

# “A SWAMP BECOMES THE CAPITAL”

## Urban ecologies of empire in Suva (Fiji)

[Received January 4th 2022; accepted February 2nd 2022 – DOI: 10.21463/shima.152]

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**ABSTRACT:** The nineteenth-century expansion of colonial port cities onto land reclaimed from the ocean generated both material and conceptual shifts in the relations between land and water. Focusing on the history of Suva, which was established as the British capital of Fiji in 1882, this article shows how, despite colonial accounts of successful efforts to ‘drain the swamp’, the city’s history has been narrativised as a series of urban disasters. From local critiques of the original unsuitability of ‘malarious swampland’ to indigenous oral accounts of the catastrophic consequences of abandoning hill forts, through to post-independence literary narratives of urban flooding, the reclaimed city has been imagined by its inhabitants as a shifting and precarious space whose terraqueous qualities undermine colonial narratives of a progressive ‘swamp to city’ trajectory. Showing how local accounts anticipate environmental concerns across coastal zones, this article proposes a ‘reclaimed’ urban method that connects colonial pasts to ecological futures, tracing the oceanic connections leading out from the Pacific city to other postcolonial sites.

**KEYWORDS:** colonial cities, land reclamation, urban ecology, water history, Fiji

### Introduction: reclamation as method

In recent years, scholars in urban studies have attended to the material and cultural significance of water, highlighting the constitutive role of water as it extends beyond maritime contexts to inform urban and land-based imaginaries. Matthew Gandy (2014), for example, notes how water is part of the material culture of urban modernity, having enabled the growth of cities while also informing some of urban development’s most powerful cultural critiques. The concept of landscape, as Gandy explains, is closely connected to human interactions with water, emerging through the Dutch term *landschap* as human occupation tied to “the drainage and regularization of land” (p. 3). If material connections with water are crucial to urban modernity’s rationalising impulses, Gandy suggests, then a “water history” of the city emphasises those social, ecological and multispecies histories that have played a formative yet invisible role.

Inspired by this method, this article turns to the concept and practice of reclamation to examine the water histories underlying a network of British colonial cities whose harbours extended into the sea following large-scale land reclamation projects in the nineteenth century. While the article focuses on narratives of reclamation in the colonial archives of Fiji, it also employs a ‘reclaimed’ method to investigate the broader cultural and representational shifts informing human understandings of, and relationships to the ocean. The word *reclaim* implies the retrieval of something that was temporarily appropriated by nature before being rightfully restored for human use; yet the fact that

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marshlands or mangrove forests were partially submerged, or that islands were linked together only during low tide, suggests that these spaces were reimagined as land only through cognitive and conceptual shifts. The water surrounding colonial Bombay's original seven islands, as Riding (2018) shows, was reconceptualised as land through the combined discursive and technical strategies adopted among colonial engineers. As in port cities such as Singapore and Hong Kong, the filling in of waterways and construction of embankments allowed what was formerly understood as liquid to be physically, if precariously, transformed into solid territory. The term *reclaim* also evokes the concept of the *terra nullius* as the legal principle by which territory not claimed by a sovereign power was free for colonisation, implying that land formerly 'claimed' by the ocean was politically and legally unclaimed by early inhabitants. Insofar as this meant that local or indigenous claims to land rights were more easily disputed, or that traders were better able to monopolise central commercial districts, it suggests that colonial economic and political interests were invested in shifting geo-epistemological definitions of land and water.

A reclaimed urban history, in this context, invites further study of the literal forms of empire-building and nation-building that have historically been tied to reclamation. As Suzanne Stewart-Steinberg (2016, p. 100) argues, marshland reclamations were intimately linked to the imaginaries of fascist national regeneration, as fantasies of a nation "emerging from the swamps" were configured as a movement from contagious, porous, undifferentiated, permeable and feminine nature to solid, clean, healthy and virile space: this is evident in the cases of fascist Italy and Nazi Germany as well as the settler colonial projects they emulated. As with imperial and nation-building projects, reclamation schemes are founded on acts of constitutive forgetting: the exclusion of those denied national status, for example, mirrors the erasure of formerly thriving regional centres, ancestral coastal lands, fishing villages and the complex marine habitats, mangrove forests and mud flats buried under concrete, tar and sand.

