Promiscuous Possibilities: Regenerating a Decolonial Genealogy of Samoan Reproduction

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Abstract: Most of the common ways of thinking about genealogical reproduction are influenced by colonialism and capitalism, which emphasize the importance of the nuclear family, heterosexuality and reproducing future citizens. Under colonialism and capitalism, Samoan women are disciplined into good reproductive laborers who reproduce the moral family and also wider society. This paper looks to Indigenous feminist discourse of regeneration to place Samoan reproductive labor outside of capitalism and within Indigenous feminist genealogies of world-building, asking what other promiscuous possibilities there are for Samoan regeneration. Here, we present a theoretical exploration: thinking with Indigenous feminism offers a decolonial intervention into Samoan reproduction, placing Samoan women’s labor into an alternative genealogy of Indigenous feminist world-building and outside of colonially imposed genealogies.

Keywords: reproductive labor; Sāmoa; Indigenous feminism; pacific feminism; decolonial genealogy; care work

1. Introduction

Most of the common ways we tend to think about genealogy and reproduction emphasize the biological, i.e., who birthed us literally and who we are genetically connected to. The overdetermination of biological reproduction and genetic genealogy in our general consciousness is influenced by the entangled forces of colonialism and capitalism, and its emphasis and reliance on the heteronormative nuclear family. In particular, nuclear families are responsible for absorbing reproductive labor by reproducing and sustaining future citizen workers of the nation state, thus sustaining the nation state itself. The term reproductive labor as used throughout this article refers to the unpaid work of sustaining human life, including childbirth, caregiving and domestic housework. It thus includes the work undertaken to sustain individuals and families—cooking, cleaning, caretaking and nurturing—and goes toward reproducing the workforce. It is work that meets third-party criteria, where if outsourced, would be paid and constitute paid work. For Indigenous peoples within colonial and settler colonial contexts, the emphasis on biological (and affinal) kin connections and normative nuclearized understandings of family becomes sinister. The colonial obsession with genetics over collective, social and relational connections has influenced a multipronged approach to controlling Indigenous reproduction and reproductive labor, for example, by tracking and controlling Indigenous belonging through pseudoscientific ideas of race and through prohibiting Indigenous modes of reproduction either legislatively or discursively through the imposition of white-Western-colonial-capitalist reproductive norms. The goal here is for colonial-capitalist ideologies maintained through Western nation states to maintain the reproduction of ‘ideal’ citizens through idealized reproductive labor in service to the colonial nation-state and under the logic of white patriarchal possession of Indigenous peoples (Moreton-Robinson 2015; Arvin 2019a; and Simon 2024).¹ These ideologies are intimately intertwined with Christian notions of morality, which constitute the founding principles of many, if not all, Western colonial and...
settler colonial states, making this idealized reproduction overwhelmingly cisgendered, heteronormative and patriarchal.

Imperialism’s moral reproductive project, as literary scholar Sita Balani (2023, p. 161) notes, “is sullied from the very beginning by its deadly production of racial difference”. As evidenced across settler colonial contexts, colonial-capitalist systems and ideologies were imposed on Indigenous cultures to assert white Western heteronormative ideas of the nuclear family in support of the capitalist agenda to exploit, extract and expand (Pihama 2019; Mikaere 2019). The emphasis within colonial capitalism on reproductive labor continues to seep into the lived realities of Indigenous peoples, who are the first peoples of a given settler colonial nation state, as well as other racially marked brown and black bodies who migrate to these nation-states or move from the imperial peripheries to the center. In this paper, we focus on the reproductive labor of Indigenous Samoans living in diaspora within settler colonial nation-states such as New Zealand and the United States (US). To do so, we examine the colonial-capitalist impositions that occurred within the Samoan archipelago first, to explain how gendered notions of reproductive and productive labor shifted within a Samoan context. This is important as these ideas are then carried with Samoan migrants and their descendants born in diaspora, within settler colonial nation-states such as those mentioned above. All these layers heighten the complexity of Samoan reproductive labor. Imperialism is a wired project of far-reaching networks that brings various Indigenous peoples into contact with each other, all imbricated in various parts of the colonial project. Through this process, various extractions occur, whether that be of land or of labor. Historically, the exploitation, extraction and expansion of the settler colonial state involved dispossessing Indigenous people of their land while simultaneously extracting the labor of others. In this paper, we argue that these same processes remain at play in settler colonial states, contemporarily known as the state, and focus specifically on the aspect of reproductive labor. We offer a critique of colonial capitalism for embedding heteronormative nuclear family ideals in support of nation building. We assert that these ideals, which rely on and embed gendered divisions of labor, are at odds with Samoan epistemological values and understandings of family. As such, they work towards assimilating and enculturating Samoan, Pacific and Indigenous people into the norms of colonial capitalism. We highlight how our reproductive labor serves and services colonial-capitalist systems that do not care for us in return.

