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FIJIAN WATER IN FIJI AND NEW YORK: Local Politics and a Global Commodity

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COCA-COLA, WATER, AND FIJI

Coca-Cola is sold in Fiji. Arriving first with U.S. soldiers in WWII, it has been bottled in Fiji since 1972, ensconcing Fiji in what has been called the “Coke Complex.”¹ And Fiji has an earlier history in the global drug and stimulant world system, as one of the sugar plantation colonies whose sugar sweetened the Asia-originating tea of the emerging British working class and the British Empire (Mintz 1985; Sahlins 1994). But the current most startling engagement of Fiji with global beverage flows is not as grower of sugar cane and it is not as site of consumption of a soft drink originally quintessentially American. It is bottled water that is now a major sector in Fiji’s export economy. Further, bottled water is a key element in the corporate strategies of the global beverage industry, including The Coca-Cola Company, and it is nowadays a staple of U.S. beverage consumption. How has this come to be?²

INTRODUCTION

In this article, I construct a transnational biography of Fijian water to discuss local politics of production and consumption of a now global commodity. It is a biography in the spirit of Igor Kopytoff’s (1986) argument that objects, like people, can have multiple and changing natures or careers over time. A molecule of H₂O could have a life as a free-flowing, nonexchanged, uncommoditized spring, then be

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a transactable object put in a coconut shell cup, and be named *wai ni tuka* (water of immortality) and drunk to induce warrior invulnerability, or perhaps later be another kind of transacted object, pumped up and bottled and sold at Adams Fairacre Farms Market, Route 44–55, Poughkeepsie, New York, for US\$2.29 per 1.5 liters. I stay closer to Kopytoff's kind of biography of things (in which what happens to things has largely to do with the meanings given them by people who use them) than Bruno Latour's (1996) strategy of endowing things themselves with agency, hopes, fears and feelings. Nonetheless in a broader sense this project joins in Latour's quest to better understand not just that social facts are things but also how things are social facts (Latour and Weibel 2005).

This is also a transnational biography. A dialogical process has now complexly connected the site of production, Fiji, to myriad localities of consumption. Complex global systematics, economies and technologies of transaction and transport connect Fiji and some of its water to drinkers in, for example, upstate New York. But despite the complex global systematics, the waterscape or water flow (apologies to Appadurai) that connects Fiji and some of its water to drinkers in New York—despite these connections—the motives and meanings, of those at the site of production and those at the site of consumption, are not shared. They require particular and dialogical cultural and historical study.

In the first half of this article, I describe the impact of local and national Fijian projects on a water-bottling company and vice versa, drawing on my research in Ra Province of Fiji's Viti Levu island from 1984 to present (Kaplan 1995, 2004, 2005). In the second half of this article, which is work in progress, I consider a local U.S. market for imported water, which has been built on fomented distrust of public water supplies and a privatized relationship to water. Why do some Americans buy and drink expensive Fijian water? A local upstate New York history of cultural and technological changes in drinking water supply and use, notably the rise of individually purchased bottled water and the decline of confidence in public water, is entwined with particular images of the purity and exoticism of the Pacific. Fijian water invites a particularly U.S. kind of consumption that articulates political forms through identification with indigenes. The U.S. politics of Fiji water consumption has roots in long-term U.S. political and body practices of consuming, inhabiting, and self-transforming.

The politics of bottled water in both Fiji and the United States involve tense, interesting confrontations about public and private interests, legacies and opportunities, profit and meaning. It is not a simple story of Fijian noncapitalist purity and Western depredation. When it comes to water, like all commodities actually,

neither demand nor supply are given, and how they relate to each other is something historically made in a dialogical process.

PART ONE: FIJIAN WATER FROM VATUKALOKO LANDS IN FIJI

In this biography of transnational Fijian water, I begin with its cultural and historical context of origin, moving from the global to the local. Starting globally, it comes from what is now called Fiji, which for centuries has been an exporting source of commodities, of ideas, and of social linkages much desired in various parts of the globe.³ In the 1700s, Fiji was a resource, for the kingdom of Tonga to the East, of husbands for sisters of Kings of Tonga. Tongans and Fijians also exchanged mats, canoes, and political systems.

Circa 1800, the islands now called Fiji, like other Pacific islands were a source for the China trade of *bêche-de-mer* and sandalwood. From the 1840s on, white settlers tried growing cotton, vanilla, and ginger for export. From the 1870s, with cession to England in 1874, Fiji was a classic British sugar colony, producing the sugar, which Mintz (1985) shows us, fueled with calories the tea of England's proletariat. Fiji's sugar industry did not turn the indigenous people into plantation laborers, but, rather, employed Asian indentured laborers, in the case of Fiji, from India. Up to very recently, including following independence in 1970, sugar was the backbone of the economy, and Indo-Fijian labor the backbone of the sugar industry. This has changed. In 2001, Fiji's main exports earned slightly over F\$1 Billion. Tourism accounted for around F\$500 million a year. Garment exports grew from almost nothing from 1988 to a record F\$313.9 million last year. Plantation pine is a F\$35 million industry, and plantation mahogany is destined to become a larger one. Exports of fresh tuna are running at F\$50 million and other fish exports make for a total approaching F\$100 million, gold and sugar each earn significant incomes, but less than in years past, and then there is mineral water, a sector with essentially one company: F\$24.7 million (Keith-Reed 2002).⁴ (See Figure 1.)