If a reclaimed method complicates colonial narratives of formerly unclaimed or empty spaces, it nevertheless shows how colonial urbanisation did historically work to reorganise pre-existing communities, trading networks, social institutions and attendant practices, skills and knowledges, as the material and symbolic construction of new coastal capitals brought groups and individuals into new relationships with one another. In the case of the British Empire, reclamation projects facilitated the expansion of an oceanic trade network linking ports as diverse as Cape Town, Bombay, Calcutta, Hong Kong, Singapore and Suva, Fiji. These cities emerged as regional hubs in a transnational consumer culture: connected by the new infrastructures of steam shipping, telegraph technologies and deep water harbours, they were transformed by waves of labor migration which left their imprint in shared architectural styles, languages and religious institutions. While the parallels in urban environments were celebrated by colonial commentators as evidence of a benign process of global integration (leading to aspirational descriptions of cities such as Lagos and Singapore as the 'Liverpool of West Africa' or the 'Manchester of the East'), the measures of segregation implemented by urban planners reinforced divides between wealthy hilltop enclaves and overcrowded, low-lying districts, generating shared social and environmental inequalities across cities (see Gandy, 2006; Home, 2013). Importantly, the fact that these cities' harbour districts were constructed on land claimed from oceans, rivers, marshland and mangrove forests meant that they produced shared experiences of environmental fragility and precarity – experiences which continue to resonate across a network of reclaimed ports today.

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Such shared experiences are documented in Hong Kong and Suva, Fiji, to take two examples. Although these are vastly different cities, their similarities reflect shared histories, in part because of the individuals who moved from one post to another as they built their careers in imperial service. One individual whose ideas travelled from India to Fiji, Hong Kong, and on to Lagos, was the administrator and soldier Frederick Lugard, founder of the University of Hong Kong in 1911. This institution, initially established as a medical school by the London Missionary Society in 1887, was situated on the side of Victoria Peak, where it formed part of a racially hierarchised topography constructed through medicalised urban planning following an outbreak of bubonic plague. In the 1880s and 90s, the British governor William Des Voeux – who also moved between Suva and Hong Kong – assisted in segregating the Peak from the low-lying, working-class harbour district of Sheung Wan to insulate European residents from the pandemic that proliferated below. Notably, the region between Sheung Wan and Central, at the north of Hong Kong Island, was subject to land reclamation schemes throughout the 1850s and again in the 1890s. These schemes had been presented as a solution to the city's health and sanitation crises and specifically to the accumulation of toxic waste on the shoreline (see Ting Sun-pao, cited in Ng, 2018). Hong Kong historians have highlighted how the government's reliance on land sales meant that the financial benefits of these schemes were accrued by private property developers; yet they also show how reclamation projects largely failed to address the sanitation, drainage and overcrowding issues that persisted well into the twentieth century (Pui-yin Ho, 2018). A similar story emerges in the port of Suva (Figures 1 & 2), where Des Voeux had been stationed as Governor of Fiji just two years before his arrival in Hong Kong, and where names such as Des Voeux Road, Grantham Road, Victoria Parade and Albert Park produce a sense of *déjà-vu* for visitors arriving from Hong Kong. Selected as the new capital following its relocation from the settler-dominated port of Levuka (Figure 1) in 1882, Suva was celebrated by British administrators for its successful transition from 'swamp to city' following the construction of its harbour district on land reclaimed from mangrove forests. Yet it was also described in negative terms by local residents as a pestiferous 'swamp capital'. Since the 1880s, Suva's history has been narrativised as a series of urban disasters, ranging from the original unsuitability of 'malarious swampland' to the unprofitability of sugar plantations in the region, and from indigenous Fijian oral accounts of the catastrophic consequences of abandoning traditional hill forts through to postcolonial literary narratives of urban flooding. As in Hong Kong, the emphasis on alternative experiences of displacement and dispossession among indigenous and migrant groups has served to complicate the triumphalist narratives espoused by the city's colonial architects.

Approaching the city from a comparative perspective, this paper examines narratives of Suva in colonial and postcolonial archival, historical, oral and literary sources.<sup>1</sup> Taking inspiration from the recent water histories within urban studies outlined above, it proposes a reclaimed urban method that traces the channels linking the city's colonial past to its ecological futures, emphasising the oceanic connections leading out from the Pacific port city to other postcolonial sites. As one node among others in Britain's former empire of reclaimed ports – a network conceptualised in this paper as a 'mangrove empire' spanning the coastal tropics – Suva anticipates ongoing environmental concerns across the global coastal zone, a term that emphasises the global interrelations among coastal regions. In this way, the city invites a comparative approach to the water histories shaping distinct but relational urban experiences.

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<sup>1</sup> For further discussion of some of these sources, see also Vandertop (2021).

