before the *Jam Session*. Therefore, the *Jam Session* brought them to the PIEAM, a home outside from home. One of the performers, Siaosi, told me that PIEAM made him feel like going back home. As Fran Lujan phrased, “this Jam Session is for the descendants to know their ancestors and for the ancestors to see what their descendants have achieved.” This Jam Session serves as a reunion of the Pacific Islander community.

In Jam Session, since artists were told to use music to honor their ancestors, they chose island reggae songs that were meaningful for their identities. While island reggae music encapsulated the memories of diasporic Islanders since the 1990s, by singing personal stories through island reggae songs, artists in Jam Sessions weaved their

narratives into their cultural lineage, connecting the present to their predecessors and envisioning a Pacific future in California. Take the last performer, Lea Love, as an example. Many diasporic Islanders, especially the second generation, do not speak their language because they lack the linguistic environment. Coming from this background, the Samoan-Hawaiian singer Lea Love sang a Samoan love song in the Jam Session because singing Samoan songs was the only way for her to use the language, as she did not speak the language in her daily life.

The Tongan artist Siaosi also sang his remake of the classic Tongan reggae song “Eva Mai” (1996; Siaosi’s cover 2022) originally from the Tongan singer Ulisie. Growing up in Hawai‘i and Southern California, he had not been to Tonga when he heard Eva Mai for the first time in Hawai‘i. Since there were not many Tongan songs being played on radio stations in Hawai‘i, Siaosi recalled his memory of first hearing this song. He said in the performance, “it brought me back to a place that I’ve actually never visited before, so at that time when I was a kid, before I ever went to Tonga, it took me to Tonga.”

Beyond connecting with their ancestors, performing continental islandness in the space of PIEAM allowed artists to speak to the shared struggles of living on the continent—and, more importantly, to offer strength, courage, and strategies that remind the community that they were not alone. When Lea Love performed, she reflected on being the only Pacific Islander representative at a particular AAPI event, as well as the only female performer in the Jam Session. As a Pacific Islander woman, she often found herself in solitary moments where she had to forge her own path. She recalled that since

high school, she had to explain to her classmates that Hawaiians and Samoans were not the same. Her decision to join the Polynesian student club also stood out among her peers, who typically chose cheerleading. Entering the music industry, she often felt caught in between—“too mainstream” for Polynesians and “too Polynesian” for the mainstream. To confront these struggles, she chose to center her identity in her music. She explained that her songs were deeply rooted in being herself, because as a Polynesian woman in California, her experience had always involved telling others who she was.

Lea Love’s actions, closely tied to her identity, resonate with what my Samoan–Native Hawaiian peer in Island Block Network, Joi Dwight, shared with me in the interview¹⁰⁶. As a Pacific Islander woman in the media industry, she described herself as a canoe—a pioneering voyager paving the way for other diasporic Islanders, just as her ancestors once bravely sailed uncharted waters, and her grandparents who created a home in the continental U.S. Like Dwight, Lea Love is a modern-day voyager to explore a new place for Pacific Islander women. Though not crossing oceans, she was among the first to enter certain spaces, and through sharing her story at PIEAM, she passed on her bravery and strength to others, reminding them they were not alone.

¹⁰⁶ Joi Dwight, interview by the author, March 26, 2023.



Image 27: Lea Love performing while Jason Pereira paints.

After spending an entire dissertation exploring how Indigeneity is manifested in everyday life practices, the Native Hawaiian artist Bo Napoleon, in the performance, offered another perspective on continental islandness—suggesting that it is expressed not only through actions, but also simply through being. During the performance, Lulu asked him, “being that you are Kanaka Maoli, how do you preserve the culture through your music?” Bo answered,

“I was born, I mean this is me, I wake up Hawaiian, you know. I’m just the epitome of being Hawaiian, and not only being Hawaiian, but being Hawaiian from California. You know I wasn’t born in Hawai‘i, but I feel like

I was born and raised a Hawaiian. My dad is from Nānākuli and my mom is from Aiea, so I hold being Hawaiian from California, you know. I'm very proud to be that, and I try to show that through my music and with all my lyrics, I'm trying to represent my parents and grandparents, my ancestors in a good light."

Bo's answer indicated that he is not Indigenous because he practices certain cultures or traditions, but that whatever he does is Native Hawaiian.