Speaking very locally, this water comes from an aquifer below the lands of the Vatukaloko people who live in Ra province in the north of Fiji's largest island. They are well known in Pacific history and in literature on anticolonial movements, for their 1880s-on political religious movement, led by a man called Navosavakudua. Among the Vatukaloko, this water was importantly transacted, had special powers, and recently—ironically for water—has been claimed as a special possession of “landowners,” or indigenes (the ethnic Fijian word is *itaukei*). (For more on this history, see Kaplan 1995, 2004, 2005, in press.)



FIGURE 1. Fiji Water bottling plant at Yaqara, Ra, Fiji. (Photo Credit: Martha Kaplan and John Kelly.)

Beginning in the 1860s, Vatukaloko people asserted their autonomy and their ritual position, in opposition to Eastern coastal Fijian kingdoms, and in opposition to Christianity and British colonialism. The Vatukaloko of this period had a sense of themselves as ritually prior, linked to the gods of the Kauvadra range. In the 1870s, most of the Vatukaloko people followed Navosavakadua, an oracle priest and member of the installing lineage, who sought to establish a new kind of polity. Rather than authorized by the “foreign” mana of a chief’s lewa (rule) associated with the sea and the coasts, it was made powerful by its connection to the center of autochthony, or indigenoussness, the gods of the Kauvadra mountain range, associated with “land” and the interior, creating a new political form, a land-centered polity.

Navosavakadua skillfully gave meaning to foreign and indigenous powers and then realigned them. Where Cakobau and other eastern chiefs adopted Christian gods and British forms of rule as powerful foreign forms, Navosavakadua preached that what was powerful was powerful because it was autochthonous and Fijian. Thus, Jesus and Jehovah were Fijian gods. Water was actually quite important in Navosavakadua’s politics. Colonial observers described how he and later followers sent out clay and coconut vessels filled with what he innovatively named “wai ni tuka” (water of immortality) to those who wished to join his mobilization against coastal chiefs and colonizers. It is not incidental to his claims to special power that

he transacted water whose source was not the foreign, or coastal sea water, but water from springs from the foothills of this sacred mountain range.

It is difficult to reconstruct how in the 1870s *wai ni tuka* circulated and how ingesting it created membership in Navosavakadua's political network. (Indeed, there is always the possibility that tales of circulating tokens of rebellion owe as much to colonial imagination of disorder as to Fijian practice.) It seems, however, that Navosavakadua worked creatively with extant Fijian political semiotics of water, for example from kava ritual, and with the uses of water emanating from missionaries and within already Christian-converted Fijian communities. A common context for kava ceremonies involves offerings of kava root (and kava root mixed with water) by people to chiefs. Land and sea principles are combined as the powdered root is infused in water, creating the beverage often called "*wai ni vanua*" (water of [the people of] the land). Kava ceremonies of chiefly installation inflect stranger, chiefly authority with responsibility also for the people of the land (see Sahlins 1985). The Methodist and Catholic Christian uses of water known by the 1870s in Fiji included baptism and also missionary medicines, which missionaries described as health giving. Medicine was translated into Fijian as "*wai*," which also means water. In 1985, a descendant of Navosavakadua showed me a *tanoa* (kava bowl) that he said was Navosavakadua's. *Tanoa* usually have a single cord, affixed with shells, that is extended toward the ruling chief during a chiefly kava ritual. Navosavakadua's descendant showed me that Navosavakadua's *tanoa* had two *sau* and told me that in Navosavakadua's rituals one *sau* stretched toward the people, and another toward Navosavakadua. This suggests that in his use of mixed kava Navosavakadua's water practices emphasized the simultaneous empowering of people and leader, a parallel to his use of water from Kauvadra springs to mobilize allies for a new form of land-centered polity.

Navosavakadua and his followers were declared to be "disaffected and dangerous" by the colonial British. Deported for decades to the island of Kadavu, the Vatulaloko people were not living on their lands in Ra at the time when colonial Commissions traveled the islands to register kin groups and their traditional land holdings. Eventually, 83 percent of Fiji's land was registered to ethnic Fijian kin groups, owned communally and inalienably. But almost none went to the Vatulaloko. Their lands, through varied local transactions while they were in exile, became the property of white settlers and were by 1926 sold to the Colonial Sugar Refining Corporation, the colonial era sugar refining monopsony, which used them as a cattle ranch. At independence in 1970, the new Fiji government bought the land from the departing Colonial Sugar Refining Corporation and established, in 1973 a private company, *Yaqara*, for cattle ranching and agriculture, 100-percent owned

nationally by the Fiji Government. In the 1990s, the postcoups Rabuka government leased part of this land to David Gilmour's corporation "Natural Waters of Fiji."

