

“Being a Lesbian is one thing, but being a Sāmoan Lesbian was, and is, a whole different thing”: Exploring the Coming Out Experiences of Sāmoan Lesbian And Queer Women

Deirdre Maisaele Stanley

Student ID: 4956560

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Abstract

This Masters research critically explores the ‘coming out’ experiences of eight lesbian and queer Sāmoan women in Aotearoa-New Zealand, utilising a lens of relationality and employing intersectionality as a core conceptual standpoint. In this thesis, I report how participants highlighted complexity in negotiating and navigating coming out within a diasporic Sāmoan context. Shedding light on how non-normative sexual identities are experienced – and made sense of – by Sāmoan lesbian and queer women in our context. In exploring their realities against existing theoretical models of homosexual identity formation, participants’ stories underscore how the formation and understanding of their non-normative sexualities are always juxtaposed relationally to ways they experience their ethnic/racialised, gendered and often politicised bodies. Indicating an intersectional experience that requires a more capacious and culturally grounded understanding of the coming out process. Utilising Talanoa and deploying a Thematic Analysis to generate and guide the data-analysis process, this research also reveals how the majority of participants do not identify as lesbian; often questioned the performativity and linearity attached to coming-out models that currently exist, and uniquely, highlights how participants centred a Sāmoan relationality in their coming-out and being-out process. These findings highlight the truly complicated nature of participants’ lived experiences. Their stories reveal the multiple, and often contradicting, factors that they faced in developing non-normative sexual identities while maintaining the other facets of their intersectional positioning.

Keywords: Coming-Out; Identity; Intersectionality; Lesbian; LGBTQI+; Pacific Diaspora; Queer; Relationality; Sāmoan women; Talanoa; Vā.

Dedication

For my Mum and Dad.

Joseph Stanley – whose life’s work has afforded my siblings and I so many privileges and protections we would’ve otherwise never had. While I’ve paid little attention to the particulars, I am grateful for how your legacy has given shape to the framework of my life.

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Chapter One - Introduction

Having fallen in love with a woman in my mid-twenties while living overseas, I wanted to know whether there were more people like me. I had identified as heterosexual my whole life and had never kissed a girl before, but now found myself in a same-sex relationship. When I flew home, I shared the update with my family: I had a partner, and they were not a man. What I did not do was claim an identity label and I did not sit my family down for a big announcement. Unbeknownst to me, this was to begin my journey as a Sāmoan woman raised in the New Zealand diaspora, toward negotiating what it meant to claim a queer identity within our Pacific context here in Tāmaki Makaurau. As time passed, I wanted to know more about other Sāmoan lesbian and queer women's coming out stories and whether there were any commonalities between theirs and mine. Much to my surprise, there was very little known about the experiences of Sāmoan lesbian or queer women regarding coming-out that existed in the academic literature. It is from this position I undertook my research journey, which I present to you in this thesis.

For members of the Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Intersex plus (LGBTQI+) community, 'Coming Out' (CO) of the closet has been described as an essential rite of passage; a defining milestone in the formation and maintenance of a healthy non-normative sexual identity (Taylor, 1999; McLean, 2007; Guittar, 2013, 2014; Saguy et al., 2020). While coming out has been popularly defined as the performative declaration of a previously hidden non-heterosexual self, scholars since have not only broadened the scope of its meaning and purpose, but some now question its relevance today (Rust, 1993). And while scholars have made significant strides in improving our understanding of the history of sexuality (Foucault, 1976), the homosexuality/heterosexuality binary (Butler, 1990; Sedgwick, 1990; Katz, 1995), and the coming-out process (Cass, 1979; Troiden, 1988; Sandler, 2022), many have since noted the majority of empirical and theoretical research has been based on an almost exclusively White, male, middle-class sample (Groves & Ventura, 1983; Rust, 1993; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Diamond, 2008).

Additionally, in focusing on coming out research, initial scholarly forays often adopted only a single-axis framework in understanding the development of a non-normative sexual self (Cass, 1979; Troiden, 1988). Simply put, coming out research, much like LGBTQI+ identities research, has specifically been primarily based on the experiences of White, middle-class men and the focus of such studies have been on the development of only their sexual identity. The role of culture, context, language, migration histories and complexities have been ignored in much of this research until recently. As such, very little is known about the coming out experiences of diasporic Sāmoan lesbian and queer women in Aotearoa-New Zealand.

This Masters research critically explores the coming out experiences of eight lesbian and queer Sāmoan women (in the 20s-60s age group) in Aotearoa-New Zealand, utilising a lens of relationality and employing intersectionality as a core conceptual standpoint and entry point to the research. In this thesis, I report how my research with participants helped me to understand what their experiences highlighted regarding the complexity negotiated and navigated during the formation and expression of diasporic Sāmoan non-normative sexual identities. I also explore questions around whether existing theoretical models of homosexual identity formation adequately speak to their intersectional realities. In particular, I sought to understand how participants made sense of their non-normative sexualities in light of their racialised, gendered, bodies and experiences in the Aotearoa-New Zealand context as Sāmoan women.

According to feminist writer, Adrienne Rich (1980) ‘compulsory heterosexuality’ and the historically coerced sexual inclination of women towards men has resulted in the deliberate omission and invisibility of lesbian existence throughout history. What Black feminist scholars such as Kimberlé Crenshaw ask us to consider further, however, is the idea of intersectional invisibility, which can help us better understand the experiences of lesbians and Queers of Colour (QOC). Groups of marginalised people who are rendered invisible on account of their gendered *as well* as their racial positioning.

Considering that Sāmoan lesbian and queer women experience marginality in New Zealand as both a racialised or ethnically marginalised body, *and* as a queer or non-normative subject/body, this research set out to respond to two key research questions that could help us to better understand this intersectional gap:

Research Questions

1. What do participants' coming out experiences reveal about the developments of sexual identities for Sāmoan lesbian and queer women living in Aotearoa-New Zealand?
2. How do participants make sense of their non-normative sexual identities with their racialised, and gendered selves?

In this thesis, I will argue that the coming out process for Sāmoan lesbian and queer women as participants in this research was truly complicated. CO models that exist in the literature often highlight a linear and performative process where one goes from being inside a proverbial closet to outside it (Cass, 1979; Sedgwick, 1990). Multiple factors impacted participants' decisions related to CO, often choosing more subtle ways of disclosure rather than full visibility in a single performative, declarative moment. This reluctance from participants is perhaps best understood through an intersectional lens. As such, research found within Western coming out models often do not account for the ways in which participants' racialised, gendered, diasporic, positionings have made for a multi-layered experience, fraught with incongruencies and contradictions (Manalansan, 2003; Decena, 2008; Adams & Phillips, 2009; Nakhid et al., 2020; Boussalem, 2021; Thomsen 2021).

I argue further that this study relating to the CO process for participants, allows us to see the strong resistance to the term lesbian in this context, tied to how and why participants show reluctance in claiming Western identity-labels to define their Pacific-experienced non-normative sexualities.

Participants often referenced their aversion to the term due to its connection to colonial modes of knowledge and histories, as well as a type of queer politic and optic that they could not relate to.

Furthermore, in exploring how participants negotiated complex social, familial, religious and cultural factors tied to their Sāmoan diasporic positionality participants often reflected on Sāmoan ideations of self, centring relationality as the identity framework with which they negotiated their coming out processes. Highlighting the significance of decisions they made in keeping their communities and families protected while honouring their same-sex attraction.

Participants' stories also allow insights into the pitfalls of essentialisms attached to cultural and sexual identities as participants expressed difficulty in feeling validated in their intersectional positioning, given the contradictions and incongruencies in their varying identities. Lastly, I argue why these contradictions and incongruencies can exist simultaneously and do not require reconciliation nor synthesis of identities, which coming out models argue (Cass, 1979; Troiden 1988). Rather, these contradictions, I advance, actually coexist in a generative tension for participants. A tense but skilfully mastered existence which allows them to move between different worlds innovatively. An adaptive approach that intersectionality and queer theory, I contend, conceptually allows us to capture in the reading of nuance and in the context of participants' stories.

Rationale of Research

Homosexuality/Lesbianism Across the Pacific

Sexual and gender fluidity has always existed in the Pacific (Ravulo, 2021). However, due to the strong influence of Christianity and colonial rule, there is little historical literature pertaining to its presence. What does exist tends to focus on gender liminality, with even less on non-normative sexualities, and has largely been written by Western scholars (Besnier, 1997, 2002; Wallace, 2003; O'Brien, 2006; Tcherkézoff, 2014). Pacific scholars, however, have recently taken up the mantle in attempting to reassert Pacific voices into discussions around Pacific queerness in both the region and diasporic

setting, arguing for the need to disrupt these heteronormative binaries that have afflicted gender and sexuality frameworks imported during the time of colonisation (see Teaiwa, 2014; McMullin & Kihara, 2018; Ravulo, 2021; Thomsen and Iosefo, 2021; Thomsen, 2022). As such, this lack of literature, which becomes even less when you consider accounts that are written by Pacific scholars themselves, points to the extent of participants' theoretical marginality. By highlighting how Christian/colonial rule muted expressions of Pacific sex/gender liminality, we are able to build on a historical context in which most of participants' difficulties of CO are tied to this framing.

One such import has been the criminalisation of male homosexuality across the Pacific region. Male homosexuality is outlawed by seven Pacific nations today (Presterudstuen, 2019). These laws in Sāmoa, for example, also criminalised men for wearing women's clothing, and were adopted at the time of Sāmoa's independence as Samoa's Crimes Act was drafted on norms that were inherited from New Zealand, its former colonial master (Thomsen, 2022). It is worth noting, however, that female homosexuality or what is referred to in this thesis as lesbianism, is not a criminal offence. A type of gender configuration that does not indicate acceptance, rather, invisibilisation of lesbian women in front of the law (Moran, 2000; Robinson, 2008; Dwyer & Rundle, 2019). This invisibility in front of the Law, or assumed heterosexuality of Sāmoan lesbian and queer women speaks to the gendered discrepancies between Sāmoan men and Sāmoan women, heightening the criticality of studies that centre Sāmoan lesbian and queer women.

Pacific Lesbian and Queer Women's Invisibility

There is very little literature that details experiences of Sāmoan lesbian, queer or bisexual women. In Western contexts, British law did not consider women full, autonomous beings with the agency let alone capability of same-sex activity (Carroll, 2012). There is much speculation that this is the reason why lesbianism was not criminalised in the Pacific as the introduction of a new system of Law in Sāmoa mirrored British Law (Meleisea, 1987) and much of Samoa's laws were drafted by New Zealand administrators (Thomsen, 2022).

Scholars have also argued that the particular absence relating to sexual relations between women in law is due to the policing of women through other modes of control – namely via the patriarchal foundations of private law and by way of regulations of the gendered family unit (Moran, 2000). Adrienne Rich's (1980) argument is also of relevance here; the invisibility of women in literature as well as legislation, one can argue, is because women have conventionally not been treated as fully realised people, resulting in women's absence in expressions of lesbianism for many years . Considering this, many argue that it is important to make the distinction that it was in fact homophobia, and not homosexuality, that was brought to the Pacific (Te Awekotuku as cited in Elleray, 2006, Smith, 2016; Thomsen, 2016, 2019, 2022; Ravulo, 2021).

The Pacific Diasporic Identity in this Research

With the end of WWII coupled with New Zealand's severe labour shortage, Pacific migration to New Zealand resulted in an influx of immigrants from Pacific Islands such as Samoa, Tonga, Niue, the Cook Islands and Fiji (Macpherson et al., 2001). The well-known story of Pacific migrants filling low paying, mainly manufacturing jobs that New Zealanders refused to do, initially being welcomed, then marginalised, led to Pacific generations being New Zealand-born and without the formative experiences of their Pacific Island homelands (Macpherson et al., 2001). This New Zealand-born and raised generation as well as subsequent generations are now considering questions regarding the relationship between identity, culture, health and wellbeing as Western influence was now an integral factor in developing a Pacific diasporic identity (Mila, 2014).

Naturally, there has been growing literature pertaining to Pacific diasporic identities in Aotearoa (Macpherson et al., 2001; Fairbairn-Dunlop, 2003; Anae, 2004). Public discourses pertaining to diasporic Pacific identities, particularly within the education and health sector has focused heavily on cultural loss, and of being disproportionately represented in low socio-economic statistics (Anae, 2010; Mila, 2014). While this important literature has examined the displacement/resettlement binary and the

multifaceted struggles faced in forming a cultural identity while being forced to reconfigure understandings of nation and home, often this work does not reference Pacific Rainbow communities and those who identify as lesbian or queer. As such, none of this research focuses on intersectionally-marginalised queer Pacific folk, as evidenced by the absence of non-normative sexuality in public discourses surrounding Pacific peoples in Aotearoa-New Zealand including from within. This presents opportunities for this research to help open spaces for these discussions to be included in Pacific scholarship based in Aotearoa-New Zealand.

Structure of Thesis

There are five main chapters to this thesis – I outline the contents of each chapter and explain some of the decisions I have made in this thesis that aims to help centre Pacific ways of knowing and being as best as possible. Although I will expound on this further in the methodology section, one of the central goals of this thesis was to help construct a Sāmoan women’s queer story through a recollection of our Talanoa, reflecting the grit and grace with which this was collectively produced.

Chapter Two – Literature Review

In the literature review, I briefly outline the history of sexuality and subsequent emergence of homosexuality as an object of enquiry before examining two of the most cited homosexual development models in the field. Vivienne Cass (1979) and Richard Troiden (1988) are two examples of how homosexual identity was initially theorised. I also briefly discuss the history of coming out research. While homosexuality, lesbianism and queerness speak to distinct iterations of non-heterosexuality, lesbianism and queerness as legitimate areas of knowledge generation and research are borne out of homosexuality as the original site of scholarly exploration regarding non-normative sexuality in Western contexts. I then discuss the tension between coming out literature from a Western perspective against more recent scholarly incisions by Indigenous and non-White scholars, in an attempt to map the contested knowledge landscape pertaining to coming out. I also introduce in this chapter the conceptual, theoretical and analytical tools I utilise throughout this research in explaining

why multiple sets of scholarly tools are required to help locate this thesis within the complicated terrain participants' stories inadvertently occupy.

Chapter Three – Methodology

This chapter explains the research tools and procedure I undertook to generate data and knowledge in order to answer my prescribed research questions. This thesis uses Talanoa, a widely used Pacific research methodology (PRM) that centres Pacific ways of knowing and being in the research and knowledge generation process (Vaioleti, 2006; Naepi, 2015). Despite the appropriateness in my view of my methodological approach, in this chapter I also outline some of the challenges I grappled with in utilising PRM, due to my positionality as a Pacific, queer woman and researcher, in trying to find, and make, theoretical space for myself and participants, where we currently do not exist in the literature (Thomsen and Iosefo, 2021).

Chapter Four – Findings

In this chapter, I present the findings via a thematic Talanoa which roughly orbited and diverged around (as an investigatory tool in its own right), a linearity identified in psychosocial coming-out models. I explore the six main themes that were identified in the data analysis process, with six subthemes that fall under two main themes:

- 1. Discovery**
- 2. Inadequacy of the Term Lesbian**
- 3. Complicating Factors Before Coming Out**
 - 3a Internalised Homophobia
 - 3b Experiences at School
 - 3c The Church
 - 3d Heteronormativity
- 4. Participants and Disclosure**
- 5. Relational Factors of Being Out**

- 5a Cultural / Gendered / Sexual Essentialisms
- 5b Family Anxieties

6. Intersectional Equilibrium

I share excerpts from Talanoa with all eight participants and offer my own researcher interpretation of participants' experiences situated in or outside existing research. At all times, the findings I present negotiate queer scholarship with Pacific frameworks and ways of knowing and being. This chapter, I believe, illustrates how complex and complicated this space is.

Chapter Five – Discussion

The final substantive chapter of this thesis discusses the findings of the research in relation to the conceptual and theoretical tools reviewed earlier in the thesis to provide direct responses to the aforementioned research questions. In this section, I also detail the reasoning as supported by data gathered through this research process, how I landed on the final argument of this thesis I foreshadowed earlier. This thesis suggests that: participants negotiated complex social, familial, religious, spiritual and cultural factors that is tied to their Sāmoan diasporic positionality, thus finding little resonance in the performativity and linearity popularised by Western process of coming out modelling. In simple terms, coming out itself was an important proposition and experience for many participants, but it quite simply was *not* the only thing that mattered.

The thesis ends with a conclusion section that considers some of the limitation and potentiality for further research that emanates from this work.

Notes on Terminology

Researchers in the queer space often grapple with the issue of terminology. This challenge was not one that I escaped in this research. As evidenced in this introductory chapter, there are many shifts in

nance and labels that characterise not just this research, but any research conducted in this field (Smith et al, 2018).

One such issue that I found was the way the term lesbian was understood, engaged with and rejected by many in this project. Originally the term lesbian was chosen for what I assumed would be as a kin-like term for participants, however, the majority of participants flatly stated that they did not identify as lesbian. This was despite being in relationships with women and having sexual attractions towards other women. The reasonings and possible explanations for this dislike are discussed later on in the thesis, however from a researcher standpoint this tension affected the way terminologies are deployed in this work. Other participants identified as queer, while others did not identify with an identity-label at all, though they are also in relationships with women. As such, I will be oscillating between the terms lesbian, queer and non-normative/non-heterosexual in describing participants' experiences. Queer is usually preferred over more traditional/essentialist labels such as gay/lesbian because of the fluidity that queer allows in being gender non-specific about attraction (Feinstein et al, 2021).

Sāmoan terminologies in describing women who are attracted to women are often derogatory. There is a growing usage of fa'atama as a Sāmoan term to describe women's same-sex attraction, though it translates to "the way of a tomboy" (McMullin & Kihara, 2018, p. 11). This still assumes a display of gender-nonconformity as well as a butch-ness in character, that references a binary shift from one point to another. Thus, participants also made it known that it could not speak to their realities, although all participants' acknowledge its value as an emerging subjectivity term deployed in Sāmoa. As all participants are part of the Pacific diaspora in Aotearoa-New Zealand, there was a tacit acknowledgement that perhaps it is a term that might gain resonance here like fa'afafine in the future. The confines of this as a Master's study meant the complexities of this term could not be explored in much detail. However, what this did highlight in stark terms was the severe lack of empirical work on Sāmoan queer women/non-men identities and experiences in not just the Pacific diaspora in New

Zealand, but in the region as a whole. Even further still, what little that does exist still focuses overwhelmingly on men and gender-liminal expressions of those who were assigned male at birth.

There are times throughout this research when the terms gay, homosexual and other iterations of the LGBTQI+ acronym is used, and in these instances, I am using the language of the scholar I am referencing. I use the term non-men in my findings chapter; that is when I am quoting a participant's words and I am reproducing that term in this thesis.

Aotearoa-New Zealand is used throughout this research. It is to acknowledge the colonial-settler status of the country while also recognising its Indigenous name. New Zealand is used when speaking to a colonial-settler context, and Aotearoa-New Zealand is used when speaking more generally.

I have chosen to use Pacific as a referential term throughout this research. I acknowledge that Pacific is not Indigenous, but a pan-ethnic construction from outsiders – European colonisers, anthropologists and archaeologists (Anae, 1997). While there is a growing call among Indigenous scholars and artists to use alternative terms such as Oceania (Hau'ofa, 1993) or Moana (Lopesi, 2021a) as a way to centre our own worldviews in our writings and decolonial imaginings, Pacific was still the most common term that participants used to self-identify themselves throughout our Talanoa. Highlighting the ways in which these originally problematic terms “have attained a place of emergent authenticity within Islander worldviews” (McGavin, 2014, p. 5). Similarly, as Upolu Lumā Va'ai and Kiki Gwaiaweng (2017) contend, we cannot escape the word Pacific as it is so engrained in so many of our political, social, and religious settings. This is not to suggest that they do not come without flaws; using Pacific as the term when referencing the region, I hope, does not confirm that I am knowingly participating in a Eurocentric scholarly practice that Lana Lopesi (2021a) states can perpetuate a colonial imaginary, but rather it highlights the desire to use terms that participants have used to situate themselves in their own narratives.

I have also chosen not to italicise non-English words throughout this thesis. There is an othering that occurs when non-English words are italicised, where an implicit privileging of the English language is assumed in our writing. As such, I wish to avoid where possible, the process of othering.

Figure 1. Terms That Will Be Utilised Throughout This Thesis

Gay	Gay is a sexual identity label, often deployed by men, to describe same-sex attraction.
Gender Liminality	Gender Liminality describes the space between genders, where the potential of transformation and becoming, is acknowledged. It is not an ordinal identarian category.
Homosexual	Homosexual is the more clinical term used to describe same-sex attraction.
LGBT	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans.
LGBTQ	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer.
LGBTQI+	Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Trans, Queer, Intersex, Plus.
Lesbian	A lesbian is defined as a woman who receives her main emotional and sexual satisfaction from relationships with women (Groves & Ventura, 1983).
Lesbians of Colour	Lesbians of colour is a term used to differentiate between the agendas and struggles of White lesbians and non-White lesbians.
Non-Men	Non-Men is a term used to describe any persons who identifies as someone that falls outside of the scope of men – for example, cisgender and trans women, non-binary etc.
Non-Normative Sexuality	Non-Normative Sexuality describes the challenge of societally accepted norms with regard to sexuality.

Queer	Queer is defined as being a non-specific sexuality that speaks to a non-heterosexual or non-cisgender identity (Feinstein et al, 2021).
Queers of Colour (QOC)	Queers of Colour is an identity that describes an intersectional approach to being non-White and being non-heterosexual.
Rainbow Communities	Rainbow communities is often used as an umbrella term that refers to the many iterations of non-normative sexual identities.

Chapter Two - Literature Review

History of Sexuality and the Emergence of Homosexuality

Charles Gilbert Chaddock is credited to have introduced homosexuality to the English language in the late 19th century (Halperin, 1990). A concept that scholars such as Michel Foucault (1976) have argued was central to the construction of the term heterosexuality. Homosexuality and heterosexuality were then seen as referring to a set of stable sexual identities, which subsequent scholars took up as the study of sexuality and a site of worthy scholarly investigation (Kapoor, 2015). Foucault's *The History of Sexuality* (1976) is a foundational text in Western understandings of homosexuality. Foucault begins his book by challenging the "repressive hypothesis" (p. 17) that has characterised much of history. The claim that sex was forced into silence from the 18th century due to the exploitative demands of capitalism and the prudish insecurities of bourgeois society. As a result, it was now considered only appropriate in its necessity for reproduction after marriage. Foucault (1976) and others subsequently argue that discourses - medical, psychological, religious - of sex, pathologised the homosexual to a point that heterosexuality needed neither overt defending nor defining (Sedgwick, 1990; Katz, 1995; Carroll, 2012; Denton, 2016). As the homosexual was presented as a sexual pervert, the more entrenched the heterosexual became its normalised opposition (Katz, 1995). As a result, focus moved from the sexual happenings within a heterosexual marriage towards the examination of the sexual perversion of homosexuality, the sexuality of children and the sexual behaviours of women (Foucault, 1976).