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Figure 1 - Map of Fiji showing Suva and Levuka. (Source: Wikimedia Commons --- [https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Fiji\\_map.png](https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Fiji_map.png))



Figure 2 - Map of Suva and surrounding bays.  
(Source: <https://asiapacific.anu.edu.au/maponline/base-maps/suva-area-viti-levu-o>)

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“Venice in the South Seas”: Suva in the colonial archives

The port cities of Oceania, and specifically those linking the islands of the South Pacific region, offer vivid examples of the social and environmental disruption that colonial urbanisation entailed. As Sudesh Mishra (2020) has pointed out, Oceania was never subject to the kind of large-scale industrialisation that transformed Europe or Asia; instead, the arrival of traders in sandalwood, bêche-de-mer, copra and whale oil in the nineteenth century, and the encounter with Christian missionaries and the printing press, led to a modern history shaped by European conquest and settlement, plantation agriculture, forced and indentured labor and the foundation of port cities, which included Apia (Samoa) in the 1850s, Port Moresby (Papua New Guinea) in the 1870s and Suva (Fiji) in the 1880s. Initially established as trading posts and strategic ports that linked harbours to plantation networks, these cities came to function as administrative centres for colonial government, facilitating the spread of colonial education, religion and legal systems, and promoting consumer economies within the wider Pacific region.

In the case of Fiji, the Suva peninsula was selected as the new seat of government in 1882, when the British decided to consolidate political power by relocating their offices from the former European settlement of Levuka, on the island of Ovalau. Although indigenous settlements had existed in the region for up to 3000 years, its colonial history began when Australian settlers attempted to establish profitable sugar and cotton plantations in the 1860s and 70s, leading to the acquisition of around 27,000 acres of Suva land by the Melbourne-based Polynesia Company in 1868 (U.S. Department of State, 1902). Between the annexation of Fiji by Britain in 1874 and the establishment of the new capital, planners devised a series of clearance, drainage and land reclamation works. The labour of reclamation was carried out by Indian, Fijian and other Pacific Island workers, who transformed the swampy mangroves surrounding Nubukalou Creek into the central commercial district. Meanwhile, surveyors from the Royal Engineers were employed to design a colonial town laid out against a panoramic harbour (Figure 3), which would eventually boast a clock tower, botanical gardens, parks, public buildings and streets commemorating figures such as Sir Arthur Gordon, Benjamin Disraeli and Queen Victoria. As is still visible today in buildings such as the Suva Town Hall, Carnegie Library and Government House, the architecture was embellished with the familiar white arches, pilasters and neoclassical ornamentation displayed in other colonial cities. Following the extension of the trans-Pacific cable to the city in 1902, which linked Fiji to North America, Australia and New Zealand, Suva went from small township to a “booming” colonial centre (Gravelle, 1983). One focal point within colonial and touristic accounts of the city is the white-arched colonnade running beside Nubukalou Creek (Figure 4). Originally housing the city’s first department store, the white arches prompted several visitors to celebrate the city for its imitation of a European style, dubbing Suva “Venice in the South Seas” (Schütz, 1978, p. 2).

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Figure 2: Reclamation works at Victoria Parade, Suva, 1915.  
(Source: National Archives UK. <https://drive.google.com/file/d/1zzpoTOitRK-TXUoDiiZwKTAhLhbCOd7/view?usp=sharing>)



Figure 4 --- The colonnade on Nabukalou Creek (1928).  
(Source: Auckland Libraries Heritage Collections 1467-ALBUM-274-013-6 <https://kura.aucklandlibraries.govt.nz/digital/collection/photos/id/85096/rec/18>)

Accounts from the colonial archives reveal a persistent tension between triumphalist narratives of the city's transition from 'swamp to capital' and depictions of this project as a misguided and ill-fated one. Detailing the original land clearances, Fiji historian Albert Schütz emphasises the significant losses and hardships sustained by those involved in the removal of reeds and mangroves, as they worked with butcher's knives and contended

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with mosquitoes as well as ‘fierce’ land crabs. Schütz also notes how the creation of a “bastion of Colonial architecture, with white-suited and helmeted population to match” was conceived by the British as an attempt to ‘drain the swamp,’ not only in a literal sense, but also ideologically by clearing away the “moral debris” deposited by North American and Australian settlers (p. 7-8; see also Veracini, 2008). Among British administrators, the former capital, Levuka, was described as a lawless city and frontier “hellhole” whose white residents and sailors had produced a hotbed of alcoholism, slavery and racist violence, having even established a local branch of the Ku Klux Klan in the 1870s (see Derrick, 1968, p. 211). As early as 1861, when the British were still considering the cession, Colonel W. T. Smythe of the Royal Engineers recommended relocating the consulate to Suva “so that a fresh start be made with the white settlement” (qtd. Schütz, p. 8). If the subsequent clearance, reclamation and drainage of Suva’s harbour materially enacted this “fresh start” for engineers such as Smythe, it also functioned rhetorically to allow the British to position themselves as an antidote to settler racism, the Pacific slave trade and the health crises that exacerbated Fiji’s regional conflicts. This narrative repeats a familiar trope within colonial discourse, whereby the dangers posed to indigenous and non-human life are acknowledged largely as a pretext for legitimising paternalistic forms of imperial control. If the rhetoric of draining the swamp repeats a familiar colonial narrative in which the jungle is tamed and native life is civilised, its use in Suva indicates a liberal turn through the emphasis on the protection of Fijians, pioneering a protectionist discourse that would later become a key feature of British liberal imperialism. Fiji was a laboratory for liberal imperialists, among whom Sir Arthur Gordon, governor from 1874-80, devised a protectionist policy – “Fiji for the Fijians” – that prefigured doctrines of indirect rule, having famously warned the country’s white residents that Fiji was “emphatically not a white man’s colony” and that indigenous Fijians would be “shielded from the encroachment on the part of settlers” (Gordon, 1880, p. 16; see also France, 1968). While this sentiment was ultimately guided by a desire to avoid the kind of settler-colonial military expenditure incurred in New Zealand, it was also part of a broader liberal ‘turn to development’ or ‘development along native lines’ characterising late colonial policy across British spheres of influence from Samoa to Nigeria.<sup>2</sup>