In the 1990s, David Gilmour, a Canadian, who owns a very expensive resort, the Wakaya Club on another Fiji island, Taveuni, had gotten interested in the water under the Yaqara land. The Wakaya Club is marketed as a place where celebrities stay, and has been featured, for example, in *People* magazine. From a Fiji perspective, I am told that Gilmour was friends with Ratu Mara, the Fiji Prime Minister from independence in 1970 until 1987. One story goes that one day at his resort Gilmour or his guests remarked on the fact they were drinking imported bottled water, when surrounded by pristine natural beauty. My sense is that Gilmour, entrepreneurially brilliant, wanted to "bottle" the resort experience, and sell it en masse. One could say "democratize." Entrepreneurially it seems irrelevant whether Gilmour necessarily knew Ra or had tasted this water. He had interests in gold mining in various parts of the world, and "borrowed geologists from his gold business to tap the Fiji source" (Meadows 2001). I think either he or industry advisers, knew both the Fiji political and land tenure scene and the global market potential well enough to know that he needed some rentable land in Fiji with a 99-year lease where he could bottle water that could be sold as "Fiji Water." And that means that it could not be 83 percent of Fiji's land, owned inalienably by ethnic Fijian kin groups, leasable on agricultural leases only for 20 years at a time to Fiji's other half, the landless Indo-Fijians. It had to be on crown land (since independence "national" land) because crown land can be leased for a stretch that would satisfy an investor. So he made the deal with Fiji's government to lease the land at Yaqara. (Details of what amount of rent is paid are not publicly available.) Natural Waters of Fiji set up a plant, sinking pipes deep into the aquifer. The distinctive square bottles are made on site and the water goes directly into them. Cartons are produced locally.

Natural Waters of Fiji was and is a privately held company: one cannot buy stock in it, and its annual reports are not publicly available. It is not owned by any Fiji citizens. The return to Fiji from it, therefore, would be the rent paid to the government of Fiji for the site, corporate taxes, employment of workers, associated contracts (construction, maintenance, transport, and the shipping cartons that are locally produced), and any voluntarily made donations, projects, and so forth.

Since 1998, when Gilmour built the bottling plant, the Vatukaloko have had differing responses. Some people have worked at the plant and are satisfied. The Vatukaloko people set up their own corporation, the Vatukaloko Investment Company, headed by Vatukaloko chiefs, to provide security, maintenance and groundskeeping, laundry, and meals service to the bottling company. (See



FIGURE 2. Vatukaloko Investment Company van, Drauniivi, Ra, Fiji. (Photo Credit: Martha Kaplan and John Kelly.)

Figure 2.) In ensuing years, however, some of the nearby people were critical of the company. Villagers from nearby Naseyani sought to open their own bottling project, using local springs.

A culminating moment of dissatisfaction came on July 12, 2000, during the turmoil following the 2000 coups. The *Fiji Times* reported that “over 80 villagers armed with spear guns, knives and sticks seized the Natural Waters of Viti, Ltd factory” (Sharma 2000b). On seizing the plant, these villagers, largely members of mataqali Nakubuti (Navosavakadua’s kin group) demanded employment at the factory, with prospects of jobs in management as well as labor. They demanded a royalty of 1¢ per bottle sold, and they demanded a meeting with Fiji government officials to discuss past Vatukaloko claims to land more generally. The takeover ended with the arrests of the occupiers. Eventually charges against them were dropped (Sharma 2000a). The Fiji Water company continues to contract for services with Vatukaloko people, and has sponsored a number of initiatives for local development, including building kindergartens in local villages and settlements.⁵

Fiji Water and its bottling factory have thus entered into the long and tenacious history of assertion of the rights of ethnic Fijian itaukei, or “owners of the land.” The Vatukaloko have always refused alienation. Beginning with Navosavakadua, they phrased their autonomy in terms of their ritual priority, their autochthonous status. Their very tenacious sense of ownership, of being vested, and entitlement to the

returns on that ownership has endured through more than a century. Strikingly, they have found in the colonial forms and processes set up by colonizers, and carried forward by colonial chiefly Fijians, bureaucratic forms and processes for defining their own entitlements.

Currently, the concepts and practices of being “owners of the land” (*itaukei*) for the Vatulaloko, articulate with wider ethnic Fijian ethnonationalist postcolonial politics in which the ethnic Fijian military has been used to oust multiethnic Labour Party led governments (Kaplan 2004, 2005). In the view of coup leaders, at the national level, ethnic Fijians are seen as permanently deserving of political leadership because of their contribution of capital in the form of land—and now water. The capital of other investing corporations is discounted. There are long term anticolonial politics to this sense of entitlement to the fruits of the investments of colonial capitalists or North American water bottlers who took and take fine profits from Fiji. But the coups and national level takeovers have not been directed against postcolonial capitalists but, rather primarily, against Indo-Fijian Fiji citizens, the Labour Party and the multiethnic nation itself. In current Fijian ethnonationalist self-definition as shareholders, the poorly compensated labor of Indo-Fijian plantation workers from 1879–1920, and the work of Indo-Fijians since then, is seen as secondary. (In some countries, Indo-Fijians would be contemplating legal suits for reparations, there would be talk of 40 acres and a mule. Indeed the ALTA talks under the Labour government had been seeking in some ways to address these issues, prior to the 2000 coups.) In the case of the Vatulaloko and their relation to the Fiji water plant, rather than calling for public scrutiny of what amount of rent is paid by Fiji Water to the national government with an eye to what the national citizenry could gain from the plant, Vatulaloko people have a primary concern with what they have lost as ethnic Fijians, as *itaukei*.