Early colonial projects in Sāmoa were interested in resource extraction and militarism, which placed Sāmoa and Samoans within global circuits of colonial, racial capitalism. As Samoans followed these colonial pathways to migrate off the archipelago in the 1950s to cities such as Honolulu, Los Angeles and Auckland, their labor became further intertwined within colonial projects. In these diasporic homes, Samoan labor followed dominant cis-heteropatriarchal norms of productive and reproductive labor, the former relating to public capitalist waged spheres assigned to men and the latter to unpaid care work in the home as well as lowly paid service, care and hospitality industries assigned to women. Both forms of gendered productive and reproductive labor work in service to the settler colonial nation state. Gendered divisions of labor were propelled by the missionization of Sāmoa and the imposition of Christian morality that instructed the domestication of women as wives, mothers and carers (Gunson 1987; Schoeffel 1995). This transformed the status of pre-colonial Samoan women and reduced their productive capacities to reproductive labor through the emphasis on their roles as, first, wives and mothers, and, second, workers (albeit secondary earners to their husbands). The emphasis on their feminized roles as carers and nurturers had broader macro-implications, including relegating women to care work industries that are often not well renumerated.

Another intersecting influence that contributes to the exploitation of Samoan women’s reproductive labor is Samoan collectivist cultural values that emphasize relationality, reciprocity and service (or tautua) and involve sacrificing individual wants and needs for the greater collective good. These culturally informed values are fundamentally at odds with the individualistic, competitive, exploitative orientation of colonial capitalism. Settler
colonial capitalism, thus, creates conditions that subvert epistemological foundations and moral principles of Indigenous Samoan values (of collectivism, relationality, reciprocity and service), making them ripe for exploitation. Because of this value placed on service or tautua, low-wage productive labor and paid and unpaid reproductive labor in service to the settler colonial state is often understood within an economy of gratitude: gratitude to the state for the opportunity to live and work in the diaspora. Yet, the economy of gratitude is not reciprocated through the state’s gratitude to reproductive carers and workers for their contributions to producing future citizens and sustaining economies both in the family and society more generally. This is evidenced, for example, in the Aotearoa New Zealand context by the fact that Pacific women are over-represented in service and care industries, paid the least across all gendered and ethnic groups and have the highest birthrate (which is especially pertinent given the climate of fear around declining fertility rates across the Anglo-West). The problem, though, is not the cultural value placed on reproductive labor, service or care, or even entering into these industries, it is that Indigenous cultural values of care that (are needed to) service the state become exploited by settler colonial nation states that do not care for Samoans (and other Indigenous and racially marked people) in return and which instead perpetuate intergenerational cycles of marginalization.

As racialized people and possessions of the settler colonial state, we argue that not only are Samoans not met with care from the settler colonial state but they are also not valued beyond their labor. Census data, for example, demonstrates that Pacific women are concentrated in community and services roles (Ministry for Pacific People 2020). Pacific women also played pivotal roles fulfilling frontline care and service roles during the COVID-19 pandemic. Pacific female healthcare workers, for example, drew on Pacific cultural values, demonstrating compassion and care to support and care for others despite facing their own moral dilemmas about being at home with their own families or working to meet the needs of others and society more generally (Phillips et al. 2024). Yet, Pacific female healthcare workers experienced a number of inequities in relation to their earnings and holding structurally recognized leadership positions in the health sector. Phillips et al. conclude with a call for Pacific- and gender-focused policies to address institutional inequities that remediate disproportionate community care burdens placed on Pacific female healthcare workers.

The settler colonial state works to maintain the marginalized position of Samoan reproductive laborers. Another example of this is Samoan US Military service. Samoans are the highest per capita enlistees, with American Sāmoa being known as a recruiter’s paradise. Many enlistees draw on cultural qualities like service and abstracted ideas of Samoan warriorhood as part of their US patriotism, which leads them to serve. However, as noted by those critical of high enlistment numbers, Samoans also have the highest per capita death rate among those who served in Iraq, with many going into low rank frontline positions (Bennet 2009). Their bodies were literally on the line for the nation-state. Yet, high Samoan enlistment continues because of good Samoan reproductive laborers who continue to produce ideal citizens and future workers to go into the military but whose reproductive labor is also made invisible and overshadowed by the patriotic masculinized military laborer. Samoan reproductive labor in this example is seen first in the biological production of Samoan people, who then go into military service, which then maintains the state. The nation state exploits the Samoan desire to serve, and their continuous hunger for Samoan labor goes unsatiated, requiring Samoan reproductive labor in perpetuity.