The role of the city within this discourse is exemplified in *Cities and Men*, the memoir of Sir Harry Luke, Governor of Fiji in the 1930s. Luke reiterates the narrative of a trajectory from settler swamp to orderly civic centre by claiming that, prior to British interference, the region functioned as a “magnet to the dregs of the white race”:

*brutal whalers; villainous sandalwood-gatherers securing their fragrant booty by fraud and bloodshed; callous ‘blackbirders’ kidnapping sturdy Melanesians from the New Hebrides and the Solomon Islands to labour in the Queensland canefields... the scum of white humanity converged upon the primitive, beautiful islands and atolls of the South Seas, despoiling, debauching, scourging with their diseases island races hitherto so healthy that their blood had never developed the anti-toxins necessary to resist them. (1956, p. 118).*

The toxic effects of white settler activity, Luke suggests, have produced “a sordid and at times a ghastly story, which not for nothing has been called ‘The Brown Man’s Burden’.” (p. 118). Yet he contrasts this with what he views as the reparations paid by the British through their governance of Fiji, claiming that the administration “has been prompt to

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<sup>2</sup> For a discussion of ‘custom’ in this broader context, see Kaplan, 1989, p. 351.

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repay the debt which the white man owes to the brown man of the Pacific. One item of the repayment is the Central Medical School in Suva, which trains islanders... in all branches of medicine and surgery.” (p. 118). Suva’s modern legal and medical institutions are here positioned as antidotes to the disease of slavery in the Pacific. Luke claims that the presence of the Central Medical School and “the dignified surroundings of the New Legislative Council Chamber” have made “a great impression both on residents and members of the general public”, working to restore faith in “white humanity.” (pp. 118-19). He focuses on public ceremonies, unveilings and other commemorative events, noting that because Suva now receives an inflow of important foreign administrators, governor generals, Royal Air Force marshals, “Commonwealth and Allied leaders” and other distinguished visitors, it has grown “to be more and more the Clapham Junction of the South Seas<sup>3</sup>.” (p. 131). This language of replicas repeats a common trope within liberal imperial discourse, in which the city is made to serve as concrete evidence of British assimilation and development.

In the early decades of the twentieth century, literary figures who visited the capital, including Somerset Maugham, Bloomsbury poet Rupert Brooke, Fanny Stevenson and James Michener, were fascinated by the discrepancy between this image of Suva as a modern English town transported to the Pacific, and their own exoticist preconceptions about Fiji. The account given in Maugham’s travel diaries, for example, focuses on the Grand Pacific Hotel, constructed in 1914. Described as “a large, two-storied building faced with stucco and surrounded by a veranda”, the hotel is seen to defy the temperature of the tropics: cool and quiet, its “electric fans [are] constantly turning” (Maugham, 1949, p. 122). A letter from Rupert Brooke, collected in the memoirs of Edward Marsh, recalls his shock on seeing the city’s modern landscape: “Fiji is obviously the wildest place I can get to round here... And lo! a large English town, with two banks, several churches, dental surgeons, a large gaol, auctioneers, bookmakers, two newspapers, and all the other appurtenances of civilisation!” (1918, p. 91). He follows this by condemning the racism of Australian residents and describing Fijians in patronising terms as “sturdy children” (p. 94). James Michener, some years later, continues this line of discourse by insisting that without the British there would be “no stately administration building, no railroad, no tradition of justice built upon local conditions” (1951, p. 119). Despite the colonial paternalism in evidence across these accounts, there is a tendency to imagine the city’s rural hinterland, particularly its surrounding mangrove forests and mountains, as threats to the precarious order established by urban planners. Maugham claims to observe something threatening in “the farther country, thickly wooded, [where] there is a strange and secret life” (1949, p. 122), while Brooke insists that despite the “civilized” rules and snobbish etiquette on display in Suva, across the bay the clouds and mountains are “nothing but forbidding and terrible” (1918, p. 93). Michener, similarly, celebrates the city’s Venetian canal, the immaculate cleanliness of its tropical hotel, and the “pleasant” government headquarters; yet he describes Suva in ominous terms as a bad decision, claiming that the British, “with a mania for wrong decisions in Fiji, built their capital at Suva, smack in the middle of the heaviest rainfall” (1951, p. 114). In critiquing the decision to build the capital on this site, he suggests that however much this “Venice in the South Seas” protects Fijians from settlers, it fails to defend them from the threats posed by the environment itself.