So a biography of Fiji Water contextualizes it, in its Fijian origin, in a regional and national, colonial and postcolonial Fijian history of land ownership and loss, and contextualized now, especially in relation to contemporary ethnic Fijian mobilization as special shareholders in the nation. But in the meantime, the Natural Waters of Fiji company produces mass quantities of Fiji water for export, and in fact has taken over a major piece of the elite water market globally. There are ironies here, of course: the success of the water company relies less on the success of Fiji’s indigenes or their actual political plans than it does on global consumer’s hopes for (or fantasies about) Fiji’s indigenes, and perhaps desire to connect with them. What Natural Waters of Fiji actually packages will be clearer after we examine a piece of the cultural history of the demand for Fiji Water.

PART TWO: WHY DO AMERICANS BUY FIJIAN WATER?

First of all, Americans as a whole bought 6.8 billion gallons of bottled water in 2004. U.S. per capita consumption was 23.8 gallons, up from 22.1 gallons in 2001 (according to water industry analyst Korolishin 2005).⁶ Wholesale dollar sales approached US\$9.2 billion in 2004 (Beverage Marketing Corporation n.d.). In 2004, Aquafina was the top seller at 15 percent of the market, followed by 13 percent private label (i.e., supermarket brands), and Dasani 12 percent. (Aquafina is bottled by PepsiCo, Dasani by The Coca-Cola Company. Both are tap water in origin.). Poland Spring accounted for 7 percent, Propel 6 percent, Dannon 6 percent, Arrowhead 5 percent, Deer Park 4 percent, Crystal Geyser 3 percent, and Evian 3 percent. Domestic nonsparkling water is by far the largest component of the U.S. bottled water market. Its 6.4 billion gallons represented 94.2 percent of total volume in 2004 (Rodwan 2005). In 2004, Fiji Water was fifth on the list of imported waters (Evian, Perrier, Arrowhead, and San Pellegrino preceded it). It has since edged into second place after Evian (Bevnet 2004). So, imported water is about 6 percent of the U.S. water-buying market. Although imported water is a very small portion of a huge industry, it is such a big industry in the United States that even imported water is significant economically, as well as culturally and politically. As noted earlier, this section describes research in progress.⁷ To consider “why Americans buy Fijian Water” in this article, I focus on only two strands of this research: on the marketing strategies of beverage companies and the semiotics of Fiji Water’s advertisements. (See Figure 3.)

GLOBAL BEVERAGE CONGLOMERATES AND THEIR STRATEGIES

To begin globally, when Fijian water shows up at Adams Fairacre Farms grocery store, this is not a grassroots phenomenon. In the 1980s, transnational corporations made bottled water an element in their future strategies. These strategies are documented by scholars and journalists from the Left and the Right. Decades ago, political economists Frederick Clairmonte and John Cavanagh (1988) drew attention to the “big fifty” transnational corporations, which in 1985 each had beverage sales of over US\$500 million (Clairmonte and Cavanagh 1988:95–150, see also Barlow and Clark 2004). The late Constance Hays, a *New York Times* business reporter, describes how The Coca-Cola Company, in what anthropologists would call a schismogenetic relation with PepsiCo, in the late 1990s began to distribute Naya (Canadian spring water), and Evian (French spring water), and then in 1999, Dasani (tap water plus Coca-Cola Company’s mineral salt addition; 2004:247). Hays

Table 1. Consumption of Bottled Water, Total and Top 10 Countries, 2000 and 2005

Country	2000			2005		
	Total Volume	Share of Global Consumption	Consumption Per Person	Total Volume	Share of Global Consumption	Consumption Per Person
	(million liters)	(percent)	(liters)	(million liters)	(percent)	(liters)
United States	17,955	16.5	61.6	28,651	17.4	99.2
Mexico	12,464	11.5	124.3	18,861	11.5	179.7
China	6,012	5.5	4.7*	12,901	7.8	9.9*
Brazil	6,838	6.3	39.0*	12,252	7.4	65.8*
Italy	9,251	8.5	160.4	11,145	6.8	191.9
Germany	8,427	7.8	101.8	10,581	6.4	128.4
France	7,456	6.9	126.2	8,424	5.1	139.1
Indonesia	4,314	4.0	20.2*	7,633	4.6	33.3*
Spain	4,221	3.9	105.6	5,923	3.6	147.1
India	2,157	2.0	2.1*	6,177	3.8	5.6*
All others	29,391	27.1		41,982	25.5	
Total	108,517			164,530		
Global average			17.9			25.5

Source: International Bottled Water Association.

*These numbers are not directly available; they were calculated with population data from the U.S. Bureau of the Census.

FIGURE 3. Comparative consumption of bottled water. Reprinted with permission of Worldwatch Institute.

describes the shift Coca-Cola planners had to make, and did make, in envisioning water as part of their long-term global marketing plan.

To illustrate industry intertwinement with what I later discuss as consumer desires, note the market trends breakout presentation and discussion topics at a 2004 Beverage Forum, an industry conference self-described as the Only Global All-Beverage Executive Conference. The three market trends topics were (1) alcoholic beverages, (2) health and wellness: framework for the future, and (3) global new product highlights and trends. Here is the abstract from the “health and wellness” breakout:

Health and wellness are the buzzwords du jour in the consumer packaged goods industry. How is increased awareness of health and nutrition issues impacting consumer actions and attitudes and how are beverage marketers responding? AC Nielsen’s Ami Heusinkvelt takes a look at how health and wellness are helping to define the future of the beverage world with an eye toward how the trend is shaping the beverage segments and the beverage marketers who are leading the way.