Under colonialism and capitalism, Samoan women are thus disciplined into good reproductive laborers who reproduce the moral family, more laborers and wider society. To begin the work of disentangling reproductive work from colonial capitalism, in this paper, we look to Indigenous feminist discourse of regeneration (Arvin 2019b) to place Samoan reproductive labor outside of colonial-capitalism and within Indigenous feminist genealogies of world-building, asking what other promiscuous possibilities there are for thinking about Samoan reproduction and reproductive labor. Thinking with Indigenous feminism offers a decolonial intervention into Samoan reproduction, placing Samoan women’s labor into an
Genealogy or gafa is of profound significance within Samoan contexts. As Samoan historian Damon Salesa (2023, p. 234) notes, “One’s identities were plural, and this was expected. This was the nature of Samoan genealogy: it was multiple, historical and responsive to context”. Salesa continues to discuss how “genealogy itself was politics: better thought of as a network of relations than as a personal history”, which is felt “in very different, practical, ordinary ways” (p. 234). While Salesa is talking about genealogies between people and places within a historical Samoan context, his explanation of genealogy as a political network is theoretically and methodologically useful for mapping the political context of Samoans more broadly. In the context of this paper, we can map Samoan reproductive labor within a genealogy of colonial racial capitalism to understand the present. Simultaneously, we can map Samoan reproductive labor within a genealogy of Indigenous feminist regeneration to imagine alternate futures. Doing that genealogical work, we agree with Kehaulani Vaughn that “Oceanic and Pacific feminisms offer a genealogy of critique to the colonial and settler colonial occupation of Oceania” (Vaughn 2022, p. 147). This does not prioritize one genealogy over another but acknowledges the Indigenous knowledge in genealogy that gives order to Samoan lives (Salesa 2023, p. 234) and uses that as a way of understanding the world in another context.

We write this paper from what Teresia Teaiwa (2001) described as the edges, from the edges of the Pacific Ocean in the Samoan diaspora. We are positioned in New Zealand and the US as academics and educators who engage in paid reproductive labor through our teaching, research and service to our communities within our public universities and un-paid reproductive labor as friends; daughters; partners; and, importantly, mothers within our own private spheres. Thus, there is something personally at stake in how we conceive of Samoan reproductive labor because it is our own labor that is also at stake in this conversation. Significantly, as Samoan women and mothers, reproducing the next generation, we are compelled to imagine and cultivate a genealogy of Indigenous feminist regeneration that raises the possibility and potential for an alternate future for our children and future generations.

2. Reproduction, Reproductive Labor and the Settler Colonial Nation-State

Reproductive or immaterial labor is the labor required to reproduce capitalist society both in terms of biological reproduction but also the care work required to reproduce society as we know it. It is the immaterial qualities of “affect, care, love, education, socialization, communication, information, entertainment, organization, planning, coordination, logistics” that Italian theorist Leopoldina Fortunati points to as part of this labor (Fortunati 2007, p. 144). This labor is also, as Emma Dowling (2021, p. 26) notes, “some of the most undervalued and invisibilized activities of all, while those who perform them are some of the most neglected and unsupported people in our societies”. As writer and organizer Alva Gotby (2023) notes, “Reproduction is an expansive field that contains the totality of the activities that sustain the lives of people under capitalism and maintain their capacity to work”. However, reproductive labor holds a contradictory place within capitalism as much of the labor involved, including biological and emotional reproduction (producing good feelings), exists outside the realm of capitalism, meaning that it is unpaid

alternate genealogy of Indigenous feminist world-building that exists outside of colonially imposed genealogies. While it may not be so simple as just finding another genealogy for Samoan ontology, we refuse to restrict the value of Samoan reproductive labor to benefiting the settler colonial state. Rather, we are interested in pushing against the moralizing and pacifying forces that were introduced to and imposed on Indigenous Samoan culture and communities, which have also become embedded within them, as they work to naturalize and make Indigenous the labor of caring for nation states that do not care for or about us in return. Drawing on the works of Indigenous scholars Maile Arvin (2019b), Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2011) and Kehaulani Vaughn (2022, 2023), we regenerate expansive genealogies of reproductive labor outside of capitalism and place Samoan reproduction instead within an Indigenous feminist genealogy of resistance, refusal and world-building.
and largely takes place in private spheres such as the home. Yet, it is also the labor that is fundamental to the operation of capitalism, or which sustains it, to borrow from Gotby. This unpaid labor has been historically feminized and relegated to the private domain of women, while men perform masculinized waged labor, all of which contribute to the maintenance of the political economy and state. This, of course, took on a raced dynamic through the colonial project when, as Nancy Fraser (2022) notes, “liberal-colonial capitalism elaborated a new gender imaginary” (p. 61), which included outsourcing various types of labor not just according to class and gender hierarchies but also according to racial ones. As Argentine feminist philosopher María Lugones (2007, p. 186) notes, “Colonialism did not impose precolonial, European gender arrangements on the colonized. It imposed a new gender system that created very different arrangements for colonized males and females than for white bourgeois colonizers”. Thus, as Sita Balani (2023) acknowledges, “Being a woman and being a man mean radically different things depending on one’s position in the racial hierarchy and the kind of labour one is expected or forced to perform” (p. 31). So, while certain bodies, certain labor and certain laborers are of a higher capitalist value than others, the settler colonial state, which is inherently capitalist, requires all labor, it just does not pay for it all.