Newspaper editorials from the late nineteenth century are similarly attentive to these contradictions. In an 1880 article from *The Fiji Times* entitled, ‘A Swamp Becomes the

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<sup>3</sup> A busy train station in south London at the junction of several lines.



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Capital', Suva is described as a "site of fetid and pestiferous mangrove swamps", resembling "a spider's web after a strong gale", whose narrow lanes and alleys are "by courtesy called streets" and appear "specially designed to retain the malarious swamp airs" (Gravelle, 1983, p. 161). Victoria Parade is described as "a danger to life and limb", its pedestrians "flounder[ing] through the mud, unable to tell whether they were on the street or off it" (p. 163). The failures of bad drainage and paving are compared to earlier aborted attempts to plant sugarcane in the peninsula, which were abandoned due to poor soil, leading the editor to dismiss Suva as "a capital for paupers" and to excoriate the government for having shifted its offices to a swamp (p. 162). An article in the *Suva Times* similarly enquires as to "why every building in the line of streets should be forced into acute angles, why one block should have an elbow-like corner pushing into the side of its neighbour, why the plan of the streets generally should be copied from the crude designs of the school boy maze" (qtd. Schütz, 1978, p. 14). As Schütz notes, the design of the commercial district was often "blamed upon" – rather than "accredited to" – Colonel Pratt of the Royal Engineers, who was appointed in 1875 to act as Surveyor-General and Director of Works (p. 14). Yet he also concedes that the primary obstacle was a lack of funding, citing an explanation from the *Suva Times*:

*We have a very limited treasury. We cannot afford to raise splendid edifices, to make boulevards, to lay out parks and create an outside paradise... Our roads are bad, our water supply is not completed, the houses are scattered over the hillside promiscuously, the architecture is not in the most artistic style.* (qtd. 14-15).

The shortcomings outlined here, especially in relation to water and sanitation infrastructure, exacerbated wider environmental issues. Not only was the position of the central district vulnerable to flooding, landslides, cyclones and tsunamis, but, as in other colonial port cities, the municipal infrastructure struggled to cope with the waste and toxicity produced by activities such as quarrying, mining, levelling and dredging works. As in reports from other colonial "plague ports" (Echenberg, 2007), including Hong Kong and Singapore, waste and sewage were observed oozing from the pavements. In Suva, incidents of contamination and outbreaks of disease, such as typhoid, measles, influenza, malaria and dysentery, were exacerbated by the arrival of cruise ships in the 1880s (Steel, 2016). Meanwhile, complaints about the breeding of mosquitoes and the overpopulation of rats and fleas, which proliferated along the riverine networks linking the port to the sugar plantations, were not trivial, given the role that imported species and infected mosquitoes played in disease epidemics across other parts of Britain's "mosquito empire" (McNeill, 2010).

As documents from the colonial archives suggest, narratives of Suva's modernising transition from 'swamp to capital' were increasingly confronted with the regressive effects of environmental degradation. From accounts by tourists, visitors and administrators to the residents' complaints found in newspaper editorials, archival documents from the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries attest to the contradictions embedded in Suva's built landscape. Yet, insofar as these contradictions are most visible in accounts of everyday life, provided by those walking through the city streets, attention to local experience and especially to that of indigenous Fijian and Indo-Fijian residents can serve to highlight gaps both in the colonial archives and in the city's narratives of foundation.

### The terraqueous city: Oceanian narratives

While Suva's architecture, monuments and street names have tended to commemorate European influences and individual governors, traders and engineers, in addition to select members of the chiefly elite, the stories of the anonymous migrants who built the city, and of the indigenous inhabitants of the region, remain relatively obscure within the colonial archives. Yet, historical, oral and literary accounts of Suva from indigenous and Indo-Fijian residents offer alternative perspectives on the city's history. Indo-Fijian historians, for example, have shown how access to urban space in the colonial period was highly uneven, as responses to health and sanitation crises were characterised by racially stratified regulatory measures. As Brij Lal (1992) has shown, European residents occupied the cooler, elevated positions on the hillside in the Tamavua district, calling for strict segregation from and between Fijian and Indo-Fijian populations. The European settlements became relatively homogenous, centring around the Fiji Club, concert and dance halls, tennis courts and cricket lawns, while segregated spaces were reserved in library reading rooms, swimming baths, schools and hospital wards. Meanwhile, anxieties about the transmission of bodily fluids led to legal measures, including severe fines for spitting in the streets and a nightly curfew imposed on non-Europeans. As in other colonial cities, health and sanitation served as the pretext for methods of stratification that privileged whites even where such contamination originated from their own commercial and touristic activities. Yet, Lal (2011, p. 82) also notes how campaigns for the desegregation of the Suva Public Baths, or 'Sea Baths', achieved success in 1956, forming one example among others in the history of Fijian resistance to urban segregation.