Many artists gave me the same response: they do not aim to convey a specific message in their music; they simply strive for complete honesty in their work. This honesty stems from embracing who they are and incorporating the values their cultures have instilled in them to honor their family. Which is to say, playing island reggae is not an intentional action of performing their Indigenous culture; instead, they play island reggae, so that makes island reggae "island".

For Bo, being a Native Hawaiian means responsibility; in PIEAM, responsibility is also the core of this relational time and space and defines continental islandness. In Bo's answer to Lulu's question, "what does it mean to you to perform live at PIEAM in front of friends, family, and community?" Bo answered,

"It means the world to me, and, Auntie Fran, it was heavy walking in and feeling that responsibility I hold being a Polynesian to the utmost of my responsibility as a human. I wake up, this is who I am, so I just love that I get to share my aloha today to everyone through my music."

After Bo's performance, he and his manager, who is also his hula teacher, dedicated a hula to the museum symbol, pahu. To record this moment, Jason Pereira created a painting for Bo's performance—a large pahu drum that filled the entire canvas.

This responsibility also includes the act of asking permission. Jason J, the representative of Guam in this *Jam Session*, is a second-generation Filipino born and

raised on the island. Although island reggae is popular among Filipino communities, and his band members are all Chamoru, Jason J consistently and explicitly acknowledges his Filipino heritage. In our interview, the first thing he said was to remind me that he is not CHamoru. He told me that he is always aware of his position within the island reggae scene and is careful not to claim the Indigenous identity. Instead, he deliberately centers his songs on his personal experiences of being born and raised in Guam. His goal as a musician is to honor CHamoru people by bringing them back home through his musical portrayals of the island. I see Jason J's positionality as a practice of asking permission and expressing gratitude—an ethic that resonates with PIEAM's emphasis on maintaining cultural space and time for Islanders.



Image 28: Jason J performing while Jason Pereira paints.

Through these island reggae artists in the *Jam Session*, we see how their performances tell stories of ancestry, the struggles they face, and the strength they develop on the continent—all grounded in Indigenous ways of knowing. By performing songs rooted in their diasporic experiences within a space of ancestry, these artists link the past to the present, paving the way toward the future. As the cyclical nature of relational time continues, each moment of the *Jam Session* does not simply become part

of the past. These moments are preserved through the paintings created by Jason Pereira, capturing them in visual form and continuing to carry them into the future.

In Jason Pereira's painting, I see an Indigenous future vividly expressed in PIEAM. For Siaosi's performance in March 2023, Pereira painted broad strokes of bright pink and green as the background, with a golden gathering house outlined in stripes and surrounded by scattered blue dots across the canvas. This painting captured a moment of transition for the gathering house and the rainy day when the space was filled with Siaosi's music that evoked the spirit of spring, joyful, vibrant, and alive. This reflects Pacific Islanders' journey on the continent, which is full of struggle and hardship, but by singing through island reggae—surrounded by joy, love, family, and islands—these artists transform that struggles into moments of happiness. It reminds me again of what Local Culture shared with me in the first chapter: that if one day they looked back on these moments, they would want to say—they were happy.



Image 29: Siasoi performing while Jason Pereira paints.

Conclusion

Island reggae, as a form of Indigenous storytelling, is infused with the diasporic Pacific Islanders' dialogues and experiences across Oceania and the U.S. The music interweaves relationships with other communities across multiple temporalities and spatialities—serving as a connective space between island and continent, ancestors and descendants, and as a contested zone between colonizer and colonized, majority and minority, essentialization and self-determination. This performance not only constructs the “island” within the framework of continental islandness, reflecting Indigeneity and sovereignty, but also facilitates a musical dialogue with the intersecting identities of race, gender, ethnicity, and class that shape life on the continent.

Many important topics remain to be explored. Due to the limitations of time and space, I leave these areas for future research and hope that more scholars will join in this work. One significant limitation of this dissertation is the underrepresentation of Micronesian and Melanesian communities. My research primarily centers on the voices of Samoan, CHamoru (from Guam), Native Hawaiian, and Tongan individuals, reflecting both the participant demographics of the island reggae scene and, more importantly, the fact that my fieldwork network was predominantly connected with Samoan and CHamoru communities. The broader Micronesian experience, such as Palauans and Chamoru from the Northern Mariana Islands, who are also active in the Southern Californian community, still needs to be explored. Also, I learned from my Fijian friend Miri and Dr. Mere Sovick, the Vanuatu-born founder of Melanesian Women Today based in Seattle, that the experiences of Melanesians in the U.S. differ considerably from those

of their Polynesian peers. These differences are shaped by factors such as their non-citizen or non-national status, smaller community presence, and racial discrimination—in some cases, being misidentified as part of the African diaspora. While these issues are not fully reflected in the island reggae scene, social organizations such as Empowering Pacific Islander Communities (EPIC) have been actively addressing them—particularly the experiences of anti-Blackness faced by darker-skinned Pacific Islander communities—which I hope to explore further in future research.

