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Home on the Fijian Farmscape: Agricultural Attachments to Land and Place

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HOME ON THE FIJIAN FARMSCAPE:
AGRICULTURAL ATTACHMENTS TO LAND AND PLACE

Ipsita Dey

A DISSERTATION
PRESENTED TO THE FACULTY
OF PRINCETON UNIVERSITY
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OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY

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Advisers: Agustín Fuentes and Jerry Zee

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Abstract

This dissertation explores how Indo-Fijians operationalize narratives of plantation labor and contemporary farmwork to produce a non-settler local identity that reconfigures relations between diaspora, indigeneity, and nationalism. Through multiple government coups and violent anti-Indian rhetoric, indigenous politics in Fiji has repeatedly attempted to render Indo-Fijians, whose ancestors arrived en masse to Fiji as indentured laborers to work on sugarcane plantations, alien to lands they consider home. Drawing from ethnographic research among farmers in the Sigatoka Valley, I demonstrate how Indo-Fijians imagine farm practices as simultaneous projects in nation-building, heritage/traditional knowledge preservation, and environmental protection. Thus, Indo-Fijian farmers simultaneously mirror and challenge ethnonationalist interpretations of indigeneity to produce a local identity that protests the exclusivity of belonging in Fiji today.

Engaging theoretical frameworks in historical consciousness and geographic imaginaries, I introduce and situate the Sigatoka Valley as a “farmscape,” a site where colonial pasts, racial tensions, and climate anxieties are diversely (re)imagined through agriculture. In Chapter One, I draw from ethnographic work on an agro-forestry biodiversity conservation initiative at the Sigatoka Sand Dunes National Park to examine how plantation logics of land distribution and property-defined personhood shape how locals design and envision shared environmental futures. In Chapter Two, I study how colonial-era notions of “hard work” persist in racially charged discourse that shapes Indo-Fijians' claims to local identity through narratives of nation-building plantation labor and landscape-tethering agricultural work. Chapter Three explores how Indo-Fijians use agricultural “miracles” and unexplained phenomena on the farm to affirm their metaphysical relation to the landscape, paralleling indigenous articulations of land custodianship.

In Chapter Four, I take a phenomenological approach to studying Indo-Fijian local sensory knowledges of the farmscape, often expressed through weather forecasting, seedling selection, and taste. I argue that local knowledge in Sigatoka draws from Indo-Fijian plantation memory and thus becomes a dynamic record of landscape transformation, introduced plants, and built environments, challenging colonialist interpretations of indigenous knowledge as ethnobiology limited to endemic species and ecosystems. I position the Sigatoka Valley as a place of expanding relational possibilities between iTaukei (indigenous) and Indo-Fijians that imagines Fijian identity outside of categorical and agonistic ethnic accounting.

For Ma and Baba

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Introduction

You are traveling north along Queen's Road, the one-lane stretch of highway that links Suva, the capital city, to Nadi, the tourist hub of Fiji. Halfway on your journey you slow down as you approach Sigatoka—a small, sleepy farm town. When you cross the Sigatoka River on your way into town, you are struck by the visual of a broken bridge to your right, its jagged edges piercing the air and sharp timber gathering beneath. If you didn't know that a severe tropical storm decades before had sawed the bridge in half, you would have assumed that the bridge broke only yesterday. If you walk to the side of the bridge still standing, you will find yourself near the town center standing on an old, rusted railroad track. The railway used to run over the broken bridge and through town on a pedestrian walkway, but the bridge, railroad, and walkway have all been removed. But if you know where the track remains untouched on the outskirts of town, you can still follow the railway through bush. You may come across some livestock that feed on the overgrown grass between railway ties, local rubbish scavengers wheeling their finds home from the local landfill, or farms that repurpose the railway system as a boundary marker. The railway is broken yet productive, invisible yet found, abandoned yet loved. Like the sugarcane plantation industry it once served, the railway haunts, beckons, and reorganizes the lives of those living around and within it.

Before the bridge was broken, local teens would climb onto the bridge during the sugarcane farming “off” seasons (when trains were not running) and jump from the middle of the bridge into the Sigatoka River. Now, even though half the bridge still stands, youth no longer jump into the River. The River has become more shallow since a recent dredging project and the River bottom holds the treacherous remains of the other half of the bridge (that have yet to be

removed). Ghosts of plantations past lie silently in the River, still orchestrating how and when people pass through or under its waters.

Near where the broken bridge makes landfall in town, the Town Council has constructed a series of amphitheaters built into the riverbank. The amphitheaters, carefully manicured lawns, and exercise machines give this area the impression of a public park, and were ostensibly built to cater towards the large tourist populations that frequent town either as a stop on their way from Nadi to Suva or as an outing from the many resorts along the Coral Coast. But ironically, you will never find a tourist enjoying the park in this capacity; they prefer the cool air conditioning of the Tappoo's souvenir store across the street. A taxi stand at the base of the bridge is the most frequented area; taxi drivers gather there to smoke *suki* (local Fijian tobacco) and wait for clients. While the railway is buried underneath the financial allure and economic promise of the tourism industry, its old path through town still traces the town's main thoroughfare.

A few miles out from the center of Sigatoka town, the railroad resurfaces. Rubbish scavengers use the railway to transport their finds home from the Sigatoka Rubbish Tip to informal settlements along the border of town. The Rubbish Tip has grown exponentially in size and mass in recent years; the trash is burned to control the size of the landfill. But the toxicity of waste still escapes from the confines of the Rubbish Tip. Fires jump onto local hills and burn through grasslands, foliage, and farms in the dry seasons; their poisonous fumes enter the lungs of local residents, who suffer from increasingly higher rates of respiratory illnesses. Trash blown off the Tip in strong winds pollutes nearby beaches; garbage turns to slush and noxious liquids seep into the groundwater during strong rains. The waste in Sigatoka overflows in excess. Plantation railroads are repurposed by rubbish scavengers who redirect the path of trash, from toxic bodily ingestion to resources for construction, mechanical parts, and local artwork.

Between town and the Rubbish Tip, the old railroad marks the boundary between state claimed land, the Sigatoka Sand Dunes National Park, and the adjacent informal settlement, Kulukulu, where many live on informal land leases and without access to infrastructures like electricity or running water. The railroad is hidden under an overgrowth of bush—a mixture of local grassland species, wild sugarcane, and palm trees. If you walk along this railroad, perhaps to find your way into Kulukulu or into the Sand Dunes, you must step carefully. This unpoliced area—a “no man’s land” between the Park and local homes in Kulukulu—is replete with hastily covered ditches that conceal evidence of illegal sand mining. As development projects in the area balloon in number—in response to population growth and the tourism industry—sand mining for construction projects has become a lucrative source of supplementary income for residents of informal settlements, who have been displaced from ancestral homes due to the disruption of land leases. Plantation railroads at the outskirts of town—precisely because they have been “forgotten”—offer opportunities for hidden informal “work” among those who must creatively reimagine their livelihoods in the death of the sugarcane industry.

Even in the decline of the sugarcane industry in Fiji, and amidst a boom in commercial, subsistence, and hobby farming that may, on its face, seem far removed from Fiji’s history of colonialism and indenture—the plantation remains (in its material and metaphorical forms) an organizing principle for both indigenous iTaukei and Indo-Fijian populations in Sigatoka. New construction projects that build roads, parks, and public spaces rely on infrastructures of the plantation system, and the path of the railroad still coordinates urban planning in Sigatoka. Gathering spaces, sidewalks, and parking lots all trace the transportation lines of sugar. Trash floating in from the ocean and produced by increased plastic consumption overwhelms the local landscape, but locals repurpose plantation infrastructures to work, engage, and live with trash

outside of the paradigms of environmental crisis. The plantation railroads at the peripheries of Sigatoka town are liminal places, present and known, but unseen. In this dissertation, I argue that the inheritance of plantation logics in Fiji gives form to how locals produce ethnic identities, environmental visions for recovery and futurity, and aspirations for social and political belonging. The plantation persists in contemporary environmental, social, and political formations.

Fiji is a small nation in the South Pacific with over 330 islands. The vast majority of the country's population (roughly totaling 930,000) resides on the two islands of Viti Levu and Vanua Levu; almost 80% live on Viti Levu. A substantial proportion of the total population is Indo-Fijian (roughly 37% today), present day descendants of the roughly 60,000 Indian indentured laborers who were brought to Fiji from 1879 to 1916 to labor on sugarcane plantations under British colonial administration (Lal 2021). Chief Cakobau ceded the Fiji Islands to the British Crown in 1874, under pressure of rising tensions with independent European cotton and copra planters (among other financial and demographic concerns, discussed later in this dissertation). Following cession, Fiji was administratively crafted as a sugarcane plantation colony—a late addition in the British Crown's era of imperial expansion.

Fijian politics are volatile and unpredictable. In the last forty years, Fiji has undergone four military and civilian coups: the first on May 14th, 1987, led by Sitiveni Rabuka in response to the election of an Indo-Fijian majority coalition government (Scobell 1994); the second on September 25th, 1987, led by Sitiveni Rabuka to nullify the 1970 Constitution of Fiji (ratified at independence from the British Crown); the third on May 19th, 2000 led by George Speight following the election of Mahendra Chaudhry as the first Indo-Fijian prime minister of Fiji (Field

2005); the fourth on December 4th, 2006 led by Frank Bainimarama to hold leaders responsible for the unconstitutionality of the 2000 coup (Prasad 2008). Frank Bainimarama held power as the Prime Minister of Fiji from 2006 – 2022, until a People’s Alliance Party-National Federation Party-Social Democratic Liberal Party coalition won the national election in December 2022 and became the first democratically elected change in government since Fiji’s independence in 1970. As indigenous Fijians (iTaukei) were isolated from the sugarcane plantation industry, iTaukei communities did not receive the social or economic “benefits” of upward social mobility within colonial administrative infrastructures, capital investment for industrial development, and the resulting exposure to global trade systems. Through the 1900s, most profitable businesses, educational institutions, and industrial development projects were run by Indo-Fijians; this resulted in both communities employing racist and scapegoating narratives of the “other” to resist or justify these economic and infrastructural inequalities (Ali 1976). Fiji’s coups have been motivated by indigenous ethnonationalist narratives (Lawson 2012), anchored in the desire to ensure indigenous paramountcy in Fijian politics—and reinforce that Indo-Fijians, despite their economic influence, will never hold political power. The 1970 Constitution cemented race as a political logic (Lal 2002) of managing the aftermaths of the plantation as an ethnogenetic machinery not only for distributing wealth and economic opportunity, but also making iTaukei and Indo-Fijian racial difference a malleable site of political maneuver: the distribution of members in Parliament was determined by ethnic identification (i.e. number of seats for indigenous Fijians vs Indo-Fijians) and iTaukei chiefly systems were integrated into public administration and protected from standard procedures of constitutional amendment. This effectively guaranteed the hegemony of iTaukei political parties, despite Indo-Fijians being equal or greater in number during this time (surpassing 50% of the country’s population in the 1980s).

The 1987 election of a majority Indo-Fijian political alliance threatened this indigenous hegemony, and the 1987 coup led by Sitiveni Rabuka brought long-standing tensions simmering between the two communities (iTaukei and Indo-Fijian) into full public view. Since 1987, Fiji has attempted to rewrite and ratify the Constitution several times to adjudicate rights of citizenship by racial identification. The 2013 (and current) Constitution gives Indo-Fijians equal rights (Regan et al. 2023), but mass Indo-Fijian emigration in response to decades of social, political, and juridical discrimination has significantly decreased the number of Indo-Fijians in the country (now 37% of the population).

The sugarcane industry in Fiji reached its peak in the late 1980s (Government of Fiji, 2002). During this period, the industry was one of the country's largest sources of employment and high levels of production and export (upwards of 240000 metric tons of sugar) made it one of the primary contributors to Fiji's GDP and growing "global" status. But the sugarcane industry in Fiji has since fallen into steep decline, especially after the 1987 coups. In addition to the loss of preferential trade agreements and the lack of maintenance of infrastructures like mills and railroads, land lease disruptions caused by ethnic tensions and the resulting displacement and emigration of Indo-Fijian sugarcane farmers have decimated the sugarcane industry (Weber 2005).