Health and wellness as real concerns and as corporate-cultivated areas for consumer self-cultivation are important to the recent rise of bottled water. We might note that in 2004, perhaps in response to Fiji Water’s successes, Evian began an advertising

campaign replacing the slogan “L’original” with “Your natural source of youth” (Ives 2004).

SEMIOTICS OF FIJI WATER: PACIFIC ROMANCE, LUXURY, NATURE, HEALTH, AND AGENCY

This section introduces a reading of Fiji Water’s ads and intentions As described above, in the 1990s, David Gilmour got interested in finding Fijian water to sell, and formed the water bottling company. Recollect that entrepreneurially brilliant plan to sell Fiji water locally at tourist resorts in Fiji, rather than importing “Old World” French bottled waters, and the equally brilliant plan to export the resort experience en masse by “bottling it.” He hired HMG Worldwide, who designed the L’Eggs pantyhose egg-shaped containers, and came up with the square bottles (Meadows 2001). This is not, of course, the first globally transacted bottling of essence of Fiji. That would be Guy Laroche’s 1966 *Fidji* perfume (which has no ingredients originating in Fiji). It cost US\$44.99 for 1.7 oz. on Amazon.com in Fall 2005.⁸

In March 2006, you could buy a 1.5 liter bottle of Fiji water for US\$2.29. The price of Fiji water signals luxury, and an exotic luxury, like the perfume, but far less expensive. And there are some very fancy, pricey add-ons available like metallic foil “sleeves” you can order on the Fijewater website for gift bottles or restaurant serving. But the majority of the Fiji Water ad copy and the bottle labels themselves do not focus on luxury. Instead they evoke nature (“Natural Waters”), health, purity and a remote, indigenous origin “far from continents.” The original packaging and website up through 2005 emphasized pristine, natural tropical beauty:

The Taste of Paradise. The origin of Fiji Natural Artesian Water is rainfall, which over decades filters into an aquifer deep beneath volcanic highlands and pristine tropical forests on the main island of Viti Levu in Fiji. Separated by over 1, 5000 miles of the open Pacific from the nearest continent, this virgin ecosystem protects one of the purest waters in the world. [Fiji Water Bottle label, 2002]

One of the interesting things about the Fiji Water label is that it goes straight to nature for its imagery. Although I could imagine trying to mobilize a romantic “gift economy” image to sell a product associated with Fiji (it has been used in past Fiji tourism promotions) it is not being used to sell Fiji Water. Perhaps in deference to U.S. commodity fetishism there are no people (not even indigenous, exotic, friendly “others”) pictured on the Fiji Water bottle. The bottle has a life of its own

as a desirable object. Now, when Americans partake of the ritual meal of turkey at Thanksgiving, one consumes the indigenous product (turkey is the indigenous bird) and remakes oneself as American thereby. Thanksgiving is a softly scripted ritual that commemoratively, viscerally, traduces and synthesizes a complex reality of conquest, people, politics, and history. But who or what do you become when drinking Fiji Water?

Are you a voyeur, the western explorer, trader, tourist, peering through the hibiscus flowers to watch a beautiful Pacific maiden bathe in a waterfall? That is what the first version of the Fiji Water bottle brought to mind for a group of Americans in their forties, fifties, and sixties I spoke with in Fall 2005. For them, Fiji Water's packaging evoked Hollywood images. They spoke of 1950s movie and stage practices of gazing, picturing and desiring a sensual, virginal but accessible other (see also Desmond 1999; Lutz and Collins 1993; O'Barr 1994; Said 1978; Wilson 2000). So, in drinking Fiji water, does one become a satisfied voyeur?

There have been recent changes in Fiji Water's labeling that can help us pursue this further. In 2004, Gilmour sold the company, reportedly for US\$50 million to Roll International (*Review* 2004:3, see also Bevnet 2004). Roll International is a privately held company, owned by a wealthy California couple who also own Paramount Citrus and Paramount Farms, the world's largest growers and processors of citrus, almonds and pistachios, as well as the Franklin Mint, which markets collectables. They also own a line of exotic fruit drinks, including Pom pomegranate drink. Since acquisition by Roll International, there have been some changes to the Fiji Water label. They have stopped using the waterfall image, and have added text that explains how pure and untouched, by air, or hands, the water is.

Note the new 2006 website copy:

Untouched by Man. Until you drink it.

Please do not touch the water: it's our number one rule.

You see, FIJI Water's state-of-the-art bottling facility was designed to protect the purity and quality of our water every step of the way. It literally sits right on top of an aquifer, and the water is drawn into the plant using a completely sealed delivery system, designed to prevent any possibility of human contact.

So, until you unscrew the cap, FIJI Water never meets the compromised air of the 21st century. No other natural waters can make that statement.

The nature of water. [Fiji Water n.d.]

So, it would seem that this ad copy makes the voyeur experience almost palpable, offering the viewer–consumer–drinker the chance to be the first “Man” to touch. But there is more to consider here.