With the development of sexuality as an object of knowledge and scientific enquiry, homosexuality went from being understood socially as isolated acts between one sex, to those acts now being considered linked to stable categories of personality (Foucault, 1976). In other words, homosexuality went from being seen as merely a physical act of pleasure, to one that revealed a codified identity (Foucault, 1976; D'Emilio, 2006; Denton, 2016). Foucault (1976) argued that language and knowledge are intimately linked to power, highlighting ways in which discourses on sexuality have been closely

linked to the control of what is and what is not considered normal. According to this critique, Sex – within an exploitative, capitalist framework – is classed as wasteful frivolity and a distraction from the kind of work ethic the bourgeois class required in order to maintain power. The want to control discourses around sexuality, then, becomes a political desire to control cultural production.

As such, the shift from homosexuality and subsequent emergence of sexual identity labels reveals the political and social shift in societal perceptions of sexuality itself. Brianna Smith et al., (2018) argue that ‘homosexual’ conjured strong negative connotations due to the medical pathologisation and state-sanctioned punishment associated to its usage. As a result, young, radical activists of the 1960s and 70s wanted to distance themselves from the sense of shame and stigma associated to being a homosexual. Where homosexuality evoked medical discourses pertaining to a mental defect that required state intervention, gay/lesbian offered a sexual identity that one could claim publicly and be proud of (Smith et al., 2018). Therefore, the changing nature of labels used to describe sexual identity reveals the ways in which terms reflect the changing political and social contexts in which they are produced (Smith et al., 2018).

History of Coming Out and Coming Out of the Closet

The concept of coming out, nowadays, refers to the verbal disclosure of a non-normative and often stigmatised sexual identity (Taylor, 1999; Sandler, 2022). While the metaphor has since taken on an entirely new meaning and has an extensive body of scholarly work dedicated to its world-structuring, its origins date back to the 18th and 19th centuries (Scott, 2018). Coming out originally referred to the process of young single women entering aristocratic society usually through the attendance of debutante balls (Chancey, 2008). At this stage coming out was initially framed as an arrival into upper-class Western society (Sandler, 2022). However, the metaphor started to gain traction from the 1930s among gay men, and later women in the US.

The addition of the closet, according to Travers Scott (2018), is where the metaphor takes on a new meaning. ‘The closet’ which is borrowed from another metaphor, ‘skeleton in the closet’ refers to a secret or “undesirable fact” that holds societal stigma. Unlike its original definition of being framed by an arrival into upper class society, the addition of ‘the closet’ makes the act of coming out a departure from secrecy and a shedding of shame (Scott, 2018; Sandler, 2022). By coming out of the closet, one refused to align with the social condemnation and pathologisation of the LGBTQI+ community (Scott, 2018). In this sense, coming out was seen as a politically radical act as the individual was openly embracing their sexual difference within a patriarchal heterosexist society. However, the significance and meaning attached to coming out has since changed (Duggan, 2002; Guittar, 2014). This subversive act, attaching dignity instead of hurt to one’s skeleton (one’s non-normative sexuality) becomes an act of political and social rebellion and one that characterises identity-based social movements of the 1960s and 70s (Sandler, 2018; Scott, 2018; Saguy et al., 2020; Boussalem, 2021).

For a while, coming out of the closet was considered a moment, usually a grand-gestural one, that involved the individual sitting their parent(s) or loved ones down, and revealing a fixed non-normative sexuality (Dank, 1971; Rust, 1993). In other words, it was a revelation shared with others (McLean, 2007; Sandler, 2022). However, further studies showed that the first coming out moment can often involve just the individual themselves with inner acceptance being the first moment of embracing a non-normative sexuality (Edwards, 1992; Morrow, 2001; Roseborough, 2004; Lind, 2005; Chazin & Klugman, 2014). Moreover, later studies have argued that we should not see coming out as a single moment, but a series of moments - a career and lifelong process to be managed for as long as someone identifies as such (Taylor, 1999; Guittar, 2014; Guittar & Rayburn, 2016; Shurts et al., 2020).

From the early 1970s, coming out of the closet primarily described an affirming experience, one characterised by pride and empowerment, and a leaving behind of denial and shame. (Hilton, 2017). As a result, a politic of visibility became a core function of identity-based politics and movements of the

1960s and 70s galvanised by the Stonewall riots and the gay liberation movements around the world (Duggan, 2002).

Homosexual Identity Developmental Theoretical Models to Understand Coming Out

The want among scholars to study the coming out phenomena resulted in an expansive body of scholarly work related to developmental models of sexual identity formation (Cass, 1979; Coleman, 1982; Troiden, 1988; McCarn & Fassinger, 1996). Scholars, particularly from the fields of psychology and counselling, developed a range of theoretical models to crystallise the construction of a homosexual identity (Cass 1979, Troiden, 1988). Presumably, to help better support the development of individuals as they came into their sexual selves. Much scholarly enquiry regarding non-normative sexuality has focused on the question of what causes homosexuality - nature or nurture, or biology versus environment? (Eliason, 1996). The varying answers to this question are examined in two theoretical orientations known as the essentialist-social constructionist debate (Eliason, 1996; Mosher, 2001). Both positions will be examined later in this chapter.

Homosexual Identity Development – the Cass Model

According to Vivienne Cass's model (1979) there are six stages that an individual goes through in order to build a healthy and authentic homosexual identity. The six stages are *identity confusion*, *identity comparison*, *identity tolerance*, *identity acceptance*, *identity pride*, and *identity synthesis*. Identity confusion is when the individual, who has been socialised with heteronormative messaging all their life, can identify their own feelings, thoughts and behaviours as homosexual. Identity comparison is when the individual begins to compare their own identity to those they see as homosexual. Identity tolerance is when the individual can state "I probably am a homosexual" (p. 229). Identity acceptance is characterised by the individual accepting their homosexuality self-image. Identity pride is marked by "gay is good" (p. 233) as well as the politicisation of the individual. Identity synthesis is when homosexual identity has been fully accepted and integrated into one's sense of self. Cass states that every individual has a public and private identity; when the two identities are in congruence with each

other, an individual moves to the next stage in their growth in which they freely identify as homosexual and freely disclose this to others, or in other words, comes out (1979).

Homosexuality Identity Development – the Troiden Model

Richard Troiden's (1988) model is also a well-known theoretical model that draws from Cass's work. Troiden argues that the six stages introduced by Cass can be compacted into 4 - *sensitization, identity confusion, identity assumption and commitment*. Sensitisation is the usually prepubescent stage where an individual starts to realise they are different from their peers. Identity confusion is when they start to regard their feelings as homosexual which causes inner turmoil and confusion. Identity assumption is when a homosexual identity is established and when coming out occurs. Commitment, is the feeling of obligation to follow a particular course of action now that they are out, and this would involve adopting homosexuality as a way of life. Coming out is thus seen as "a form of adult resocialization" (Eliason, 1996, p. 47); the adoption of an identity that is so wholly different from the individual's previous socialisation. Although both the Cass (1979) and Troiden (1988) models became some of the most cited developmental models to date, they became also some of the most critiqued for their linearity (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Eliason, 1996; Adams & Phillips, 2009; Smuts, 2011; Kenneady & Oswalt, 2014; Shurts et al., 2020).

Essentialist View of Sexuality

Both Cass and Troiden's modelling are predicated on the notion that one's sexuality is an inherent part of self, that it is fixed and stable throughout one's life (Eliason, 1996; Horowitz & Newcomb, 2008). Coming out, in essentialist terms, is then considered a process of "learning to recognize what one was all along" (Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995, p. 95). John Hart (1984) critiques this approach and understanding of sexual identity. Instead of seeing peoples' sexual identity as an innately fixed sexual character, Hart (1984) argues that sexuality is more about the "creations of the interaction between an individual and society at historically specific moments" (p. 41). Similarly, Paula Rust (1993) posits that developmental theories treat sexuality as an essentialised part of self that is waiting to be discovered.

By adopting a more socially constructionist view of sexuality, Hart contends that people are given a “personal and political history of their lives that emphasises the choices they have made – consciously or not” (p. 42).

Scholars who write about sexuality in essentialist terms argue that one’s sexual self is a fundamental, pre-determined core that is waiting to be discovered (Mosher, 2001). Michele Eliason (1996) highlights that this conceptualisation of sexuality can be partly attributed to how medical, legal and theological discourses view sexual orientation, as an essential, biological aspect of an individual that is fixed at birth and stable throughout. This thinking is underpinned by psychological frameworks that assumes that a core self exists outside of social location or historical context (Dilley, 2002). Sexuality, in this vein, is treated as an objective truth with the employment of developmental models designed to help reveal that truth.

Social Constructionist View of Sexuality

Scholars who view sexuality as a social construction, however, argue that society impacts sexual identification (Hart, 1984; Horowitz & Newcomb, 2008; Denton, 2016). By treating sexuality as existing in a changeable societal context, it allows for scholars to interrogate the ways in which sexual identities are a reflection as well as a result of evolving social, racial, political and historical contexts (Rust, 1993; Mosher, 2001). By taking a socially constructionist approach to sexuality, individuals are afforded agency in the development of their sexual identity, as opposed to being passive agents and discovering it (Horowitz & Newcomb, 2008). Within a socially constructionist view, sexual identity is seen as an ongoing process that evolves throughout one’s life and according to one’s surroundings (Taylor, 1999; Mosher, 2001; Horowitz & Newcomb, 2008).

Linearity and Additional Critiques of the Cass and Troiden Models

A further critique of the psychological models advanced by Cass and Troiden is the presumption that the formation of a homosexual identity is a linear, sequential process (Taylor, 1999; Horowitz &

Newcomb, 2008; Brainer, 2018). According to this logic, individuals develop their sexuality in a task-based manner, and that any reverting back into nodes of heterosexual activity/behaviour is considered a regressive detour, or more colloquially, as a sign of heading back into the closet (Rust, 1993; Denton, 2016). Scholars have argued that this approach sacrifices complexity in favour of universal explanations of sexual identities (Rhoads, 1997). By linking coming out to a gradual increase in wellbeing not only for the individual but for the collective wellbeing of the LGBTQI+ community, this insistence to come out, or the “disclosure imperative” (McLean, 2007, p. 164), oversimplifies and fails to convey the stories of people whose experiences are not centred on the closeted/out binary (Boussalem, 2021).

Another assumption that these stage models make is that coming out is an essential, if not the final stage in the construction of a healthy homosexual identity (Troiden, 1988). This assumption can be seen as a result of onto-epistemological norms in psychology and the predominance of Western ways of thinking around sexuality, identity and identity formation theories (Wah-Shan, 2001). What these models inadvertently do is centralise the closet as the focal point of understanding non-normative sexualities’ oppression, and places utmost importance in verbal disclosure of those sexualities (Boussalem, 2021). This metric against which non-heterosexual people have been measured has inadvertently created a binary of good, selfless, out gays versus bad, selfish, closeted ones (McLean, 2007; Boussalem, 2021).

This binary is complicated further when racial and social hierarchies are also considered (Decena, 2008). It ignores the nuance and intersectional complexities of non-normative sexual selves, creating a reductive dichotomy, without any consideration as to how race, gender, class and positionality impact safety for those who experience what Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) would refer to as intersectional marginalisation. Additionally, Kirsten McLean (2007) highlights the moral judgement embedded within binaristic discourses of the closet. With disclosure being positioned as a necessary component of living a fully gay but also honest life. Thus, those who chose not to come out or who are only ‘partially

out' are seen as stunting their own sexual growth who lack the integrity to support the wider LGBTQI+ community (McLean, 2007).

Similarly, Travers Scott (2018) argues that coming out of the closet is underpinned by the core notion that collective visibility equals liberation. Scott's position is that this visibility imperative relies on the Western philosophic tradition of ocularcentrism – prioritising vision at the expense of other modes of analysis and perception (2018). This visual logic argues that:

Seeing is Knowing
[Knowing is Empathy]
Empathy is Liberation
(p. 149)

It is a given that public opinion and homophobic laws cannot begin to be challenged without increased collective outness (Eliason, 1996; Scott, 2018; Boussalem, 2021). With public visibility being a vital starting point for the recognition of rights, coming out is framed not only as a political act of self-affirmation but as a responsibility towards the liberation of the wider LGBTQ community (Shilts, 2009 as cited in Boussalem, 2021). This elevates the coming out process in political importance for queer liberation. However, as will be detailed later in this section, this still creates dilemmas for non-White, non-Western Rainbow communities whose knowledge systems and connections to familial and community wellbeing precipitate more complex urgencies than visibility in many contexts.

As such, for many outside the famed queer metropolises of the West (think New York, London, Sydney, Amsterdam and Los Angeles), a shortcoming of these models is their lack of intersectional interrogation (McCarn & Fassinger, 1996; Adams & Phillips, 2009; Kenneady & Oswalt, 2014). Homosexual identity formation models have tended to adopt a single-axis framework in conceptualising sexuality which means they do not explore the multiple social categories of difference

that contribute not only to peoples' sexual identity development, but also how this impacts their coming out experiences (Eliason, 1996; Adams & Phillips, 2009). Eliason (1996) argues that these inadequacies are due to the major limitations of sociological and psychological theories of sexual identity formation that "do not consider other aspects of identity and the ways by which race, ethnicity, gender, class, age and other important components of living may intersect with sexuality" (p. 52). To be fair, Vivienne Cass acknowledges this shortcoming in her own work and states that her model cannot adequately speak to all peoples of different cultural backgrounds due to the complexities and context-specificities of individual subjectivities (Thomsen, 2021).

A key assumption often uncritically made is the idea that one becomes a healthy gay/lesbian/queer subject only when they have gone through a prescriptive criterion that includes behavioural and performative changes in persona and appearance and ends with public disclosure in the form of coming out (Butler, 1990; West & Fenstermaker, 1995; Boussalem, 2021). However, many scholars have also found that not only are staged models too narrow in their scope and too Western in their epistemological foundations, but they are also almost exclusively White and middle class (Groves and Ventura, 1983, Eliason, 1996; Halperin, 2003; Decena, 2008; Diamond, 2008). As Hiram Perez (2005) states: "coming out promises liberation and celebrates a species of individualism in the form of self-determination. Conceptually and materially, that freedom and self-determination are premised on the property of Whiteness" (p. 178).

Coming-Out Literature that Exists Outside the West

Since the mid-1990s, there has also been a surge in scholars writing from outside Western frameworks, contexts and cultures that have advanced important research challenging the Eurocentrism and Whiteness of much coming-out studies and theories (Wah-Shan, 2001; Manalansan, 2003; Adams & Phillips, 2009; Wang, Bih & Brennan, 2009; Decena, 2008; Smuts, 2011; Brainer, 2018; Nakhid et al., 2020; Achar & Gopal, 2021; Boussalem, 2021; Thomsen, 2021). As the following studies reflect, people's sexual selves and their managing of them do not always have to involve verbal disclosure for

their sexuality to be valid. By interrogating the normative structures that underpin coming out models as well as stable sexual identity-based categories, non-Western queer subjects are adopting intersectional, relational strategies that manage their sexual selves *but within* their own cultural, political and historical contexts and via their own Indigenous methods (Thomsen 2018; 2020; 2021).

Narratives of Convenience - Gay Men in Korea

Seuta'afili Patrick Thomsen's (2021) intersectional study of Korean gay men in Seattle complicates the Western notion that verbal disclosure is the only way forward. Thomsen's term "Narratives of convenience" (2021, p. 14) was an adaptive strategy for some of his participants that presented a heteronormative story to family members in order for them to remain part of their family and wider social circles. As Thomsen's study reveals, coming-out is complicated when seen through a lens of relationality, and not from a place of "individualistic agency alone" (2021, p. 17). This relational consideration, according to Thomsen, advances the notion that for gay men in the Korean diaspora in Seattle, their decisions around coming-out does not exist in isolation, and has material implications for others. Thus, complicating the coming-out process further.

Coming Home - Tongzhi in China

This acknowledgement of relational selfhood is shared by Chou Wah-San (2001) who states that the popularised notion of coming out is a Westernised practice of individualised cultural affirmation:

[coming out] is not only a political project of the lesbian movement but is often a cultural project of affirming the Western value of individualism, discourse of rights...high level of anonymity in metropolitan cities, and the prioritization of sex as the core of selfhood (p. 28).

Wah-Shan (2001) problematises the Western notion of coming out but also hegemonic notions of homosexuality itself. To be out and proud, according to Wah-San is culturally problematic for Chinese tongzhi as being out implies that family, parents, and culture have been left behind in favour of an

individual's sexual identity. "Coming home" (p. 35) is proposed as an alternative to coming out, as an Indigenous lexicon of tongzhi self-confirmation. Wah-Shan (2001) writes:

Tongzhi come out not by segregating the sexual from the social and confronting the public, but by coming home. Come home articulates the visibility of tongzhi not as an isolated sexual self-abstracted from social relations, but as a means of exactly locating the tongzhi in the mainstream social relations (p. 35).

Thomsen's narratives of convenience (2021) is echoed in Wah-Shan's study as some of his participants chose a more implicit and subtle way of coming out to their parents – by introducing their partner as a good friend. By maintaining a platonic pretence, Chinese parents can experience their children's tongzhi relationship via everyday activities and interactions. In doing so, tongzhi are able to negotiate integration into and acceptance within their family without verbal confirmation of their sexual identity (Wah-Shan, 2001). Similarly, as argued by Wang et al., (2009), the Western notion of coming out, reflects "individualistic conceptions of selfhood but fails to recognise the importance of relational selfhood, which is important in Chinese culture" (p. 287).

Strategic Silence – Muslim Diaspora in Brussels

Furthermore, Alessandro Boussalem's (2021) study of queer people with a Muslim background living in Brussels highlights the need for researchers to move beyond the binarist constructions of the closet when observing the lives and experiences of people of colour (POC) and lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer (LGBTQ) people as part of a diaspora. Blurring the confines of the closet, according to Boussalem (2021), allows for all the ways in which different lexicons of communication is conveyed without the use of direct verbalisation. 'Strategic silence' and 'tacit knowledge' were some of the alternative ways of framing the closet articulated by Boussalem that reimagines the closet as a "non-Western, non-White way of navigating one's communication about their sexuality with their close communities" (Boussalem, 2021, p. 446). Boussalem (2021) argues that the only way to avoid the

dichotomous essentialisation of Western disclosure of coming out versus oriental silenced sexualities is to move our analyses beyond the closet metaphor to reveal the nuance and complexities that govern the lives of QOC.

Feeling Out - Filipino Diaspora in New York City

This strategic silence is also referenced in Martin Manalansan's (2003) study of Filipino gay men living in New York city. Manalansan's informants found coming out to be an unnecessary prerequisite of a healthy sexual self and that the Western fixation for verbal confirmation felt superfluous. Instead feeling out or "pakikiramdaman" (p. 28) was a term used to describe informants' awareness and importance of a discourse of silence that existed among Filipino gay men and their families. Informants shared accounts of their families knowing of their gay sexual identity without ever having to confirm it via public disclosure, thus highlighting the multiple forms of communication at play when navigating alternative ways of maintaining healthy sexual selves within a globalised, diasporic context.

Tacit Subjects – Queer Dominican Immigrants in New York City

Carlos Decena (2008) is another scholar who contests the rigidity of conventional understandings of sexual disclosure via their study of queer Dominican immigrants living in New York city. According to Decena (2008) because visibility, individualism and pride underpin popular discourses of coming out, experiences of the closet that do not subscribe to this prescriptive reading have been classed as instances of internalised homophobia, denial or outright pathology. This binary becomes racialised for immigrants whose physical displacement is meant to be characterised by an overcoming of the homophobia that supposedly characterised the experiences of their ancestral home. Decena coined the term "tacit subject" (p. 340) as an analytical framework that acknowledges the relational aspect in the social construction of identity for her queer participants. She writes:

In a neoliberal world that exalts the atomized and unmoored individual and in LGBTQ communities that celebrate self-making by clinging to the promise of coming out as the

romance of individual liberation, tacit subjects may make us more aware that coming out is always partial, that the closet is a collaborative social formation, and that people negotiate it according to their specific social circumstances (p. 17).

Coming Out Literature in Pacific Contexts

While there exists an expansive body of work related to the coming out processes for Western societies, and a growing literature that speaks to the experiences of non-Western societies, there is no research in this area that explores Pacific lesbian and queer women's experiences. Seuta'afili Patrick Thomsen (2019), a Pacific queer scholar, has written on coming out, but his focus has been on the experiences of Korean gay men living in Seattle.

Pacific Queer Diasporic Subjects/ Contexts

There is an underrepresented, but growing scholarship of Pacific, queer, diasporic subjectivities. Seuta'afili Patrick Thomsen and Joshua Iosefo (2021) acknowledge that what little does exist in this area either centres on narratives of oppression or hypervisibility, neither of which highlight the complexities of Pacific Rainbow communities (p. 94). In interrogating the intersectional positions they embody, they state what Pacific queer scholarship can offer in developing new directions in New-Zealand based Pacific research.

Thomsen and Iosefo (2021) call on other Pacific queer scholars to disrupt normative structures of academia but also normative visions of seeing the world via queer theoretics. This summoning, an act they call "a duality of criticality" (p. 94) is inextricably tied to an Indigenous, decolonial, anti-racist politic rooted in queer liberation. "Pacific queer worldmaking" (p. 103) is proposed as a way forward, enacting the aspiration for us to live another way now. Queering Pacific scholarship and politics in Aotearoa-New Zealand, then, becomes a worldmaking practice that is concerned with destabilising normative/colonial structures that underpin much of the world, while centring the nurturing, and development of our genealogical relationships and connections (Thomsen and Iosefo, 2021).