Much has been written about the "impossibility" of Indo-Fijian social, cultural, and political belonging, where long-term ethnonationalist politics have rewritten Fijian identity in the exclusivist terms of indigeneity (Carens 2000, Emde 2005, Prasad 2008, Trnka 2008). Those that learn of the volatile politics and Indo-Fijian discrimination often ask me, "So, why don't the Indo-Fijians just leave?" The question presumes a *desire* to exit. What of those that want to stay? How do they articulate their attachments to place within a socio-cultural and political framework

that emphasizes indigeneity as the only form of belonging? This approach to studying Indo-Fijian belonging and indigenous politics necessarily puts Indo-Fijian and iTaukei identities in conversation with each other. This dissertation does not imagine Indo-Fijian and iTaukei communities as bounded and separate, but resonating and fluid, and examines how this indeterminacy resists ethnonationalist rhetoric that excludes belonging for some.

In Sigatoka, a coastal town on the main island of Viti Levu and my field site for dissertation fieldwork, a domestic and international export agricultural industry has been growing even as the sugarcane industry deteriorates. Sugarcane farmers are repurposing some of their lands to grow high price agricultural crops as the profitability of sugar decreases; Indo-Fijian commercial farmers in the highlands continue to grow specialty Fijian crops and have built infrastructural systems to support domestic distribution and international trade of agricultural products; people (both Indo-Fijian and indigenous) living in town practice subsistence farming in small backyards, some selling or bartering their produce in local markets; those (both Indo-Fijian and indigenous) with access to medium sized plots of land (2-10 acres) are hobby farming (farming as supplementary income to primary employment elsewhere). Even as sugarcane no longer dictates the rhythm of life, plantation history shapes the perception of Sigatoka as an agricultural landscape and its inhabitants as always-already farmers. This “agricultural consciousness”—shared by both Indo-Fijian and iTaukei people—influences how environmental futures are imagined through agro-developmental projects, how Fijian nationalism is defined by soil fertility and vegetative abundance (in contrast to the assumed resource scarcity of the West), and how Fijians articulate their metaphysical connections to land as nation-state and Mother Earth. The tendency to frame Fiji in a Pacific Ocean of endings—the death of the sugarcane industry, a dying landscape buried in trash and rising seawater, a geopolitical dystopia that

forecloses possibilities for democracy—is a scholarly imposition that obscures how agriculture emerges from the plantation as more than an extractive industry, but as both method and product of a life worth living in “place” (Fiji). This dissertation seeks to understand how agriculture weaves together narratives of crisis and resilience, local and global perspectives, indenture and indigeneity.

I argue that sugarcane plantation history and Indo-Fijian agricultural labor, eco-cosmologies, and sensorial knowledges produce agricultural consciousness and a sense of “place” in Sigatoka that intimately ties Indo-Fijian and indigenous ways of being-in-the-world. In doing so, the narratives enclosed herein trouble the distinction between “settler” and “indigenous”. Indo-Fijians deny the label of “settler”, as they were indentured laborers in exploitative contracts working in violent conditions, outside of their own volition; and they cannot be indigenous because they are not autochthonous (iTaukei). Are there ways for Indo-Fijians to claim belonging to landscape and country outside of these juxtapositions? It is the attempted formulation of such a non-settler local identity, in paradoxical tension and engagement with settler-colonial and politicized indigenous narratives of place, that I discuss in this dissertation.

Farmscapes

In the coming chapters, I approach the Sigatoka Valley as a farmscape—a place where plantation history, agricultural infrastructures, and farm labor determine not only the price and circulation of agricultural commodities (like sugarcane and other cash crops), but also (and more importantly, I argue) the cadence, rhythm, intimacy, and relational encounters of everyday life. The farm (as defined by or experienced as property lines, embodied labor, sensory knowledges

of physical elements, more-than-human relationships to land, etc.) is consistently the backdrop for how Indo-Fijian and iTaukei residents in Sigatoka imagine political, environmental, economic, religious, and social possibilities in Fiji.

Scholars have argued that plantation complexes are distinct from contemporary large-scale farms such as the industrial corn rows of the American Midwest, strawberry fields of Central California, or citrus orchards in the American South because of the essential presence of “peasantry” (Thompson (1932) 2010). Both plantations and large-scale industrial farms are emblematic of consumerism and commodity fetishism (Taussig (1980) 2010), engage in mass productions which increase profit margins and the severity of environmental impacts (Kenney-Lazar and Ishikawa 2019), and use extractive labor practices that marginalize minority populations (Hetherington 2020)—but plantations include “the peasantry” (Wolf 1966) or laborers who live, subsist, and grow crops for personal consumption on land owned by a master or corporation (Kearney 1996; Lewis 1951; Mintz 1953). Plantation workers are caught within contracts of systematization, classification, and hierarchy through which corporations make claims on much more than their labor but also their home, their family, their free time, etc. (Besky 2014). Because plantation workers live on the plantation in houses provided by the corporation (Mintz 1960) and in kinships often organized by plantation geography (Willford 2014), their entire livelihood (not only their wages) is dependent upon the plantation complex. Of course, in some cases, claims upon the bodies, lives, and future generations of plantation workers were made even more explicit through slavery and bonded labor (Calvão 2016). Additionally, unlike most large-scale farm workers, plantation workers are not hired in an “open labor market:” plantation jobs and livelihoods are passed down generationally and labor is fulfilled by large families who often work in the fields together, across lifetimes (Best 1968; Jain

1970; Whitaker 2016; Lal 1985). Thus, plantations are defined by the permanent presence of “peasants,” or laborers who live and make their homes on plantation land. In places like Fiji—where following the end of their contract Indian indentured laborers were given long term leases to small-scale plots of land to grow sugarcane and other crops, and farm work was a family affair, and leases stayed within families over multiple generations—all Indo-Fijians are either contemporarily or just one/two generations removed from labor within the sugarcane and/or agricultural industries. “Farming” thus becomes the shared lingua franca of Indo-Fijian history and identity. All Indo-Fijians, everywhere and at every time, are “farmers” by ancestry if not birth.

In the classical example of a feudal relationship between the peasant and the landowner, the peasant subsists upon their plot of land with the basic guarantee of necessities (such as food and shelter) provided by the landowner (Silverman 1979). This guarantee forges a complicated relationship of loyalty and belonging between the peasant and the landowner. The plantation claims to provide such necessities, but instead allows the violent extraction of labor without the provision of support that would allow laborers to lay any kind of spiritual, emotional, or ethnic claim over the land they have called home for generations (Mayer 1973). The severing of this contract (the removal of a “subsistence guarantee”) marks one of the major differences between feudal peasantry and plantation labor, and has inspired revolution, resistance, and rebellion among laborers who no longer feel allegiance towards the corporation (Scott 1976). Therefore, life on a plantation deeply impacts moral economies of trust, loyalty, and justice as laborers are always reworking themselves in response to, in opposition to, or in alliance with capitalist and extractive practices. What happens when the Indo-Fijian descendants of Indian plantation laborers lose access to generational homes in cases of land lease expirations and racially

motivated lease terminations at the height of ethnonationalist indigenous politics in Fiji? In this dissertation, I explore how Indo-Fijians conceptualize plantation history as forms of embodied labor that tie them in sacred relationships with the landscape that cannot be denied even in the case of lease terminations, evictions, migrations, industrial decline, or political discrimination. Indo-Fijians identify their belonging to the country via their embodied relation to Fiji as “home/mother-land” rather than participation in the sugarcane industry.

In “Sweetness and Power,” Mintz (1985) discusses how the commodification of black tea, the rising demand for sugar, the making of the plantation complex to mass produce such commodities, and the resultant economic network of capital fueled the Industrial Revolution (elaborated in Williams 1994) and led to the development of systems of mass production, efficiency logics, and profit accumulation. “Sweetness and Power” makes explicit the capitalist relationship between commodities, exchange, value, and labor in the global economic network and frames the plantation (and all the diverse livelihoods, relationships, fantasies, and realities contained within it) as operating within a framework built, supported by, and perpetuating consumer capitalism.

But capitalism is more unstable, more unpredictable, and more ambiguous than such analyses as “Sweetness and Power” would have us believe, and plantation complexes were built on more than “efficiency logics,” or the obsession with extracting as much labor and/or product from a single person/unit in the shortest amount of time (Ho 2005). The plantation takes on temporal forms other than “accelerated time-spaces”, such as waiting, pacing, pause, or delay, especially in intimate social spaces like the home, the bed, or places of worship (Bear et al. 2015). For example, Indo-Fijian syncretic worship of Kaliya-Degei (in which Indo-Fijian Hindus believe that the cosmic snake Kaliya is the same divine being as the snake creation God of

indigenous Fijian mythology), affirms that Fiji is “Ramneek Dweep” of scriptural lore—an island where there is no famine, disease, or lack of resources. Patience and continued faith will reward Indo-Fijian Hindu devotees—descendants of plantation laborers—with an experience of Fiji as paradise. Emergent Hindu theologies redefined the spiritual significance of migration and “laborious” patience and the sacredness of physical work within violent realities of plantation life. Yet another example is of plantation laborers’ subsistence cropping practices, which gave them access to crops for trade with local indigenous villages. After dusk and in the cover of night, Indian plantation laborers and iTaukei villagers met to exchange language, food, and perspectives away from the watchful gaze of plantation overseers. These private encounters at the peripheries of the plantation shape how Indo-Fijian and iTaukei communities come to understand their collective identities in relation to each other. The plantation is not only a site for work and labor extraction but also the framework for relational intimacies and more-than-human cosmologies that place laborers in mythological time. This dissertation’s grounded approach to studying plantation worlds, which privileges the voices of those resisting and attempting to create new potentialities for themselves, reveals that the plantation complex is more variable, less formulaic, and often less recognizable than we might first predict.

Scholars in Black studies have brought renewed attention to the persistent racial logics of the plantation complex (McKittrick 2011, McKittrick 2013, King 2016), in the careful construction of the following arguments: chattel slavery configures the individual as commodity and person as property outside “human” (Wynter 2003); that these stereotypes create and reify ethnic/racial distinctions that are used by corporations/institutions to control, subjugate, and extract from marginalized peoples (Clukey and Wells 2016); that racial stratification systems lead to generational trauma among descendants of laborers (Hartman 2007); and that the legal

structures and political institutions born from the plantation continue to perpetrate violence and inequality in post-colonial worlds (Shange 2019). In Fiji, the sugarcane plantation industry constructed the racial categories of “indigenous” and “Indian”, and the biological and teleological assumptions of each category were used to justify the import of Indian indentured workers for plantation labor, the juridical separation of indigenous and Indian communities in colonial administration, and the geographical segregation and heavily policed boundaries between plantation property lines and indigenous villages. Such physical and legal divisions significantly shaped the ethnic identities of Indo-Fijian and iTaukei communities and cemented racial logics in the administrative, political, and social dimensions of everyday life. But this dissertation argues that in constructing ethnic identities *always-in-relation* (most obviously, defined in opposition to the “other”) on the plantation complex, Indo-Fijian and iTaukei communities participate in mimetic practices that co-opt the imagined “other” in race-bending attempts to produce a shared Fijian identity. To state the critique differently, this dissertation forefronts how plantation racial logics that define Indo-Fijian and iTaukei identity are not taken-for-granted, but actively highlighted, contested, and re-articulated in deliberate efforts to redefine belonging in Fiji. Contextualizing enduring plantation logics in Fiji within frameworks of diaspora, migration, and citizenship make this dissertation about more than race relations, but also transnational formations shaped by histories of colonialism, globalism, and sovereignty movements.

The plantation has been a generative field site for anthropologists to think about: global economic networks, corporations, bureaucracies, and capitalism (Hetherington 2019, Chao 2022); the construction of personhood (Allewaert 2013) through racial categories and racist institutional structures (Trouillot 1988, Stoler 1985, Bourgois 1989); and resistance, rebellion,

and the reconstruction of sovereignty and citizenship (Thomas 2019, Rutherford 2012). In the chapters that follow I explore how the Fijian farmscape is at the lived and conceptual intersections of plantation history and logics, agronomic industrial infrastructures, agricultural spatialization of landscapes, and agrarian cultural identities. The farmscape is both the source and method of imagining Indo-Fijian and indigenous belonging to land, community, and country.