Fiji historians have shown how Suva's colonial foundation also brought in domestic migrants from around the Fiji islands, who worked as stevedores in the docks. As Mamak writes, after spending their days 'hawking', many of the city's dock workers "would sleep in the open, under the ivi tree, or if it should rain they would take shelter under the verandah of the Bank of New Zealand" (1974, pp. 43-44). Despite the presence of stevedores, as well as Fijians employed by Europeans as domestic workers, urban experiences among indigenous populations were frequently characterised by exclusion and immobility, given that 'Native Regulations' controlled their residential status and compelled them to produce tax crops in communal village gardens. As Ponipate Rokolekutu (2017) shows, the land tenure system was designed to protect 'customary' land rights yet its effects served to dispossess indigenous Fijians of prime agricultural, real estate and tourist land in the coastal zone, which was exploited through perpetual leasing arrangements. This led to a discursively complex situation in which indigenous iTaukei were nominated as landholders under clan titles despite being unable to access the resources and capital necessary for the productive use of this land.

If the colonial government's prioritisation of the commercial exploitation of land excluded indigenous participation, this process of exclusion is exemplified by the history of Suva itself. Given that the colonial narrative of the "swamp to city" presupposes an empty, uninhabitable but also uninhabited space, its authority remains contingent on the erasure of the region's original inhabitants. By contrast, accounts collected from oral sources make visible the residents of the original Suva Village (now the site of the Thurston Botanical Gardens), who were evicted and forcibly relocated to Suvavou, near the town of Lami, to make way for government offices. Historians have dated the original Suva Village to around 1820, when sandalwood, bêche-de-mer and arms traders, as well as escaped Australian convicts and missionaries, arrived on Fijian shores. As historians have also shown, Suva's original inhabitants resided in hilltop locations; yet, pulled by the

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imperatives of coastal trade and pushed by the internal wars between coastal and hill tribes, they left their hill forts in the 1820s in what has been described as a “general exodus” in which “hill towns were left deserted” (Wall, [1919] 1996, p. 37). This coheres with research on the prevalence of hilltop settlements and forts (*koronivalu*) during pre-contact times in Fiji, showing how the colonial-era encounter with white traders — which brought modern armaments, invasive disease and devaluations of Fijian customs through Christian conversions — culminated in the widespread abandonment of hill settlements across the islands (see Nunn, 2012, p. 3). Within just two decades, the vulnerability of the new coastal location in Suva led to an attack by another, newly armed clan, during which the village was completely destroyed. This conflict paved the way for the land’s cheap purchase, leading to the unfair sale of what would become the city to the Polynesia Company (Schütz, 1978, pp. 13-15). Suva’s story thus forms part of a broader historical pattern by which communities became embroiled in armed conflict, sickness and debt before migrating to the coast and having their land sold to colonial planters.

Transcribed oral sources also show how Fijians have narrativised the Suvans’ ill-fated decision to leave their protected hilltop locations. The story of the Suva chief, Tabukacoro, connects the decision to migrate to the coast with the chief’s poor choice of a wife, claiming that the “generous proportions” of chiefly ladies and their dislike of exercise made them reluctant to climb the hilltops, ultimately persuading the chief to leave for the coast and leading to the “ruin, and the crippling, nay almost destruction, of his people” (Wall, [1919] 1997, p. 37). A similar narrative appears in the popular legend recorded by Vuataki, which suggests that “a hefty Bauan lady married by their chief was unable to climb the slippery slopes of the Nacovu fortress” (2013, p. 38). Despite the humorous nature of such accounts, they effectively gender the narrative of Suvan disaster, placing the blame on women for the decision to relocate from the hill forts, rather than on the foreign arms traders and local patriarchs driving regional conflicts. Nevertheless, the emphasis across these accounts on the forms of social and political *vulnerability* produced through coastal urbanisation provides an important counter-narrative to British colonial representations of the city as a site for the development and protection of indigenous Fijians.

Similarly, literary representations of Suva from the independence period can be seen to challenge discourses of colonial protectionism. While several novels and plays set in Suva have adopted an urban realist style to explore issues of crime and poverty in the city’s squatter settlements, writers associated with the wave of creativity that swept Oceania in the 1970s and 80s have experimented with impressionistic narratives. Fijian writers such as Subramani and Vanessa Griffen, for example, prioritise fleeting moments and sensory impressions in their stories of Suva, departing from wide-lens historical accounts. By channeling interiorised perspectives, subjective experiences and urban memories, these writers combine descriptions of Suva with a critical reflection on the process of historical narration itself.