Returning, then, to the place of reproductive labor, capitalism relies not just on the continued production of workers but also on the production of the right kind of workers, something that Indigenous sovereignty and Indigenous worldviews directly threaten. Hence, systematically controlling Indigenous reproduction and reproductive labor has long been a key focus for colonial violence. This violence includes genocide, where the choice is made to murder Indigenous peoples seen as obstructing colonial goals. It includes violating one’s reproductive autonomy through sterilization, family planning, and prohibitive legislation on sexual relationships and who one can (and cannot) marry, with the goal to limit the production of non-ideal (meaning non-white) citizens. It also includes assimilative practices of blood quantum, child removal and schooling, all of which attempt to shape the ideal citizen through assimilation by essentially turning them white. These tools work by impeding the reproductive capacities of those the settler colonial state deems ‘non-ideal citizens’ and simultaneously assimilating those same citizens. The idea is that over time, these non-ideal citizens will become ideal or, in other words, white.

A significant part of this reproductive disciplining was the reordering of Indigenous sexual and gender relationships as well as kinship structures, which nuclearized understandings of family and prioritized Christian monogamy and heterosexuality. As such, expansive kinship structures were replaced with nuclear family ideals, which individualized care in ways that are antithetical to many Indigenous ways of organizing family and community. By reordering the family, you reorder the community. Kehaulani Vaughn (2023) recalls an Indigenous feminist genealogy through Haunani-Kay Trask (1999a), who joins the cacophony of Indigenous feminist voices who note the colonial assault on family organization. Trask notes, “Our extended families have suffered incessant pressures to fragment into nuclear units of only parents and children. In nuclear families, women’s power, as the power of the mother is reduced to life giver to domestic servant” (p. 105). This comment, Vaughn (2023) notes, highlights the damage made to more collectivist family units and kinship modes of doing family. The context for reproductive labor as outlined in this section is specific to the settler colonial context where Samoan diasporic communities are found. However, to be able to understand how labor can be exploited in diasporic settler colonial contexts (as discussed in the following sections), we must first take some time to understand labor and reproduction within the Samoan archipelago itself as that constitutes the core of Samoan values as they are maintained globally.

3. The Samoan Context

The collectivist values of Sāmoa enshrine service, duty and obligation. As such, gendered relations as well as relations of re/production were framed as being relational and reciprocal, in pursuit of social balance and achieved through service (tautua). Reproductive
and productive labor were not, and could not, be separated from the relational whole, for example, women cared for young children, while men cared for the elderly; women produced culturally valuable goods (such as ie toga/fine mats and siapo/tapa cloth), while men worked the plantations. These are just a few examples of relational practices that work towards maintaining reciprocal, communally based collective responsibility and power. However, the missionization and colonization of Sāmoa imposed hierarchical patriarchal gendered divisions of labor, emphasizing women’s reproductive roles while minimizing their productive capacities.

In Sāmoa, the colonial period embedded a Christian morality that instructed the domestication of women, inscribed gendered binaries of male dominance and female subservience, and instilled gendered divisions of labor in service to colonial-capitalist systems. This was largely due to the governing Christian codes of morality, which prioritized individualized and nuclearized understandings of family, with idealized reproduction occurring within a heterosexual nuclear family structure. This undermined Indigenous gender relations centered on reciprocity and maintaining the vā or relational and metaphysical space that nurtures individual and collective identities and wellbeing. It did so by diminishing the centrality of collectivist kin structures and communally based modes of re/production. One example of this shifting gender relation is the feagaiga or sacred bond and covenant between brothers and sisters that maintains social harmony within the family, village and community more generally. This encompassed a brother’s enduring service, protection and nurturing of his sister, which in turn reciprocated a sister’s care and respect for her brother by, for example, supporting the bestowal of chiefly titles in recognition of their service/tautua to them, their family and their community. With the introduction of Christianity, the emphasis on feagaiga shifted from the relationship between a brother and sister to focus on the relationships between a husband and wife, and pastor and congregation (Latai 2015). In this example, Indigenous gender relations were also altered to control and police women’s sexuality according to Christian values. This reconfigured feagaiga demands “Samoan women to be good and dutiful wives, who raise good and dutiful daughters who go then on to be good and dutiful wives” (Keil and Lopesi Forthcoming), demonstrating the way that the reproductive labor of the nuclear family is entangled with Christian family ideals.