Indigeneity (in Relation)

Elenoa is an iTaukei lead park ranger at the SSDNP, and she grew to be a close friend of mine over the course of my fieldwork. We sat cross legged on the wooden floor of the Ranger staff room, after I'd just finished a brief basic algebra lesson with the rangers to teach them how to convert between different currencies when charging tourists the Park entry fee. I'd heard recently from another interlocutor that an Indo-Fijian sugarcane farmer with land adjacent to Queens Highway near Sigatoka had his lease illegally terminated by the local *mataqali* (indigenous land owning clan unit). Elenoa was from a local iTaukei village, Mayama (pseudonym), and I thought to ask her what she made of the rumors about this disruption of an Indo-Fijian's *mataqali* land lease.

“Hey, you’re talking about Mohan! I know him. He and my grandfather were best friends. We were their neighbors growing up. And yeah, I heard he’s getting kicked out. But the Mayama gang are hopeless anyways. They think they are iTaukei, they are landowners, and the power goes to their head, but they don’t even know the law.”

Her voice grew louder and higher. She shook her head and I could see her lips quivering. I sensed this was personal.

“My own *vuva* in Mayama (patrilineal land owning unit) tried to tell my family to get out of our house and off the land because my father is not from Mayama. But in their selfishness they seem to have forgotten that here in Nadroga the women have power too. Our land is passed to us from our grandmother, who is *Lewe i Nadroga* (descended from the chiefly clan of the region). So when they tried to evict us I gathered all the paper work that showed that my grandmother was from Mayama and *Lewe i Nadroga* and took it to the Taukei Land Trust Board to show that we still had rights to the land. Of course, we did, and my family still lives there.”

“The problem is that all this iTaukei obsession with land owning after the coups means that people have gotten more and more selfish, they are forgetting the real indigenous ways. Like, my grandmother used to tell me that if you needed land, or food, or shelter, someone would always offer you what they could. Like how we did with the Indians. And when there were sugarcane farms you could walk through the plantation, eat some cane, share some food, and continue walking. And now look at what we’ve come to - we live in fear of our own *vuva*. We have traumatized ourselves. So much talk talk talk about land ownership and now we just fight and steal from each other. Our elders would be so ashamed.”

“I think that’s why the local villagers avoided the Park lands. Because when the National Trust came in and told everyone they were making this area into the Sigatoka Sand Dunes National Park (SSDNP), the indigenous told themselves they had to stay away or they would get in trouble, and they have

enough trouble with land among themselves. But we're doing such a good thing now by opening the Park lands to the local people and encouraging them to share resources amongst themselves. I think we are showing them that we are protecting the Park for them not from them. Helping them go back to the truly indigenous way, when we were givers not takers."

For Elenoa, "true" indigeneity lies in a respectful, peaceful, and generous relationship with land, most often exemplified in retold oral histories that praise the friendship between villagers and local Indian sugarcane farmers. While there are few sugarcane plantations left in the Sigatoka area, Elenoa reimagines an agro-forestry conservation project at the SSDNP almost as a contemporary version of a plantation, one that restores values of generosity, cooperation, and altruism among the local community purportedly like in earlier days of indenture and sugarcane farming. Interestingly, Elenoa also argues that the removal of land ownership from the locus of debate or conversation in the agro-forestry project, as it is clear to all stakeholders that the land falls under the boundaries of the National Park, enables younger generations of iTaukei landowners to redefine indigeneity for themselves outside of the high-drama affairs of land disputes. While land ownership is of clear importance to Elenoa—she frequently punctuates her sentences with the phrase "I am iTaukei, I am a landowner" (land ownership through one's *mataqali* is a hallmark of indigeneity in Fiji) to emphasize her knowledge of the local landscape—Elenoa also conceptualizes ancestral indigeneity as fundamentally rooted in morals and values embodied in relation to Indo-Fijian sugarcane farmers. This ethnographic moment with Elenoa encourages me to think about how indigenous knowledge and self-representation in Fiji reflects and includes local plantation histories in a way that strikingly departs from

prevailing ethnonationalist rhetoric that imagines “indigeneity” exclusively outside of Indo-Fijian history or influence.

Discursive practices of marking indigeneity in Fiji are threefold and include: (1) genealogy, which establishes patrilineal descent from a “home” village or kinship group within the Fiji Islands; (2) kinship, which involves placing oneself in relation to others through specific matrilineal or patrilineal kinship terms; and (3) land, which entails claiming ownership of land through the *mataqali* in one's home village and engaging in the *vanua*, or a cosmological relationship with more-than-human elements of the environment. These frameworks are embedded in the everyday cadence of life in Fiji. They affect how you might (as an iTaukei) introduce yourself to new acquaintances and establish “where you are from” (which may be a village of patrilineal connection that you have never lived in or visited), who and how you can be in conversation with specific family members, where you can sit in relation to others present in public and private spaces, what claims to land you can make and where, etc. Because Indo-Fijians are considered to be “outside” of indigeneity and indigenous relation, Indo-Fijians are frequently exempt from such practices and considered in the category of *vulagi* (guest) in daily interactions (unless a kinship relation has been previously established by marriage or close friendship). (For example, when I went to visit Elenoa’s elderly aunt, I gestured to sit down on the floor with Elenoa at the feet of our host but was promptly scolded and made to sit on the couch alongside Auntie while Elenoa remained on the floor, in deference to her Aunt). Indo-Fijians are, however, deeply familiar with these cultural practices and can “read” kinship or village relations between iTaukei community members based on language, conversation, and bodily positioning. Frequently, my Indo-Fijian interlocutors also interchange Hindi terms with Fijian terms (like *vuvale*) to describe their own relations to extended family members; similarly,

my iTaukei interlocutors understand the linguistic markers of relationality among Indo-Fijians (such as *Aja/Aji*, terms for paternal grandparents).

Thus, being “iTaukei” is marked by a continuous embodied, linguistic, and social relation to people and place associated with a home “village” (Overton 1993). Previous scholarship has extensively explored the chiefly and hierarchical kinship structures in indigenous villages in Fiji (Ravuvu 1983, Ravuvu 1988, Lasaqa 1984), more recently framing such social organization as indigenous knowledge that builds “communal resilience” and “adaptive capacity” in the face of natural disasters and environmental crisis (Nakamura and Kanemasu 2020). Studies on iTaukei community governance structures also emphasize indigenous perspectives on education, environment, health, and land rights issues in Fiji (Nabobo-Baba 2006, Ali 2016, Kitolelei et al. 2021). Indo-Fijians are not organized into common ancestry villages, do not have chiefly governance structures within their communities (colloquially referred to as “settlements”), cannot own *mataqali* land, and do not have similar linguistic methods for marking place of “origin”; scholarship that focuses on these cultural distinctions between Indo-Fijian and iTaukei communities further reinforces a racial divide imposed by the plantation system (which disallowed sustained contact between Indian indentured laborers and iTaukei villagers). This dissertation takes a different approach. I trace how these “imagined communities” are in relation to one another, how their “encounter” fundamentally alters the perceptions of self, other, and place in ways that are often obscured by scholarship and politics that frames these communities as discrete (oppositional) entities. Teaiwa writes (2007), “...In an ocean in which roots are strong, where genealogy is the frame, where sharing food can initiate bonds for life, and place always matters...identity-making through cultural consumption takes on a new valence. New kinships are possible.” For Elenoa, indigeneity is impossible without the figure of the Indo-

Fijian, whose friendship exemplifies the “best” of communal social values in iTaukei identity. But imagining Indo-Fijians as kin troubles the ethnonationalist assumptions of indigenous politics. How do Indo-Fijians become “local”, “in-relation”, and “of-place” in Fiji?

Epeli Hau'ofa's "Our Sea of Islands" offers a radical reimagining of the Pacific water and land-scape. By describing the Pacific as a "sea of islands" rather than "islands in a far sea," Hau'ofa shifts the focus on islands as isolated fragments to places deeply interconnected by the ocean (Hau'ofa 1994). Water emerges as an epistemological framework that challenges Eurocentric perspectives by highlighting the unity and fluidity of Pacific identities across vast oceanic spaces (Subramani 2001). The ocean is a living entity that serves as a medium through which stories, traditions, and knowledge are transmitted across generations.

In a post-colonial context, the spatio-temporal framework of the ocean serves as a platform for pan-Pacific indigenous resistance against marginalization and the reclamation of traditional knowledge and cultural sovereignty. Resurgence of interest in navigation and seafaring practices, calls for the demilitarization of islands that were depopulated for nuclear testing and other military activities, and resistance against the assumed environmental precarity and racialized vulnerability of Pacific Islanders are the most obvious examples. But scholars have also thought with *va* and “sea of island” frameworks to theorize diasporic identities, as Pacific Islander migration pathways have reached far beyond the Pacific Ocean. The concept of *va* (as it arises across the Pacific, most notably studied in Samoan, Tongan, and Rotuman contexts) refers to the relational space that exists “in-between” places and people (Lilomaiaava-Doktor 2009, Anae 1998). Scholars such as Albert Wendt (1996), Melani Anae (2010), and Vilsoni Hereniko (Hereniko 2004) emphasize *va* as a metaphysical connection to home and place that is maintained through social interactions in the Pacific diaspora.

The ocean connects Pacific Islanders to each other, ancestral knowledges, mythologies, etc. This dissertation asks: how does this oceanic epistemological framework—that connects people across vast physical and metaphorical distances—expand to include Indo-Fijian experiences of place? Put another way, how does *va* make space for other conceptions of diasporic movement?

Satendra Nandan, a revered Indo-Fijian poet, writes in his seminal piece “Lines Across Black Waters” (1997):

“Death is the dearest of all friends.

Tathastu: so be it.

...

Kalapani, black waters, a cross across the seven seas

...

Sharpen your cane knives

We, too, have ancestors in our lives.

...

Their journeys were made:

Migration *is* reincarnation.”

In this dissertation, I consider how histories of indenture and indigeneity converge to produce local knowledge of Fiji as “home”. The ocean is death, and rebirth: Indian ancestors reincarnated in Fiji. This metaphysical encounter, facilitated by the oceanic journey across the *kalapani* (black waters) endured by indentured laborers, ties Indo-Fijian history, spirits, and bodies with the Pacific Islands. If the ocean is *va* between islands, between generations, between cultures and

languages—can the ocean facilitate a meeting of Indo-Fijian and iTaukei claims to belonging in Fiji?

Overview of Chapters

This dissertation explores how Indo-Fijians operationalize narratives of plantation labor and contemporary farmwork to produce a non-settler local identity that reconfigures relations between diaspora, indigeneity, and nationalism. Through multiple government coups and violent anti-Indian rhetoric, indigenous politics in Fiji has repeatedly attempted to render Indo-Fijians, whose ancestors arrived en masse to Fiji as indentured laborers to work on sugarcane plantations, alien to lands they consider home. Drawing from ethnographic research among farmers in the Sigatoka Valley, I demonstrate how Indo-Fijians imagine farm practices as simultaneous projects in nation-building, heritage/traditional knowledge preservation, and environmental protection. Thus, Indo-Fijian farmers simultaneously mirror and challenge ethnonationalist interpretations of indigeneity to produce a local identity that protests the exclusivity of belonging in Fiji today.

Engaging theoretical frameworks in historical consciousness and geographic imaginaries, I introduce and situate the Sigatoka Valley as a “farmscape,” a site where colonial pasts, racial tensions, and climate anxieties are diversely (re)imagined through agriculture. In Chapter 1, I draw from ethnographic work on an agro-forestry biodiversity conservation initiative at the Sigatoka Sand Dunes National Park (SDDNP) to examine how plantation logics of land distribution and property-defined personhood shape how locals design and envision shared environmental futures. As park rangers, government administrators, and local community members imagine the growth and impact of a “foraging” forest of fruit trees at the border between the SDDNP and the local informal settlement Kulukulu, they reframe the sand dunes

area as a site of food secure and self-sufficient futures. This local confidence in soil fertility and agricultural capacity of the sand dunes is, however, in direct contrast to apocalyptic climate change rhetoric, soil sample reports of diminishing nutritional quality, and conservation discourse that frames the sand dunes as a “barren” place. The locals’ (both Indo-Fijian and iTaukei) belief in the agricultural promise of sandy soils reconfigures “barrenness” as a marker of sociocultural disruption (ethnic land disputes), rather than an environmental quality of land. Thus, a boundary which clearly delineates and organizes claims to land between the Park and local residents is essential to imagining political, economic, and ecological possibilities. Even as the liberal logic of the plantation persists, it produces a shared “agricultural consciousness” among Indo-Fijian and iTaukei locals that challenges representations of Fiji as a place that is slowly dying. I argue that sugarcane plantation history shapes both how boundary construction/land claims and agricultural productivity/resilience become the terms of environmental imagination in Sigatoka. In this chapter that reveals how and why agricultural development becomes synonymous with Fijian environmental thinking, I position the Sigatoka Valley as a place of expanding relational possibilities between iTaukei and Indo-Fijians that imagines Fijian futures outside of categorical and agonistic ethnic accounting.