Subramani’s story ‘Kala’, collected in his 1988 book *The Fantasy Eaters*, exemplifies this method. Well-known in the region for his stories about the lives of indentured workers and their descendants, Subramani combines narratives of the postcolonial migration of Indo-Fijians from the sugar plantations to the coastal cities following decolonisation in the 1970s, with earlier stories about the arrival of indentured Indians in Fiji in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. “Kala” makes a suggestive link between these two histories. The story narrates the interior voice of its eponymous protagonist – an Indo-Fijian woman who feels frustrated by the constraints of her marriage – as she engages in a

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series of aimless urban walks. While Kala romanticises the city and seeks an outlet from domestic boredom, the narrative evokes a jarring, rundown landscape during a flood. As “unseasonable” rain descends on the city, the narrative depicts mud oozing up from the streets, flooded pavements, and a crowd watching a drowning rat, punctuating the events with news reports of a girl who has drowned in the nearby Rewa river. Kala wanders through the city in the rain and sees a figure following her, although – as in much of Subramani’s fiction – this figure (or mirage) blurs the line between fact and fantasy. When she reaches Nubukalou Creek, site of the city’s initial land reclamations, she observes a “sour-looking stream, lined with black and green bricks and rusted iron, moved sluggishly with the refuse. It bore the stench of rotting mangroves”; at the same time, she perceives “[a] lonely haunted face ... emerge from the black rain She saw a pair of bare feet on naked shingles slaked with rain” (Subramani, 1988, p. 93). Mishra (2020) has noted how the unknown figure who haunts the narrative resembles Krishna, showing how the text layers modern realism onto classical North Indian aesthetics dating back to the twelfth century. Just as the form of the text incorporates an older history, so the rotting mangroves serve as ghostly reminders of Suva’s own submerged past: at the site of initial reclamations at Nubukalou, the bare feet also evoke those of the indentured laborers who carried out the initial clearance of the mangrove forests. In such moments, the protagonist’s personal disappointment in Suva signals to a wider, collective historical experience, troubling narratives of the city’s modernity by evoking the experience of those coerced into building it.

Approached through an ecocritical lens, Subramani’s story also channels the city’s environmental history. The rain, as an elemental force, operates both as a theme and formal device across the story: not only is it key to the text’s representational instability, insofar as it renders the city’s borders porous and unstable, but by facilitating the ‘flooding’ of urban memory, it connects a fractured postcolonial experience to collective memories of a colonial past. Notably, the rain enables the juxtaposition of the metaphorical “drowning” of the protagonist with realist reports of an anonymous girl drowning in the flood; as such, it links the personal (gendered and racialised) constraints of Kala’s urban experience to the structural forms of environmental precarity and vulnerability experienced in the region. Read historically, Subramani’s image of a swampy, terraqueous city, flooded by “unseasonable” rain, enacts a critical reversal of Suva’s linear trajectory from ‘swamp to civilisation’, revealing both the social exclusions and environmental limits of this narrative.

This section’s focus on the terraqueous qualities of the city in Oceanian narratives intersects with recent literary and cultural studies that have sought to reclaim alternative concepts of land and water in ways that restore attention to formerly ‘invisible’ populations. Macarena Gómez-Barris’s *The Extractive Zone*, for example, uses the term “submerged perspectives” to underscore “forms of life that cannot be easily reduced, divided, or representationally conquered or evacuated” (2017, p. 4). Tiffany Lethabo King, in *The Black Shoals* (2019), brings together related perspectives from Black and Native studies by imagining the space of the shoals, or the shallows, as “an in-between, ecotonal, unexpected, and shifting space... a liminal space between the sea and the land” and a “location of suture between two hermeneutical frames that have conventionally been understood as sealed off from each other” (p. 4). Terraqueous and tidal spaces, in these examples, inspire alternative concepts of identity that undermine the territorialising imaginaries of settler colonialism and extractive capitalism. In the accounts of the Pacific port city discussed above, the city operates as an equally ecotonal space whose porous and shifting qualities facilitate the recovery of both migrant and indigenous perspectives. Suva, built on a site of heavy rainfall, is a terraqueous city, whose outlying islands shift between separate and connected entities depending on the tide, whose shopping malls slowly sink into the ground, and whose resident land crabs still scuttle through the streets. In drawing attention to the city’s watery past, such scenes make

visible the porous, entangled and relational qualities of urban water histories, dissolving the colonial projections of a world of clean, virile, solid space, of the kind enacted by the material edifices of sea walls, artificial islands and reclaimed land.