The cultural value placed on tautua (service) becomes similarly gendered, with a masculinized tautua being attributed to political life (in relation to both Indigenous fa’amatai (chiefly) and colonially imposed Westminster governance systems), and highly feminized tautua being associated with reproductive work. However, there is a point of contradiction in this oversimplified gendered reduction of women’s roles and service that mirrors Western contexts. Women fulfill (and are expected to fulfill) productive roles central to the economic provisioning of the (collective, extended) family and village, for example, through the weaving of ie toga or fine mats. Ie toga are measina Sāmoa (cultural treasures), the most valued and prized possessions of a family and village. Ie toga not only provide central sources of wealth; they are also required to fulfill cultural ceremonies and obligations and demonstrate status. Thus, women’s re/productive roles do not simply generate wealth; they also ensure the reproduction of culture by enabling the fulfilment of culturally important rituals and obligations (such as saofai [ceremony] to bestow chiefly titles and ifoga [public ceremonial apology]). In this context, we see how Samoan women are stripped of aspects of their power despite being creators and providers of cultural and material wealth that extends far beyond the narrow confines of under-valued reproductive labor.

This emphasis on Christian morality and the heteronormative nuclear family displaced other promiscuous ways of social organizing beyond state-sanctioned marriages and heterosexual monogamous partnerships. Ultimately, it primed Samoans entering diaspora in settler colonial contexts to the needs and norms of colonial capitalism. However, in this new diasporic context, Samoans would contribute to the colonial-capitalist nation-state, with the added layer of race or, more specifically, of being a racially marginalized minority. In diaspora, the complexities of gendered reproductive labor in Sāmoa are combined with
the settler colonial realities of the diasporic home and racialized hierarchies to further reinforce gendered divisions of labor in service to colonial-capitalist systems. We see this in the high numbers of Samoan care workers, who maintained front line positions during the Covid 19 pandemic: while they kept society churning by putting themselves at immanent risk, they were lowly paid. We see this in the data with Pacific women in New Zealand, who are most likely to be in the health care, social assistance or education industries. Similarly, while we do not have Samoan-specific data, in the US roughly 60 percent of employed Pacific women work in sales and service roles. These are roles in which care is central yet lowly valued. In both New Zealand and the United States, there are significant gendered and racialized wage disparities, with Pacific women in New Zealand and the US, respectively, earning 75 cents and 60 cents for every dollar earned by their white male counterparts. This cycle contributes to the high rates of Samoan poverty experienced in diaspora.

Women are expected to continue to reproduce the nuclear family while also filling roles of paid care work, simultaneously reproducing their own families and wider society and, importantly, doing so without questioning or critiquing colonial-capitalism. Indigenous values and principals of fa’aaloalo (or respect) and collectivism that center the vā (sacred relational space) operate in colonial-capitalist contexts to disempower and pacify Samoan women (as opposed to empowering them) by exploiting their labor for the ‘greater good’. Yet, these Indigenous values used to silence resistance operate in ways that are antithetical to the spirit of the Indigenous values as they were never intended for colonial-capitalism but the maintenance and preservation of, and care for, Indigenous Samoan cultures and communities. So, embedded in the colonial-capitalist exploitation and extraction that our values are used to maintain is our compliance and consent as settler colonial reproductive laborers. The focus on Samoan notions of care and service without acknowledging the racialized and gendered power within reproductive care (and care industries) continues to entrap Samoan women within subjugated positions within colonial capitalism. As such, reproductive labor contributes towards culturally influenced burdens of saying yes to meet one’s duties and obligations as good women, mothers, workers and citizens who give their reproductive labor in perpetuity.

Samoan reproductive labor can be understood as being informed and maintained at the intersection of decolonial theorists Anibal Quijano (2008) and Walter Mignolo’s (2007a, 2007b) colonial matrix of power, which outlines four areas of control central to the colonial project and maintenance of coloniality, which are control of the economy, authority, gender and sexuality, and knowledge and subjectivity (Mignolo 2011, p. 7). Further, Mignolo notes that the racism and patriarchy that structures coloniality is grounded on a historical foundation of theology. Within this context, control of the economy occurs through the control and exploitation of Samoan reproductive labor for the benefits of the settler colonial state while maintaining the subjugated position of Samoan women; control of authority occurs through the imposition of patriarchal hierarchies of power on Indigenous governance systems; control of gender and sexuality occurs through the imposition of ‘family’ according to white Western (nuclear family) heterosexual norms; and control of subjectivity and knowledge occurs through epistemological colonization and constituting Indigenous subjectivities as inferior or lacking (thus primed for exploiting). Thus, the complexities of Samoan reproductive labor are entangled with all aspects of coloniality, emphasizing the need, as Mignolo (2007a) asserts, for Indigenous cultures, peoples and communities to delink from such entanglements.