Chapter 2 unpacks one of the central assumptions of Fijian “agricultural consciousness”: that farm labor can turn desertified landscapes—like quickly destabilizing sand dune—into livable places. In this chapter, I study how colonial-era notions of “hard work” persist in racially charged discourse that shapes Indo-Fijians’ claims to local identity through narratives of nation-building plantation labor and landscape-tethering agricultural work. I open with the question of how British colonial administrators came to choose Indian laborers as the “ideal” plantation worker, in comparison to local indigenous populations. Imagined as preconditioned colonial

subjects familiar with the “demanding” nature of task based work, Indians were considered cheap, efficient, and resilient laborers. This racialization of Indian bodies and social values was in opposition to the assumed “primitivity” of local indigenous populations who were fashioned as “premodern” and fixed to natal landscapes in such ways that reduced their economic resourcefulness and proficiency in industrial labor. The “primitive” indigenous villagers and Indian “effective but detached” indentured laborers were effectively isolated from each other on the plantation complex, cementing a divisive plantation racial logic rooted in settler colonial ideals of “work”. I consider how contemporary Indo-Fijian farmers reconceptualize plantation history and agricultural work as “nation-building”, affirming Indo-Fijian cultural relevance to local infrastructural and economic development. But agricultural labor does not only tie Indo-Fijian farmers to the nation-state; it also ties them to land in narratives that emphasize how farm work keeps Indo-Fijians in constant physical and cosmological relation to “Mother Earth.” As farmer becomes child and soil becomes mother, Fiji manifests as the “motherland” for Indo-Fijians who are attempting to claim political, social, and cultural belonging in response to indigenous ethnonationalist politics. Yet, these Indo-Fijian farmers face a glaring paradox: claiming belonging through “work” always puts them outside of a native relation to landscape, as defined by plantation racial logics that imagine indigeneity as an inherent rootedness independent of form/product of labor. A refusal to work among Indo-Fijians farmers, then, constitutes an attempt to embody a native relation to landscape that performatively blurs the distinctions between Indo-Fijian and indigenous identity. The failures and excess of this mimetic practice highlight the limitations of defining Fijian belonging according to colonial racialized assumptions of indigenous primitivity and Indian apathy to place.

Chapter Three explores how Indo-Fijians use agricultural “miracles” and unexplained phenomena on the farm to affirm their metaphysical relation to the landscape, paralleling indigenous articulations of land custodianship. I begin with a retelling of the syncretic Indo-Fijian Hindu mythology of Kaliya, a cosmic snake who lives in the Nakauvadra Mountains in Fiji and who Indo-Fijian Hindus believe to be the same as Degei, the Creator god of ancient Fijian indigenous religion. Indo-Fijians draw from this syncretic religious mythology to emphasize an ancestral descendancy from deities that inhabit the local landscape, and articulate their experience of agricultural miracles (such as flood avoidance, expedient regrowth of crops following unexpected destruction, or the flourishing of plant species in non-ideal environments) as evidence of this “primordial” (ancestral) relation to the cosmic and physical landscape of Fiji. But local iTaukei Christian paradigms resist claiming Degei within their religious practice as this was explicitly maligned as “witchcraft” by 19th century Christian missionaries and is now commonly discussed in indigenous communities as pre-Christian “naivete,” of which cannibalism is the prime example. So, although Hindu worship of Kaliya/Degei separates Indo-Fijians from Fijian Christianity and political belonging (as exclusivist indigenous ethnonationalism becomes more closely aligned with Christian fundamentalist politics), Indo-Fijians consider their religious practices as decolonial acts of “rememory” that preserve the sacredness of local deities, landscape, and also - indigenous cultural heritage. I problematize how the narrativization of agricultural success as proof of Indo-Fijian metaphysical connections reproduces Fijian farmscapes as Hindu landscapes, where Indo-Fijians can articulate a uniquely local place-based identity.

Recent environmentalism initiatives in “disaster resilience” and “sustainability” in the Pacific have turned to indigenous/traditional knowledge systems to envision what environmental

restoration and adaptation might look like in a time of climate change. Because traditional knowledge practices have been politicized in ethnonationalist rhetoric as a return to pre-contact/pre-colonial “indigenous” lifestyles, this focus often obscures plantation histories and how they have irreversibly altered and created “new” landscapes. In Chapter Four, I take a phenomenological approach to studying Indo-Fijian sensory knowledges of the farmscape, often expressed through weather forecasting, seedling selection, and taste. I argue that local knowledge in Sigatoka draws from Indo-Fijian embodied knowledges and plantation memory and thus becomes a dynamic record of landscape transformation, introduced plants, and built environments, challenging colonialist interpretations of indigenous knowledge as ethnobiology limited to endemic species and ecosystems. Indo-Fijian farm work and the embodied knowledge about food, land, and labor that it produces redefines Fiji as a place of many reworldings, a landscape that has been changing much before the media turned its lens to the Pacific for jarring visuals of rapidly devolving environments. In conceptualizing Fiji as an always “new” place, Indo-Fijian farmers challenge who and what can be considered as “local”.

Thus, agricultural histories, cosmologies, infrastructures, and labor practices in the Sigatoka Valley are the terms through which iTaukei and Indo-Fijian communities imagine diverse forms of belonging, such as claims to land as property, political representation, ancestral descendancy from mythological deities, and local expertise/knowledge of the landscape. How agriculture comes to loom so large in the imagination of geography, environment, politics, and ethnicity is intimately tied to the history of Fiji as a British sugarcane plantation colony. While plantation racial, industrial, and infrastructural logics have enabled persistent ethnonationalist politics that racialize “indigeneity” as premodern and discriminate against Indo-Fijians, plantation history has also produced an “agricultural consciousness” that inspires local visions

for “good” political and environmental futures shared by Indo-Fijian and iTaukei communities. In this dissertation, I unravel the puzzle of how plantation logics produced and continue to reify racial divisions between iTaukei and Indo-Fijian communities, how Indo-Fijians articulate agricultural livelihoods as claims to belonging in the nation-state and connection to the metaphysical landscape, how these claims destabilize the central assumptions of indigeneity and challenge ethnonationalist politics in Fiji, and how this imagination of landscape in agricultural terms produces a shared sense of environmental and economic resilience in the face of political and purported climate crisis.

Methods

Fieldwork for this project was conducted in 2022 and 2023, although I have been visiting Fiji since 2019. While in the Sigatoka town area, I lived with Charvi Aunty and her extended family: her son Sumit, her daughter-in-law Palak, and her two grandchildren. When I first arrived in Sigatoka in 2019 for preliminary field experience, Charvi Aunty and her husband, Dr. Ekambar, had invited me into their home on the recommendation of Dr. Daksh (Charvi’s brother). Dr. Daksh lives and works in the San Francisco Bay Area and is a close friend of my immediate family. (I was born and raised in the San Francisco Bay Area in an immigrant community with many shared relations and connections between “brown” families. The experience of growing up in this diasporic enclave motivates much of my broader ethnographic questions about community and solidarity building in marginalized populations).

In the two weeks that I stayed with the Narra family, on my very first visit to Fiji, Ekambar Uncle passed away from a heart attack. The coming weeks were tumultuous for the whole family, and I was unsure of where to place myself. I told Sumit that I would find another

place to stay in Sigatoka while the family was grieving; I did not want them to have the additional burden of looking after a house guest, especially when extended family from all over the world would soon be arriving for the funeral. But Sumit specifically requested me to stay in the family home, “especially because we’ll need help with the kids” (at the time, they were 5 and 1 years old). So, I lived with a family whose guiding patriarch had passed and I occupied sacred physical and emotional space as the family was reorganizing themselves in Ekambar Uncle’s absence. In those quiet, sad, desperate moments, our intimacy grew very quickly and deeply.

Ekambar Uncle was an established primary care physician in the Sigatoka area and it seemed that all of Sigatoka, and much of Fiji, came through the house before, during, and after the funeral to offer their condolences. The privileged (female) space I occupied in the house at a time of mourning—always close to Charvi Aunty or the kids, prepping foods in the kitchen to help with hosting visitors, even participating in funeral rites usually reserved only for immediate family members—signaled to all that I was a “Narra” girl. (I use the term “girl” here intentionally: it is precisely because I was young, single, and female that I was entrusted with the tasks of child care and enfolded within the reciprocity of family obligations. Because I was young and female I was perceived as non-threatening and welcomed into the home; because I was not married (single), and did not have a family (or responsibilities) of my own, I could become a part of theirs.) My induction into the family was silent but complete; and most of Sigatoka would come to recognize me as a distant relation (or family friend) of the Narras of Sigatoka in the years afterwards.

The Narras are well connected across Fiji and my close relationship with them allowed for easy access to interlocutors across geographic spaces in the Sigatoka Valley. Charvi Aunty was born and raised on a farm in the Sigatoka Valley; her early introductions to Indo-Fijian

farmers living in the Valley were crucial in identifying my first interlocutors. But an unsupervised, single but of-marriageable-age, and American-accented female researcher working with farmers and on farms was an anomalous novelty in this rural town. For many of my interlocutors, it seemed that they could not “understand” my project until they “understood” me—and my unique position as an unattached and independent woman living in Sigatoka. In most cases, my relation to the Narras afforded me a more readily understandable kinship position within an established local family. My integration into the Sigatoka Valley was primarily through my identity as a Narra family member, and it is in this process that I came to realize the relational stakes of a shared Fijian sense of place.

While living in town with the Narra family, I also became deeply embedded in the Sigatoka Sand Dunes National Park (SSDNP) through my collegiality with Jason, the SSDNP park manager. When I returned to Sigatoka in 2022, “self-sufficiency” and food security were key topics in Fijian environmental conservation and agricultural institutional discourse, and Jason wanted to incorporate these themes in a grant application (IUCN (International Union for the Conservation of Nature) Kiwa Initiative) he was writing for a climate change intervention project at the SSDNP. Jason knew I was in Fiji and asked for my help with the grant writing; this engagement with the park—which I was at first doing as a friendly favor to Jason—rapidly engrossed me and the SSDNP became one of three major field sites in my project. At first, to help contextualize the Park in day-to-day activities and write a stronger grant application for the SSDNP, I joined the ranger team as an assistant and participated in all ranger responsibilities, including Park patrols, tour guiding, and litter clean up. Through this intensive experience I learned more about the politics of environmentalism and development in Fiji and how it frames local environmental imagination. Once the SSDNP was awarded the Kiwa Initiative grant, I

participated and observed in the agro-forestry phase of the climate change intervention project, where I helped plan project goals, organize community workshops, and write project reports. Not only did this experience offer me greater insight into the agricultural and environmental history of the Sigatoka region, but it also introduced me to the local iTaukei (indigenous) villagers who lived and worked in Sigatoka. The SSDNP rangers and community workshop participants (most of whom are iTaukei) became key interlocutors throughout this project, helping me understand how agricultural identities in Sigatoka are produced in conversation between environmentalist discourse, iTaukei cultural politics, and Indo-Fijian history.

Because I was interested in agricultural development projects in the region, an interlocutor introduced me to Sita, an office worker at the Sigatoka Town Council implementing a UNDP (United Nations Development Program) funded subsistence farming/food security project in local “informal” settlements. (These settlements are considered informal because many of the residents are Indo-Fijians displaced from their homes at the expiration of sugarcane/agricultural land leases and are living in without any formal documentation of land rights.) Sita introduced me to several interlocutors within Kulukulu, the informal settlement immediately bordering the Sigatoka Sand Dunes, where I conducted ethnographic research on local foraging and subsistence farming practices in association with the Sigatoka Sand Dunes National Park.