FIJI WATER AS NATURAL, AS A SOURCE OF HEALTH, AS A RESOURCE FOR AGENCY

Here, I consider both marketing intentions and consumer intentions. One way to address the situation in which bottled water comes to seem an obvious alternative, a reasonable choice to be preferred to tap or drinking fountains, is simply to reiterate the sudden omnipresence of bottled water, via the beverage distribution systems so intricately set up by soft drink bottlers. Robert Foster, a scholar of Coca-Cola in the United States and Papua New Guinea, has pointed out to me that Dasani, for example, jumped into the market and achieved a huge market share simply by being there, available, through The Coca-Cola Company’s extensive distribution system (personal communication, 2006). At Barnes and Noble bookstores, in their cafes, Fiji Water is the bottled water for sale. Thus, via supply it becomes an obvious, natural-seeming choice. Otherwise if you want a drink you have to drink something caloric, or a hot beverage or you would have to leave the café and go out to the water fountain, near the bathroom. So availability, in this upscale locale, makes the water seem obvious, not a peculiar or novel choice. But of course there is more to the meaning of bottled water, and Fiji Water in particular, than availability.

On the one hand, there are important questions here about ideas and practices of health and the empowerment of consumer agency. Here, I think Fiji water taps into a long-standing European and U.S. interest in health and specialty waters, encountered at spas or in rural resorts (including in New York State, Saratoga Springs, see Chappelle 2005). This deep history of water-related body practices articulates with a recent trend of the past two decades in the United States that involves a complex, at least three-sided interaction of consumer agency in relation to professional and public institutions and in relation to corporations. The meteoric rise of bottled water in the United States is simultaneous with the rise of nutritional “supplements” as a major industry, and as an increasing U.S. “body practice.” In both cases, individual people often choose to buy something they believe is good for them. People find bottled water is virtuous compared to soft drinks (“No calories, no chemicals”) or alcohol. Relatively small amounts of money spent allow people to treat their own bodies through supplements, unhindered by medical authority and the insurance industry or the lack of insurance. With purchased water, one can address the “need” often quoted to me by informants, “you are supposed to

drink 8 glasses a day” to be “hydrated.” Plus, it is felt that you can control what you drink.

On the other hand, there is a lot of fomented fear about public water out there, from mistrust of drinking fountains to public water supplies. An industry analyst, Kitty Kevin, began a recent article about bottled water with remarkable frankness, stating that people worry about water safety, and “worry sells” (2004). Interestingly, there is a confluence between leftist environmental concerns about water pollution (a long-standing concern in areas of New York State adjacent the Hudson River), Right Wing conspiracy theories about fluoridation, and beverage industry interest in encouraging water purchase. Clairmont and Cavanagh see this as part and parcel of privatization, an attack by corporate capital and its political associates on public-sector enterprises, in which “consumers are being molded by multibillion dollar advertising campaigns to repudiate public sector tap water” (1988:127). (This impels me to express my conviction, as someone who lives near the neighborhood of Franklin and Eleanor Roosevelt, with their faith in civic projects, that U.S. tap water is safe and is one of the wonders of the world.)

But, what is also interesting is the way that bottled, purchased, nonshared water has come to connote health and purity. Just as with supplements, there is something going on with the creation of a sense of agency, health, and purity through purchase and individual ownership and consumption in the bottled water response. Especially when it is Fiji Water.

TOWARD SOME CONCLUSIONS: IMPERIAL POWER, AMERICAN POWER, AND EXOTIC COMMODITIES

This biography of Fiji water has had its playful and serious elements. As *wai ni tuka*, water helped Vatulaloko people of the land to challenge their colonizers. As Fiji Water, it allows us to satisfy honor when money must be spent, or hospitality shown (Clairmont and Cavanagh 1988:126); it gives a really pretty drink of water—and you can always refill the bottle, a student said to me. But as I said in the introduction, the politics of bottled water in both Fiji and the United States involve tense, interesting confrontations about public and private interests, legacies and opportunities, profit, and meaning. As a transnational biography, this is certainly not a simple story of Fijian noncapitalist purity and Western capitalist depredation. Ethnic Fijians in their relations to land and water are highly creative in using shareholder models to disenfranchise other citizens. U.S. water purchasers

are investing their resources in talismans of health and hydration they could have for free.

In both Fiji and in the Hudson valley in New York, water flows are raising questions about private and public interests. It would be tempting to read the water story in the two localities as commentary on a shared experience of the troubles of the nation-state. But they are such different stories. In their nation-state, many ethnic Fijians want paramountcy and comfortable income as shareholders, not necessarily justice or civil rights for all citizens. U.S. public support for a Fijian national elite via buying Fiji Water would thus be misguided. So too support for the Vatulaloko by buying or not buying Fiji Water would miss the mark. But, on the basis of my research so far, I find that there is no attempt on the part of U.S. drinkers of Fiji water to aid, or even acknowledge the existence of, actual Fijians as indigenes, let alone as Fiji citizens, when drinking Fiji water.⁹

To make this point via a contrast: This is a very different marketing and consuming situation from Hawaiian Islands Water, in which a person is clearly portrayed on the bottle (a young woman, wearing very little, dancing a hula) and you can draw your own conclusions. More seriously, Fiji Water is also very different from “Fair Trade” brand marketing, for example, of coffee, which addresses in packaging copy the human, social conditions of production. It is also different from the Ethos water that Starbucks sells, which proclaims that it donates 5¢ for every bottle of Ethos sold to a fund that supports a range of NGOs that work for community water supplies in the third world.¹⁰