To overcome the coloniality of power embedded within colonial capitalism, we seek to disentangle Samoan reproductive labor from the settler colonial state by emancipating it from colonial-capitalist reproduction and repositioning it within Indigenous regeneration. Glen Coulthard’s (2014) notion of Indigenous Resurgence is useful here; it describes the
daily acts of resistance against the constructs and limitations set by the settler colonialist state. Resurgence is useful to help create a decolonial break that disconnects Samoan reproductive labor from the systemic trappings of colonialism and capitalism. To relate this to Mignolo’s (2007a, 2011) work, Indigenous Resurgence provides an avenue or framework that de-links Samoan reproductive labor from colonial matrices of power. Importantly, Mignolo (2007a) notes that “de-linking cannot be understood as a new conceptual system coming, literally, out of the blue” (p. 455). Instead, it draws from what he calls “border thinking or border epistemology”, which includes Indigenous knowledges. Mignolo writes, “Delinking means to change the terms and not just the content of the conversation” (Mignolo 2007a, p. 459). Thus, rather than encouraging an attempt to dismantle racial colonial capitalism from within, we seek an epistemic break to regenerate Samoan reproductive labor elsewhere, as belonging to another non-colonial-capitalist genealogy.

Samoans as ‘good’ laborers who care for settler colonial society offer a legible performance of Indigeneity, which contributes to the rhetoric of the liberal multi-cultural nation state, with its culturally embracing but structurally lacking artificial tokenistic celebrations of ‘diversity’ and ‘inclusion’. Refusing the idea that we are relegated to the confines of capitalist genealogy is a refusal to (continue to) perform labor that contributes to the settler colonial state. Indigenous Resurgence is not interested in changing the current settler colonial system but rather, as Leanne Betasamosake Simpson (2011) notes, aims for a different approach altogether. She states that the way forward is to imagine and create new, alternative worlds with:

profundely different ways of thinking, organizing, and being because the Indigenous processes that give birth to our collective resurgence are fundamentally non-hierarchical, nonexploitative, nonextractivist, and nonauthoritarian (pp. 22–23).

Simpson (quoted in Klein 2013) also describes this process of creating new worlds as regeneration. She envisions regeneration as a “process of bringing forth more life—getting the seed and planting and nurturing it. It can be a physical seed, it can be a child, or it can be an idea. But if you’re not continually engaged in that process then it doesn’t happen”. Here, Simpson is expanding the notion of reproduction beyond the biological to include the process of reproducing life more broadly, placing reproductive labor outside of the nuclear family and capitalist cycles, to be about the generation of new possibilities that would support the production of worlds beyond this one we are currently within. This notion also echoes that of Indigenous feminists asserting notions of caring for the earth, the ocean, the cosmos and each other as Indigenously grounded, as opposed to care work within a colonial-capitalist frame. Kanaka Maoli scholar Maile Arvin (2019a, 2019b) builds on Simpson’s articulation of regeneration, noting, “Bringing forth more life, in multiple senses, holds particular salience to Indigenous peoples who have experienced genocide, dispossession, and cultural repression” (Arvin 2019a, p. 340). Arvin describes regeneration as being important to Indigenous feminism, naming regeneration as an “Indigenous feminist analytic”. One thing that Arvin notes regeneration brings forth in the context of Indigenous feminism is “different relationships and therefore different worlds for everyone, not only for Indigenous women or Indigenous peoples, who never live in complete isolation”. Writing from her Hawaiian context, she notes that:

Regeneration signals new growth and life cultivated after destruction, as in the plants that gradually return to a charred landscape after a volcanic flow. Regenerative actions seek the return of function, balance, or power, as in the regrowth of a starfish’s limb or mo’o’s (lizard, gecko) tail. In other words, regeneration is acting on the recognition of a responsibility to a people and a place to refuse the settler colonial order of things (Arvin 2019b, pp. 20–21).

Thus, we can think of colonial racial capitalism as a kind of destruction and regeneration that gives Samoan reproductive labor a different political network to exist within that speaks not to Samoan women’s subordination within colonial, racial capitalism but
rather their capacity to bring forth life in its expanded form. This enables a re-rooting of Indigenous Samoan notions of care and tautua (service) as determined by us for our own purposes. This expansive notion of reproduction is echoed in Haunani-Kay Trask’s (1999b) idea of being “slyly reproductive”, which she notes includes ideas, books and visions of resistance. This kind of reproduction is sly in that it undercut racial colonial capitalism and speaks to the birthing of radical possibilities that center and foster the vā (relationality). Being slyly reproductive, Kēhaulani Vaughn (2023) notes “challenges Western ideas of biological reproduction and instead plants expansive notions of genealogy and kinship”. Framing Indigeneity through a lens of regeneration consciously centers the raced and gendered body in analyses of both settler colonialism and decolonization. Regeneration in this Indigenous feminist sense invokes the body but does not center and prioritize genetic, biological reproduction as the only and ideal mode of building the future. Rather, regeneration takes a broader view of kinship and community that is rooted in good relationships with oneself, one’s community, other communities and the lands we live on. To relate this to a Samoan context, regeneration involves and centers Indigenous notions of vā that recognize the interconnectedness of individual and collective senses of self as well as all that lies within the cosmos, including physical and spiritual worlds (Tamasese 2009). As former Head of State of Sāmoa Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese said:

I am not an individual; I am an integral part of the cosmos. I share divinity with my ancestors, the land, the seas and the skies. I am not an individual, because I share a ‘tofi’ (an inheritance) with my family, my village and my nation. I belong to my family and my family belongs to me. I belong to my village and my village belongs to me. I belong to my nation and my nation belongs to me. This is the essence of my sense of belonging (Tamasese 2003, p. 51).