Sita grew up in Nabitu and also invited me to live with her immediate family—who have been large scale commercial agriculturalists for generations—for further research on the agricultural industry in the Sigatoka Valley. In Nabitu, the Singh family welcomed me affectionately and enfolded me into the daily chores and responsibilities of farm work immediately. I spent much time in the fields, planting and harvesting vegetables alongside my

interlocutors. It is now very familiar to me: the finger feel of dirt and seedlings between my fingers, the smell of urine as the horse-pulled farm equipment goes past me, the stinging sun that burns my face and hands. At first, I was consumed with safety precautions and increasing my speed in the planting “lines”—I bought personal protective equipment like gloves, boots, and hats from secondhand stores in Sigatoka and spent all my energy trying to match the efficiency with which the laborers next to me sorted, planted, and harvested crops. Sita’s family (her mother, father, and brothers) showed me the ropes and though I was an enthusiastic learner, I made frequent (often hilarious) mistakes. But these mistakes drew my ethnographic attention to the forms of embodied expertise that my interlocutors had from generations of agricultural work; this careful noting of ingestive and other sensorial practices motivated my interest in the phenomenological aspects of farm work in the Sigatoka Valley. How the bodily experience of agricultural land, history, and labor produces local knowledge became a central question in my research following these immersive experiences on Indo-Fijian commercial farms.

When I was in Sigatoka town, I worked with local farmers—most of whom were part-time commercial or small-scale subsistence farmers. Because Sigatoka is located along the tourism corridor called the “Coral Coast,” with a high concentration of upscale hotels and resorts, many people work in the tourism industry and farm on the weekends. It is in my experience working with such “hobby” farmers that I learned how people imagine agriculture as necessary to living a “good” life. Many of my interlocutors repeatedly told me that they did not “need” to spend their limited free time bending over seedlings and performing manual labor; their incomes from local resorts or jobs in town were “enough” to secure financial stability. Yet, they all found themselves sweating in the hot sun: some trying to experiment with new crops to see what could grow in Sigatoka; some attempting to scale agricultural export businesses to

clients in Fijian diasporas; some hoping to use land to prevent others from claiming it; others trying to grow food for fermentation and preservation that would sustain their family through the flooding-induced food scarcity of the wet season. In my time spent with hobby and subsistence farmers, I learned how farming in Sigatoka is a more-than economic activity, but also a practice that mediates environmental precarities, ethnic tensions, and regional identities.

My fieldwork spanned across farms and backyard gardens in the Sigatoka Valley, colloquially named the “Salad Bowl” (in reference to the agricultural industry in the area). Around Sigatoka Town, I worked with hobby, subsistence, and small-scale farmers (less than 20 acres of farmland); in the Sigatoka Valley highlands, I worked with large-scale commercial farmers with dozens of acres in farmland; and at the SSDNP, I worked with rangers, Park management staff, and local community members to study agro-development projects and environmental conservation initiatives in the area. (All interlocutors’ names in this dissertation are pseudonyms, unless the interlocutor specifically requested otherwise.)

When I first came to Fiji in 2019 and visited Charvi Aunty and Ekambar Uncle, their son Sumit asked me at the kitchen table: “So, what are you doing here?” I gulped *salifa* (soursop) juice and started to hesitantly talk through the initial formulations of my project. “I’m interested in the decline of the sugarcane industry and how this has impacted local agricultural economies...”

Sumit stopped me before I could continue. “Oh God, another person who is going to write about how sad and desperate we all are? I am so tired of reading about how terrible *girmit* (indenture) was. I’m so tired of all the coups and all the talk about coups. Can you please write something about how we are still here, and happy, and smiling? Write about the food we eat and the jokes we tell each other.”

Later that night, the Narras were hosting a family get together in their backyard. Charvi Aunty had set up a large *tawa* (cooktop) and was making *dosas* (lentil crepes) for everyone to grab hot as they came off the pan and eat with fresh *naryal* (coconut) chutney. Ekambar Uncle and his friends were setting up a karaoke machine in the corner; soon, off-tune renditions of old Bollywood songs from 70s and 80s would reverberate through the back alleys of Sigatoka town. A few drinks later, conversations got louder and everyone started dancing in the paved center of the yard. These were the first of many moments of joy that I participated in and witnessed in Fiji.

In writing this dissertation, I have struggled with how to represent and discuss the lasting impacts of plantation history on contemporary livelihoods, without writing about, as Sumit describes, “how sad and desperate we [Fijians] all are.” As a researcher, I challenge the positivist claim that ethnic markers, such as “indigeneity” or “Indo-Fijian”, are inaccurate and the invalidating assumption that they are only political. My broader goals are to expand scholarship on how narrative constructions of ethnicity shape how people dare to imagine post-colonial futures, whether environmental, economic, or social. This approach to ethnographic and theoretical analysis is crucial in highlighting the lived experiences of marginalized populations as they produce meaning despite capitalist “ruin.”

In a town like Sigatoka, where agriculture is pervasive in its industrial, social, and metaphorical forms across time and space, foraging for wild *choraiya bhaji* at banks of the Sigatoka River, planting cabbage seedlings in the Sigatoka highlands, laboring on farms without fear of injury or sickness because of the cosmic protection of local deities, and theorizing plantation labor as local knowledge in and of Fiji are quotidian practices that frame how Indo-Fijian communities embody their connection to the landscape. In the following pages, I uncover the paradox of how plantation logics reproduce the racial frameworks for indigenous

ethnonationalism and industrial infrastructures for resource extraction, while plantation memory simultaneously produces a sense of place that challenges exclusively indigenous claims to belonging and narratives of environmental crisis. Farming, then, underpins both histories of marginalization and transformative post-colonial imagination of place and identity in Fiji.

Chapter 1 – Plantation Liberalism and Agricultural Consciousness on the Fijian Farmscape

Introduction

It had been a long week at the Sigatoka Sand Dunes National Park (SSDNP), where I served as a project consultant for a climate change intervention project funded by the International Union for the Conservation of Nature (IUCN). The team of rangers at the SSDNP was attempting to plan logistics for the upcoming “agro-forestry” phase of the project, where quickly destabilizing sand dunes in the Park were to be reforested with fruit trees and native plants. Prior to the arrival of sugarcane, these dunes had been home to a vibrant tropical dry forest ecosystem, small sections of which continue to survive in protected areas of the SSDNP. The “agro-forestry” project was framed as a four part attempt to: 1) conserve native plants and local biodiversity; 2) control and prevent sand destabilization that threatens local homes with increasingly severe sandstorms; 3) protect and preserve sand dunes which safeguard local communities from rising sea levels and oceanic storms; and 4) increase food security among locals who frequently forage for fruits and other forest resources in the Park.

Jason (SSDNP Park Manager), Kalesi (SSDNP Project Specialist), and I had recently returned from an off-trail hike into the less traversed corners of the Park, mapping which areas of the sand dunes were to be used as “demonstration plots” in the implementation phase of the agro-forestry project. I followed behind the group as Jason led us all to the slopes immediately bordering a local informal settlement, Kulukulu. The agro-forestry project plan was to grow a forest of native fruit trees on these slopes immediately adjacent to the community, to protect dunes against sand destabilization and improve the long-term food security of local residents.

Where just a week before there had been a thick of waist-high grassland, now there remained the repeating black and brown tones of charred soil, interrupted only by the dull yellow color of burnt foliage. A fire from a neighboring home's routine trash burning had escaped onto the slope and blackened the sand dunes immediately adjacent to the community; this was a frequent occurrence in the dry season. Jason pointed towards the houses at the bottom of the slope.

“Maybe once the agro-forestry project has been implemented and seedlings planted along this stretch, we'll have an effective natural border that marks this as Park land, and people will stop disturbing the landscape here with their irresponsible burns, illegal livestock agriculture, and hastily cut foot trails that carve into the sand dunes. Let's hope that the boundary gives our forest a fighting chance to survive.”

Jason imagined that in a few years' time, the mature trees were to double as a “natural” boundary between the Park and the local community in Kulukulu.

Upon our return to the ranger station, we splashed water on our sweaty faces and attempted to brush sand off our legs, but as usual, the grains stuck to our skin despite our best efforts. While cell signal rarely reached our little corner of Sigatoka, today Jason was lucky enough to be able to check his email. The soil report had come in from the Ministry of Agriculture—we'd been waiting on this to determine which plants would grow best along the sand dunes bordering Kulukulu. Kalesi and I lifted ourselves off the cool timber of the station porch and walked into the office. Jason sat at his computer, his eyes scanning numbers. He didn't say a word, and handed his computer to Kalesi. Kalesi sat silently as well. Curious, I sneaked a peek at the paperwork over Kalesi's shoulder. The numbers were clear: Alkaline soils with low organic matter and very low levels of plant-available phosphorus, potassium, and nitrogen. My

heart dropped through my chest and I feared the worst for the SSDNP team. These were, according to the Ministry's report, impossibly barren soils. Would the poor results on the soil sample report limit, or worse, halt project funding as the IUCN reconsidered the feasibility of the agro-forestry project?

Jason sighed in quiet frustration.

"I knew this would happen: science will always say that sandy soils are bad for agriculture. And now we might have to convince people at the IUCN that this project will still work. But how do I explain that I know the plants will grow here? I'm not worried about the productivity of the soil; I know that these sands can grow forests, I've seen it before myself. The soil is not our problem.

Protecting and maintain our boundary is."

Apparently, sand and its poor scores in the soil report did not deter Jason and the Park team's growing ambitions for the agro-forestry project. Instead, and in direct opposition to recommendations offered within the soil sample report, Jason retained his faith that the Sigatoka Sand Dunes held the agricultural promise of regeneration. Constructing, maintaining, and a re-enforcing a boundary between the local community and Park lands, was, however, an assumed prerequisite. There are two (competing) senses of the soil here: one grounded in agricultural technologies, soil science, and chemical measurements; another rooted in a social, legal, and moral landscape of more-than-human relations between plants, food, local community members, property lines, and plantation history. For Jason, soil health is a relational measurement, not a standalone quality that can be determined by laboratory testing.

This ethnographic interaction prompts a set of questions about the social and historical context of environmental imagination in Fiji that guide this chapter: how do locals in Sigatoka—

SSDNP Park rangers, Kulukulu residents, and other Indo-Fijian and iTaukei (indigenous) interlocutors—contest and challenge globally imposed narratives of landscape degradation, climate change apocalypse, and impossible futures? Why, for Jason, does fertile vegetative growth require the active boundary maintenance of land sequestered under a specific title or name? How does agricultural work within and in compliance of a boundary become reconceptualized as land stewardship? And how does local confidence in soil fertility produce an agricultural consciousness and national identity that centers farm work as Fiji’s unique resilience to environmental and social crisis? The perceived “work” of the boundary in protecting and preserving landscapes, and the confidence in soil fertility specifically in the context of agricultural productivity, are two main themes that organize this chapter.

In the first section of this chapter, I chart the historical genealogy and logic of “plantation liberalism” (Paredes 2024), an agricultural and industrial form and conceptual framework that organizes Fiji’s current land management issues and approach to environmental justice. I show how farmers consider the widespread transformation of fertile agricultural landscapes into grasslands not simply as a matter of land becoming barren—as measured in surveys of dwindling carbon, phosphorus, and changing soil chemistry—but rather, a legacy of land disputes, dispossession, and ongoing racial tensions between Indo-Fijian and iTaukei communities. In doing so they challenge narratives that attribute the country’s ecological challenges solely to climate change or over-cultivation, a narrative that has outsize purchase in a time in which climate change is imperiling island nations. I outline the historical plantation context of racialized land use policies and post-indenture land allotment for Indian laborers and their Indo-Fijian descendants, which produced and continues to influence a neoliberal logic that ties land stewardship to land proprietorship, closely linking the properties of land to the way that land

becomes property. This process is inseparable from the diverse Indo-Fijian vs. indigenous racializations that explode into political debate in one election and coup after another in Fiji, where resurgent nativist ethnonationalisms continuously pose the Indo-Fijian population as “outsiders” in Fiji. To call this a “plantation” liberalism firmly situates land, indigeneity, and race in relation to land as a necessarily bounded property whose physical properties, in turn, disclose multiple ways of speaking to the histories and futures of indigeneity and indenture. By examining the historical context of the sugarcane industry's rise and fall, the afterlives of plantation infrastructure, and the ongoing struggle for land claims and access steeped in indigenous ethnonationalist discourse, we can understand how “land” becomes a contested political space that shapes local approaches to environmental challenges and land management practices.