Niko Besnier's and Kalissa Alexeyeff's (2014) *Gender on the Edge: Transgender, Gay and other Pacific Islanders* is a collection of essays that explores the conflicts and contradictions of queer Pacific lives spanning through the Pacific. Alexeyeff's and Besnier's (2014) exploration of non-heteronormative identities throughout the Pacific highlights the unsuitability of Western binarisms of gender and sexuality in conceptualising Pacific liminal subjectivities. The imposition of Western binaries on to non-Western subjects, they argue, results in an oversimplified reading that reveals neither the complexities nor the nuance of queer Pacific identities (Presterudstuen, 2019). While these works are all welcome additions to the study of queer Pacific lives, neither are of Pacific heritage, and there is still a lack of focus on Pacific lesbian, queer women, and even less on formations of non-heterosexual identities for Pacific women.

In terms of the Sāmoan-specific context, Dan Taulapapa McMullin and Yuki Kihara's *Sāmoan Queer Lives* (2018) documents the lived experiences of fourteen queer Sāmoans based within and around the Pacific. Narratives that do exist of fa'afafine have a long controversial research tradition exclusively written by Western scholars, so the collection is a welcome addition to a literary space that is often conceptualised by non-fa'afafine and viewed through a Western (and often essentialised) lens (Thomsen, 2019). These narratives are not only personal accounts written by fa'afafine themselves, but they also disrupt the historical propensity among scholars to "distort and sensationalise" their existence (p. 2). Most stories were of fa'afafine, however those of queer Sāmoan women were still sparse in the volume.

MVPFAFF+

MVPFAFF+ - Māhū (Hawaii and Tahiti), Vaka sa lewa (Fiji), Palopa (Papua New Guinea), Fa'afafine (Samoa), Akava'ine (Rarotonga), Fakaleiti/Leiti (Tonga), Fakafifine (Niue) + - is a Pacific-specific acronym coined by Phylesha Brown-Acton (2020), a Niuean queer activist and icon who has served our MVPFAFF+ communities for decades. Not only is MVPFAFF+ a nod to the Pacific non-normative

gender and sexualities that have always existed, but it also speaks to the inadequacies that can often arise when using Western terms (LGBTQI+) to capture Pacific fluidities (Wallace, 2003; Alexeyeff & Besnier, 2014). While Acton's conception of MVPFAFF+ highlights the need for Indigenous terms for Indigenous-led movements, this framework does not capture Pacific lesbian, queer and bisexual women, an omission that she herself has acknowledged many times.

The premise holds then that very little is known about the coming-out experiences of Sāmoan lesbian and queer women of the Pacific diaspora in New Zealand. Their positionality as Sāmoan, lesbian and queer and living in Aotearoa-NZ has resulted in their experiences falling outside of Western academic remit or as Niko Besnier puts it, as existing on the edges (Alexeyeff & Besnier, 2014). Besnier (2014) argues that we cannot understand the power dynamics of Pacific normative gender and sexual structures without first examining the non-normative categories that give it "definitional power" (p.2). As such, Sāmoan lesbian and queer women of the diaspora highlight a multitude of experiences that have not been critically explored.

Conceptual and Analytical Tools

In this section, I outline the concepts I have selected to work with in order to help theorise and contextualise Sāmoan lesbian women's experiences of coming-out reflected in the stories of participants shared in these pages. These conceptual tools, I purport, allow me the capacity to position the stories shared in our Talanoa with wider theoretical and scholarly work as well as within the cultural and social context in which they are produced. They are separated into two sets of tools: Western conceptual frameworks and frameworks that underscore intersectional and critical understandings of the role colonialism plays in the construction of gender and sexuality across the world.

Western Frameworks of Gender and Sexuality

Lesbianism

Lesbian as a term as well as an identity, gained traction and popularity in the late 1960s and early 1970s against a backdrop of radical politics (Smith et al., 2018). In acknowledging the fundamental difference in men and women's socialisation in society, theorists argued that lesbians' struggles and experiences were vastly different to men, as previous research had overwhelmingly focused on male homosexuality (Groves & Ventura, 1983). As more scholars focussed on lesbian studies as a legitimate object of enquiry, lesbians of colour argued that normative perceptions of lesbianism became synonymous with middle-class Whiteness (Lorde, 1984; Hooks, 1984; Muñoz, 1999). A reading that erases lesbians of colour who negotiate multiple antagonisms, including those posed by White women themselves (Muñoz, 1999). This is most obvious in the definition and construction of the term woman.

Maria Lugones (2007) provides the example of the colonial construction and definition of 'woman' as the first accomplishment of the colonial state. In racialising and gendering the definition, 'woman' came to represent not only Whiteness but also meek and peak femininity. As a result, Black women and First Nations women were deliberately excluded, and thus labelled as chattel/animals, an identification that allowed for their continual enslavement and sexual exploitation (Lugones, 2007). Additionally, according to Bell Hooks (1984), White lesbians and feminists have historically focussed on issues relating solely to their oppression, namely middle-and-upper class frustration with gendered roles while wilfully ignoring the "intersectional stigma" that lesbians of colour face daily in addition to patriarchal violence (Hooks, 1984; Logie & Rwigema, 2014). The normalcy afforded to Whiteness and subsequent invisibility of Black women and women of colour in representations of LBGTQI+ communities is a deliberate form of cultural exclusion that reinforces White culture within these communities (Logie & Rwigema, 2014).

Shane Phelan (1993) posits that there is a flawed commitment to objective truth among lesbian theorists, arguing that the postmodern self cannot rely on such a unitary approach. Such an approach,

where theorists are tasked with the pursuit of unearthing a natural truth, only serve to authentically measure and then justify lesbian existence within a heterosexist society. Phelan (1993) contends that White lesbians' continual return to a unitary lesbian identity limits the possibilities for solidarity with women of colour who do not conceive of the self as being defined by a single identity.

Queer Theory

In its most simplest form, queer theory is concerned with the theoretical task of disrupting gender-sexuality normalcy (Cohen, 1997; Thomsen and Iosefo, 2021). The term, and later the centre of dense scholarly research has been the response to the seemingly stable and fixed social categorisations of gender and sexuality (Halperin, 2003). Although some have argued that queer theory has since become so popularised throughout academic disciplines that it is now in fact normalised in a way that gay/lesbian studies never was (Halperin 2003; Thomsen & Iosefo, 2021), its disruptive tenets force scholars to have to move beyond the hegemony of White, male modes of analysis in order to see and embrace multiple fluidities of difference.

Eve Sedgwick's *Epistemology of the closet* (1990) is a foundational text in queer theory which highlights the symbiotic nature of the heterosexual/homosexual relationship. Sedgwick moves beyond the various binarisms created by the closet metaphor to argue that the privileged position afforded to heterosexuality is only made possible by the continual pathologisation of homosexuality (Reschke, 1991). In simple terms, one cannot exist without the other.

One of Sedgwick's focal arguments is that the closet is the defining structure of gay oppression of this century (1990). Sedgwick positions coming out of the closet as *the* way to define gayness, a definition that can only exist in its binaristic relationship to heterosexuality (Thomsen & Iosefo, 2021). By working to deconstruct the heterosexual/homosexual dichotomy, and other binarisms that result from this epistemological pairing, Sedgwick highlights the need to complicate prescriptive categories of social organisation in order to reveal the multitude of possibilities of understanding the relationship

between power, knowledge, discourse and sexuality. This work should start, according to Sedgwick, by avoiding the societal propensity to ascribe sexuality as well as gender from birth (Thomsen and Iosefo, 2021).

Judith Butler's foundational text *Gender Trouble* (1990) re-examines our understanding of gender in much the way Sedgwick's work does to our understanding of sex. Butler introduces the term 'gender performativity' to redefine gender as repetitive social performances that people enact daily that have been signified as falling into the man/ masculine/ woman/feminine divide. By challenging gender's essentialist foundations, Butler posits that gender is in fact continually reproduced and therefore always up for subversion (Thomsen & Iosefo, 2021). Butler's portrayal of gender as uncertain and performed, takes aim at stable categories of identity that have previously governed feminist theory and lesbian/gay studies.

Butler's term "the heterosexual matrix" (1990, p. 37) describes the often unquestioned trifecta of the gender-sex-sexuality assumption – people make judgements based on what they are conditioned to see, for example – that person is a man, because they are presenting as and performing acts that are gendered as being masculine behaviours; masculinity is intrinsically linked to heterosexuality therefore he is also straight. Butler problematises all the assumptions made in this reading in an attempt to reveal the liberational potential of critically revisiting gender and sexuality scholarship through a social constructivist lens. Butler, for example, in queering the metaphor of closet/coming out binary, asked:

So we are out of the closet, but into what? What new unbounded spatiality?... for being 'out' always depends to some extent on being 'in'; it gains its meaning only within that polarity. Hence, being 'out' must produce the closet again and again in order to maintain itself as 'out' (1993, p. 309).

Conflating lesbianism with troubled gender, Shane Phelan (1993) argues, only serves to strengthen heterosexual patriarchy. Deviation from gendered roles, therefore, becomes linked to a deviation from heterosexuality itself, highlighting the tendency among lesbian theorists to conflate non-normative behaviours to sexual deviance. The call for engaging beyond single identity frameworks or political motivations tied up in disruption, is another compelling reason as to why intersectionality as an analytical tool is also deployed in this thesis.

Compulsory Heterosexuality

An important text for this study and for the development of scholarship on queer women's experiences is Adrienne Rich's '*Compulsory Heterosexuality and Lesbian Existence*' (1980). This foundational feminist critique argued that women have been historically defined in their relation to men and many mechanisms have worked to enforce that definition (Phelan, 1993). Rich argues that women have been societally coerced into heterosexuality via socialised patriarchal heteronormativity. Instead of treating heterosexuality as a natural, innate phenomenon, Rich, frames this as a politically constructed institution designed to maintain the privileged power of men and the continual subordination of women.

Additionally, Jonathan Katz (1995) adds to this critique further through their work the role of power ascribed to White, bourgeoisie male privilege, associated with enforcing a sexual normality that worked to legitimise White, bourgeoisie, male pursuits of sexual pleasure as well as reinforcing their claims to authority (Berrett, 1996). As a result, the historical invisibility of lesbianism in particular and women's same-sex desire more generally points to the barriers women have to face in forming a non-heterosexual self (Jenness, 1992).

Intersectionality

Intersectionality is an analytical tool, method and disposition that is rooted in Black Feminism and Critical Race Theory (Carbado et al, 2013). It was coined by Kimberlé Crenshaw (1989) as a response

to the “problematic consequence of the tendency to treat race and gender as mutually exclusive categories of experience and analysis...” (Crenshaw, 1989, p. 139).

Crenshaw (1989, 1991) argued that the subordination and continual erasure of Black women’s experiences was due to the inadequacy of a single-axis framework that underpinned antidiscrimination laws as well as feminist theory. The struggles of Black women were falling outside of gender-based and race-based categories of discrimination because operative conceptions of race and sex became grounded in experiences that represented only a subset of a much more complex phenomenon (Crenshaw, 1989).

As a result, intersectionality was designed as an analytical tool to critically explore the ways in which Black women’s oppression, and subsequently those who experience multiple forms of oppression more generally, experience discrimination on account of their varying sites of social difference. The experiences of Sāmoan lesbian and queer women of the Pacific diaspora of Aotearoa-New Zealand, I argue, must be approached with an intersectional lens. Their experiences cannot be adequately explored without understanding their experiences as intersecting and meeting at different points of marginality – race/ethnicity and gender. In other words, I argue that their multiple social identities of difference result in experiences and worldviews which cannot be fully encapsulated without interrogating the sites at which their various identities collide.

Disidentifications

José Esteban Muñoz’s *Disidentifications: Queers of Color and the Performance of Politics* (1999) is another foundational text that sits within the queer theory canon with which I will engage conceptually and theoretically. As Sāmoan women with non-normative sexualities living in the diaspora, the participants fall outside of the racial and sexual normativity that characterise the popular, public image of a queer subject, having to negotiate and navigate their way through this sociocultural landscape and thus transforming these spaces to suit their own minoritised subjectivities. Muñoz (1999) calls this

process disidentification. Muñoz's disidentification is a theoretical attempt to divorce fixed identity dispositions and the socially encoded roles attached to those dispositions. A disidentificatory subject, according to Muñoz, is someone that works with, on and against dominant ideology.

Third World, Indigenous , Black Feminism

In the late 1970s and 80s, Third World, Indigenous and Black Feminism was born out of the concerns of mainstream (White) Feminism, which subscribed to the understanding that women around the world faced exactly the same oppression merely by virtue of their sex/gender (Herr, 2014) ¹. In promoting a brand of women's empowerment and emancipation that was overly concerned with White, highly-educated, middle-classed issues, White feminists ignored the implicit, and sometimes outright, racism and imperialism of their agendas (Hooks, 1981, 1984; Hill Collins, 1990; West & Fenstermaker, 1995; Battle et al, 2015). Often oblivious to the multiple oppressions and issues of Indigenous sovereignty that Indigenous and women of colour faced (Lorde, 1984; Trask, 1996; Herr, 2014).

In response, Third World, Black and Indigenous feminists work with theories and concepts of the self within an intersectional framework (Moraga & Anzaldúa, 1981; Hooks, 1981, 1984; Lorde, 1984; Hill Collins, 1990). As leading Black Lesbian scholar Audre Lorde (1984) states, a lack of an intersectional feminism leads to a feeling of "...constantly being encouraged to pluck out some aspect of myself and present this as the meaningful whole, eclipsing and denying the other parts of the self" (p. 120). This highlights the importance of conceiving the self as an intersectional whole. This is crucial because feminist theory - as defined by Third World, Indigenous and Black feminist scholars - is integral to the visibility and empowerment of Brown and Black women. This is because colonialism takes place

¹ I acknowledge that grouping all three distinct branches of feminism – Third World, Indigenous , Black – runs the risk of homogenising the distinct gendered, racialised experiences linked to their geopolitical positioning between and among all three factions. My doing so aims to highlight the way all three branches emerge as a challenge to the Whiteness inherent in mainstream feminist movements of the time, which lacked an intersectional understanding of the realities for non-White women the world over.

through gendered and sexualised forms that reconstitute both individual and communal Indigenous identities in stigmatised and disempowering ways (Hall, 2009). In drawing attention to the hegemony of White feminism, I believe that we can then see how this gendered, racialised, colonial past has material implications for the participants in how they make sense of their Sāmoan woman-ness in relation to their lesbianism and queerness.

Gender/Sexuality and the Colonial Project

While scholars of sexuality and same-sex desire have often been White and of the West, Indigenous and Non-White scholars have more recently explored the ways in which these binary understandings of gender and sexuality were deployed for colonial purposes. Although not referring specifically to homosexuality, Edward Said's (1979) critique of the masculinised, dominant West, existing solely on the othering and passive feminising of the Orient or East is useful in understanding the genealogical root of colonial thinking and categorisations of peoples not of the West. Said argues that the concept of the Orient and Occident – a binary construct deployed by the West, hierarchised the world between the modern and barbaric, and the coloniser versus colonised. The coloniser was portrayed in masculine, powerful tropes via historical accounts, journal entries of early settlers, biblical scripture, and art (O'Brien, 2006). The colonised feminine on the other hand, was 'othered' as the passive recipient bereft of power. This is tied closely to the way Pacific peoples have often been hypersexualised in artwork and thus up for sexual exploitation (Wallace, 2003; O'Brien, 2006; Lopesi, 2018b). Sexual deviancy then – ie instances of homosexuality or sexual behaviours that fall outside the heterosexual matrix – needed to be dealt to and controlled.

Queering the Third World

Scholars such as Jasbir Puar (2007) warn that the apparent lack of progress on gay or queer rights in a non-Western country has been instrumentalised as a barometer for the legitimacy of certain shapes and form of government. This liberal critique of "barbaric" countries on queer or LGBT rights in non-Western countries often functions as a way to justify the continual subjugation of states outside the

West both militarily and discursively. Building on Puar's work, Thomsen (2020) further cautions that such homo-nationalist practices often elides the innovative ways in which queerness and homosexuality is practiced at local levels, suggesting also that there is only one "right way" to be gay (Thomsen, 2021). Ilan Kapoor (2015) calls this process "the queering of the third world," where colonial powers project their own European homophobic prejudices (and fantasies) onto colonies in an attempt to civilise them, only to then use that civilising process as a means to subjugate them. Whether the Third World was actually queer, mattered less, because it was presented, regulated and then disciplined as such (Kapoor, 2015).

It is important to note the various framings of the Pacific once colonisation is introduced as Pacific conceptions of gender and sexuality were now controlled by the Church, capitalistic interest and medical discourses (Pulotu-Endemann & Peteru, 2001). The theoretical and material impacts of colonialism and Christianity as well as their component parts serve as an important backdrop to the way this research has developed. In drawing on these insights, we can draw attention to the way sexual subjugation and heterosexualisation of Indigenous peoples was a central tenet in the West's imperial project. This is how we see the power structures that govern the various moving parts of this research – lesbianism, queerness, diaspora, gender, sexuality, Sāmoan woman. These historical and ongoing racialised, gendered, structures of power are important in being able to contextualise the findings of this project, which will be further developed in the subsequent chapters.

Chapter Three - Methodology

Aims and Objectives

This Masters research seeks to critically explore the coming out experiences of Sāmoan lesbian and queer women of the Pacific diaspora living in Aotearoa-New Zealand. It is focussed on their experiences of coming out, how they make sense of their non-normative sexualities in relation to their gendered Sāmoan-ness and to what extent their experiences of being part of the Pacific diaspora in Aotearoa have shaped their expressions of identity. Drawing from the conceptual tools outlined earlier, data gathered from Talanoa will be discussed and presented against a framework that centres intersectionality, and insights from queer theory, whilst deploying at various times and stages the different conceptual tools that were outlined in the previous chapter. I believe this an appropriate way to convey what participants' experiences, as retold in Talanoa, reveal about the formations of diasporic Sāmoan lesbian and queer women and the coming-out process within the context of sexual identity formation and can allow us to answer the stated research questions that guide this thesis:

Research Questions

1. What do participants' coming out experiences reveal about the developments of sexual identities for Sāmoan lesbian and queer women living in Aotearoa-New Zealand?
2. How do participants make sense of their non-normative sexual identities with their racialised, and gendered selves?

Researcher Positionality

Positionality is defined as the result of an individual's overlapping identities that shape the lens through which they make sense of their world (Kezar, 2002). This lens, or positioning, strongly influences the research process as well as analytical decisions made by the researcher and their subsequent findings (Bourke, 2014; Braun & Clarke, 2019). Scholars argue that continual reflexivity or being aware of

one's own positionality is important, but what researchers do with this information is as equally important and vital when conducting qualitative research as it ensures a research process that is considered and thoughtful (Bourke, 2014; Braun & Clarke, 2019). Furthermore, in order to say anything at all, there must be a stance taken of some kind as positionality is determined by one's standing in relation to "the other" (Hall & Du Gay, 1996). Additionally, Sharan Merriam et al., (2001) argue that rather than occupying one side, researchers can experience instances of being both an insider and outsider, which benefits the research as both stances allow for different but equally valid insights. Positionality, therefore, becomes the space whereby subjectivity and objectivism meet, a symbiotic relationship that accepts the subjectivities of one's positioning while still trying to remain thoughtfully impartial in the pursuit of knowledge (Bourke, 2014). Kirin Narayan (1993) writes:

To acknowledge particular and personal locations is to admit the limit of one's purview from these positions. It is also to undermine the notion of objectivity, because from particular locations all understanding becomes subjectively based and forged through interactions within fields of power relations (p. 679).

I conduct this research as a Sāmoan/Niuean queer woman of the Sāmoan/Pacific diaspora living in Aotearoa-New Zealand. I live on land that rightfully belongs to Tangata Whenua and acknowledge my role as tauivi is to support mana whenua in their ongoing struggle for land-back and self-determination (Tuck & Yang, 2012). I was born in Tāmaki and because of this initial dislocation from my ancestral lands in the Pacific, I lack fluency in both sets of my grandparents' Indigenous languages. I was raised in Japan for some of my formative years of my childhood and was exposed to different ways of being in the world. My parents, also born in Tāmaki, came of age during the historically tumultuous period of the 1970s and 80s, a watershed moment in New-Zealand's history that is known for rising racial tensions that led to the birth of Indigenous -led political movements such as the Ngā Tamatoa movement, and the Polynesian Panther party. Assimilationism was still considered paramount to leading a fulfilling life in New Zealand - due to the "normative New Zealand identity" being used as a

political euphemism to mean Pākehā New Zealanders during the 1970s (Johnson, 2005, p. 137). As a result, my parents were not taught to speak Sāmoan or Niuean in an attempt to fully commit to being ‘real’ New-Zealanders. I come into this study acknowledging the multiple positionalities I embody and acknowledge that they undoubtedly shape the lens through which I understand and make meaning of participants’ experiences.

As Sharan Merriam et al., (2001) attest, I occupy positions of both insider and outsider throughout this study; this duality is not uncommon for non-White people living in Aotearoa-New Zealand – as Sereana Naepi (2015) suggests, “we learn to navigate two spaces in order to be successful in today’s world” (p. 72). Like the participants, I am also a Sāmoan queer woman, so I carried a lived experience that allowed me to connect with participants through a shared sexuality and societally ascribed position as a result of also being queer. However, I cannot, and do not, assume that my shared cultural, queer background alone will automatically grant me insider status (Naepi, 2015; Palaamo, 2018). This is because many of my participants and I diverged in age, class, familial position and status. In addition, my position as researcher also places me as an outsider due to the power-imbalance inherent in all research (Merriam et al., 2010). I am aware that the relationship between researcher and researched has historically been fraught with capitalistic exploitation and colonial extraction (Merriam et al., 2010; Smith, 2012). However, in theoretically locating this work within a Pacific methodological approach, the relational, generative, community-driven aspects that foregrounds this research as well as my own values, I hope, ensures that this project is governed by the contribution participants have made, and the motive of contributing to more visibility and nuance in the understanding of our communities.

Research Design

The study takes its cues from Pacific research methodologies and methods (PRM) which focuses on the collective process of knowledge construction. This is a fully qualitative study, where qualitative research methods involve the generation, analysis and presentation of information, often via thematic narrative (Palaamo, 2018). Furthermore, this research design/approach carries similarities with how

Sāmoans share knowledge and make sense of their surroundings (Palaamo, 2018). I find this the most appropriate approach for this research context, which is limited in scope and size, but also, a fully qualitative process acknowledges the researcher as a resource of research as well as the multiple and contextual nature of meaning-making (Braun & Clarke, 2013). As Virginia Braun and Victoria Clarke (2019) assert:

Qualitative research is about meaning and meaning-making, and viewing these as always context-bound, positioned and situated, and qualitative data analysis is about telling ‘stories’, about interpreting, and creating, not discovering and finding the ‘truth’ that is either ‘out there’ and findable from, or buried deep within, the data (p. 591).