So, to be clear, while marketing these exotic products, “Fair Trade” and Ethos raise the image of people in other places, growing coffee, drinking water. But Fiji Water’s copy promises instead, if I may recontextualize the phrases: “using a completely sealed delivery system, designed to prevent any possibility of human contact.” This most recent labeling and advertising copy shifts the consumer from a voyeur of Pacific romance to an initial, first encounterer of not people but pristine nature itself. The first “Man” to touch the water is not, I would argue, a fulfilled voyeur. Rather, “he” is the U.S. self-named “discoverer” of a land that is in reality full of people but is asserted to be empty nature. Picturing no people, ultimately Fiji Water does not invite one to ravish, nor even just to meet, an indigenous person. The promise, the hope, for the U.S. consumer, is to be the indigene, to restore health like an imagined indigene.

Maybe in U.S. purchase of talismans like pure, natural, exotic water we see a U.S. equivalent to what historian James Walvin called the *Fruits of Empire* (1997) for the British. Certainly empire gave the British the corner store and created

a capitalist distribution of global luxuries, an unprecedented inroad of things of far flung origin into British quotidian life of all class groups. But British fruits of empire were understood as “commodities,” with a meaning something closer to the 18th-century English sense of the term that is not merely *thing* as Marx has it, or a saleable thing versus a gift as some use it now. Rather, the commodity fruits of empire were “luxurious,” a commodious alternative to relying on one’s own labor or the means available to hand (think commode as comfortable indoor toilet vs. outhouse or fields). Commodities improved life, brought luxury to daily living. In the English view, white bread (as E. P. Thompson [1963, 1967] shows) or refined white sugar (as Mintz [1985] shows), were held to have a purity from their entire processing and therefore were better. The English did not want pure, natural simple goods from their empire, they wanted “refinement” and luxury.

Now, many would have it that Americans—the United States—are imperial. But the nature of U.S. power and depredation is both similar to and different from empire, particularly when we look at global commodities. Even in their exotica U.S. desires are distinguishable from the imperial British love of finery (see Cohn 1983) and the refined.¹¹ Americans, historically, fashion themselves as direct consumers of imagined nature. As in Thanksgiving, Americans make themselves into the people of the land, here through unreflective consumption of pretty water, not roasted bird. And, by the way, this is not the first time beverages have figured in U.S. self-fashioning as “natives.” The Boston Tea Party is important for many reasons (see Young 1999) but in this water biography we may note that the actors, emphasizing their American-ness versus British (refined?) tea culture, dressed themselves as “Indians” claiming that they were indigenes, in opposition to the English.

The history of politically consequential “playing Indian” (Deloria 1998), of white-settler self-fashioning as indigenes, has been well traced by scholars. The local history and politics of New England and New York state reveal many moments when claims to nativeness through serious or parodic use of Indian disguise were vehicles for anti-British rebellion, for class struggle, and other imaginations of political community (Deloria 1998; Green 1988). That “this land was made for you and me” is a powerful assertion undergirding seizure and depredation as well as inclusion and hope. Water and nutritional supplements, growing arenas of U.S. commodity and body practice, tap this deep well of national practice. And as Americans reach across the globe, the pattern is similar. It is not the sophisticated, French *Fidji* perfume but, rather, bottled Fiji water that is the surprise best seller of bottled essence of Fiji in the United States. Picturing no Fijian people on its bottle,

ultimately Fiji Water's self-presentation does not invite one to ravish, to aid, or even to meet an indigenous person. The water has been marketed through skilled product placement, placing it directly in the hands of U.S. actors and celebrities, and directly in the "obvious, natural" spots for purchase of a drink in the café of a Barnes and Noble. Bottle in hand, commodity fetishized, the promise, the hope, for the U.S. consumer, is to be the indigene, to restore health like an imagined indigene.

Surely it is an open question whether the desire is to "be native" or to make the self through reflection on others. But in U.S. consumption, human relationships are devalued in favor of the paramount relationship of consumer and desired product. And Americans currently long for tokens of nature. Insouciant and radically uninterested in history, U.S. consumers of Fijian water seek pleasure, fulfillment, and health, indeed nonalienation, through being the imagined "first" to touch this natural water. In contrast to the English imperial love of finery, the ultimate U.S. fetishes are Nature, Native, and Nation, things that freely produce themselves. So capital daily provides means to restore what Americans in their cultural story tell themselves is true nature and freedom, regardless of the bizarre contradictions—from hair coloring and makeup to cars that are like a rock, from a heartbeat to anything with all-natural ingredients. Fiji Water redoubles the naturalness, not just with any pure natural spring water, but native nature, from a native, natural nation. And the U.S. consumer of Fiji water, enmeshed in the global intricacies of the flow of this water, from Fiji to, for example, upstate New York, acknowledges none of these global intricacies, instead with a hubris matched only by its amazing conviction, "becoming" the indigene in the act of consumption.

When it comes to water, like all commodities actually, neither demand nor supply are given, and how they relate to each other is something historically made in a dialogical process.