Jason’s confidence in the sandy soil’s ability to bloom frames the second part of this chapter, where I critically examine and propose the concept of “agricultural consciousness”, a Fijian habitus that encapsulates the shared local belief in the enduring fertility of soil as a safeguard against environmental, political, social crisis. While challenging Western narratives of the Pacific as isolated, vulnerable, and barren, agricultural consciousness also produces a distinctive rhetoric of Fijian self-sufficiency rooted in the resurgence of indigenous and local ecological knowledge, traditional farming methods and plantation-derived subsistence farming techniques, and local resourcefulness with found and foraged organic materials. Drawing from scholarship that theorizes resilience as a “site for gestating...new visions of postcolonial recovery” (Bonilla 2020), I argue that discourse about Fijian self-sufficiency as a counter point to Western capitalism and exploitation is a dynamic social force that bridges Indo-Fijian and iTaukei communities in imagining shared environmental and political futures. I think about the

multiple discursive, affective, and material ways that soil fertility becomes a site through which other figurations of ethnonationalist relations are possible.

As I write this, volunteers from schools, offices, foreign study abroad programs, and local villages in Sigatoka are pouring into the SSDNP, cane knives in their hands as they slash into the overgrown bush on the slopes bordering Kulukulu. As one person clears a path forward, another runs behind them with a small shovel, digging holes six feet apart for another to fill with seedlings of mango, tamarind, and local fruit and nut trees donated by the Ministry of Agriculture. Drone shots reveal the hauntingly plantation-like grids chiseled onto these slopes—rows measured six feet apart, with six feet of distance in between each seedling. In Sigatoka, environmental futures are already envisioned with planting lines stretching towards the horizon, etched onto the landscape. These, together, constitute a distinctive farmscape shaped by histories of plantation labor, the after effects of agricultural industrialization, and shifting features of the climate. The cadence and rhythm of farming seasons, the sweet smell of moist soil after heavy rains, the humid heat that accelerates vegetation growth from sand dunes to backyard gardens, as well as ecological surveys that pit designations of poor soil quality with Fijian determinations to make land arable – all this enables a reimagining of who and what Fiji is and can be. I end with the dynamic tension at play: liberal plantation logics of land proprietorship continue to shape the contours of land stewardship along divisive racial lines, while local confidence in the fertility of Fijian soils produces a shared agricultural consciousness and collective feeling of resilience in the face of environmental and political crisis.

Part 1: Grassland-ification

Savannah grasslands are common in Fiji. The yellow-green stalks of grass blow lazily in the wind in waves that ripple across vast landscapes—expanses of land which were once sugarcane farms, and centuries before, dense tropical dry forests. Grass is a signal of the colonial and postcolonial histories of land use, as well as a medium through which those pasts become ecologically into the future. Quickly, the grass covers the remnants of abandoned houses, the plantation quarters of Fiji’s first indentured laborers and the homes from which Indo-Fijians were displaced in times of heightened political and racial tension; they grow on the squishy soil of mixed sand and clay, demonstrating the resilience of plantation ecologies, in both their persistence and ruination; quietly, they grow along the King and Queen’s Road, the one lane highway that circumambulates the entirety of Viti Levu, the main island of Fiji.

Agricultural and soil specialists in Fiji describe these grasslands as the result of years of overcultivation, monocropping, and slash and burn land clearing methods condoned by the sugarcane industry, which have left Fijian soils severely depleted and unable to support diverse forms of plant life (Morrison and Gawander 2016, Morrison 2019, Mahadevan 2008). They are leftovers of the plantation complex, an engine of ecological fragmentation. In scientific literature, popular media, and climate intervention rhetoric, discussion about Fiji’s rapid environmental degradation inevitably concludes in gestures of concern for “barren” or “infertile” landscapes (Susumu et al. 2023, Ali 2020). Bearing the heavy weight of histories of soil extraction in a colonial plantation industry, this environmental discourse suggests the impossibility of life and growth in a land slowly dying (Lyons 2022, Belson 2018).

And yet, among farmers in the Sigatoka Valley, not once did an interlocutor express fear – or even, the observation – that soils were tired and could no longer sustain subsistence or commercial crops. “Barren-ness” is a deficient social theory of landscape, one that forecloses

both the history of labor migration and the possible effects of agricultural work. Sigatoka is a small agricultural town halfway between the metropolitan tourist center of Nadi and the capital city of Suva. In the early 1980s, at the peak of the sugarcane industry's domestic and global economic influence (Reddy 2003), Sigatoka was a major producer of sugarcane among town areas and cities in Fiji. While decades of political instability, lack of infrastructural maintenance, and loss of preferential trade agreements decimated the sugar industry (Dean 2022), local commercial farmers diversified their crops and Sigatoka soon became an agricultural powerhouse, lovingly nicknamed the "Salad Bowl." Famous for its temperate weather, intermediate ecology between the dry leeward zone and wet windward zone on Viti Levu, and resulting ideal growing conditions, farmers in the Sigatoka Valley fulfill nearly all domestic agricultural needs and have also built a thriving infrastructure for agricultural export of specialty crops such as pawpaw, taro, cassava, kava, and bongo chilis (Ministry of Agriculture 2020).

The region's famous farms are concentrated along the parallel Valley and Kava Nagasau Roads, which run alongside the northern and southern riverbanks of the eponymous Sigatoka River. During the planting season, rain from the evening before will have left the lingering aroma of sweet, wet Earth and the perfect moist texture for seedlings to root strongly into the ground. By morning, a faint smell of urine will hang in the air as horses are walked to plots, outfitted with ancient looking iron plows as most farmers still turn and prepare land for the planting season without automated and/or machine equipment. Planting in the transition between the wet and dry season means paying careful attention to the weather: if you plant too early, the small seedlings *guljayenge*, or will melt into the earth; if you plant too late in the season, you'll need to prepare for additional labor in watering crops as there is no irrigation infrastructure in the highlands of the Valley. By harvest season, the sun will have dried the Earth and little fruit

bearing plants will have sprung up between cracked soil. The Sigatoka River's water content will have reduced significantly; the raging rapids will seem less violent than a few months earlier. Before, farmers crafted traditional *bilibili* rafts to transport produce down from the highlands via the Sigatoka River and into the Town's famous vegetable market; these days, their descendants drive lorries on potholed dirt roads that trace the gentle curvature of the River.

On a harvesting day when I was up in the highlands living with my host family in Nabitu, I woke early, before the rooster broke my sleep. Nabitu is the last Indo-Fijian settlement along Kava Nagasau Road, after which there are only small sparsely populated iTaukei villages. In the dark, I packed a light overnight bag and tiptoed my way through the tin farmhouse to meet Sojan Bhaiya outside. The evening before, I had helped my host family pack vegetables into large white *bastas* or bags and tie them onto the bed of the farm lorry. This morning, we were going to make the trek down to Sigatoka and then onwards to Suva, the capital, to sell yesterday's harvest.

Dawn broke as Sojan and I descended from the highlands. My body was numb from intense jostling as the truck ran over pothole after pothole. As we neared town, I could only see grass on my left and right sides and sometimes the blur of a dilapidated building. The orange-pink light of the rising sun spread a warm golden hue through and above the blades of grass. I leaned my head through the open window hoping to catch the scent of an ocean breeze as we neared the coast. Sojan Bhaiya interrupted my reverie when we passed another old house.

"I remember the old farmers that used to live here—this used to be a large Indo-Fijian community. These grasslands used to be some of the most productive farms you've ever seen—sugarcane, pawpaw, vegetables, anything you can imagine. But after 1987, these families either had their leases broken or not renewed by the local *mataqali* (or local indigenous landowning

clan unit), and they all went overseas trying to escape the Indian discrimination here. The local *mataqali* ransacked their homes and left this area to become bush.” I turned towards Sojan Bhaiya. His face, normally young and bright, had hardened and the creases on his forehead more pronounced. His grip on the steering wheel tightened as he swerved to avoid yet another pothole. I turned back to the window to look out towards the grassland. His voice traveled across the length of the space between us: “This bush is all that survives of that community and their legacy. Doesn’t the land look like it has so much more to give?”

For Sojan Bhaiya, grasslands—termed “bush” in local languages of Fiji—are not the mark of tired soil but rather a socio-political-environmental process of land dispossession (Kumari and Nakano 2016), where locals (both Indo-Fijian and indigenous) lose access or claim to land and are unable to steward the landscape to produce meaningful subsistence or commercial crops. It is not the content or quality of soil that dictates the possibility for life on the landscape, but rather the local’s ability (or lack thereof) to claim access to land by establishing, protecting, and maintaining a stable boundary.

Part 2: Liberal Plantation Logics

“Plantationocene”, and its Critiques

Recent anthropological interest about the environmental impacts of plantations—one of which includes the grasslandification of forest habitats, as outlined above—have animated the rise of the “Plantationocene” conceptual framework. At a roundtable conversation titled “Anthropologists are Talking – About the Anthropocene” (transcript published, Haraway et al. 2016) Donna Haraway exclaimed “We need to call [this era] the Plantationocene, forget the Capitalocene [and the Anthropocene]! The people that I know who use ‘Anthropocene’

emphasize history from the mid-18th century forward, and take the use of fossil fuel as the key historical moment. But I think we are looking at slave agriculture, not coal, frankly, as a key transition.” Thus, the Plantationocene framework arrives in response and in critique of Anthropocene-ic thinking, where proponents argue that the current environmental condition is not to be considered a geological epoch that can be reduced to a specific temporal start-date (as currently entitled the “Anthropocene” by Earth scientists and geologists) but instead reframed as an extractive relationship between actors that causes planetary scale geological change (increase in carbon emissions, acidification of oceans, loss in biodiversity, etc.) and renders life “as-we-know-it” impossible. This historic roundtable conversation, held in October 2014 at Aarhus University, is the first mention of the term “Plantationocene” that I have been able to trace in recent literatures and has spawned a number of academic conversations, conferences, and literatures (such as the Plantationocene Project at the University of Wisconsin).

In 2017, Tsing published the first guide to the Plantationocene (Tsing 2017), outlining how she defines plantations, how plantations are constructed, what their consequences are, and why plantations are important enough to take center stage in a “big new name,” or alternative framework to the Anthropocene. Broadly defined, a “plantation...is a simplified ecology designed to create assets for future investments and to knock out [ecological] resurgence and [multispecies relationships]. Plantations ‘proliferate’: [they] kill off beings that are not recognized as assets...sponsoring the unmanageable spread of disease and pollution” (Tsing 2017). Whereas Holocene resurgence involves productive disturbance of a landscape (i.e. retreat of glaciers at the end of the Pleistocene epoch 11,700 years ago, or the clearing of forest land for farming in indigenous communities) coupled with multispecies renewal, Plantationocene proliferation “reorganizes the living [and non-living] world into resources [for building capital]”

(Tsing 2017), “alienates” living (including humans) and non-living things from their local ecologies and “abstracts” them into marketable products with use/exchange values, and in this violent process, isolates these things from companion species and other assemblages to increase standardization of product and efficiency in transportation.

Scholars of the Plantationocene reject fantasies of the “Anthropos” (where within systems and institutions of geo-power, humans retain myths of control over Nature and indulge hero-arc fantasies that glorify technological fixes for geological and planetary change) and instead claim multispecies “resurgence” as the ideal relationship between and among human-nonhuman assemblages. Rather than focus on the history of capital (like in the Capitalocene), the Plantationocene redirects attention to processes of “alienation”, “abstraction,” and “proliferation” (Tsing 2017) that threaten livability and sustainability on Earth today. The Plantationocene concept provides fertile ground for rethinking local/global distinctions (as cross-continental, global transportation of enslaved peoples still produced locally specific cultures (Carney 2011)) and understanding the experience of multiple temporalities, as plantation traumas seep into the present and shape our abilities to imagine potential or possible futures (Sharpe 2010, 2016, Hartman 2007, 2019, Shaw 2002).