### Reclaiming the mangrove city

Scholars in Pacific Studies have noted that over half of Fijians are now city dwellers, forming part of a new “urban Melanesia” (Mecartney and Connell, 2017). Yet Fiji is also an archipelagic nation of island chains, or an “aquapelago” – a term that emphasises the waters linking and encircling islands as they influence the way that land is both inhabited and imagined (Hayward 2012). At the interface of the city and ocean is the mangrove forest, a crucial coastal ecology for Fiji as a country with the highest coverage of mangroves in the Pacific islands. Mangroves, as tidal swamps or coastal forests, appear as dense tangles of roots and trees that collect mud and sediment; they are complex ecosystems that provide habitats for marine life, and they serve as a key defense against coastal erosion, tides and extreme weather. Scientists have shown how they capture and store disproportionate amounts of carbon, helping to protect coastal communities by offsetting the effects of human-induced climate change (see Cameron et al, 2021). In Suva, land reclamation schemes have come at the expense of mangrove forests since the early colonial period, when the port city expanded to serve the sugarcane plantation network. Padma Lal has noted how, following the imposition of British law in 1874, mangroves were identified as wastelands and water and land became “conceptually distinct entities” (1984, p. 320). While she claims that, in pre-contact Fiji, mangrove ecosystems were seen as an ‘integral part of the land’ (p. 320), she also acknowledges the postcolonial afterlives of colonial concepts of land, water, waste and ownership, noting how mangrove reclamation schemes continued across the cane belt after the government received a loan from the World Bank in the mid 1970s. Today, as urbanisation continues to drive mangrove depletion, policymakers have proposed mangrove management plans, recognising the effects of reclamation on local fishing economies and coastal defence (Cameron et al, p. 2). These renewed efforts to protect intertidal spaces invite us to recover alternative, ‘aquapelagic’ concepts of land and water and to reconfigure the relations between city and ocean.

Despite growing awareness of the environmental effects of land reclamation, however, the idea of extending cities into the sea as an environmentally justifiable action retains its currency elsewhere, as property developers continue to undertake vast reclamations and construct ‘manmade islands’ in regions from Hong Kong to Singapore and Dubai. Although land reclamation increases the chance of waterlogging and flash floods – leaving runoff water unable to permeate the soil without natural waterways – developmentalist solutions such as the Hong Kong government’s massive reclamation project, ‘Lantau Tomorrow Vision’, threaten to repeat the events of the past by making environmental justifications for reclamation schemes. In Singapore, the reclamation of Marina Bay has been described as a “literal act of nation-building” and associated with class land grabs (Jamieson, 2018) as the state compulsorily buys flats in villages for the purposes of public reclamations, before selling the reclaimed land to developers who, by building high rise private housing, force villagers off coastal land they can no longer afford.

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That this paper's reflections on Fiji can be extended to other parts of the global coastal zone makes the reclaimed city a uniquely productive space for a postcolonial and ecocritical comparative method. This method compares distinct yet related experiences across parts of what might be termed Britain's 'mangrove empire', a network of reclaimed ports across the coastal tropics linking cities as diverse as Lagos and Bombay, Calcutta and Hong Kong, Singapore and Suva. The framework for comparison might also extend to former settler cities built in swampy locations, such as New Orleans, whose development puts them at odds with their terraqueous environment. Specifically, the 'reclamation as method' proposed here highlights the extent to which reclamations are informed by colonial-era spatial divisions, border politics, structures of ownership and environmental vulnerabilities. In Fiji, present-day divisions in the use of urban land and real estate have been linked to the legacies of colonial-era land policies and leasing arrangements in the ports, plantations and tourist centres of the coastal zone. It is important to retain a sense of the consequences of decisions made by colonial planners and engineers, such as the choice of location for capital cities or the construction of commercial districts, as they carry environmental implications, and warnings, for the present.

Equally, the 'reclamation as method' proposed here can be useful in the context of urgently needed climate action and adaptation. During the COP26 conference, the Fijian Prime Minister Frank Bainimarama reminded his audience that, since the signing of the Paris Agreement, Fiji has been hit by thirteen cyclones. Yet the recent efforts at rural rejuvenation and resilience-building in Fiji, viewed historically, are responses to the coastal vulnerability of urban centres as well as to colonial doctrines of reclamation and their associated ways of conceptualising land and water. While smaller reclamation projects may in fact provide solutions for low-lying coral atolls in regions such as the Marshall Islands, it is important to note how, in other contexts, the selection of coastal construction sites undermined regional inland centres, or hill settlements in the case of Fiji, leaving fewer alternatives for the growing number of urban citizens exposed to coastal pressures. It is therefore necessary to retain a historical perspective, especially for those living in spaces in which the legacies of colonial urbanisation and border regimes continue to cement inequalities and reproduce coastal vulnerabilities.

### Acknowledgements:

Many thanks to Nicholas Halter and Aliko Economides for their encouragement and feedback on an earlier draft of this paper.

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