This is a kind of collectivism based on Indigenous notions of vā demonstrates how our individual and collective welfare is inseparable and connected to each other. Similarly, Vaughn (2023) holds hope for lifeways with “extensive kinship networks . . . [that] can (re)generate Indigenous futures related to land as a relative, not defined through settler family or identification schemes” but through a collective rejection of patriarchy and colonial-capitalism. This aspiration for Vaughn includes the possibility to “exist beyond the settler state and the extractive economic, political, and social norms”. Vaughn traces this type of thinking to Trask as laying “the groundwork for Indigenous feminisms that reject Christian heteropatriarchal values” (p. 110).

Aligning with decolonial Indigenous feminist thinkers Arvin, Simpson, Vaughn and Trask, we hope to be able to discuss Samoan reproductive labor within a critique of colonialism and its gendered hierarchies, which Samoans now maintain themselves within (Keil and Lopesi Forthcoming). As demonstrated by decolonial Indigenous feminist scholars and writings, mainstream feminism is not capable of undertaking this kind of theoretical recovery because what is required is recovering an Indigenous Samoan feminist genealogy. Rather just as other Indigenous feminists have grounded their theorizations within their own cultural contexts as well as expansive genealogies, we hope to do the same by highlighting the significance of doing so within a Samoan context that stands in coalition with other Indigenous feminist decolonial thinking and tinkering, as well as calls for a grounding of Samoan reproduction within Indigenous feminisms that reproduce new worlds outside of colonial capitalism. This regenerative refusal of Samoan reproductive labor within capitalism reveals possibilities elsewhere.

5. In Favor of Promiscuity: A New Genealogy for Samoan Reproductive Labor

So what does all this mean for Samoan reproductive labor then? Mignolo (2007a, 2011) notes that delinking is only possible when one understands the matrices of coloniality that one exists within, which we have sought to explicate here by revealing the entanglements of Samoan reproductive labor with the state. This starts in Sāmoa itself and moves into diaspora where it becomes further complicated and entangled with settler colonialism. Not only is Samoan labor necessary, Indigenous values of collectivism and service operate in
ways that simultaneously exploit Samoan labor and maintain the subjugated position of Samoan laborers. The settler colonial state exploits and is rewarded by Indigenous Samoan collectivist values. The point here is that while the Samoan laborer might be collectively oriented, the nation state is not. Understanding this position, we return to the question: why care for a society that does not care for us in return? In our critique of and response to colonial capitalism, we take up Arvin’s (2019a) challenge of having a responsibility to our people (as opposed to the settler colonial state) to reimagine and rehabilitate our reproductive labor as our own, refusing the settler colonial order of things.

Rather than being wedded to being the well-disciplined good Samoan laborer or being monogamous to colonial capitalism, there is value in promiscuity. Colloquially, promiscuous and promiscuity are words that are often used as a reference to having multiple sexual partners, but they also describe one having casual or irregular habits of being indiscriminate in realms beyond intimate relationships. We pick up the latter two meanings but also play on the metaphor of the first to offer Samoan reproductive labor and laborers’ other pathways and other genealogies. We draw on this metaphor to move beyond being wedded and monogamous to genealogies that serve and support colonial-capitalist ideologies and systems, as well as to challenge coloniality embedded within (post-missionized and colonized) Sāmoa. Promiscuity pays homage to sex–gender relations prior to the missionization in Sāmoa, where sex–gender relations were understood and operated in more fluid ways so as not to stigmatize and marginalize sex outside of marriage as well as having multiple sexual partners. Tala o le vavau (Samoan legends), for example, demonstrate how prominent feminist figures in Samoan history, such as Taema and Tilafaiga, had multiple sexual partners prior to marriage and even during marriage. This is also evidenced by histories of Queen Salamasina, who conceived her first child outside of wedlock. Thus, embracing promiscuity works as an act of re-appropriation that simultaneously challenges Western discourses and constructions, as well as critiques colonially imposed Christian moralities that misappropriate Samoan cultural values and instruct the subservience and domestication of Samoan women under the guise of fa’aSāmoa.