Scholars such as Whitaker (2020) have utilized the Plantationocene concept to argue that the affective states produced by present-day encounters of environmental crisis (potential for catastrophe looming over everyday interactions) have always been experienced by people living on plantation complexes. For example, “landscape homogenization, dislocation and [changing] relations to land, labor, and capital connect Makushi [indigenous] interactions with plantations [of the past] with [contemporary] miners, loggers, and other extractivists” (Whitaker 2020). The Crow Nation (native to Montana) experienced cultural devastation and were forced to contend

with the annihilation of their language, customs, and people (Lear 2006); the past (slavery) continues to haunt and rupture Black lives in “orthographies of the wake” (Sharpe 2016); indigenous peoples have been displaced from ancestral lands because of proliferating plantation complexes (Kenney-Lazar and Ishikawa 2019). The Plantationocene critiques and resists the Anthropocene’s Eurocentrism, insisting that the “End of Ends,” multispecies tentacular thinking, and complexities of hope amid uncertain futures are not new encounters or affective states but in fact are the lived realities of generations of colonized and enslaved (or slave descendant) populations.

Although “the Plantationocene points to the ongoing socioecological consequences of plantation agriculture and the permutations and persistence of the plantation across time and space”, the Plantationocene narrative of multispecies resurgence flattens the concept of “making kin” into another iteration of assemblage thinking or actor-network theory, where “[manufactured or socially constructed] difference among and between forms of life is obscured” (Davis et al. 2019). The Plantationocene, as currently dominated by discussions about environmental and multispecies relations, assumes a “stable human subject” (Paredes 2024) and thus does not make enough space for studying the racial processes that abstracted humans into property, how racial hierarchies contemporarily structure assemblage possibilities for people of color, and how racist disciplinary and policing systems threaten sustainable resurgence (Thomas 2019). Jegathesan (2021) has written previously about how the Plantationocene framework has committed the citational faux pas of ignoring black feminist theorists’ long standing arguments about plantation futures. Thus, like Jegathesan (2021) and Paredes (2024), I specifically bring the work of black feminist theorists – mostly thinking and writing about transatlantic worlds – into

analysis of plantation worlds in other “plots” (Jegathesan 2021), such as sugarcane fields in the Fiji Islands that have now turned into “bush.”

Boundary Making as Land Stewardship

In this section I argue that the post-indenture plantation structure, in which ex-indentured farmers received small-scale agricultural plots on which they continued to plant and harvest sugarcane, shapes how locals have come to define land stewardship and consider boundary making as the first step to establishing a place-based relationship that guards and guides the landscape to healthy production. The endurance of the plantation is the ongoing condition of such relationships. In conversation with scholars such as Katherine McKittrick and Tiffany King, I draw from Black feminist theory to think about how the plantation is “more than the agricultural field but a logic, a social infrastructure, an inheritance, and a technology of dominance that supercedes the material landscape of monocrops” (Paredes 2024). Thus, despite the rapid and continuing decline of the sugarcane industry in Fiji, plantation logics continue to “frame social life beyond immediate agrarian” (Paredes 2024) economics.

Scholars (McKittrick 2011, 2013) have written about how the transatlantic plantation system perpetrates the continuing racialization of Black persons as property, to be controlled, policed, and exploited within prison infrastructures; McKittrick defines these “plantation futures” as “a conceptualization of time-space that tracks the plantation toward the prison and the impoverished and destroyed city sectors, and consequently, brings into sharp focus the ways the plantation is an ongoing locus of antiblack violence and death” (McKittrick 2013). While Jim Crow style segregation and violence of white supremacy cannot be cleanly transposed onto the plantation conditions of Fiji, in the next chapter I discuss how the colonial indentured labor system constructed racial categories, in which Indo-Fijians were framed as resilient “hard

workers” and the local indigenous population, iTaukei villagers, as tethered to landscape by primitive tradition and customs and incapable of task-based plantation work. These racial categories influenced the politics of colonial administration, as Indian laborers suffered under exploitative indentured contracts, and indigenous *mataqalis* (land owning clan units) were legally and effectively isolated from the plantation industry and thus removed from the economic resources of agricultural capitalism as they flooded into the colony at the height of sugarcane production and export. These deeply cemented racial divides continue to influence political rhetoric and have fueled previous indigenous ethnonationalist coups that restructured access to education, political representation, and property rights based on ethnic identification, the first of which was a military coup in 1987.

The condition of the plantation system in Fiji necessitates an additional perspective into the afterlives of plantation logics in Fiji. After the end of a 5 to 10 year indentured contract, Indian laborers (who first began arriving in Fiji in 1879) were offered 49-99 year leases by the Colonial Sugar Refining Company to grow sugarcane. This resulted in the eventual dissolution of large scale monocrop plantations into individually held, small scale farms where ex-indentured laborers and their families grew sugarcane for their previous employer. Due to a clause in Fiji’s 1874 Deed of Cession, approximately 87% of land in Fiji was (and remains) within the ownership of *mataqalis*. Indo-Fijians can therefore only claim access to land via Crown Land (or state-sponsored) leases, *mataqali* leases (plots of land leased to Indo-Fijians by indigenous villages), or freehold land purchase (an extremely rare option as freehold land is limited in quantity and exorbitantly priced due to its value for the tourism industry). Crown leases can be subject to the volatile state leadership and structure in Fiji, which has suffered 4 military and civilian coups in the last forty years and only completed its first successful

democratically elected change in government last year. *Mataqali* leases are considered even more insecure and vulnerable to loss during times of heightened racial tension between iTaukeis and Indo-Fijians, usually during election seasons. Thus, the 1874 Deed of Cession and colonial plantation logics created a land allotment system that defined personhood and ethnicity by relation to land as property. Those who had access to land within their *mataqali* (land-owning family units) were indigenous; this distinctive trait of indigeneity grew to have such importance in social rhetoric about ethnicity and national belonging that indigenous Fijians are now referred to as iTaukei (literally translated to mean “land owners”). Those who leased land, either from the state (Crown land), local *mataqalis*, or freehold land owners, and were effectively disallowed any legal claims to own land, were ex-indentured laborers and their descendants, contemporary Indo-Fijians. As Tiffany King writes in her analysis of plantation landscapes, “Blackness is the raw dimensionality used to make space...Black bodies cannot also occupy space on human terms. Black bodies do not exist as human cartographers, inhabitants or stewards of space and property...[but as] spatial coordinates that the human can manipulate and inhabit” (King 2016). Again, while transatlantic histories of slavery cannot be assumed of the sugarcane industry in Fiji, King’s theorization of the plantation laborer as “outside...humanness” is useful in contextualizing how the colonial plantation industry imagined the future of life and possibility for the Indian indentured laborer.

The plantation infrastructure of parceling land into small-scale sugarcane farms on temporary land leases placed land claims as the central axis by which all Fijians imagined, and continue to imagine, racial and ethnic identity, political representation, and economic prosperity (Kurer 2001). That is, the plantation as a spatial, legal, and environmental form also structures the form of (and impasses) in Fijian racial politics. Establishing a claim to land through defining

the boundaries of land ownership or lease structure thus becomes the primary concern of those attempting to imagine possible futures in Fiji. In reverse, this means that the landscape itself is an empty signifier until it can be corralled and plotted into property lines and defined in ownership or lease to a specific person or group, at which time it can become a “place.” Liberal notions of proprietorship, then, organize the ideals of land stewardship: one can care for land when it falls within the boundaries of one’s own property, making it a claimed space, or “place.”

For Sojan Bhaiya and other interlocutors, grasslands represent land that has fallen out of stewardship, places that bear the mark of previous cultivation but suffer the continued loss of care after boundaries were bitterly disputed, people violently uprooted, and farmers removed from their homes. They are landscapes whose visual ecology can be read as a signal of Indo-Fijian dispossession: both the plantation and its enduring aftermath. The fertility and productivity of the soil is a relational, rather than quantitative, measurement: land grows well when it has been “claimed” and can be cared for without fear of loss or abandonment.

Land Proprietorship in Environmental Imagination

Drawing from Alyssa Paredes’s (2024) conceptual framework of plantation liberalism, defined as the “fraught political inheritance that both galvanizes modes of corporate social violence and legal procedure, and simultaneously and contentiously, shapes the contours of social, environmental, and agrarian justice as well”, I argue that the plantation infrastructure of post-indenture land distribution is not only a source of racialized antagonism between Indo-Fijian and iTaukei communities, but also a conceptual apparatus for environmental justice that redefines landscape stewardship and management along liberal logics of fixed boundaries, containment, and property defined personhood.

Here we will return to the Sigatoka Sand Dunes, at the edge of park property where hastily built homes of tin lie dangerously close to quickly eroding sand dunes. During the wet season, heavy rains pull sand from hills into piles in their backyards; in the dry season, ferocious night winds create blistering sand storms that leave homes almost buried in sand. Before the Sand Dunes became a park, a small Indo-Fijian informal settlement had claimed the area that has now become the Visitor Center. When the Park boundaries were established in 1988 and this community was to be displaced, the local charitable Lions Club of Sigatoka sponsored homes for this community in neighboring Kulukulu along the border of the sand dunes. At the time, Kulukulu was home to twelve sugarcane farms and several peanut farms; since then, Kulukulu has experienced a rapid increase in population as displaced farmers move to urban or semi-urban locations in search of economic alternatives to the dying sugarcane industry. The rapid population growth through the 1990s fueled the informal economy of undocumented land lease trades and many Kulukulu residents now live in close proximity to the destabilizing sand dunes of the Park without access to legal deeds, electricity, and other basic services. The Park and local residents have a fragile, turbulent relationship with one another, which Jason alludes to in his assurance that a forest border—a reimposition of the spatial form of the plantation—will lead to the ecological regeneration of dunes as agricultural land. Locals in Kulukulu carve rough trails into Park lands for easy access to forests for foraging and firewood collection, to the grasslands for livestock grazing, to dunes for sand mining and to the ocean for fishing and boating, while Park rangers lament the destruction of the sand dunes ecosystem as such frequent and intensive human activity disrupts the process of forest regrowth and dune restabilization. Sometimes, a lone wild sugarcane stalk pokes through the sand, reminding local residents of the history of

sugarcane farming in the area and a time before sand storms, dune erosion, and the anxious desperation for a place to call home.

Years of unceremonious displacements of Indo-Fijian communities, the dissolution of local sugarcane farms due to the expiration and disruption of land leases, rapid population growth and the resulting rise in informal and insecure lease agreements, and illegal livestock grazing and sand mining activities have led to the spread of grassland areas along the southern edge of the Sigatoka Sand Dunes National Park. In the opening ethnographic vignette, we learn that Jason and the Park management team believe that the grasslands are indicative of an acrimonious and contentious relationship with the local community, where stewardship of the landscape has been lost. While the grassland areas technically fall within Park lands, the lack of physical boundary and proximity to the Kulukulu neighborhood means that these hills become disputed territory and are immediately vulnerable to exploitation. Like Sojan Bhaiya, Jason believes that grasslands are the symptom of a broken relation to the landscape, where no-one or no community can stake protective claim to a “place.” A boundary is necessary to clearly organize relations of stewardship, labor, and care for land-soil.

Thus, even in a government project branded specifically as a climate change intervention initiative, constructing and establishing a boundary around Park lands is considered the primary prerequisite for successful agricultural development and reforestation. In light of the poor soil scores in the agro-forestry demonstration plot, conventional environmental conservation logic would have considered soil fertility as the primary constraint in restoring biodiverse flora to the unique tropical dry forest ecosystem of the Sigatoka Sand Dunes area. Yet, inside closed doors and in hushed tones, local project leaders scoffed at the assumption that soil scores determined the fertility, capacity, or possibility for vegetative growth. Soil is never the problem; the inability

to stake and protect claims to land, is. I argue that this method of conceptualizing environmental possibility within the framework of proprietorship is rooted in liberal plantation logics that not only fuel racial antagonisms between Indo-Fijian and iTaukei communities but also imagine human-Earth relations as constricted to legal claims and access to land.