ABSTRACT

In this article, I construct a transnational biography of Fijian water to discuss local politics of production and consumption of a now global commodity. I argue that a dialogical process has now complexly connected the cultural and national politics of the site of production, Fiji, to varied but now orchestrated cultural politics of myriad localities of consumption, here with a focus on upper New York state. Technological and transactional connections, however, do not translate into shared meanings or motives. Fijian Water as corporately purveyed invites a particularly U.S. kind of consumption—simultaneous commodity fetishism and appropriation—with roots in other U.S. political and body practices of consuming, inhabiting, and self-transforming.

Keywords: Fiji, water, global commodities, U.S. consumption, indigenous nationalism, bottled water, commodity fetishism

NOTES

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1. Coca-Cola Amatil, 35 percent owned by the Coca-Cola company, manufactures and distributes Coca-Cola and other beverages in Fiji as well as Australia, Indonesia, New Zealand, Papua New Guinea and South Korea. Its products have, according to its website, the majority share of Fiji's soft drinks market. See (Coca-Cola Amatil n.d.). As far as I know there are no studies of Coca-Cola in Fiji. On soft drinks in Papua New Guinea, see Foster (2002:151–174) and Gewertz and Errington (1996).
2. In this article, I report on research in Fiji in 2002 with Vatukaloko people in Ra, on whose traditional lands the Fiji Water bottling plant is located. (I have pursued field research among the Vatukaloko on a number of topics since 1984.) I also describe ongoing research that inquires into why people in the United States would buy Fijian water, with a focus on upper New York State water histories, including: a review of industry publications and analytic literature on the marketing strategies of global beverage conglomerates, a study of the semiotics of Fiji Water's advertisements which emphasize luxury and natural purity, a study of local newspaper stories on drinking water safety issues in the Hudson Valley, a water technology census at a local college (taps, drinking fountains, coolers with bottled water, and cup filling and bottle vending machines) in the context of national trends in the water business, and interviewing local vendors and consumers of bottled water, augmented by demographic information from industry analysis sources. I focus especially on the marketing strategies of global beverage conglomerates, and the study of the semiotics of Fiji Water's advertisements that emphasize natural purity.
3. On the history of Fiji's cultural political-economy, see the classic works on divine kingship, ritual, and the creation of value by Hocart and by Sahlins 1985; on colonial commodities and entanglements, see Lal 1992, Sahlins 1994, and Thomas 1992; on plantation economies, see Kelly 1999 and Moynagh 1981; on comparative capitalisms, see Kelly 1992; on labor history, see Bain 1994, Kelly 1991, Lal 2000, and Moore et al. 1990; on late-20th-century ethnic Fijian exchange, see Toren 1989; and on ethnic Fijian ethnonationalist reification of production and exchange, see Arno 2005; Kaplan 2004, 2005, n.d.; and Rutz 1987.
Kelly and Kaplan (2001) brings together analysis of the development of ethnic Fijian ethnonationalism with the postplantation political history of Indo-Fijians and Fiji as a whole.
4. In 2001, US\$1.00 was worth F\$2.308 (see Reserve Bank of Fiji n.d.).
5. Fiji Water received one of the 2004 U.S. Secretary of State's Awards for Corporate Excellence, presumably at the recommendation of the Ambassador to Fiji, a George W. Bush administration appointee (U.S. Department of State n.d.).
6. Note that in 1976 (the first year the USDA Economic Research Service kept data on bottled water sales), U.S. consumption was 1.6 gallons per capita. This includes sparkling and nonsparkling,

- and domestic and imported waters (U.S. Department of Agriculture n.d.). For a partial history of U.S. water sources, public and private, see Chappelle 2005, and see also Barlow 2004.
7. Richard Wilk's (2006) insightful overview of the U.S. bottled water market was published too late, unfortunately, for me to draw on it for this article.
 8. In 2005, Michael Kors introduced a new perfume, "Island Michael Kors Fiji," which contains "a splash of Fiji Water. 3.4 ounces in a fuchsia bottle" US\$75.00 from NeimanMarcus.com in July 2006.
 9. On connection and lack of connection between people along a commodity chain, see Foster 2002, 2005. The point is complex, especially when nuances of political economy meet the broad and important theses of Latourian social theory. As Latour would say, the commodity as a thing is an assemblage of relationships, connections, and potentials (Latour and Weibel 2005). But as is well-established in the literature on global commodities, commodities do not necessarily or generally create or recognize social assemblies, connecting producers and consumers into one public. Furthermore, Fiji Water, at an extreme of commodities generally, does not build a public out of the relations between the Fijian producers and especially the U.S. consumers. As I argue, this is because of a cultural dynamic on the U.S. side; along with the commodity fetishism negation of relationship there is a peculiarly U.S. form of appropriation at work.
 10. This is not to romanticize or endorse "Ethos" marketing. See Roseberry 1996 for thoughts on similar marketing strategies. Whether these marketing strategies actually assemble a public connection between producers and consumers is an interesting and debatable question that is beyond the scope of this article.
 11. My informants desire and document Fiji Water's purity. One raised it with no mention from me of Fiji at all:
 MK: Do you ever buy water?
 Informant: Yes.
 MK: Why?
 Informant: Health, it's better for you. Cleaner. The purest water is Fiji Water [he later corrected to "Fiji Water"]. I saw an infomercial about it.

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