As such, the researcher plays an intentional role - they must be active in the process, construct meaning from the data, and make executive decisions during the coding and analytical process (Braun & Clarke, 2006; Bryman, 2016). The inescapable subjectivity in this approach speaks to the epistemological and ontological foundations associated with a constructivist creation of knowledge (Blaikie, 1993; Braun & Clarke, 2013). This aligns with PRM as Pacific ways of knowledge creation is a collective effort, driven by relationality rather than exploitative extraction (Botha, 2011; Thomsen, 2020).

Ontological and Epistemological Position

According to Matthew David and Carole Sutton (2011), ontology in its simplest form is “the theory of fundamental reality” or in other words, the study or science of what things are (p.75). Epistemology on the other hand refers to the fundamental assumptions about how we know what things are and how we use these claims to differentiate between what we would claim as knowledge and beliefs (Blaikie, 1993). Referring to David and Sutton’s (2011) work, from a Western research approach, this study sits between constructionism and constructivism. Constructionism’s theoretical emphasis is on social actors or human agency – it is people, and not external structures or objective truths, that construct meaningful social realities through interactions which in turn creates order and shared beliefs. The

ontological assumption of constructionism is the premise that the social world is built on shared meanings created by rational actors, which is then reproduced by continuing interaction. The epistemological foundation of constructionism allows the researcher to share and understand these shared meanings as a social actor themselves via interpretivism.

Although there are varied criticisms in the use of an interpretivist approach (subjectivity namely), this research is based on the experiences of Sāmoan lesbian and queer women of the Pacific diaspora in Aotearoa-New Zealand and whether similarities can be gleaned from their experiences. Thus, nuance is most likely to emerge through an interpretivist lens. Interpretivism ensures a nuanced understanding of the participants' intersectional experiences. Constructionism, in this sense, seems to be the most relevant epistemological approach to adopt for this research. Seuta'afili Patrick Thomsen (2018) and Dion Enari (2021) also suggest that constructionism/constructivism aligns well with a Pacific research methodological approach and worldview in which methodologies/method such as Talanoa are housed. As such, I believe that a constructionist view of the social world aligns well with attempts to understand the coming out experiences of Sāmoan lesbian and queer women of the Pacific diaspora living in Aotearoa-New Zealand, as it allows for the process of intersubjective meaning giving to be explored.

Despite this agreeability, constructionism, is still not able to fully account for how I am onto-epistemologically positioned, especially in terms of research that is designed to be in partnership with Pacific communities. Whilst constructionism focuses on the process of intersubjective meaning giving, Pacific research that seeks to illuminate Pacific communities' experiences in any context must centre Pacific epistemologies (Vaioleti, 2006; Sua'ali'i-Sauni & Fulu-Aiolupotea, 2014; Ponton, 2018; Anae, 2019; Thomsen, 2019; Naepi, 2020; Keil, 2021). As research on Pacific communities in the past have privileged Western ways of knowing and being, it is important to challenge this hegemony, which I commit to ensure Pacific epistemological approaches are deployed in this research as well. These epistemologies are based on Pacific worldviews that emphasise the interconnectedness of all things.

Epeli Hau'ofa (1993) highlights this interconnection with the ending of the discipline-defining 'Sea of Islands' essay:

We are the sea, we are the ocean, we must wake up to this ancient truth and together use it to overturn all hegemonic views that aim ultimately to confine us again, physically and psychologically, in tiny spaces that we have resisted accepting as our sole appointed places and from which we have recently liberated ourselves. We must not allow anyone to belittle us again and take away our freedom (p. 16).

Hau'ofa reminds us as Pacific peoples that our ways of knowing and being in the world is foregrounded in a deep-rooted connection – to our ocean, to our land and to each other. For this thesis, I chose to use Talanoa as method as well as drawing methodological insights from PRM and concepts such as the *vā*². Data that was generated from the Talanoa underwent a thematic analysis, which I present in the subsequent section. The decision to situate this research within a Pacific framework was important for me as it helped to create a foundation for this work that is unequivocally Pacific – one that is rooted in relationality (Va'ai & Kiki, 2017). This decision not only speaks to which knowledges I wish to privilege by adopting Pacific-centric tools when conducting Pacific research, but is also an intentional, theoretical nod to the decolonial practices that Konai Helu Thaman (2003) urges Pacific scholars to undertake. Decolonisation, according to Thaman (2003) begins with the mind – by reclaiming the Oceanic perspectives, knowledges and wisdoms that were ignored due to the “...intellectual colonization by the West” (p. 4).

² *Vā*, as defined by Maualaivao Albert Wendt (1996) is a redefinition of space to assume a relational, contextual meaning that transforms it from being an empty void to a space that connects entities and carries purpose. I speak more on the Sāmoan concept of *vā* later in this chapter.

Privileging Pacific Research Methodologies

The process of data extraction/collection, knowledge creation and data analysis pertaining to Pacific research has, historically, been conducted by non-Pacific researchers using non-Pacific methods (Vaiotei, 2006; Farrelly & Nabobo-Baba, 2014). Consequently, these scholars became the academic storytellers and knowledge-gatekeepers of the Pacific, whose positionalities lacked the cultural competencies to prioritise Pacific elements that provided crucial socio-cultural context (Vaiotei, 2006). What is created, then, some argue, is a sanitised distortion, an academic project that may meet all requirements of Western academic processes but which holds little benefit, and potential dangers, to Pacific peoples (Naepi, 2015). This process is considered linguistic and cultural colonialism, in its attempts to homogenise the world on the assumption that the same knowledge produced in the West can be applied universally (Skutnabb-Kangas, 1999). As such, Eurocentric theoretical frameworks do not and cannot meet the needs of Pacific research due to the underlying assumptions, values and agendas embedded within them (Otunuku, 2011).

As it stands, very little research exists on the experiences of Pacific queer peoples, and what does exist has often been conducted by non-Pacific scholars using non-Pacific methods (Besnier, 1997, 2002; O'Brien, 2006; Farran, 2010; Tcherkézoff, 2014; Biersack, 2016). This is not to suggest that this work is not without merit; non-Pacific scholars of gender and sexuality have committed great theoretical strides in illuminating the liminality around gender expression in the Pacific, however, their work can never truly reflect an authentic, situated and embodied understanding of non-normative gender-sex articulations in the Pacific (Thomsen, 2022). I choose to privilege PRM as I am working specifically with Sāmoan lesbian and queer women. Not only does it make contextual sense, but as a set of tools, they are more suited in being able to draw out nuances and contextually situate narratives and data generated here in the Pacific and Sāmoan research space.

Talanoa

This study utilised Talanoa (Vaiotei, 2006); a methodology and method that has Tongan origins but has since been developed as a culturally-appropriate Pacific approach to knowledge generation and transfer (Vaiotei, 2006; Farelly & Nabobo-Baba, 2012, 2014). Rooted in Pacific oratory tradition, Talanoa has a history recognised throughout most, though not all parts of the Pacific with various iterations describing Pacific ways of collective knowledge generation (Prescott, 2008; Tufuna'i, 2016). Talanoa is particularly useful in this research context addressing an intersectionally-marginalised group (Sāmoan lesbian and queer women), as Talanoa requires researchers to firstly build empathy with participants by sharing stories before a research interaction takes place and thus highlights the importance of the positionality and suitability of the researcher (Thomsen, 2021).

For Timote Vaiotei (2006), the Tongan transliteration is derived from the word 'tala' which translates to talk, and noa which translates to nothing in particular. The more formal Sāmoan iteration of Talanoa is used to engage in critical discussions about serious matters pertaining to church, government or village/nation (Vaiotei, 2006). Essentially, Talanoa as a methodology is about connection and drawing on the epistemological strength of strong, genealogical bonds (broadly understood as a cultural genealogy) and relationality – ensuring that the researcher/participant relationship exists in *vā* so that the sharing of experiences and stories among Pacific peoples results in Pacific knowledge(s) creation. As Tamasailau Sua'ali'i-Sauni and Saunima'a Fulu-Aiolupotea (2014) note, the quality of research is heavily dependent on the relationship between researcher and participants, alluding more generally to the creation of Pacific knowledges as a collective effort.

Talanoa as methodology ensures that the foundations of academic projects involving Pacific people and communities are carried out using a Pacific-designed, culturally sound methodological framework.

Vaiotei (2006) underlines the importance of a: For Us By Us (FUBU) approach, as he highlights the potential inaccuracies that can arise in using Western methodologies to conduct non-Western research. He states that:

...there is a danger in assuming that all Western, Eastern and Pacific knowledges have the same origins and construction so that, by implication, the same instruments may be used for collecting and analysing data and constructing new knowledge (p. 22).

Similarly, Thomsen (2021) claims that PRM has less to do with universal truths and more with capturing the relational expressions of life, which forms the basis of knowledge generation in a Pacific context. A Western methodological approach, one that is predicated on individuality and the pursuit of abstract truth, does not adequately reflect the collective relationality of Pacific (his/her/their) stories and knowledges (Vaioleti, 2006; Bennett et al., 2013; Naepi, 2015). This becomes crucial for this research, as expressions of self for Sāmoans tend to be defined in the relational, as opposed as to the individual (Thomsen, 2020).

Talanoa was also utilised for its culturally embedded reciprocal exchange between researcher and participants (Farrelly & Nabobo-Baba, 2012). While there has been concerns that Talanoa is another version of open-ended interviews and is similar to decolonial, feminist and intersectional approaches to research, it is the cultural competency required that differentiates it from Western methods (Farrelly & Nabobo-Baba, 2014; Keil, 2021; Thomsen, 2021;). Trisia Farrelly & Unaisi Nabobo-Baba (2014) writes:

Talanoa is not all about ‘what you say’ or even just about ‘how one says it’...even silence is far from empty: it is a way of knowing: ‘there is eloquence in silence...a pedagogy of deep engagement between participants (p. 94).

Since much communication in a Talanoa is also non-verbal, the ability to read silence, body language, and cultural meaning becomes equally important in holistically understanding participants’ lived realities (Farrelly and Nabobo-Baba, 2012). Farrelly and Nabobo-Baba (2012) challenge the popular,

though reductive, definitions of Talanoa that paints an informal conversation around a kava bowl or a formal meeting within a public forum. Talanoa is so much more and requires a level of cultural understanding and intersubjective empathy (Zhao, 2012). Farrelly and Nabobo-Baba (2012) argue that unless researchers create a warm and reciprocal environment in which participants feel safe, academic work will continue to reflect lifeless accounts that fail both the researcher and participant. This cultural and emotional prerequisite, a response to the sterile and impersonal work that has eventuated from Western academia's fixation with objectivity, is a step towards decolonising Pacific research (Farrelly & Nabobo-Baba, 2012). Although some scholars have since questioned the theoretical ambiguity and politically powerful, though elusive conceptualisation of Talanoa (Sua'ali'i-Sauni & Fulu-Aiolupotea, 2014; Tunufa'i, 2016), it is precisely its philosophical fluidity that makes Talanoa such an adaptive Pacific research tool (Vaiotei, 2006). Thomsen's (2021) deployment of Talanoa for a non-Pacific set of research participants is a prime example of its malleability and transnational, transcultural potential.

The Vā

For Sāmoans, Talanoa takes place in what we refer to as the vā. In Sāmoan custom, this is a sacred space (in) between people/things/entities (Thomsen, 2021). The space between people is given meaning via the vā as that space changes from being an empty space (in a Western context) into space carrying contextual meaning, of relationality, of connection, of purpose. In Sāmoan culture, much like other Pacific cultures, the concept of self is relational — one does not exist as an individual, but rather their existence is dependent upon the existence of others (Refiti, 2008; Anae, 2016; Va'ai & Kiki, 2017; Thomsen, 2021). Under this definition, taking care of one's relationships, or the space between, in a way that is ethical and of service, is considered a core underpinning of how Sāmoans make sense of their social worlds (Wendt, 1996; Anae, 2016). Moreover, the vā is a space that is activated in social relations, which makes it a central concept for holding Talanoa as a Sāmoan.

Given the relationality inherent to the concept of vā in its collective conception of identity formation, my position as researcher, I believe, cannot and should not be severed from the participants of this

research. As the researcher-participant relationship during Talanoa existed in vā to ensure that all participants were kept safe and cared for in our interactions. Maualaivao Albert Wendt (1996) in his essay ‘Tatauing the Post-colonial Body’ describes vā as “...the space between, the betweenness, not empty space, not space that separates but space that relates, that holds separate entities and things together in the Unity-that-is-All, the space that is context, giving meaning to things” (p. 4). Although Wendt is speaking of vā in relation to the Sāmoan tatau, he presents vā as a fundamentally “relational ethic” (Lopesi, 2021b, p. 132); as an alternative epistemological lens from which to create understandings of our place in the world from a distinctly Sāmoan reading.

Similarly, Misatauveve Melani Anae (2016) widens her analysis to the full phrase of teu le vā which translates to value, nurture, and tidy up social and sacred spaces. While Anae’s use of the Sāmoan phrase is a call for the centrality of relationships as an ethical approach to Pacific research in New Zealand, her definition of teu le vā is also one of spiritual sacredness (2016). Anae states that teu le vā can be experienced as:

...a spiritual awakening and the recognition of the ‘sacred essence’ beyond human reckoning, which comes from the knowledge that Sāmoan people are connected in a web to the Gods of our understanding. Some understand these Gods as Tagaloa and all of creation; others as the Christian God (p.121).

The vā that Pacific scholars have conceptualised is a relational space of sacredness, one that is defined by the collective agenda of wanting to mend what is broken (Anae, 2016); to maintaining spiritual equilibrium (Wendt, 1996). This sense of social harmony that underpins conceptions of vā speak more broadly to what Tui Atua Tupua Tamasese Ta’isi Efi (2018) discusses about the relationship between peace and harmony in the Sāmoan worldview. Efi (2018) describes the pursuit of peace as: the search for harmony between the four elements – harmony with the cosmos, harmony with the environment, harmony with one’s fellow men and harmony with oneself. When all four are in congruence with each

other there is peace (p. 137). This is predicated on the notion that for there to be balance, all living things are considered equal.

Thus, from a research perspective, the significance of the *vā* for a Sāmoan researcher that chooses to lean into its ontological and epistemological foundation, is a research approach that focuses on the relational aspects of identity formation. This foregrounding and acknowledgement of the *vā* was an important part of my research process. However, Talanoa and the *vā* both presented me with practical and theoretical dilemmas that relate to their actual operation in research. In the next section, I will talk through some recent scholarship that complicates both Talanoa as a methodology for women, and concepts of the *vā*.

Complicating Vā and Talanoa as Method: Unresolved Tensions

Previous articulations of Talanoa as method and methodology have paid scant attention to gender dynamics in its articulation (Keil, 2021). This lack of focus on aspects of marginality within PRM is now experiencing a critically-reflexive turn as a rising generation of Pacific scholars positioned in diasporic communities begin to reflect on questions that have not been asked of PRM before (Thomsen, Lopesi & Leenen-Young, 2021). Moeata Keil (2021), for example, highlighted the male-centred lens in Talanoa literature and writes about the gendered disparities embedded within its conception. Keil posits that PRM research thus far has been silent on how researchers using Talanoa might navigate the gendered relational space. In acknowledging the difference in sociocultural positionings between men and women, cultivating the *vā* required a different approach for her Talanoa with the men in her research than it did with the women. Keil acknowledges that the quality and depth of data did not differ between the men and women of her research, more that Vaiioleti's assertion that *vā* between men and women must be made *noa* (neutral), held no resonance to her research experiences and questions whether this is possible when a gendered element is brought into the Talanoa space.

Similarly, David Fa'avae et al., (2016) acknowledges the difference in social rank and hierarchy among participants in partaking in Talanoa. As a young researcher having to Talanoa with participants who were much older from the Tongan community, the social customs that needed to be followed often limited his ability to be authentic, but also to get the data he required in one sitting. Fa'avae conducted Talanoa with Tongan grandfathers who were more interested in his social identity as a Tongan man before continuing with research discussion. Equality in this context was not possible due to their superiority in age and rank, and by acknowledging that, Fa'avae answered the questions they asked after his parents, his proficiency with the Tongan language and his length of time in Tonga. The wrong response to these questions, however, might have had negative consequences, a consideration Fa'avae was aware of throughout. This highlights the practical tensions that exist in utilising Talanoa as method with participants whose positionalities require the enactment of shifting contexts and protocols.

This insight was crucial for me also as I conducted Talanoa with participants who were from the same generation as my parents. In being aware of the hierarchical imbalance in our Talanoa, I was ready to answer any of their questions before conducting my own – like Fa'avae, the older participants of this research were interested in aspects of my family history – they asked after my parents, my parents' villages in Samoa and Niue, and where my parents currently reside. I understood my answers to these questions would shape the remainder of our Talanoa and likely the level of openness with which they would speak about their experiences.

Lana Lopesi (2021) argues that there is an assumed neutrality embedded within academic and artist conceptualisations of *vā*. Lopesi builds on her argument with a definition of *vā* provided by Leali'ifano Albert Refiti who uses a metaphor of everyone sitting around a table each holding a string connected to an instrument. The quality of music played is dependent on the tension pulled by the individual each holding a string end – the strings held by people are *vā* relations. However, Lopesi aptly asks – what of those who are not holding a string end? Moreover, what of those who were not invited to hold string at all? (2021, p. 138). These considerations pose an important question to the often ethereal conceptions

of *vā* within academia that depend on the harmonious balance of all relationships. Lopesi (2021) also asks whether the understanding and pursuit of social harmony, and by extension, *vā*, is now inextricably bound with the introduction of colonial-heteropatriarchal normativity to our Islands. This reading of how *vā* has shifted post-colonisation asks important questions around how in the pursuit of harmonious relationships, imbalances in power and access for those with liminal sexual/gender identities can be glossed over, which an intersectional lens allows us to redress if embraced generatively.

This acknowledgement of power hierarchies is critical for the research I am undertaking as Pacific queer identities since colonisation have either been made illegal due to codified heterosexuality and the imposition of Christianity or have been forced to fit within rigid sex/gender binaries (Thomsen, 2022). In other words, is balance and harmony possible for Pacific queer bodies in these situations when homosexuality (sodomy) is still technically illegal in Samoa and *fa'afafine* continue to experience major exclusion by wider Sāmoan society despite the appearance of acceptance (Thomsen, 2022)? At its core, the dilemma I was facing was the fact that the participants of this research *are* a marginalised group within a marginalised community.

Overcoming Queer Reservations on Talanoa and Vā

Despite the apparent epistemic collapse (Byrd, 2020) that I was encountering, I still chose to deploy Talanoa for the following reasons. Firstly, I am Sāmoan. And as a Sāmoan, this is also my *gafa*/genealogy; As a Sāmoan, I felt it important to not only claim my genealogical rights to our concepts, re-learning our epistemological tools, our ways of knowing and being, but it is also a right of participants in this research to be held and cared for in *vā* during research which touches on often traumatising experiences. My hope is that by making use of our tools of knowing and being, there is a sense of also making them more inclusive.

The second reason pertains to my positionality here in New Zealand. As part of the Sāmoan diaspora in New Zealand one of the immediate tasks that falls on us as queer Pacific researchers, I felt, was the need to make and claim space for Pacific queer research. In other words, I needed to write myself and my participants into the Pacific research repository. Through making space for Pacific queer scholars, I hoped it would then expand by presenting the nuances that exist within our context to then also disrupt the White textures of queer scholarship. Lastly, and relatedly, We – Pacific/Sāmoan lesbian and queer peoples – exist in neither the Pacific Studies canon nor in the canon of Queer or Diasporic Studies. By writing us in to all, it not only calls for an overdue reawakening, but it also adds to the growing chorus of international voices calling for better inclusion of non-normative sexualities that exist within non-Western cultures (Thomsen & Iosefo, 2021).

Moreover, as a queer person moving into the research space, I decided to lean into the potentialities it offered, through its methodological foundations that still spoke to me as a Sāmoan, non-Western researcher, navigating the diasporic space. From a methodological standpoint, it made sense for me to use Talanoa as I am a Sāmoan queer woman in research with other Pacific lesbian and queer women. Thus, it meant that we were from a gender/sex-sexuality angle, positioned similarly, all carrying the expressed purpose of disrupting a heteronormative narrative of our non-existence within Sāmoan culture, but also challenging our invisibility in scholarly queer representation that exists in New Zealand. Talanoa itself is activated in *vā*, which means that participants in a Talanoa activate the *vā* and are drawn to the space in order to co-construct an understanding of a specific issue. In this case, as Sāmoan lesbian and queer women, we were drawn into the *vā* on the count of our shared sexual non-normativity, and in many ways, our shared experiences of marginalisation. As such, I was able to overcome my apprehension with using the methodology and method both from a reflexive-positionality point and a methodological procedural standpoint.

Research Procedure

The methods, research design and research procedure for this study was given Ethics approval from the University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee (UAHPEC)³. Eight participants were recruited to take part in this study. Participants were recruited via an electronic advertisement, as this research is undertaken with a marginalised group, it felt the best strategy was a purposive sampling strategy that could reach the target for the study digitally and the extra layer of confidentiality this created. This electronic advertisement was promoted by groups and organisations that were relevant to Aotearoa's gender diverse and Pacific Island individuals and communities including Coconet TV, Tagata Pasifika and the Manalagi Project community networks. Groups/organisations posted the recruitment flyer on their Instagram and Twitter platforms, which my contact details for interested participants to make contact confidentially.

Adopting a snowball recruitment strategy (Naderifar et al., 2017), I was able to utilise the networks of my supervisor and other groups within my networks to recruit participants. This allowed me to draw from their networks to search for potential participants. Recruited participants were also encouraged to share the electronic advertisement with anyone they knew who fit the criteria and who could be interested. This strategy was extremely effective, as I managed to field enquiries beyond my initial goal of six participants, reaching as high as ten potential participants in a short period of time. Two participants fell outside the scope of this specific research. There were also two potential participants who made contact but upon receiving the participant information sheet, I did not hear from them again. I followed up with one further email to ensure they received the information and to ask whether they had any queries, but I received no response. When potential participants made contact, I sent them the Participant Information Sheet (PIS) and Consent Form (CF) as email attachments. Once they read through the PIS and were still interested, they confirmed their participation in the study via email.