Thus, promiscuity in this context means stepping out of and away from capitalist ideologies and their mythologized collective. We are not indiscriminate with our use of promiscuity—it is intentional. Promiscuity recognizes the restrictive nature and overpowering grasp of colonial capitalism. Promiscuity is the unshackling from colonial undertones or, more aptly, overtones; it operates as a form of resistance against moralizing (and intersecting) forces of Christianity, colonialism and capitalism. Embracing promiscuity gives oneself other options, as Walter Mignolo (2007a) frames it. In doing so, promiscuity destabilizes the foundation of the nuclear family and works against the monogamous, cis-heterosexual marriage. Metaphorically moving outside of the state-sanctioned marriage framework provides a wider scope of Samoan reproduction that includes non-heterosexual, non-biological ideas of reproductive labor, including visions and imaginings, offering other kinds of life-worlds. This more expansive remit of Samoan reproduction is already in existence; we just need to emancipate Samoan reproductive labor from colonial trappings so that it can be reconnected with this other genealogy that centers the vā and admonishes ideas, processes and systems that transgress or sully vā relations.

In refusing the capitalist colonial genealogy of Samoan reproductive labor, Samoan reproductive laborers assert a kind of defiant indigeneity (Teves 2018) that rejects the gendered and racialized hierarchies and logics of the well-disciplined Samoan care worker working to reproduce settler colonial society. Once one can see the limitation of that kind of reproductive labor, they are able to shift their reproductive energy toward alternative modes of regeneration. Creating a decolonial intervention into the genealogy of Indigenous reproduction is also about refusing a ‘progressive West’ and a damage-centered approach to Indigenous reproduction that precludes liberatory futures (Tuck 2009). It offers a possibility and an intervention that disrupts the status quo by providing, as Gotby (2023) notes, “a potential space for the radical remaking of the world” (p. 36). We can think, then, of
reproductive labor and care work as a contested space for imagining alternate possibilities and resisting into existence alternate futures.

6. Conclusions

This paper digs into the epistemological questions of Samoan reproductive labor’s position with colonial capitalism and maintenance of the nation state. The emphasis here has been on an epistemic delinking from coloniality, and a decolonial project of relocating reproductive labor within Indigenous feminist knowledge systems. We see this work as being vital. However, there are still very current questions about what stepping out of this colonial capital genealogy intellectually means materially for Samoan women and Samoan reproductive laborers. How can this epistemic work shift what is lived in communities and the structural constraints experienced by and within Samoan communities today? How too do we reconcile our colonial past with our post-colonial present to progress to a decolonial indigenous future? These are questions we continue to grapple with and have not been able to answer yet. This reproductive labor of our own, through the production of Samoan feminist thought, is the beginning of a bigger project that seeks to scratch a little deeper. For now, though, we know, as Audre Lorde (2007) famously asserted, that the masters tools will not dismantle the masters house; hence the need to step out of this genealogy and into a promiscuous future.

Genealogy is important in a Samoan worldview. But, in contemporary contexts, much of the reproduction we focus on is colonially imposed, heterosexual and romanticized, with a focus on Christian nuclear families. Under Christianity and capitalism, Samoan women put a lot of effort into reproduction as they are disciplined into being good reproductive laborer’s both in terms of reproducing the family and reproducing society through care work. In this paper, we have sought to reposition Samoan reproductive labor outside of racial capitalist trappings and alongside Indigenous feminist ways of thinking about reproduction by regenerating Samoan reproductive labor’s emancipatory possibilities for conjuring and world-building. Regeneration, resurgence and being slyly reproductive are very different ways of thinking about genealogy beyond what is biologically produced through the nuclear family as the locus of reproducing the nations ideal citizens. The colonially imposed idea of genealogy is also concerned with disciplining women, our relations and our reproduction. Thus, we advocate for a promiscuity to the predetermined genealogy of our labor within racial capitalism, to step out and find new relations who we can labor with to build new genealogies. Embracing promiscuity offers another way to think through Samoan women’s reproductive labor that moves it beyond the colonial, capitalist reproduction. Remembering promiscuity regenerates decolonial possibilities.

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Notes

1 Throughout this article, we use the phrase colonial-capitalist and various iterations to point to the entangled nature between colonialism and capitalism as being part of the same project while still being co-dependent on each other. The desired colonial conquest of the ‘New World’ occurred through industrial capitalism, which was also a racialized and gendered project, ordering certain bodies for certain purposes to labor toward the liberal nation-state. For more reading in this area, see (Koshy et al. 2022).

2 While Sāmoa (formerly Western Sāmoa) gained official independence in 1962, theoretically ending their era of possession by the New Zealand government; one could argue that colonial ideologies persist through international relations and the prominence of the Christianity. In contrast, American Sāmoa is a US territory; the archipelago thus remains a US possession.
For further discussion on the complexities of gender within Samoan political, economic and social contexts, see (Lilomaiava-Doktor 2020; Fairbun-Dunlop 2005).

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