This also points to another limitation of my research: the experiences of mixed-race Pacific Islanders. Many Pacific Islanders in the U.S. have multiracial heritages. For example, Siaso is African Tongan, and Samantha Olvera is Mexican-CHamoru. Their experiences and identities require a more nuanced examination, which I hope to pursue in future work through the lens of creole studies and mixed-race identity scholarship.

In addition, this dissertation focuses mainly on the generation of Pacific Islanders who are the first to be born and raised in the U.S., whose parents still have direct experiences living in their home islands. As this generation has grown up and started having children—many of whom are now participating in the music scene—a new, U.S.-born second generation has emerged with distinct perspectives on identity and belonging. This generational shift also reveals the limitations of island reggae as a cultural framework. While it remains significant, many younger Pacific Islanders now gravitate more toward hip hop. As Olvera shared with me in the interview¹⁰⁷, she listens to hip hop

¹⁰⁷ Samantha Olvera, interview by the author, March 27, 2023.

more in her private time than island reggae, and island reggae is “family music” that her mother used to play.

In hip hop, I’ve observed a stronger expression of local identity—particularly place-based pride in cities like Los Angeles and Carson. Studying Pacific Islander engagement with hip hop will be the next step in my research, as I aim to understand how their Indigeneity continues to respond to their localized lives in the U.S., and how this new generation articulates their continental islandness through hip hop. Expanding the music focus to hip hop also allows me to see how musical genres differently shape Pacific Islanders’ identity expression. For instance, the early Samoan hip hop group Brownzville has already emphasized their Carson identity in their lyrics of “Breezin’ (Thru My City)” in 1998.

In terms of issues, this research does not explore militarism or engage in a deeper discussion of Christianity due to my limited access to these conversations. However, both are crucial in shaping the diasporic lives of Pacific Islanders—from identity and patriotism to community and family structure, engagement with governmental institutions, and gender and sexuality. As Melodie Turori and the Samoan artist Kiana “Kiki” Rivera both noted in our conversations, the military and church have significantly influenced gender norms in the diaspora. I hope these issues will be taken up by more scholars or addressed in my future work.

Finally, the relationship and reciprocity between Pacific Islanders and Native Americans is an essential topic that I was unable to address fully in this dissertation. As mentioned throughout this work, diasporic Pacific Islanders are deeply aware of their

position as guests on Turtle Island and consistently express gratitude to Native American hosts. This relationship is also actively practiced and emphasized at institutions like the PIEAM. One notable example is the exhibition *Left Behind to Bring Them Home* (January–June 2024), an artistic dialogue between Pacific Islanders and Native Americans—particularly the Tongva people, on whose ancestral and unceded land PIEAM stands—curated by Tongva artist Cindi Alvitre. Through such art collaborations, we see powerful examples of solidarity and shared efforts toward cultural resurgence and justice.

At the very end of this dissertation, I want to close with a conversation I had with Fran Lujan, whom I will refer to here as Auntie Fran. One day, after an interview had been canceled for the third time, and I was already delayed in dissertation writing, I vented my frustration to her. She asked me, “Do you need this interview to finish your dissertation? How many interviews do you have right now?” I replied, “Not really—I already have a sufficient number of stories to write the dissertation.” Then she asked, “So did your advisor say you need a lot of interviews to finish it?” I said no, but I explained that I wanted to write a perfect story because that was how I hoped to give back to the community for all the support and relationships I had received.

She responded, “Then just finish it! You don’t need to be perfect—no one is perfect. Your interviewees are not living in academic time. You can’t ask them to follow your academic schedule. They don’t care about your dissertation; they care about you being a person in a relationship with them. So you don’t have to write a ‘good’ dissertation.” After that, I stopped complaining. I stopped chasing a specific number of

interviews and instead began reflecting on the idea of time. This reflection became the foundation of my entire discussion of time and space in the dissertation. The ending, I learned, is also a beginning. So, the end of this dissertation is not the conclusion of my research, nor of my relationships with friends and mentors—it is a new beginning.

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