³ The approval letter is attached in appendix A.

Data Generation - Talanoa

Talanoa one-on-one with participants began in August 2021 and ended in December 2021.

Unfortunately, due to COVID-19 and the subsequent four-month lockdown in Auckland from August-December 2021, I was only able to conduct one Talanoa in person. As such, this meant shifting Talanoa into the digital vā (Enari & Matapo, 2020; Thomsen et al., 2021). For the in-person Talanoa, we met at a location that was convenient to her and enjoyed lunch together before beginning our Talanoa. The sharing of lunch before Talanoa was crucial; we were able to get to know one another better, speak about our day before meeting, and share a meal together – a fundamental aspect of connection for Pacific cultures (Rush et al., 2009).

Each Talanoa lasted between 1-3 hours in total, though no timeframe was enforced to allow participants the space they needed to share. The remaining Talanoa were conducted via zoom during this period. This was an initial disruption to the data generation process; initially I believed it would be difficult to create a virtual space of warmth and reciprocity without being able to introduce myself in person with a warm greeting. Also, I would be virtually hosting participants without sharing food and drink and the small conversations that add to relationship/rapport building that result from being in one's physical company. This component of the Talanoa process is considered crucial for, and in alignment with, Talanoa as method (Vaioleti, 2006; Farrelly & Nabobo-Baba, 2014). I also believe that this sits in alignment with Sāmoan values of tautua/service to those you are hosting. Nevertheless, I apologised to each participant for not being able to offer this component of Pacific knowledge generation and continued with our introductions virtually.

Although zoom felt initially disruptive to the Talanoa process, Pacific/Moana scholars have added to the growing field of scholarship that demonstrates how social media - and the internet more generally has facilitated and fostered Pacific connections/relationships where physical distance, or in this case, a global pandemic, has proven to be a barrier (Faleolo, 2021; Thomsen et al., 2021). As such, Pacific/Moana scholars argue that constructing relational identities/communities could still be achieved

through digital platforms. The rapid growth of telecommunications technologies has meant that physical separation no longer means social isolation for Pacific communities (Machperson et al., 2001). This has been coined digital vā whereby Indigenous concepts and Pacific ethics such as Talanoa and vā can still be practiced virtually due to the connectivity that the internet, and social platforms like Twitter, provide (Lopesi, 2018a; Thomsen et al., 2021). Similarly, Lopesi (2018a) argues that social media has offered an affordable and efficient way to maintain relationships where physical distance has previously been a problem. While it is acknowledged that this connective relationality looks a little different online, the connections fostered have materialised implications that include relationship building, the strengthening of family ties, visibility and accessibility of Pacific issues, and a strong sense of community (Thomsen et al., 2021).

With Talanoa being conducted via zoom, the values of alofa/love, fa'aaloalo/respect and empathy that foreground Talanoa had to be expressed in different ways. I opened each Talanoa session with light conversation about their day and about the pandemic we were all experiencing. I felt it necessary to share my own experiences as a way of creating a safe space, gaining trust and settling nerves with participants, specifically participants who were younger than I as the researcher. This decision to centre the co-connection building was designed to create comfortability and trust with participants by sharing my own subjective truth (Keil, 2021). This immediately had the impact of relaxing many participants, which was important considering we were engaging in a digital Talanoa online, whilst negotiating the digital vā.

Once I shared about my own upbringing, I asked whether participants felt comfortable sharing more about themselves – with younger participants I asked which high school they attended which often brought up laughs due to the loyalty people still carry toward their college affiliations, and with older participants I asked about their history of living in Tāmaki. I made sure to conduct myself differently when speaking with older participants – in acknowledging their rank as elders within the Sāmoan and lesbian and queer community, I was slightly more formal, though warm, in my approach. This aligns

with the practical tensions raised by Fa'avae et al., (2016) and Keil (2021) who argue that in some instances, Talanoa and vā cannot always be experienced neutrally due to the context-specific positionalities we embody when entering vā. Once this was done, I moved to information about the research – I built on information that was already shared in the PIS, how the Talanoa was going to work, and what I was hoping to achieve with the research project together. I explained that they were able to pass on any questions that arose, that we could pause the Talanoa or the dictator at any stage, and that they could withdraw from the research entirely without any questions asked. I assured each participant that their confidentiality would be protected and continued to check-in with them throughout to make sure they were happy to continue. Once all ‘housekeeping’ was completed, I worked through the list of general topics that I wanted to cover in our Talanoa. This Talanoa protocol was not a set of questions, but more prompts to ensure that our Talanoa covered aspects of their lives that would galvanise responses related to this research. When the Talanoa veered off in other directions, I enjoyed the opportunity to get to know them better and did not enforce strict boundaries as to what we could Talanoa about. This relaxed, though intentional, approach, while extending the Talanoa in length, was important as it let the participants know that the floor was theirs – I was interested in them as people, and not there to force only the relevant parts of their lives out of them for the display and benefit of research.

At the end of each Talanoa, I thanked them again, and obtained their details to send their koha. ‘Paying’ participants for their input is seen as unethical in some research traditions, however, reciprocity is key in Pacific research contexts, and I certainly felt strongly about ensuring I honoured their time and generosity with a reciprocal token of my appreciation as researcher. With all but one Talanoa being conducted on zoom, however, I was not able to physically give participants their prezzy card. It was decided that due to lockdown, participants were comfortable with receiving their koha electronically. Once this was done, I explained next steps – I would transcribe our Talanoa verbatim, send them a copy of the transcript so they were able to make any edits or amendments before approving it for the next stage of data analysis. This step was important to me as PRM emphasises the need to

uplift participants' voices in research and this also includes not misrepresenting their voices or their intent for the sake of a false pursuit of objectivity.

Analytical Strategy - Thematic Analysis

This research deploys Thematic analysis (TA) as analytical tool to process data generated through our Talanoa. Although TA is tied to a tradition of knowledge generation not of the Pacific, with roots in psychology and social research, TA offers a systematic and cohesive analytical strategy that is at its greatest utility when working with qualitative data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Thematic analysis is the process of identifying patterns or themes within qualitative data. Braun & Clarke (2006) suggest that it is the first qualitative method that should be learned as “...it provides core skills that will be useful for conducting many other kinds of analysis” (p.78). A further advantage, particularly from the perspective of learning and teaching, is that it is a method rather than a methodology (Braun & Clarke 2006; Clarke & Braun, 2013). This means that, unlike many qualitative methodologies, it is not tied to a particular epistemological or theoretical perspective. This makes it a very flexible method, a considerable advantage given the diversity of work in learning and teaching. TA centres the experiences of participants, acknowledges the active role of the researcher, and rejects the pursuit of independent truths (Braun & Clarke, 2021). TA is not associated with any pre-existing theoretical framework, making it a malleable method, particularly for novice researchers starting out in qualitative research (Braun & Clarke, 2006). While TA has been criticised by some as an ‘anything goes’ approach (Antaki et al., 2003) – a concern some scholars also share regarding Talanoa (Fa'avae et al., 2016) – TA’s flexibility only applies to how it can be used, not in what it is and how to do it (Braun & Clarke, 2006).

TA is a method for identifying, analysing and reporting patterns (themes) within data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). Braun and Clarke have written various iterations (2013, 2019, 2021) since their initial article on TA (2006) and have since coined the term ‘reflexive thematic analysis’ to more accurately present TA in alignment with their own learnings and development (2019). The key difference between TA and reflexive TA is the intentional reflection of the researcher – the researcher’s role in knowledge

production sits at the heart of reflexive TA. Reflexive TA emphasises the researcher's engagement with their data and their reflective and thoughtful engagement throughout the analytic process (Braun & Clarke, 2019). This added component aligns well with PRM which already stresses the importance of reciprocity and thoughtfulness in guiding all steps of the research process. As such, themes do not passively exist in the data waiting to be discovered, nor do they present themselves to the researcher during the analytic process. Themes are creative and interpretative *stories* about the data, created with the researcher's skill, theoretical assumptions, analytic resources and the data itself (Braun & Clarke, 2019).

Data Analysis Process

In following the six stages of the TA process (Braun & Clarke, 2006) I printed out all Talanoa transcripts and read, highlighted and re-read them. The initial period of reading, along with transcribing all Talanoa transcripts myself, except for one, helped with familiarising myself with the contents of the data. I wrote down initial ideas I had in relation to areas of interest that could help with answering my research questions. Secondly, I created fifteen initial codes that reflected areas of interest which also helped with linking features of the data across all participants' Talanoa. I went back through the Talanoa transcripts again, this time allocating each highlighted extract a code according to its relevance to the corresponding areas of interest. I did this for all Talanoa transcripts, providing another opportunity to read through the data again. Under each initial code I went through each transcript and typed out again the highlighted extract that had been given the relevant code, starting at code one and working through all fifteen. Once this was completed, all highlighted extracts had been collated into one document that had all data extracts placed under their appropriate coding.

Having created a document with the data that had been coded and collated, I read through the document again. I wrote out all codes on to separate pieces of paper with bullet points of key ideas underneath, making it easier to organise codes into piles that could be compressed into an overarching theme. Some codes became subheadings within themes. From the fifteen codes created in phase two, six main

themes were identified amongst them, with six subthemes. With six initial themes identified from the coding process, I then wrote them all out onto a piece of paper. Keywords or phrases were put under each theme. This created a mind map, with themes visibly written out with key words. After finding the common denominator for each theme, names for themes were confirmed. Each theme told a clear sub-story that added to the overall arc of the Talanoa. My findings and outcome of this process is detailed in the next section.

Chapter Four - Findings

This chapter presents the findings that emerged from Talanoa with participants. A demographic table of participant's age bracket and sexual identification is included with potential identifiers removed.

Figure 2. Demographic Breakdown of Participants

Name:	Sexual Identification:	Age Band:
Talanoa 1 (T1)	Lesbian & Queer	50s-60s
Talanoa 2 (T2)	No identification	20s-30s
Talanoa 3 (T3)	No identification	50s-60s
Talanoa 4 (T4)	No identification	50s-60s
Talanoa 5 (T5)	Lesbian	20s-30s
Talanoa 6 (T6)	Bisexual & Queer	20s-30s
Talanoa 7 (T7)	Queer	20s-30s
Talanoa 8 (T8)	Lesbian	50s-60s

The findings are shared as a thematic Talanoa, and the structure of the thematic Talanoa roughly tracks in a similar linearity identified in psychosocial coming-out models (CO) such as Vivienne Cass (1979) and Richard Troiden (1988). Crafting a narrative in this form is not meant to reinforce the idea of this process being straightforward nor linear, rather I believe it helps to better pinpoint possible points of divergence and the complex ways participants navigated their coming-out experiences. As I have chosen relationality as a framing device, the findings presented here, I believe, highlights how participants make sense of their sexual selves within a conceptual framework that brings their cultural context forward.

This methodological decision also speaks more broadly to focussing on the connections made between and beyond participants' sexual, cultural, gendered selves – a complicating factor appropriate to the context my research was conducted in. While most CO models treat the multiple identities of a person as individual variables, in foreshadowing the findings of this study, it appears Sāmoan lesbian and queer women living in the Pacific diaspora, participants do not experience the varying positionalities they embody as separate, independent wholes. Their sexual identities do not make sense without being

in relation to other areas of self (Wah-Shan, 2001; Va'ai & Kiki, 2017; Anae, 2019; Thomsen, 2021). It is also important to note that participants did not experience these areas sequentially nor did all participants experience each theme identified in the same way – or at all in some cases. Differences in their stories are captured and detailed throughout this findings section. This is where Braun and Clarke's assertion becomes important, in that "the 'key-ness' to a theme is not necessarily dependent on quantifiable measures – but rather on whether it captures something important in relation to the overall research question" (2006, p. 82). The findings are categorised under six overarching themes identified in the coding process with an additional six sub-themes tied to two overarching themes:

1. Discovery

2. Inadequacy of the Term Lesbian

3. Complicating Factors Before Coming Out

3a Internalised Homophobia

3b Experiences At School

3c The Church

3d Heteronormativity

4. Participants and Disclosure

5. Family Anxieties /Chosen Family Support of Being Out

5a Cultural / Gendered / Sexual Essentialisms

5b Family Anxieties

6. Intersectional equilibrium

Theme One: Discovery

Many CO models suggest that the initial realisation of same-sex desire happens in the early stages of one's life measured by years lived. For participants, "early" is necessarily subjective, as early in life by measure of years, was not their common experience. In fact, many experienced same-sex desire at different stages of their life measured by years lived.

An example being Talanoa 2 (T2), who actually identified as heterosexual for all of her teenage years and early twenties:

I was in a relationship with this guy and we had been dating for just over a year...then I finally got a full time job. It was probably like the first month into my job this girl, literally this is me being a cis straight girl for my entire life. She came up to me and she was talking to me about this bowl, but it was her mannerisms and the way she was talking to me...that was my first moment of like 'why do I feel like you're flirting with me and why am I getting butterflies, why am I liking it?...I told my boyfriend and he just laughed...I was crying like I don't know what this means because 1. am I cheating on him? and 2. what the hell? Like since when in my whole life, and it's a woman.

For T2 she discovered her same-sex feelings when they confronted her at work while she was in a committed heterosexual relationship. Similarly, Talanoa 4 (T4) was in a heterosexual marriage before her same-sex relationship:

Because I've been married before I would say that I don't necessarily really look at women and go 'wow I want to be with women'....I don't have a special time that I sit down and can think 'oh that's when I discovered that I like women' nah not at all.

For T4, she cannot even recall a discovery moment where she realised her same-sex feelings. For Talanoa 3 (T3), she discovered feelings towards women while at high school:

My first feelings towards a woman was when I was 17...The first time I knew I had feelings for a woman was when I had to play defence and our coach – we were in one of the top Basketball teams in the country – we had to critique the player that we were marking. My coach said ‘watch how she breathes, watch how she moves’ and so that’s what I did. But that’s when I started having feelings for this woman I was defending. [Having those feelings made me] uncomfortable but in the Basketball crowd it was alright.

T3 is not the only participant who identified sport as a space for same-sex revelation; two other participants also discussed how sport teams/clubs were a safe space for themselves and other young Brown lesbians in Tāmaki during the 1970s and 80s, a point that speaks to the importance of community groups in coming to terms with non-normative sexual feelings.

T2’s initial shock and uncomfortability when realising her same-sex attraction, speaks to the compulsory heterosexuality that pervades Western society (Rich, 1980). Adrienne Rich (1980) argues that Western societies are so inherently underpinned by heteropatriarchy⁴ and heteronormativity⁵ that women are assumed to have an innate desire for men. Women are then socialised into heterosexuality because it has been discursively designed and presented as the natural, default sexual trajectory for everyone. T2 and T3 relay the shock one feels when that assumption is challenged via same-sex discovery. T2 goes on to reiterate her assumed heterosexuality:

⁴ Heteropatriarchy is defined as a socio-political system in which heterosexual, cisgender males are considered to have authority over everyone else.

⁵ Heteronormativity is defined as the societal, political, sexual, historical normalisation of heterosexuality as the natural sexual preference for all.

My first girlfriend was the first girl I'd ever kissed. Sissy, I was straight up heterosexual my whole life...I was boys, boys, boys, right up until I met my first girlfriend – it was strictly dickly until her (laughs).

Nicholas Guittar (2013) calls this “internalised heteronormativity” (p. 178) in that for some cases, people are not necessarily concerned with potentially identifying with a LGBTQI+ identity, more that their heteronormative conventions have been challenged by new feelings. This is also an example of the gender-sex-sexuality assumption that Judith Butler (1990) advances, related to essentialist constructions of gender and sexuality assigned at birth that limits possibilities and attributes an entire set of behaviours, attitudes and desires to people from infancy. T2 and T3’s reaction suggests that they have never been confronted with the possibility of liking someone of the same-sex, due to the assumed gender-sex-sexuality we are already assigned with at birth (Sedgwick, 1990). For Talanoa 7 (T7), however, she first became aware of feelings during primary school:

When I was maybe 7, I remember having feelings for girls around me, not in a sexual way but it was an all-girls school and we used to joke about adult stuff...I never had the language to identify what I was feeling, I definitely kept my distance from boys a lot, I knew that wasn't normal but I think I knew it was always there, I didn't really know what it was until there was this girl at my primary school and we used to pretend like we were making out, but never actually doing anything, we would just pretend. She came to school one day and she told me that she didn't want to be a lesbian, and I didn't know what that meant. So that's when I was like OK, and that's when I started to think maybe I am different, but I never felt scared of that... I've never felt that to be queer was abnormal. And I felt like it was mine to hold.

T7 excerpt demonstrates how at a young age, she did not experience the shock and confusion associated with realising same-sex awareness that much of the literature documents, even when her

friend negatively labels their actions as being decidedly lesbian. Youthful innocence may be at play, however, relatedly and somewhat contrastingly, T7 attributes this response to her upbringing:

Because my family is so artsy I really grew up in a progressive household, and I was surrounded by queer people all the time, my family have always been really open in that way. And when we would go back to Samoa a lot of people identify as fa'afafine so it was a spectrum that I was used to.

What this subsequent excerpt helps us to understand is that for T7, their exposure to queerness as well as Sāmoan gender liminality from a young age is closely linked to the community in which she was raised. Having her actions be labelled as lesbian was not a deterrent in the same way that it was for other participants, highlighting the different ways participants reacted upon discovering and encountering same-sex desire for the first time.

Theme Two: Inadequacy of the Term Lesbian

Another notable theme for participants was the lack of identification with the term lesbian. In fact, a key finding in this study is that the majority of participants do not identify as lesbian, and took issue with the perceived Whiteness that underpins normative associations to identity-labels. Some participants also attributed their reluctance to identify with Western labelling to the colonial history of gender and sexuality in the Pacific, a history, they feel, is still inherent in LGBTQI+ labelling more generally.

For the following participants, the assumed Whiteness and fixed identity attached to lesbian made it less accessible and too rigid an identity for them to claim. This is important as CO literature often underlines the sense of belonging to a group-identity that orbits around an identity-label as a way to help synthesise one's homosexual identity (Taylor, 1999).

T2: It's definitely a conscious decision not to identify with a label; labels to me is just a White peoples' thing...Like yeah I'm in a same-sex relationship but you're not in a same-sex relationship – whoa, cool, all good... I'm just trying to be loud, brown and proud. Proud as in being proud of being brown, not proud because of Pride or being rainbow, no (laughs). This is proud of being brown and being the bomb, not proud Pride festival proud.

T2 highlights some of the complicating factors around the development of Sāmoan lesbian and queer women subjectivity whilst living in New Zealand. For Sāmoans, identity is predominantly seen as being defined in relation to others – especially to one's family. As a result, claiming an identity-label that crystallises an individualised self – a declaration that is often seen as a rejection of one's family in pursuit of a sexual identity (see Wah-Shan, 2001) does not hold meaning for T2. Additionally, as in an Anglo settler colonial context, Western understandings and framings of queerness become the default conceptual and discursive frameworks with which non-normative sexualities are presented. Rainbow flags, Pride festivals, being out and proud – this sense of hyper-visibility has been linked to the wider liberation of the LGBTQI+ community (Boussalem, 2021). While this is important for visibility politics in these contexts, this did not seem to resonate for T2 when the question of identity was brought forward. She makes the point of identifying as a 'brown bomb woman' that foregrounds her complex understanding of self, rather than her non-heterosexual sexuality. In other words, sexuality is important for T2, but it was not her most or only important positioning; a sentiment that echoes Phylesha Brown-Acton assertions that for Pacific queer peoples, we are our gafa/genealogy before anything else (Thomsen and Brown-Acton, 2021).

Moreover, Elizabeth Armstrong (2002) also argues that for White lesbians, asserting one's gay identity means presenting as a single identity politic (as cited in Alimahomed, 2010). QOC critique this Western framing, and instead emphasise non-normative sexuality in relation to their race, gender, and class identities (Wah-Shan, 2001; Thomsen & Iosefo, 2021). This difference between Sāmoan and Western ideations is reflected in a comment made by T7:

One of my flatmates, one of my really good friends, is a White lesbian, and that's how she introduces herself, even to strangers, that's just who she inherently is. And when I first met her I was like 'I would never say that straight away' like when I was queer, it probably is still some internalised thing for me, but it's also a safety thing, not all spaces are made for us, and I want to be careful in that way.

T7's intersectional positioning to that of her flat mate's singular identity-framing exemplifies the difference between Sāmoan and Western framings of identity in certain contexts. All participants explicitly identified as relational people – they were Sāmoan, lesbian/queer/non-heterosexual women, but were acutely aware of their identities and responsibilities as daughter, sister and in many cases also Christian. This framing is important as it demonstrates not only how identities of difference constitute each other, but also how participants never present as one aspect of their identity; they are all, all at once. Whereas for White, Anglo middle class gays and lesbians living in Western societies, as Wah-Shan argues (2001) “erotic object choice, instead of the family-kinship system is taken as the identity basis of the individual” (p. 27).

T7 was also content with not needing a label to define her sexual identity at all, before agreeing that queer is a term she is comfortable with:

I don't identify as a lesbian and I thought that would disqualify me from the research...I don't hold anything really strongly to a term...I don't feel like I'm searching for a word to define myself, but I feel comfortable using queer, I like how it's all encompassing...

T2 and T7 reveal their belief that Western labels are inadequate in capturing their subjective experience of queerness. Both feel at ease with not needing to claim a stable identity due to the inadequacies of Western language and by T2 mentioning her cultural classification as a key factor in understanding

who she is. One can infer from an intersectional perspective then, that the term lesbian is unable to capture Pacific sexual fluidities when centring T7's experience and words. T6 perhaps sums up the reluctance felt among most participants in claiming a Western label to identify their Pacific-specific experienced queerness:

Even now, those labels and boxes, they all come from White people and White ideas about what queerness is, they're never rooted in Pacific ideas or Indigenous ideas about what it means to be gay or what it means to be queer...and that's a big part of my queerness and understanding my fluidity – that I don't have to fit in a box.

T6 identifies one of the main reasons why some participants were not comfortable with claiming lesbian as a label as well as an identity – this language is from a colonial precept, and its origins and power in historically subjugating Pacific ideations of gender and sexuality, is not lost on them. For older participants, they found lesbian to be jarring due to the intergenerational trauma attached:

Talanoa 1 (T1): Lesbian is such a swearword and still is in lots of peoples' minds because of the Christian abuse...Me and other lesbians would talk about it and it's like 'nah always hated the word, the community's always hated the word, they're scared of it. And the only lesbians we know are White people (laughs) so for a lot of us we couldn't carry it or like it...

Although T8 identifies as a Sāmoan lesbian now, she too was initially sceptical:

There was something about the term lesbian that I didn't relate to, every time I heard it, it was so White. I got involved in the Black women's movement, which was just at the end of the Polynesian Panther movement, and I remember thinking when people would ask 'are you a lesbian?' and I didn't actually like that term, it felt like it was a White term, and I couldn't relate to it because all the White lesbians I knew were pretty weird.

T1 and T8 highlight the reluctance among participants to identify with Western labels that does not encapsulate racialised experiences within a sexual identity framework, due to the substantially different experiences and agendas between Palagi lesbians and Sāmoan lesbian and queer women that participants storied. This disparity between the two groups' experiences, which perhaps captures the overall reluctance among some participants to claim lesbian is summed up by T8:

You had this thing with radical separatist lesbians, and I'm thinking 'um that wipes out my whole family' (laughs)...and I'm reading these notices where they'd say 'if your son is older than 5 years old he cannot be in this space' and I'd say what is that? I'd be keen to go to that party that I saw on the notice but then I'd turn around and say nah fuck this I'm out of here...There was one thing about being a lesbian but a Sāmoan lesbian was, and is, a whole different thing...We can't all be sitting together and thinking everything's alright because we're all women, it doesn't work that way.

T8 not only highlights the intersectional aspects of participants' queerness in that their sexuality exists in relation to their Sāmoan-ness where family is integral to their wellbeing, but she also touches on the Whiteness inherent in normative constructions of non-normative sexual identities which tap into a different values system, unfamiliar to participants. T8 echoes the historical view of lesbian theorists of colour who argued that lesbianism is not a unitary experience with a singular political meaning but rather a critical site of gender deconstruction (Phelan, 1993). This sense of reluctance felt or outright refusal to claim a Western label by majority of participants can be linked to the historically fraught relationship within the echelons of Rainbow communities more generally. Aligning with a Western same-sex identity-label, for T1 and T8, appears to privilege an identity that, as other scholars have contended, is premised on a sense of individualism that stands in stark contrast to relational understandings of Sāmoan selfhood. However, it is also important to acknowledge that for a few

participants they did indeed find value and purchase in the term lesbian. Talanoa 5 (T5) for example *does* identify as a lesbian:

T5: Originally, I initially labelled myself as bi...at the time my friend identified as a lesbian. She thought lesbianism was a dirty word and I did too. I felt it was too strong for me, too bold, too political I guess. I wasn't brave enough. Then I whispered it to myself while driving one time (laughs) 'I'm a lesbian, I'm a lesbian', playing around with the word, I even yelled it aloud once to see how I'd feel. I wanted to normalise the word for myself. I love lesbian now. I call myself a lesbian all the time.

T5 talks to the self-labelling of lesbian, a previously derogatory term laden with stigma, in a way to revalue it, to transform the term used to demean into positive expressions of self. Adam Galinsky et al., (2013) call this process 'reappropriation' whereby individuals take possession of a slur previously used exclusively by dominant groups to reinforce a marginalised group's lesser status. Bridget Taylor (1999) argues that self-labelling involves ascribing oneself to a negative trait which is culturally devalued, thereby representing the acceptance of deviance. This self-labelling appears to be political for T5 as it is a defiant action against a stigmatising constraint, and is a way of capturing the term for themselves to deny others the power to use it (Galinsky et al., 2013, p. 2021).

Theme Three: Factors in Coming Out

Participants experienced numerous and multifaceted complicating factors in their CO process – the main areas of difficulty experienced identified were: internalised homophobia, experiences at school, the Church and heteronormativity.

3a. Internalised Homophobia

Internalised homophobia as described by Casey Totenhagen et al., (2018) occurs when an individual adopts society's negative attitudes towards one's own sexual identity. According to participants

themselves, internalised homophobia was a complicating factor in their process and journey toward developing healthy self-images regarding their sexualities. For T8, seeing her friends in same-sex relationships was the deciding factor in processing her own internalised homophobia:

I hadn't come out as a lesbian when I was at school, but my friends had gotten into relationships with each other, and I was like woah. I was pretty homophobic, my behaviour at the time was like what the fuck? until they got into a relationship with each other and then all of a sudden it was OK, and then started exploring it and being OK with it, but also then having to counter the conversations that our wider group were having about our friends that were now together. I hadn't come out then, I was just supporting them by still being their friend...

T8 then goes on to talk about a Black women's hui she attended as a teenager, and how mesmerised she was by their kōrero on lesbianism and sexuality more generally. At the end, she was encouraged to stand up and sing with the group:

My mate is saying 'come on, you're coming up on stage' and I'm saying 'I'm not a fucking lesbian, leave me alone' and she's going 'nah just come up' and so I went up and sang and it just felt, from that point on, it felt like it was OK to be a lesbian.

T8 highlights why a relational lens is so important in contextualising this work. Processing her internalised homophobia was important not because it implicated herself, but because it was damning of her friends who were now in same-sex relationships. The cathartic moment of resolving her internalised homophobia is linked to being in space with Black women as there is a sense of solidarity based on a similar/adjacent racial experience that T8 connected with at the hui. This was key in helping her process her own homophobia.

T4, however, was raised in the Church, and comes from a staunchly religious Sāmoan family. She has since left Church in order to be with her partner. Unlearning the lessons of the Church attached to her socialisation and religious upbringing is a current work in progress:

To this day, I still think being in love with a woman is wrong and so I am very conflicted with these conversations about it...I've been in a same-sex relationship for 14 years and I'm still coming to terms with it. I probably run away from those labels (LGBTQI+) because they remind me of what I'm doing which doesn't always sit right in my head.

This excerpt exemplifies the power of religion in Sāmoan families. There is a sense that Church has been a contributing factor for most participants' internalised homophobia as all three participants who were open about their homophobia were actively raised in the Church. Furthermore, Patricia Groves & Lois Ventura (1983) call this the "denial rationales" (p. 147) which describe the rationalisations that allow a woman to engage in a relationship with another woman without considering herself to be a lesbian. Some women use denial rationales as a means to avoid the social stigma associated with a lesbian identity (Sophie, 1982 as cited in Groves & Ventura, 1983) but T8 adds a cultural element because for her, it is also a means of protecting the religious foundations of her family. This is also an example of the insidious nature and pervasiveness of heteronormative discourses. In particular T4's own relationship, is seen as wrong and this is also impacted by her family's religious beliefs. Sāmoan families are often quite Christian in their belief systems, as was a factor in how this denial rationale was formed, which has been inferred from T4's own responses. I also expounded upon this in latter parts of this section.

Thus, T4 is able to maintain a long-term same-sex relationship without forming an identity-label on this basis, rather, she centres the strength of connection to her partner by removing the label. This compartmentalisation is common for those in same-sex relationships living in a heteronormative society (McIntosh et al, 2022). In fact, it has been argued that this is a coping strategy – people

compartmentalise their non-normative identity in order to conform to society's heterosexual expectations – which allows them to work through their own internalised homophobia, and to protect themselves from potentially damning public opinion (McIntosh et al., 2022). But there is an added cultural element for T4, in that this compartmentalisation also accounts for family, who sit firmly at the centre of Sāmoan culture. The role of family for Sāmoans - which extends past the nuclear family unit - is far more pronounced than many Palagi familial structures (Sua-Tavila, 2019). So T4's want to protect her family could also be read within this framework. This heteronormative pressure is echoed with Talanoa 5 (T5) who reflects on her own experiences with internalised homophobia:

I know for a fact I had a lot of internalised homophobia and a lot of it was probably subconscious. When I would see two men, I would've felt uncomfortable. I wouldn't have verbalised it or acted on it in any way, but I would've thought something simply because I was socialised to.

T5 reiterates the structure versus individual agency dilemma as she attributes her internalised homophobia to her socialisation rather than any sense of individual agency (Barnes, 2021). This speaks to the strength and prevalence of religious discourses in T5's socialisation. As will be explored later in this chapter, Christianity is a fundamental tenet of Indigenous Sāmoan and diasporic Sāmoan identity. Consequently, religious messaging of homosexuality have been so ingrained that unless questioned, will continue to materialise in homophobic attitudes and opinions. T5's admission speaks to the complex and often contradictory role religion has played in her, and other participants' development of their intersectional selves. Participants can identify their religious upbringing as a source of their internalised homophobia while also acknowledging the integral role the Church has played in fostering community for so many Sāmoan, and Pacific Island families in Aotearoa-New Zealand. An internalised homophobia critique alone is not adequate to account for this complexity.

3b. Experiences at School

Experiences at school also had a profound impact for many participants and the development of their understandings around sexual identity. For instance, younger participants recall experiences with friends at school that further entrenched unhealthy and inaccurate perceptions of lesbianism and queerness. T5 recalls her experience when friends spread a rumour that she was a lesbian:

The conversations at school and the way of speaking about gay people, it was always seen as a gross, perverted thing. It was taboo and I had a lot of religious Pacific Island friends at the time...I noticed a lot of my female friends started distancing and emotionally detaching themselves from me until I was completely excluded from hanging out with them in and outside of school... As girls, we'd hug and greet each other and one time I went to hug my friend and she said 'don't hug me lezzy'...what I found difficult was being perceived as a pervert. That being interested in girls or even just touching them in completely innocent, platonic ways was perverted and therefore, I was inherently a pervert just by existing as someone who could be gay. That made me really uncomfortable with myself...I couldn't even accept hugs sometimes and I'd recoil if a female friend put her arm around me.

T5 touches on a few key points, the isolation she felt as a result of being labelled a lesbian by her peers at school, and the sense of perversion still inherent in religious, and in this context Christian framings of homosexuality among Pacific Island communities. The internalised feelings of perversion for T5 were strong, she was unable to practice platonic intimacy for fear of what people would think of her, and felt a sense of unease in her own body throughout her teenage years. Similarly, T6 recounts the messaging about queerness that she received at school:

I remember that in school there was a couple of girls who were bisexual or who were, I suppose, on the masculine side. There was a girl in particular who was quite masculine, everyone coded her as being lesbian and talked about her as being gay or being a boy and then

there was a girl who came out as bisexual, and people coded her as being fast and loose and being a slut.

T6 touches on an important issue – how popularised notions of ‘doing gender’ serve to naturalise certain activities as falling into the masculine/feminine divide (West and Zimmerman, 1987). We act, walk, speak and talk in ways that confirm an impression of being coded as a man or being a woman (Butler, 2011). As such, women who do not conform to assigned gender roles are often considered lesbian while gender conformists are assumed to be heterosexual while bisexuality is still framed as promiscuity (Guittar, 2014). This is due to the stereotypical lesbian appearance within LGBTQI+ communities being popularised as ‘butch’; lesbians of the 1970s who rejected culturally normative femininity and aligned themselves with more traditionally masculine looks as a performative way of confirming sexual liminality (Huxley et al., 2014). This is interesting because the majority of participants presented femininity in diverse and various ways during Talanoa. While there is a term for “femme presenting” lesbians among Western LGBTQI+ communities: ‘lipstick lesbians’(Moore, 2006) – I felt that participants were not trying to perform their lesbianism/queerness during Talanoa in a way that highlighted a binary framing between “butch” or “lipstick lesbians”. Neither was there a purposeful attempt to transgress or blend gender expectations and roles as a point of sexual difference (Moore, 2006).

3c. Church

The Church was also an important referential in understanding the experiences and views of the majority of participants. Most participants recall the messages about homosexuality and queerness as stemming from their religious/Christian upbringing or relationships with the Church.

T5:...I grew up religious as well and my whole family went to church every Sunday. We were youth leaders. We were in the praise and worship band, we were so involved and in so deep, I thought I couldn’t possibly escape and live a different life...From a very young age I’d hear in

bible studies, from casual conversations in church and in the pastor's sermon that being gay is a sin...My uncle who was our Pastor preached regularly about how being gay is wrong, it's a sin, you're going to Hell...I never agreed with him and eventually despised him for it...I eventually left the church and that made things a lot easier for me.

T5 highlights the sentiment felt by participants who have had to manage their religious upbringings with the development of their non-normative sexualities. Because religious notions of sin is attached so strongly to homosexuality, T5 felt that the only way to reconcile her sexual identity was to sever her relationship with her uncle and the Church. Similarly for T4, she also left the church because of her same-sex relationship:

Do I want to go back to church? Absolutely I do but I can't because if I go back to church then I'm going to choose my church and my relationship will be over... Every time there's a big breaking news thing for our church or at a conference or at an announcement I'm literally scrolling so quickly thinking 'I can't wait to read a part that says the church has accepted same-sex relationships' because that would be one part that would help me in my mind.

Unlike T4, T5 is hoping to return to church but is aware of its stance on homosexuality. T5 and T4 highlight the difficulties participants faced in having to reconcile different parts of their identity. They could not be Christian/Catholic/Mormon etc in one setting and queer in another, they were both, and others, simultaneously, all the time. Christianity, and by extension the religious condemnation of homosexuality, feel inextricably tied to what it means to be Sāmoan for some participants, making it difficult to claim a diasporic cultural identity without being a church going Christian.

T8, however, is a Minister's daughter. She is no stranger to this religious messaging, and talks extensively about her own fraught relationship with being Sāmoan and being raised in the Church. She

however diversifies this narrative by acknowledging the relationships made in being raised within this community:

When I think about our connections, we'd all made them because we were PIC kids, you can go anywhere in the world and if I asked 'any PIC kids here?' if I saw Pacific Islanders, I'd just see these hands pop up. And we'd just talk about that because it's important, it's a history and it's made a lot of us...This whole idea of being Sāmoan means you're a Christian, I had to explore that further.

While the distinction between religion and Church is not made among participants, this is an example where, for Sāmoans of the Pacific diaspora in New Zealand, the Church was not just a place of worship, but also a place of connection for other Sāmoan families trying to start out in a new country (Fairbairn-Dunlop & Makisi, 2003). T8 exemplifies the difficulty for participants to claim a cultural identity in this country without that identity being tied to religion, making it exponentially more difficult to then claim a sexual one. She also reveals how Church is also tied to a history of community for Sāmoan families as the connections and relationships made via Christianity is what allowed for so many families to find their footing when migrating to New Zealand (Fairbairn-Dunlop & Makisi, 2003). This example is viable only through a relational lens because it allows the participants to speak to the importance beyond their gender or sexual identities. In being critical of Christianity's colonial origins while also acknowledging the important relationships fostered at church, T8 pinpoints the nuance that is not captured by CO models because they do not account for the ways in which different positionalities, in this case religion and diaspora, interact and can sit in tension with each other to complicate the CO process.

3d. Heteronormativity

Heteronormativity as defined by Nicholas Guittar (2014) frames 'normal' romantic intimacy as shared only between people of different sexes. Heteronormative pressure was felt on an interpersonal level

and at a societal level for participants. T5 came out to her brothers as bisexual, despite knowing she was lesbian, after months of building up to the conversation. When asked for her reasons for why she came out as bi she responded:

Largely because of compulsory heterosexuality. It pervades so much of society...We're socialised from birth that heterosexuality is the norm and often the only option...and I think in a way I perceived bisexuality as being more palatable. Not that bisexual people endure or suffer less homophobia but I rationalised that if I was still seen as someone also attracted to men, I'd still be accepted in some way. So when I labelled myself as bi, it felt comfortable and a bit safer.

T5's reference of compulsory heterosexuality speaks not only to her acute awareness of queer theoretical tools, but also to how participants have had to deal with their internal struggles of lesbianism within a societal framework that enforces a heterosexual structure (Rich, 1980; Kitzinger & Wilkinson, 1995). Bisexuality is often systemically understudied within LGBTQI+ literature (McLean, 2007; Diamond, 2008; Feinstein et al., 2021) but for T5, she saw safety in bisexuality because of this erasure. Bisexuality is seen as an initial safety net for women (Groves & Ventura, 1983), but it is also considered an "identity compromise" (Guittar, 2013, p. 166). This is seen when T5 considered the heteronormative but also religious and cultural pressures involved in claiming a lesbian identity. Guittar (2013) asserts that this is called the "queer apologetic", someone who attempts to minimise the disapproval of and disappointment over one's genuine sexual identity by disclosing a public identity believed to be more palatable to family, friends or even oneself (p. 174).

However, Rich and Guittar's theorising cannot account for the relationality in T5's decision. T5's choice speaks to a want to protect her relationships with family and friends by not disrupting the *vā* that exists between them. While compulsory heterosexuality and the queer apologetic can, to some degree, contextualise T5's decision to come out as bisexual, it does not account for the fear of potentially

disrupting *vā* between T5 and her loved ones. This is why a relational lens is so important in making meaning of this work as it allows for a specifically Sāmoan reading of participants' experiences that would have otherwise been overlooked. For T6, it was a conversation with her mum about bisexuality that made her realise the extent of the heteronormative pressure she was up against:

I remember my mum saying to me 'well the majority of the time it's just a phase and you grow out of it and then you find somebody who you'll want to settle down with' somebody obviously being coded as a man...I guess in her mind the phase, or rather the phase for me was evidence that there is a spectrum and at one point in time you can like a woman and at another point in time you can like a man. To her though, it was evidence that the attraction to the woman wasn't real and the attraction to the man is what you end up with.

T6's mum's sentiment aligns with the notion that bisexuality is often something young people try out, framed as an exciting phase from the eventual heterosexual lifestyle they will live out later (Mosher, 2001). Young peoples' sexual fluidity is seen among parents as evidence of non-heterosexual identities being a detour on account of their immaturity; instead it has been argued that it is more accurately a reflection of the heterosexist construction of homosexuality and the inferior public perception it holds (Toft et al., 2020). This essentialist framing of sexual fluidity still maintains heterosexuality as the natural course for everyone, with any deviance from that being touted as the rebellious stage that happens beforehand (Carrion & Lock, 1997). What is not accounted for however, is the Sāmoan element to T6's mum's comments; for Sāmoan families, harmony, or *vā*, is protected by adhering to the pillars that uphold Sāmoan society – *aiga* and religion. T6's queerness not only challenges Western society's heteronormative expectations, but it is an affront to the social structures that Sāmoans hold most dear, demonstrating the complex layers that T6, and others, have had to manage in their CO process.

Theme Four: Participants and Disclosure

Disclosure is defined as the verbal declaration of a non-heterosexual self, whereas a coming out story is popularly defined as the performative process whereby disclosure is a required prerequisite in developing a stable non-normative sexuality. Every participant had a story about disclosure, however not everyone had a coming out story. Some participants did not feel the need to sit their family down for the 'big announcement', rather, they demonstrated that a performative proclamation often associated with disclosure was not their experience. In fact, many found other non-verbal ways to disclose their sexuality to their loved ones with some choosing to skip the announcement completely. Some instead chose to bring their partners home, and some were not entirely sure as to whether their circumstances warranted a coming out announcement or event of disclosure. No one in this study sought comfort from a public declaration of self nor in the revelation of a previously hidden 'true' identity', further challenging not only the performativity but also the linearity of CO paradigms. In fact, for T3 and T4, though they have experienced instances of disclosure, they do not feel as though they have come out:

T 3: I was a lot later [when I came out], and it was really difficult for me. I would've been in my mid 30s before I had the courage to come out to my siblings...But there wasn't a time where I came out...I never did tell my parents. But I think they knew anyway, we just never discussed it together.

T4: I don't think I really have come out...I've come out to very few people but in general, I don't come out...My Dad never addressed the relationship I had with my partner, and he never spoke outright to me and said 'you're with a woman'. But in fact, the three of us travelled a lot and we had a great time together, even with extended family at all the different places we travelled to.

Similarly for T2, she did not verbally disclose her new girlfriend to her Dad either:

My mum told my dad about me, but we've never had a conversation about it. And my Dad never treated me any differently.

This questions whether a politics of visibility associated with CO is as necessary to the personal for these women. Participants assume they are not out because they have not engaged in a performative declaration of self, yet live what can be described as full and fulfilling lives as well as relationships. This speaks to the problematics associated with a prescriptive and performative advancement of CO whereby those who choose not to declare themselves publicly are often made to feel less than, or as if they are still in the closet (McLean, 2007; Boussalem, 2021) .

There is a tacit knowing (Manalansan, 2003; Decena, 2008;) in these responses – all participants knew, beyond the English word of knowing, that their parents were aware of their sexuality without ever having to verbally disclose it. This echoes what Decena (2008) refers to in the term 'tacit subjects' in that the social construction of a queer identity is always relational for racialised communities who have more to consider when CO. For Sāmoans, connection to family and these bonds are never easily severed as the foundation of Sāmoan society is genealogy (Anae, 2019). This often takes precedence over difference and harmony is emphasised over conflict. There is also a tacit knowing that is associated with this paradigm and worldview of social relations.

T6: My sister's friend she was obsessed with Scarlett Johansson to the point where it was like um? I never had those experiences I just had lots of attractions to women that I really love on a friendship level...So when I came out to my friend, she was like 'oh that's cool'. My coming out story wasn't from a place of trauma or something that caused hurt, it was more like 'oh that's a part of her now and it's who she is now' it was never really a big deal.

T7: I didn't come out to my family until I met my current partner...I said that I was seeing someone and it was a girl ⁶.And my mum was like 'amazing, I'm looking forward to meeting her'...I think the grand gestural thing wasn't really my thing so I never felt like I needed to come out to my parents before I was in a relationship...I ended up telling my parents because I had a new person in my life who I wanted them to meet and it just so happened not to be a man. I didn't have this feeling like I had to confess something or I felt the need to tell them about it. I didn't feel like I was holding back.

T6 and T7 talked about their CO almost apologetically. Their CO stories were void of trauma, making them feel as though they did not have the 'proper' CO experience. T7 even shares in our Talanoa that she was not sure whether she had much to offer this research, given her experiences have been comparatively positive. This comment speaks to the role that oppression plays in narratives of Pacific research communities but also developments of a non-heterosexual Sāmoan self, a focus that does not account for the complexities of people's experiences (Thomsen & Iosefo, 2021). Both do not adhere to a performative declaration of sexual self either, further supporting Indigenous scholars' challenge in the necessity of performative coming out practices. When I asked after T6's grandparents who she lives with:

To this day [in my family] it's only my parents and cousins that know about my bisexuality...My grandparents don't know, they have no idea. I think him [grandfather] knowing would just change his entire perspective of me. And I don't know whether any good would come from telling him, or sitting them down and telling them both. My Nana knows I think, she is educated enough to know that there are people out there who exist that aren't like her and that she needs tolerance for that. So I've never had to verbalise it.

⁶ T7's partner is now non-binary, girl is being used for the purposes of transcript verbatim.

T6 highlights a difference in how she manages her sexual identity to protect her familial relationships. From a relational standpoint, this does not mean she is partially out, nor that a portion of her is still in the closet – it acknowledges the importance of her relationships and the decision she made to protect those familial connections (Wah-Shan, 2001; Manalansan, 2003; Decena, 2008 Va'ai & Kiki, 2017; Anae, 2019; Thomsen, 2021). Letitia Smuts' comments (2011) about South African women's sexual identities being spatialised is also of relevance here – for South African lesbians of colour, their level of outness differed according to place and space, as some stressed certain situations would determine which of their identities would emerge at particular points in time. CO literature of the West has a disclosure imperative so that increased visibility is framed as supporting the wider cause of queer liberation (Scott, 2018).

For gerontocratic cultures like Sāmoa, that also means the potential loss of integral relationships within the family, a risk no one in this study was prepared to take. This also speaks to the concept of 'strategic silence' that Indigenous scholars discuss as a way to describe other modes of communication that QOC exercise within their families (Boussalem, 2021). In doing so, there is no need to verbally express a non-heterosexual sexuality to others. Where this is problematic is when the favoured verbal declaration of a sexual self has symbiotically positioned silence as a selfish, oppressive force. QOC however, have championed the need of silence as a space where important communications take place between QOC and their communities (Boussalem, 2021). This aligns with Pacific understandings of communication as the ability to read silence, body language, and cultural meaning is equally as important as verbalisation (Farely & Nabobo-Baba, 2012).

In highlighting further difference, it was clear that for older participants in the research group, their CO story suggests they believed they never felt that they were coming out of the proverbial closet to begin with:

T8: my coming out story, it's not actually even a coming out story, I just took it on, that was my relationship and I did the thing of just going home with my girlfriend – everyone would go home and take their boyfriends so I did that...when I think about coming out, I think I'm always coming out, even now, even today.

T8 complicates the CO paradigm because CO is a spatial metaphor, it assumes one moves from one destination – the closet - to another – out of the closet. For T8, they did not experience that disclosure that many Western theorists argue is necessary for a healthy budding sexual identity. Without that mobility, and without the starting point being in the closet, T8 does not fit within conventional CO models while also challenging the notion that CO is a moment – as T8 reflects, it is a continual process (Guittar, 2014; 2016). Further, their ability to just take on this new facet of their lives demonstrates the adaptability participants demonstrated to be able to live their lives despite this new discovery as part of their sexuality and image of the self. T5 is the only participant who had a coming out experience that aligns with Western literature:

The first people I came out to were my two younger brothers. At that time I was 21 and my brother had just turned 20. My other brother would've been 17. I had been hyping myself up for a few months. I knew I would tell them for certain, I just didn't know when. They shared a room at the time. I went in, sat down and told them I had something to tell them. I think I was quiet for a moment and then it just came out. "I'm Bi". I explained my journey with it a bit and I got emotional and started crying.

T5 modelled a more conventional understanding of a moment of disclosure, but could recognise almost immediately afterwards why she felt uncomfortable with the implied assumptions embedded in a CO story:

I realised I didn't like the way it felt... I remember feeling like it was a bad thing, a dark secret, that prior to my coming out I was lying and being deceptive...and the way I placed a lot of

expectations on their response made me feel as if how I lived out the rest of my life revolved around being accepted or rejected, as if my life hinged on it...I hated the expectation that it had to be a big grand announcement or that I needed a sob story and that I needed to tell it in a way where the other person might empathise with me.

Later on T5 casually tells her older brother and sister in law that she is gay while driving home from the airport:

To me, that felt way more liberating than when I came out to my younger brothers. It didn't feel like a big deal and their responses were enough for me.

Theme Five: Relational Factors of Being Out

Once out, participants discussed the ways in which they managed their sexual identities with other parts of self, and the wider implications faced due to being out. The main areas identified were cultural/gendered/sexual essentialisms and family anxieties.

5a Cultural/Gendered/Sexual Essentialisms

Participants expressed sentiments of feeling like they were not meeting the sexual, cultural, or gendered essentialisms attached to their various identities. Some felt they were not authentic enough in their sexual identity because it did not meet aspects of the prescriptive criterion of a normative gay, and some participants were called out when they did not meet cultural and gendered roles they were expected to fulfil. I believe that this context requires an intersectional-identity framework to truly grasp its complexity.

T6: We talk a lot about culture and being close to your culture and to do that is through XYZ, like the term 'plastic' is used to identify people who aren't close to their culture, who don't operate in the way that 'real' Sāmoans operate in. But that mode of operation is borrowed from

Christianity...People are always going to have some opinion...[and] it has been the people online thinking they can say stuff, especially Sāmoans, because I don't fit into the idea of what a real Sāmoan girl is or what a normal healthy Sāmoan girl looks like. I had to really reckon with a lot of my own imposter syndrome as a result because I was just being called plastic left right and centre because I'm a slut and I like to suck dick and pussy so people think I'm possessed.

T4: I can only speak for myself but I grew up living according to everybody else's expectations, I grew up pleasing people and their interests, and their wellbeing came before my own, and it's just a natural thing for Sāmoan women I think, that service and care to everyone except yourself.

T7: I would often be told that I didn't seem Sāmoan or I didn't seem like an Islander because I was eloquent or I didn't look like a full Sāmoan, even Sāmoan people would often call me plastic.

T8: There was a bit around people always reminding me that I'm a Minister's daughter and I used to say, what does that mean? Like what does that actually mean? I was never one to wear dresses. There were stereotypes like a Sāmoan girl should act this way...One of the Minister's wife would say 'why are you showing up to church like that [in jeans], you shouldn't come to church like that' and then they'd try and get me into a puleyasi and then they'd say 'your job is to help'.

These excerpts allude to the many unspoken essentialist expectations embedded in a Sāmoan woman identity. There is also a moral judgment involved as those who do not meet these unspoken expectations are considered trouble-makers, or tautalaitiiti (Lopesi, 2021b). According to participants' experiences, they felt they had to display their femininity via modest appropriate dress, they were not meant to sound too educated for fear of being labelled plastic, they had to be decidedly heterosexual,

though not show any signs of sexual behaviour, and they must contribute to the requirements of Sāmoan family and church life. This echoes what Tamasailau Sua'ali'i (2001) posits between the gender discrepancies of Sāmoan men and women. Where Sāmoan men's sexual virility was encouraged, if not celebrated, Sāmoan women's chastity needed protecting. For women living in modern Christian Sāmoa, according to Sua'ali'i (2001), they had the option of fulfilling the roles of virgin, mother, sister, wife; in other words, roles which require men. This explains the extent of difficulty experienced by T6, T4, T1 and T8 because in pursuing a non-heterosexual self, they have had to contend with the roles attached to their Sāmoan, gendered positioning.

What these essentialisms reveal, though, are the gendered, racialised and religious structures that participants live within and how these structures have respectability politics underpinnings. Respectability politics is defined as the continual obedience to cultural behaviours and norms that reinforce the gendered, racist, sexist systems in place that maintain hegemonic power (Kendall, 2020). It is used as a way to police marginalised groups, laterally as well as systematically, into thinking that one is only deserving of respect if they conform to normative behaviours. Lopesi (2021b) argues however that this adherence only reinforces the structural power of race, class and gender, while silencing perspectives that actively work to undermine that power. As such, actions and opinions that undermine the status quo, as participants are inadvertently doing in claiming both a Sāmoan and lesbian/queer identity, means they are undermining the gendered, racialised structures in place. This is a truly complicated space as participants' identities as Sāmoans are also tied to their genealogical line that flows through their families, and respecting their family's positions and their relationships with their families brings these exclusionary structures and discourses into play.

The participants of this research are in essence, claiming a very 'un-Sāmoan' identity (lesbian/queer), leading to the questions of their rights to claim a cultural one in the process. In other words, participants resented the notion that they were not meeting an expectation of being a good Sāmoan woman, which orbits around cultural essentialisms attached to a Sāmoan identity that pairs

heterosexuality to normalcy. Though this pairing is largely attributed to Christianity's stronghold on Sāmoan culture, Sua'ali'i (2001) offers another reading. Sua'ali'i contends that the ancient Sāmoan emphasis on procreation was a symbol of Sāmoan men's rank. Thus, sexual productivity and procreation abilities, for Sāmoan men, were linked to power and status, consequently equating Sāmoan aiga-wellbeing to heterosexuality (2001). One of the pitfalls of essentialisms is, according to T6:

...just stupid because it justifies people perceiving Sāmoans as monolith which we're not, we're not a monolithic people but when you use the term plastic to describe our people who don't fit into these norms, you're giving away our right to be complete and multifaceted. That's what the term plastic does.

5b. Family Anxieties

Participants identified familial anxieties as a complicating factor of being out, in maintaining their sexual identities with that of their cultural norms.

T1: Mum was really concerned about the wider community. I told Dad I was getting married; told mum and she was really concerned about the family image. So her reaction was really sad, it was traumatising...Mum was into being a peaceful person and not having shit come back to hurt us so she was toeing the community line. She didn't want any blowback...It didn't matter what I'd chosen [as a life for myself], well it did to mum, she felt that she had to wear my choices.

Similarly, T4's sibling took great offence once learning about her same-sex relationship and called a family meeting:

She said it was just a phase, that I was a disgrace to the family and that I'll be damned. My father was there and that was really sad for me because I think he probably didn't need that in his life, he was in his 80s.

When T4 responded that she would seek professional support, her family suggested what appears to be very similar to a conversion practice:

Counselling? That's evil, you need to go back to Church, that's what you need to do, you're going to get your best counselling by going back to Church...There was several times during that time in my life that I thought about suicide because it would've been so much easier to die than to have to put up with this. It would have been so much easier for me to be gone than to hurt my Dad...If my parents hadn't passed away, we would still be sneaking around, no way would we be living under the same roof, we probably wouldn't even be together because it just would've been too much conflict for me.

T1's mum's anxiety with people finding out about her wedding and T4's consideration of suicide as an easier option than hurting her father and bringing shame to her family echoes a Sāmoan saying that is tied to a specifically Sāmoan ideation of self: "o amio o tamaiti, e ta'u ai le lelei o le aiga" - which translates to "the conduct of one's children reflects the status of one's family unit" (Sua'ali'i, 2001, p. 172). It is also an upsetting reminder and reality for participants, and others, who have to navigate the implications of what being out means for their families and wider communities. This is not uncommon as fear of judgment is a well-known factor for LGBTQI+ communities in considering CO and being out (Guittar, 2013). However, there is an added element for participants because for Sāmoans, all social relationships are structured by aiga/family (Manuela & Sibley, 2014). The giving and receiving of tautua/service, fa'aaloalo/respect and alofa/love are crucial in the maintenance of Sāmoan social relations, and having and raising 'successful' children is an important criteria in protecting that balance (Sua'ali'i, 2001). As such, the struggle felt by participants in many ways can be ascribed to this aiga-

centric approach that encourages the internalisation and prioritisation of the collective-based self over the individual self (Sua'ali'i, 2001). Suggesting for Sāmoan lesbian and queer women, the decision to be more publicly visible in their non-normative sexual identity is much more complex than just navigating a process that moves one from a place of internalised homophobia to out and proud lesbian/queer subject.

Theme Six: Intersectional Equilibrium

Participants talked openly about their own sense of equilibrium - a moment/ feeling where they felt comfortable and at peace with the different identities that made up their intersectional realities. Cass's end stage – identity synthesis – is similar however the Cass model only speaks in relation to sexuality –for participants, their experiences have always been about finding ways to reconcile their diasporic, cultural identities after finding the strength and courage to be who they are in their lesbian and queer sexualities, an added element that CO models often do not account for in much detail.

T5: In the beginning for me, I saw and very much felt that they were two separate parts of my identity [Sāmoan and lesbian] that I couldn't reconcile...I compartmentalised myself. Where I felt unsafe or unwelcome, I'd leave the unwelcome parts of me behind.

T5 attributes leaving the church and building an online community with other Pacific queer non-men to when she started making sense of her multiple identities:

T5: That's when I saw the possibilities – I'm not just a Sāmoan, I'm not just a lesbian, I'm both. I'm all of that. I don't need to leave one side of me at home, all of me can go anywhere and everywhere. I am not just the isolated parts of myself but the whole sum of my parts. And every day spent merely existing as a Sāmoan lesbian is an act of resistance to colonialism, oppression and exploitation.

T7: It's been a reconnection to all parts of my culture and I think that going on this journey with a queer lens has really helped me discover who I am and what I stand for and who I want to surround myself with and the kinds of conversations that I'm having every day, the work that I do, that's all seeping into it and I think that if I hadn't realised my sexual identity, I wouldn't have been able to make more links with precolonial Sāmoan culture as well.

For T5 and T7, and others, integrating their non-normative sexualities with other areas of self was also tied in with an Indigenous, decolonial politic. Neither were overtly religious in the end due to Christianity's homophobic and colonial leanings and both viewed their sexual fluidity as a nod to precolonial understandings of Sāmoan gender and sex liminality. As Thomsen & Iosefo (2021) argue, we should fear falling into another essentialised binary of a pure precolonial past of queer freedom versus a poisoned colonial present; there is nuance to the indigenisation of Christianity within the Pacific that needs to be engaged with carefully not just as a tool for colonialism, but also as a contemporary site of identity formation for many Sāmoans.

There was also a noticeable generational divide on this issue. For some older participants, synthesising a religious connection in addition to other areas of self was important to them:

T3: I've totally accepted this pathway of being in this same-sex relationship and I'm committed to it, and I don't feel like I've compromised my family or my culture or my spirituality because the God that I love and respect does not judge and loves me unconditionally.

T8: My lesbianism wasn't a thing on its own, it has always been a thing in terms of the whole of me. When I think about it, even today, sexuality is just that much (gestures a small amount) though how important it is to make it just as equal as every other part of me. The Sāmoan part of me, the woman part of me, the Minister's daughter part of me. I've always had the attitude and belief that my sexuality is who I am, and my Sāmoan-ness is who I am.

For T3 and T8, there was a sense of equilibrium in that both accepted and felt comfortable with the varying identities that made up their intersectional selves. They understood that their identity as Sāmoan women did not have to come as a result of repressing their same-sex sexualities, nor their religious backgrounds - these various identities did not necessarily have to reconcile, but could exist simultaneously, in every iteration of themselves. Kimberlé Crenshaw's (1989) insights around intersectionality has been crucial to the reading of this thematic Talanoa. As a lens to capture Sāmoan lesbian and queer women's lives play out in the intersections at which their various identities of difference meet has allowed for a Sāmoan lesbian and queer story to be told that embraces the nuance and complexity it embodies. Critical and theoretical reflections as to what this thematic Talanoa reveals and allows us to understand is outlined in the next (discussion) chapter.

Chapter Five - Discussion

Overall, as evidenced by the thematic Talanoa shared in the previous chapter, the CO experiences of participants have revealed five key findings that provide responses to the initial research questions posed at the beginning of this thesis. A recap of research questions and key findings are outlined below.

1) What do participants' coming out experiences reveal about the developments of sexual identities for Sāmoan lesbian and queer women living in Aotearoa-New Zealand?

The majority of participants did not identify as lesbian nor did they feel comfortable with claiming Western terms to describe their Pacific-experienced lesbianism and queerness. Participants as Sāmoan lesbian and queer women had to negotiate complex social, familial, religious and cultural factors that is tied to their Sāmoan diasporic positionality. As such, due to these complications, participants did not resonate with the performativity and linearity of Western processes of CO modelling, often adopting more complicated and tacit modes of disclosure that speaks to the intersectional complexity of the context in which their sexuality was negotiated, best understood through the lens of relationality.

1. How do participants make sense of their non-normative sexual identities with their racialised, and gendered selves?

In mirroring Sāmoan, and Pacific, ideations of self, participants centred relationality, an identity framework that prioritises the strength of connection for participants in making sense of their intersectional selves. Within a relational framework, participants governed the development of their non-normative sexual identities within their cultural, gendered positioning by centring their relationships with their aiga/family, their partner, and the wider communities to which they belong.

Participants expressed difficulty in claiming, and authenticating their intersectional positioning, due to the essentialist conceptions attached to their identities. The complexity of their subjectivities required

an intersectional approach, one that held space for the contradictions their different positionings reflected.

An Aversion to the Term Lesbianism

A key finding among participants that makes this research unique is the way participants were reactive to labels. In fact, the majority of participants do not identify as lesbian. This is not uncommon among those experiencing non-normative sexual desire for the first time, but what was very unique in terms of respondents was the forthrightness in which they offered a critique around Western-centrism as the source of this discomfort. While identity label rejection is acknowledged among Western theorists as an instance of desiring more fluid possibilities (see Diamond, 2008), most participants expressed their reluctance to claim a lesbian or queer identity on account of the Whiteness and trauma embedded in the terms. Participants did acknowledge a desire for greater fluidity in their own understanding of their sexuality, it was made known in many instances that they believed these terms were inherited from colonialism and represented an integral Whiteness to its construction of women.

T7 echoes this positioning: “This colonial language that was created to describe us doesn’t fully encapsulate us”. T7 echoes what native Hawaiian scholar-activist Haunani-Kay Trask (1996) argues in that other branches of feminism often overlook the impacts of colonialism, and dispossession of Indigenous peoples. By adopting an exclusive focus on women, Trask felt her affiliation to feminism would be seen as siding with the feminist agendas of mostly White, American women while neglecting the historical oppression of all Indigenous Hawaiians, a tension that participants can relate to in choosing to emphasise their Sāmoan positioning before their non-heterosexual one.

As an example, Carmen Logie & Marie-Jolie Rwigema (2014) contend that media representations of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Queer (LGBQ) communities as well as discursive practices are insidiously underpinned by White privilege. Consequently, QOC feel spatially and discursively excluded from

claiming a LGBQ identity due to these labels being closely linked to issues pertaining to middle and upper class Whiteness (Han, 2007; Logie & Rwigema, 2014). This is exemplified in the fight for marriage equality, a policy change that statistically benefits those in LGBTQI+ communities who are already in a place of race and class privilege (Leachman, 2016). Participants' hesitation in claiming lesbian as an identity, as expressed by T7, is reminiscent of the differing agendas between Palagi lesbians and Lesbians of colour who have historically been excluded from LGBTQI+ organisations. As a result, issues pertaining to race, gender and class exploitation, in other words issues central to the lives of lesbians of colour, were considered peripheral and irrelevant to the movement's mainstream causes (Vaid, 1995). Furthermore, scholars have contended that racial minorities within the LGBTQI+ community still experience discrimination from their White queer peers (Battle et al, 2015; Hinkson, 2019).

This is common for lesbians of colour and QOC who, on the one hand, have to deal with the heteronormativity and homophobia that pervades their cultural communities, but then on the other, have to also contend with the White normativity that permeates lesbian and queer culture (Muñoz, 1999). As commented on by T8 and others:

The whole LGBTQI labelling, I have real difficulties with that. It's like someone's trying to put me in a box, and it's such an exclusive group. And I get it, because how else do we identify? but I find that it's someone else getting to identify who I am...

T7 and T8 echo what Brainer (2018) contends in that "no single term is or can be a perfect translation or representation of complex gender and sexual subjectivities" (p. 917). T7 and T8 echo what scholars have voiced concern in relation to writing about groups that are imagined, defined, and oppressed as a result of identity categories being attached to them (Weeks, 1995). This speaks to the history of the State becoming the "designer of tools" to construct someone else's identity, often forcefully due to colonial rule (Natividad, 2014, p. 235). As Nicholas Natividad (2014) argues though, "constructing

someone else's identity is to socially dominate and control them" (p. 235). In speaking of Indigenous peoples Natividad (2014) states:

If the state prescribes rights to Indigenous peoples, it also defines what Indigenous means and who are considered to be Indigenous, thereby drawing the parameters and boundaries of Indigenous community existence and resistance (p. 235)

There is a disconnect between Eurocentric definitions that work within gendered hierarchical binary systems and Pacific ideations of non-normative sexualities that move beyond clearly defined boundaries, as participants have shared. This sentiment is echoed in a comment T8 makes in relation to how fa'afafine are sometimes problematically perceived in New Zealand:

When I grew up I had uncles that were fa'afafine – they were married to women, but they were still fa'afafine so for them their sexuality was still heterosexual, and it's a beautiful thing.

Whereas it's different today, the term has all these things that go with being a fa'afafine now so when people say fa'afafine, people have a clear picture in their mind as to what they think that means. People think they're the ones who hang out on the streets of Sāmoa, or the ones that prostitute themselves on K road ,and I'm like that's not fa'afafine – they may also be fa'afafine but that's not actually what fa'afafine means. So I'm having this constant argument with White people in how they choose to identify us.

T8 touches on the socially encoded roles attached to fixed identity dispositions that Muñoz calls on queers scholars to disrupt (1999). T8 speaks to the apprehension felt by participants in subjecting brown ideations of self to Palagi frames of reference in that there is a specifically Sāmoan reading that often gets lost in translation. There is a rigidity of Western understandings of Pacific liminal subjectivities that do not account for the fluidities of Sāmoan lesbianism and queerness experienced in this research.

As has been made evident, participants' reaction to the term lesbian and Western identity-labelling is not borne out of an isolated event that has no bearing, their reluctance and in some instances outright refusal, is tied to a history of colonial discourses pertaining to gender and sexuality and the subsequent hegemony of Whiteness imbued into LGBTQI+ labelling more generally. CO modelling does not account for the complicated iterations of colonialism - despite the imposition of Western forms of gender and sexuality to the Pacific being one of many branches of the colonial project – and how some aspects of the CO process have felt to have colonising agendas for participants. As Qwo-Li Driskill (2010) contends, hegemonic rainbow community movements do not encompass the complicated history of colonisation.

Negotiating Complex Worlds: Familial, Social, Religious and Cultural Factors and Rejecting Performative CO Narratives

Participants as Sāmoan lesbian and queer women had to negotiate more complex social, familial, religions and cultural factors that is tied to their Sāmoan diasporic positionality. Due to these complications, participants did not resonate with the performativity and linearity of Western processes of CO modelling, often adopting more complicated and tacit modes of disclosure that speaks to the intersectional complexity of the context in which their sexuality was negotiated.

Popularised coming out narratives as understood within mainstream queer representation shows very little resonance with the participants of this research. CO, as characterised by scholarship from the West, is theorised as a very performative and linear process because it is tied to the closet which requires the trajectory of a previously hidden non-normative sexual self to the declaration of a stable sexual identity (Denton, 2016). However, the claiming of a stable sexual identity, Indigenous scholars have argued, is akin to rejecting the family unit in pursuit of an individualised, queer subjectivity (Wah-Shan, 2001). As demonstrated in findings, participants did not subscribe to this framing.

Disclosure for participants were embodied in subtle moments that spoke to the complexities they negotiated and responded to in situated and innovative ways. This is reflected in T1's story, who married her wife in a small ceremony so as to not alert others in her community and further upset her mother. This is also reflected by T2, who upon realising she had feelings for a woman, entered a relationship and texted her sister to say she now had a girlfriend. T7 described also that upon falling in love with her partner, mentioned to her family during dinner that she had met someone and they were not a man. T3, who is in a committed long-term same-sex relationship but who is still active in her faith. T6, who identifies as a proud bisexual/queer Sāmoan woman, but who is out to only a handful of family members. T4, who has been in a same-sex relationship for fourteen years but still struggles with what her communities will think if she was to publicly confirm her partner. These moments of subtle disclosure among participants do not reveal a fixed sexual identity reverent, nor do they involve a performative announcement of a secret once kept. These moments speak to the complexities and contradictions that participants have had to navigate in negotiating their sexualities in ways that still aligned with, and maintained, important relationships. Paying attention to the connection or *vā* between them and those around them.

This challenges the linearity embedded in Eurocentric psychosocial models of coming out that are reflected in the ways of being and knowing as defined by queer theorists of the West. This is because participants' experiences question the closet as the central trope of their Sāmoan lesbian and queer oppression. The closet is a spatial metaphor that only has definitional power when individuals have an internalised belief that they have something to hide, namely their non-normative sexuality. Participants' experiences however speak to queer theorist's disruption of the performative and linear aspects entrenched in CO models and the in/out closet binary, skilfully described by queer theorists such as Eve Sedgwick (1990), because participant stories are not centred on the closeted/out arc. This is where Judith Butler's (1993) problematisation of the closet is useful. For in order for one to be out, it relies on the perpetual existence of the closet so that others are kept in.

Some participants also experienced non-heterosexual feelings in their adult lives; T2 experienced her first kiss with a woman in her early twenties, T7 met their current partner in their late twenties, and T4 is in a relationship with a woman having been heterosexually married previously. Participants' timing of same-sex discovery parallels queer theorists' argument of how queerness undermines the normativity of time (Thomsen & Iosefo, 2021). Jack Halberstram (2005) posits that queer uses of time and space develop in opposition to the normalised heteronormative institutions of family, heterosexuality, and reproduction. The incongruencies inherent in a queer lifecycle does not follow the linearity of heterosexual life events (Halberstram, 2005). As such, time itself is not experienced and understood in the same way, as it appears to be the case for participants. Rather than major milestones of adulthood be shaped by marriage, home-buying, and children, a queer person's lifecycle follows different life events - coming out, gender transitions, non-linear and creative schedules - this queer lifecycle diverges from the heteronormative banality as the queer adult is forced to accept the political act of exclusion (Tea, 2016 as cited in Thomsen & Iosefo, 2021). While the queering of time, compulsory heterosexuality and the sex-gender-sexuality assumption can account, to some degree, for participants' timing of same-sex discovery, there is a cultural element that is not accounted for in this reading.

As has been expressed by participants in findings, it appears that an essentialised Sāmoan identity - due to the stronghold of Christianity and the pursuit of harmony as inherently embedded in maintaining *vā* - has paired heterosexuality to normalcy. Sāmoan concepts such as *vā* and *Fa'a Samoa* are inextricably tied to respect and reverence towards *aiga* and religion. Disrupting these structures that are fundamental to Sāmoan society did not come easily for participants as protecting familial connections, and maintaining *vā*, is of utmost importance. As such, assuming linearity in their narratives and experiences cannot be supported. Participants did not centre the closet in the development of their sexualities, which assumes a trajectory of previously hidden non-normative sexuality to out and proud non-normative

identity. This is why a relational, intersectional lens is so important in making meaning of this work because it locates participants' decisions in their culturally complex contexts.

Centring Relationality in Ideations of Self through an Intersectional Lens

In mirroring Sāmoan, and Pacific, ideations of self, participants centred relationality, an identity framework that prioritises the strength of connection for participants in making sense of their intersectional identities. Within a relational framework, participants governed the development of their non-normative sexual identities within their cultural, gendered selves by centring the relationships with their aiga/family, their partner, and their wider communities.

What has been evident throughout Talanoa is that relationality mattered to all participants. This strength of connection was to participant's aiga/family, partner, and communities, characterising the uniqueness of the coming out process for participants. Whether it was participants discovering their same-sex feelings well into adulthood, or instances of participants making decisions that arguably challenge and even undermine popular CO paradigms – these moments speak to the relationality inherent to Sāmoan ideations of the personal, political, and public self. When relationality is centred, we can see how participants have honoured the various relationships in their lives. It explains why the linearity present in CO models does not capture the complexities of these stories because relationality is about interpreting Pacific realities through a lens of relationships shaped by a specifically Pacific Itulagi/worldview (Va'ai & Kiki, 2017). For example for T5, one of her coming out experiences is intimately tied to her brother's coming out story:

My coming out to my mum brought courage out of my brother to tell my mum about himself. My mum absolutely loves my brother so when he told her, it really softened her like, she just accepted him straight away which I'm happy about to be honest because I think that's what it

took. Hearing it from him made it easier to accept me too like ‘I love my son so much, how can I turn my daughter away too?’

T5 goes on to share about coming out to her father in Gagana Samoa, the only participant to come out in Sāmoan, before her brother joined her in coming out, also in Sāmoan:

It was honestly the most beautiful thing I’ve ever witnessed in my own language. I’ve never heard someone come out in another language and to hear it in my own was so special and will forever be memorable to me. So we told our parents together and that’s what happened.

This beautiful moment between T5, her brother and their parents would not have been accounted for in Western CO processes because it requires a relational lens to capture its importance. T5 believes her mother’s acceptance of her lesbianism is tied to the unconditional love that she has for her brother. In this instance, T5’s lesbianism is connected to her identities as daughter and sister. For T2, she centred the values of her cultural heritage, her family, and her partner in her understanding of self:

I think for me, being Pasifika specifically is what I think about more. Sometimes I’m like ‘oh my gosh, I’m this brown beautiful woman with another beautiful brown woman and we are just out here, like that’s twice the force, that’s twice the strength, that’s twice of everything great in this world...Two brown Indigenous women together, oh lata bo! That’s everything, that’s so powerful. We have the love, we have the strength of our families and our values as brown people and then we get to kiss – and we can be intimate on this whole other level and create families and have these bonds and I just think it’s so powerful and beautiful.

T2’s understanding of her sexuality is not foregrounded in conventional constructions of a sexual-identity framework because she centres her Pacific-ness, and frames her and her partner’s intimacy as an added bonus to that framing. This speaks to Acton-Brown and other Pacific scholars, assertions that

for Pacific peoples, our gafa/genealogies is what grounds us and compels us into community (Thomsen & Iosefo, 2021). For T8, her sexual identity could not be contextualised without acknowledging how it is tied to her decolonial positioning:

Decol (decolonisation) work is my whole life. I'm a lesbian, but I'm also Sāmoan and at different times I have to be present to all those things, and it's exhausting...From a very young age I got to learn about Māori issues, land struggle, I started to think critically about my place in Aotearoa...I know the struggle of being Sāmoan in this country. But also being mindful that whatever it is for me, it didn't override what was happening for Māori.

T8's sexuality and broader CO process is closely tied to an Indigenous, decolonial politic, much like other participants who shared similar sentiments. This reading, too, is only viable by examining the connections that participants made between and beyond their sexual selves and the various other identities they hold important. T8 appears to have paired her lesbianism to her decolonial politics which is also tied to her responsibilities as tauiwī/a guest on Māori land – an interpretation that is made sense of via a relational lens. For T6, not coming out to her wider family meant she could protect other LGBTQI+ family members by engaging in confrontational conversations about same-sexuality with people outside her familial circles, keeping those within her family safe:

For the people in my life who are cis-hetero men, for them it's not a big deal because a lot of the conversation centres around 'oh but this is just my perspective, I'm just stating my opinion' when actually your opinion and the way that you express that opinion could be the straw that breaks the camel's back for our family and then I get excommunicated and nobody wants to talk to me for the rest of my life...But I would rather have this conversation because they assume that I'm a cis-hetero woman, than have somebody in my family, like my cousins who are fully fully gay and that's the only way they can live their life. I would rather be the one to have that

conversation with cis-hetero people than have my gay cousin have to defend her humanity, and justify her right to exist.

This sentiment of responsibility towards their family, friends and wider brown LGBTQI+ community was felt and shared by all participants. Some attributed the support of their friends as to why CO and being out felt achievable, others recalled memories of attending bars together as a group where everyone would chip in for door charge, some talked at length about their want to keep their parents happy, and others referenced delicate moments between siblings that made them feel seen and safe. These examples convey the complexity in participants' CO process because they are not strictly based on their sexuality – they are focussed on how their sexuality informs and constitutes other parts of self. The uniqueness of participants' sexual-identity formation cannot be adequately contextualised without widening the framework to capture the varying identities of difference that constitute the intersectional self (Crenshaw, 1989; Cho et al., 2013; Va'ai & Kiki, 2017). Only when utilising a relational lens is when these narratives are made visible. I argue that they cannot be reduced to essentialisms – cultural, sexual or otherwise – nor can they be defined within the bounds of the countless binarisms that the West seem to be fixated on in theorising same-sex attraction. This is reminiscent of Muñoz's (1999) disidentificatory subjects in that participants have had to negotiate Western frames of reference while having to transform them to suit and include their own subjectivities. But more importantly, T6 used her assumed heterosexual status to protect the gay members in her family, a move that highlights how and why participants have adopted more subtle ways of identity disclosure.

Troubles of Essentialist Notions of Sexuality and Cultural Identities

Participants expressed difficulty in claiming, and authenticating, their intersectional positioning, due to the essentialist conceptions attached to their identities. The complexity of their subjectivities required an intersectional approach, one that held space for the nuance and contradictions their positionings reflected. Some participants expressed exasperation in being made to feel inauthentic in their

queerness, some were called a plastic Sāmoan⁷ often by others from the Sāmoan community, and some felt they were not meeting the essentialist expectations of a Sāmoan woman. T6 and T1 shares:

T6: My sexual fluidity also caused a lot of imposter syndrome for me, I already had imposter syndrome from my cultural identity but then my sexual fluidity made me feel that I didn't belong in the gay community because a) other people went through a lot worse trauma than I did and b) because I felt like I didn't know whether I'm actually attracted to men and just like women sometimes or whether I'm actually attracted to women and I just like men sometimes and it felt almost like I had to be faking one of them. When actually I didn't have to choose between either of them, I can be both.

T1: I'd turn up to Pacific Island meetings and some of the men would make a huge deal at the fact that I was dressed like a street person because I don't have the ie on, I haven't got a dress on...I was breaking, according to him, cultural protocols. But it was because he loved my parents, I could understand that – I was shaming my own family.

This speaks to the problems participants encountered when cultural essentialisms⁸ are attached to a Sāmoan identity, and sexual essentialisms are attached to LGBTQI+ labelling. In sensitising the findings in the previous chapter with current literature, participants describe a gender-sex-sexuality framework where heterosexuality has been decidedly paired to what it means to be Sāmoan. And middle-class Whiteness has been normatively paired to LGBTQI+ labelling. Participants fall outside the normative conceptions of both sets of essentialisms, highlighting another factor for participants that

⁷ A 'plastic' Sāmoan is a term used to describe Sāmoans who are accused of being out of touch with their culture; it is also used against lighter skinned Sāmoans, those who cannot speak the language, or those who do not demonstrate popularised notions of Sāmoan identity.

⁸ Cultural essentialism is defined as the belief that racial categories are associated with distinct, fixed, and stable cultural patterns (e.g., values, beliefs, practices, and lifestyles) (Soylu Yalcinkaya et al, 2017).

made their CO and BO process harder in ways not accounted for in Western processes. This also speaks to how so much of our identities are linked to performance (West & Zimmerman, 1987; Linnekin, 1990; West & Fenstermaker, 1995). When being raised in the Pacific diaspora, that initial disconnection almost reinforces normative signifiers of Sāmoan culture to become visible displays of our ‘Sāmoan-ness’ – proficiency in language, browner skin, heterosexuality to name a few.

Furthermore, normative signifiers attached to same-sex sexuality, because of the colonial-settler framework in which we live, are underpinned by hegemonies of Whiteness, making performative displays of non-normative sexualities tied to hypervisibility – Pride parade, rainbow flags, a public persona that champions for LGBTQI+ rights. In this instance, participants claiming a non-normative sexuality, according to others, should mean they cannot authentically claim a Sāmoan one, since Christianity, and thus religious messaging of homosexuality has been so inherently imbued into what it means to be Sāmoan. But as T6, and other participants’ realisations attest to, participants do not have to reconcile one identity in order to appease another. The incongruencies, contradictions and complexities that characterised their CO processes could exist simultaneously, together, and did not have to result in a neatly formed, unitary understanding of their identities as well as their CO experiences.

While the varying heteronormative, feminist, religious, oppressive structures that have been identified as conceptual frameworks in helping to situate participants’ stories within the complicated contexts in which they navigate non-normative sexuality, they are not concepts that can explain, on their own, why it felt so difficult for Sāmoan lesbian and queer women in this research to find visibility. In looking at the varying parts that this research is centred on – Sāmoan woman, lesbianism, queerness, diaspora, coming out, identity formation – these parts, singularly, or even additively, cannot account for the multiple factors that participants have had to consider in their CO process. By examining how these parts mutually constitute the ways participants’ experienced their world and life around them, their intersectional subjectivities are made visible. It is my contention that by centring a Pacific lens of relationality is where the complexity and radical beauty of their stories is made apparent.

Chapter Six: Conclusion

Summary of Findings

The coming out experiences of Sāmoan lesbian and queer women of this research has been a truly complicated process, fraught with complex social, familial, religious and cultural factors that their intersectional, diasporic positioning revealed, and for which Western coming out models could not adequately account. This research has argued that their realities are best understood through a lens of relationality and from the standpoint of intersectionality. As a researcher, it was a privilege to share space and stories with all participants in this study.

Hegemonic Textures of the Coming-Out Binary

This thesis was not an attempt to create yet another binary that supposes an adversarial relationship between Western notions of coming out and the particularities of cultural context that creates a sense of difference and situatedness in notions of sexuality disclosure. Nor is this an attempt at buttressing hegemonic notions of coming out, which relegates all other variations as a reaction to that centre. This type of relative dichotomous framing maintains the Westernised closet as *the* focal point while all other examples become alternatives that orbit around it whilst existing in the margins and looking in from the periphery.

What these discussions reflected through participant stories emphasise, however, is the power imbalance that exists through the hegemony and locatedness of Western gay and lesbian movements framed firmly within an emancipatory politics of pride and public visibility (Carroll, 2012; Scott, 2018; Boussalem; 2021). This leads to a popularised image of an out and proud, White, politicised gay subject which has been crystallised as the metric against which all gay subjectivities have been measured (Muñoz, 1999). The trouble with this positioning is that it does not allow for other ways to be LGBTQI+ to be validated and celebrated for their innovative adaptability as a sense of universality of hegemonic performative sexual politics emerges. For participants, their aversion to overt forms of

identity claiming in performative ways, does not invalidate the reality and norm of this practice, rather, highlights the hegemonic textures of this framing. As Boussalem argues (2021) we must move beyond the metaphor of the closet if we want to reveal the nuances and complexities that govern the lives of Sāmoan lesbian and queer women.

Moving Beyond the Closeted/Out Binary and Working *with* Discourses of Silence

Had participants not moved beyond this closeted/out framing, and had this thesis not engaged with the disclosure imperative inherent to Western notions of CO, then the experiences of participants would have been subjected to a seriously distorted reading that ignored the multiple tensions and contexts in which they live. The work Indigenous scholars have done was crucial in underlining the moral and value judgments attached to the closet metaphor. From this vantage point, participants' decisions to model more discreet ways of developing non-normative sexual identities would have wrongly and offensively labelled them as selfish gays lacking in integrity, as McLean problematically points out (2007). It is only when revealing the properties of Whiteness and individualism so imbued into the fabric of Western CO paradigms that we begin to see the power imbalance in this normative interpretation. Because if we subscribe to this thinking, in order to be out, someone has to be in, and for someone to be proud/loud, someone else has to be silent.

Complicating the Narrative – Removing the Closet and Embracing the Silence

What the closet metaphor and disclosure imperative can inadvertently do is belittle the fears people experience before CO. And as participants have shared, their intersectional fears were valid for myriad reasons. However the public display of one's sexual marginality via CO, though lauded as a milestone of sexual growth and health among Western Rainbow communities, can be dismissive of the relational implications of such a decision. The societal coercion to CO and 'be proud of who you are, embrace your difference' that Western Rainbow movements embody places the onus on lesbian/gay/queer individuals to help with the wider liberation of Rainbow communities without taking any accountability or responsibility for the networks and communities intersectional Rainbow peoples must

grapple with. In this framing, participants are meant to dismiss their fears and publicly CO anyway, regardless of what it may cost them. As wellbeing for Sāmoans and Pacific people is often tied to our families and culture, this is not an insignificant factor to consider when thinking about the CO process as understood outside our context.

As previous chapters have demonstrated, this symbiotic framing would have reduced the nuance of participants' stories to an overly simplistic reading that ignores the equally valid ways they have formed sexual identities *without* the framing of the closet and *with the help* of silence. But what is perhaps less surprising is that performative and binary CO paradigms ignore participants' *Samoan-ness* – both from a colonial and cultural context. These CO models do not account for the relationality that was crucial for participants, where the maintenance and protection of *vā* played an integral role in their identity formation. But it was only when a relational lens was used and an intersectional approach deployed, when we saw participants through a much more generative and complex light – they are not partially out, nor are they morally bankrupt lesbians/queers for refusing a public declaration of their non-normative sexuality. They are negotiating the various responsibilities that their intersectionality requires while managing a sexuality that not only challenges Western societal expectations but also those of their gendered, diasporic Sāmoan positioning. CO, among those whose history and present day are still tied to gendered, racialised, colonial framings, is considered a luxury afforded to those who already possess and benefit from racial, social and political privilege (Wah-Shan, 2001; Perez, 2005; Smuts, 2011).

Limitations and Further Study Opportunities

One of the main limitation of this study pertains to its sample size. While the experiences of participants have been rich, these initial insights can act as a basis for a bigger sample that tries to scale these analyses using other research designs. I believe also, that this work could also galvanise conversations for more research to be done specifically with *and* by lesbian and queer women in Sāmoa. Namely, how do we marry together emerging identities like *fa'atama* and lesbian or queer,

where and when do Indigenous and diasporic Sāmoan women's development of non-normative sexualities meet and diverge, and what are the implications of this marriage for the Pacific region more generally?

Concluding Remarks

While many of the reflections I have shared in this thesis are of a theoretical and conceptual type, at its core, this research has been about revealing eight Sāmoan women's story and relationship in their pursuit of love. A love that so many oppressive structures, whether by deliberate design or unconscious bias, has been rendered invisible. This research – from a normative perspective and from my own – I liken to a long, letter and labour of love dedicated to Sāmoan lesbian and queer women who are trying to form healthy sexual selves, while dealing with notions of shame and abuse in our society. However, what has been visible throughout, is the gumption and grace with which participants have managed to still live full, complex lives. As has been made clear throughout this research, I hope - with the help of a Pacific lens of relationality and a methodological foundation that is unequivocally Pacific - is the intersectional difficulty that participants have had to negotiate in coming out and being out. In wanting to keep participants' voices at the core of this research process, I finish by coming back to a comment made by Talanoa 1 after our afternoon had concluded. She asked:

No one understands that it's actually just – what is love to you? That's the real question. Lots of people weren't ready to talk about this and I suppose in a big way we were all just fefe/scared because we were already being hated on by people that needed to understand, needed patience and needed to get over their Christian beliefs. But I just think love should transcend all of that.

Appendix A

The University of Auckland
Private Bag 92019
Auckland, New Zealand

Level 3, 49 Symonds Street
Auckland, New Zealand
Telephone 86356
Facsimile +64 9 373 7432

UNIVERSITY OF AUCKLAND HUMAN PARTICIPANTS ETHICS COMMITTEE (UAHPEC)

15/07/2021

Dr Patrick Thomsen

Re: Application for Ethics Approval (Our Ref. UAHPEC22826): Approved

The Committee considered your application for ethics approval for the study entitled "**Dykes of the Diaspora: the coming out narratives of lesbian New Zealand-born Samoan women**".

We are pleased to inform you that ethics approval has been granted for a period of three years.

The expiry date for this approval is **15/07/2024**.

Completion of the project: In order that up-to-date records are maintained, you must notify the Committee once your project is completed.

Amendments to the approved project: Should you need to make any changes to the approved project, please follow the steps below:

Send a request to the UAHPEC Administrators to unlock the application form (using the Notification tab in the Ethics RM form). Make all changes to the relevant sections of the application form and attach revised documents (as appropriate). Change the Application Type to "Amendment request" in Section 13 ("Submissions and Sign off").

Add a summary of the changes requested in the text box.

Submit the amendment request (PI/Supervisors only to submit the form).

If the project changes significantly, you are required to submit a new application.

Funded projects: If you received funding for this project, please provide this approval letter to your local Faculty Research Project Coordinator (RPC) or Research Project Manager (RPM) so that the approval can be notified via a Service Request to the Research Operations Centre (ROC) for activation of the grant.

The Chair and the members of UAHPEC would be happy to discuss general matters relating to ethics approvals. If you wish to do so, please contact the UAHPEC Ethics Administrators at humanethics@auckland.ac.nz in the first instance.

Additional information:

Do not forget to fill in the 'approval wording' on the PISs, CFs and/or advertisements, using the date of this approval and the reference number, before you use the documents or send them out to your participants.

All communications with the UAHPEC regarding this application should indicate this reference number: **UAHPEC22826**.

UAHPEC Administrators

University of Auckland Human Participants Ethics Committee

c.c. , Ms Deirdre Maisaele Stanley 1 of 1

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