Part 3: Agricultural Consciousness

If the only constraint on vegetation development or diverse botanical growth is establishing stable claims to land, then the starting assumption is that life is always abundant in Fiji, simmering in the soil, just beneath the surface. The plantation, as a logic, is a vexed condition to project this imagination of abundance. For many of my interlocutors, the viability and capacity of the landscape is often interchangeable with rhetoric about agricultural productivity and successful crop cultivation. Thus, while the liberal logic of land ownership and access so clearly delineates the politicized differences between Indo-Fijian and iTaukei histories, representation, and national belonging, a common faith in the continued fertility of the landscape produces a shared agricultural consciousness outside of agonistic ethnic accounting in the face of environmental, political, and economic crisis. I observed this most clearly in Sigatoka's response to COVID-19 quarantine regulations and Fiji's economic isolation caused by the collapse of global supply chain and trade networks and the tourism industry.

“Self-Sufficiency” in National Discourse and Identity

When I returned to Fiji in February 2022, barely two months after Fiji finally and hesitantly opened its borders during the COVID-19 pandemic, Sigatoka was unrecognizable. Along Queens Highway, stretching between Nadi and Suva, barely a hill remained covered in bush or grassland as before. Instead, I saw dirt colored, almost bald landscapes, with lines of seedlings stretching

into the horizon. Prior to the pandemic, Sigatoka's farming industry was concentrated in medium to large commercial farms in the Sigatoka Valley, and most urban or peri-urban residents near Sigatoka Town preferred to work in the local tourism industry. But now, resort workers in uniform were few and far between, and most remained hesitant to rejoin their workplaces once the tourism industry slowly restarted operations. Instead, backyard gardens burst with the vibrant colors of local favorite vegetables and greens—dark taro leaves, tall and skinny cassava trees, the mixed shades of green of *khatta*, *choraiya*, and *karomwa bhajis*, the yellow-orange of paw-paw fruits dangling over roofs and roads, the bright purple of eggplant mixed with the red of bongo chilis. There was a faint hum in the air: neighbors trading tips, tricks, and stories of how to grow subsistence crops in the backyard at maximum efficiency; friends excitedly smuggling seeds through biosecurity customs at Nadi airport. Homes received packages of tin cookies, and underneath a top layer of biscuits would be the fruits and seeds sent over by family overseas. Everywhere, everyone, both iTaukei and Indo-Fijian, was a farmer—either reclaiming an identity lost to time, reconnecting and returning to family still living on farmlands far up in the Valley, or reinventing themselves in response to pandemic pressures.

With the collapse of tourism, *kaivalagis* (or white people) no longer structured the rhythm of life in town; I was struck by how interlocutors framed backyard gardening as a form of resistance against the extraction of the local tourism industry, often exclaiming, “Life was good during COVID. My hands were in the Earth and my belly was full. I don't need to go back to a job where they take advantage of me and expect me to work 6 days a week. Ha! I figured out their scam.” Farming had returned as a central social and organizational structure in Sigatoka following the pandemic caused collapse of the tourism industry (Pickering et al., 2023), making space for redefining and reimagining shared Indo-Fijian and iTaukei resilience in the face of

disaster. It is imperative to emphasize here the enduring labor logic of the plantation system: presumed soil fertility promises flourishing crops, but only under the condition of “hard work”—backbreaking manual labor with old and/or repurposed farm machinery. During and immediately after Sigatoka’s COVID-19 lockdowns, the prevailing social logic was: you ate as much as you grew, and you grew as much as you “worked.” In such a paradigm, food security in Sigatoka during and after the COVID-19 pandemic is not only an economic but also a *moral* marker—the sign of a “good” person (or family) that practices fiscal austerity and upholds the individual responsibility for economic and social well-being. In Chapter 2, I discuss in further detail how plantation labor is remembered as nation-building “hard work” and shapes current racial imaginations of Fijian citizenship.

In newspapers and political speeches throughout and immediately after COVID, discourse about small-scale and subsistence farming became the brick and mortar of a national identity centered in themes of “sustainability” and “self-sufficiency” (Chand 2022, Fiji Sun 2020, Randin 2020). In the following section, I argue that this focus on “self-sufficiency” stems from and reproduces a distinctively anti-touristic national identity rooted in post-colonial solidarity between and with Pacific communities often derogatorily assumed to be primitive, isolated, or inconsequential in global politics.

“Resilience” Imagined on Arable Landscapes

Seminal scholarship in disaster studies has reaffirmed three central claims: first, that disaster is socially produced via processes of imperial expansion, nation-state formation, and capitalist economic and industrial growth (Oliver-Smith and Hoffman 1999, Faas and Barrios 2015); second, that disasters are not abrupt aberrations but the consequence of slow, structural violence (Nixon 2011, Davies 2018, Ahmann 2018); and third, that disasters often exacerbate the inequity

and inequality in race, class, and gender divides (Jones and Murphy 2009, 2015; Kroll-Smith and Brown-Jeffy 2013). “Resilience” has been rightfully critiqued as a neoliberal framework that ignores and depoliticizes the racial-colonial framework that produces crisis and instead places the burden of rebuilding or redevelopment on those who have been extracted from, neglected, and otherwise dispossessed (Barrios 2016). Building on Yarimar Bonilla’s (2020) scholarship in this area, I explore “how neoliberal calls for self-reliance converge with anti-colonial projects of self determination.” If narratives of resilience diagnose the staggeringly precarious reliance of Fiji’s economy on postcolonial tourism, Fiji’s push toward agricultural “self-reliance” bespeaks the yearning for “the dawn of a new political future” (Bonilla 2020) that is nonetheless complicatedly bound up with the racial, property, and ecological forms of the plantation.

Again, we must return to the agro-forestry project site at the Sigatoka Sand Dunes National Park. Primarily a vista point for tourists in resorts along the Coral Coast, and the National Trust of Fiji’s largest and most profitable national park, the SSDNP’s marketing strategy relies heavily on the image, and fantasies, of sand. For most of us, sand evokes an image of something like this: clear blue waters that stretch into the horizon, white soft sands, and quite often, emptiness. These images are crafted to be unnamed, uninhabited, non-specific islands in the South Pacific, aspirational fantasies for those of us who desire to live like the billionaires who purchase these islands for private summer playgrounds (Ables 2023, Baker 2022, Wilson 2019). Of course, these low lying coral atolls are also plastered across climate change intervention documentaries, journal articles, and other media that fashion these Pacific Islands as the Earth’s effective “canaries in the coal mine” for imminent planetary crisis (Swyngedouw 2010, Pelling and Uitto 2001, Chandler and Pugh 2021). Rarely do we see images of a beach in the South Pacific filled with people, livestock, litter, or even green biodiversity – sand banks are

the ultimate isolationist fantasy (Ronström 2021). Sand is a fetish of barrenness, and a marketing ploy that brings billions of tourism dollars and foreign aid for climate change intervention programs (Stunkel and Wyeth 2021, SDG Knowledge Hub 2019) to South Pacific island nations like Fiji.

Reframing the sand dunes as a site of environmental promise and agricultural capacity reverses this narrative of desolation (Griswold 2021) and instead positions Sigatoka, and by proxy Fiji, as an independent nation-state supported by the resources of an arable landscape. I argue that this is not “a cooptation of collective sentiment in the service of neoliberal recovery”, but “an assertion of independence in the face of imperial neglect” (Bonilla 2020). At community planning meetings where representatives from local villages and settlements gathered at the Park offices to discuss their vision for the agro-forestry project, I heard the constant refrains: “While the West scrounged for toilet paper and canned food, we ate fresh picked vegetables and fruits of the day.”; “While the West struggled to source the materials for their daily tasks, we built and crafted our household items by foraging local plants.”; and “While the West sat silently in their homes, in fear of themselves and their neighbors, we found strength and healing in the medicine of our forests.” Both Indo-Fijian and iTaukei interlocutors rhetorize the agricultural promise of the landscape to imagine a resilient and “good” life, especially framed in opposition to the materialism, consumerism, and detachment of the strawman “West.” It bears mentioning that this anti-West solidarity also paradoxically co-exists with shared Indo-Fijian and iTaukei political interests in modeling Fiji as a Western facing industrialized leader among South Pacific island nations. Domestic politicians frequently claim that Fiji’s well established agricultural trade networks and English-medium educational infrastructures—built by the British colonial sugarcane plantation industry—make Fiji the “gateway to the South Pacific” (The Japan Times,

2009). This national re-branding centers Fiji both as a site for foreign capital investment in the agricultural and tourism industries, and as a globally recognized stage for climate change intervention projects.

The resurgence of indigenous and traditional farming methods (including seasonal planting, mixed-cropping, and foraging practices) and the narratives of agricultural promise tied to Fiji's high island physical geography and its density of arable landscapes together produce a distinctively anti-West national horticultural identity shared by both my Indo-Fijian and iTaukei interlocutors. This resilience is not a heroic feature of a marginalized population, but rather, the day-to-day practice through which understandings of landscape, history, and work become the raw material through which a divisive ethnic politics and fixed understandings of the landscape are negotiated into notions of land and ethnicity that depart from the commonsense of Fijian racial politics. In other words, to be iTaukei is to own land and to be Indo-Fijian is to lease land, but to be Fijian – a nationalist identity rooted in both plantation history and traditional ecological knowledge – is to coax life from the ground and live plentifully off, of, and with its bounty, a form of self-sufficiency and environmental imagination that rebukes the culture of scarcity found in the West and the empty barrenness assumed of the Pacific by the West.

Farmscape as “Safe Haven”

On December 22, 2022, I received an urgent call from my driver, who I call Kabir Uncle. He'd dropped me off in Suva the day prior for a meeting at the National Trust of Fiji, the parent organization of the Sigatoka Sand Dunes National Park. Vote counting had just finished in the recent national elections; if the National Federation Party – People's Alliance Party Coalition won, it would be Fiji's first democratically elected change in government since independence in 1970. Unfortunately, the NFP-PAP Coalition tied in votes with Fiji First, the current ruling party

that had come into power through Fiji's last military coup in 2006. On December 22, the minor party SODELPA - widely considered to be a Christian fundamentalist and indigenous ethnonationalist party - would decide which government would come into power. With 5% of the vote, whoever SODELPA decided to coalition with would be voted into office. Newspapers and radio hosts labeled SODELPA as the unlikely "King Maker."

I picked up Kabir Uncle's call, surprised to hear from him. In a frantic voice, he said, "I'm coming to get you. You need to leave Suva today. I'll come get you in the morning." I had a meeting later in the afternoon so I hesitated. "Is this about the SODELPA vote?" Kabir responded, "Listen. You never know with Fiji. The vote could take an hour or ten. We need to get out of there as soon as possible. I've heard reports that they are attacking Indo-Fijian homes, and taxi drivers in Suva are telling me not to come. But I know you're there. I'll come get you, we'll leave as soon as possible."

In the coming days the NFP-PAP-SODELPA Coalition would come to power, marking a historic day in more ways than one. NFP, the oldest Indian sugarcane party, in coalition with PAP, the party led by Sitiveni Rabuka (the mastermind of the first indigenous ethnonationalist coup in 1987), in coalition with SODELPA, a Christian fundamentalist party, was almost unimaginable.

While on the phone with Kabir Uncle, my palms started sweating, my vision blurred, my heart beat came so far up my throat I could feel it in my ears. I didn't know what to expect. I messaged Jason, the Park Manager at SSDNP, to ask him what the situation was like in Sigatoka. He responded, "I haven't heard anything yet. I know what Kabir is saying because usually the trouble starts in Suva. But during the last coups, Sigatoka was a safe haven. We knew about the coups, but the people here also knew that life must go on."

Jason's response reminded me of what others in Nabitu had told me about their experience of the 2006 coup, from the highlands of the Sigatoka Valley: "On the radio we could hear: 'There's been a coup, there's been a coup!' But we were in the field and we kept planting. Coup or not, people have to eat, right? We need this cabbage more than we need more tears." The pragmatism of Sigatoka's farmers – the recognition of a "sacred" duty to nourish their country in the midst of collapse – influences the construction of an agricultural consciousness in Sigatoka that frames local self-sufficiency as a form of post-colonial solidarity and resilience.

Once I'd calmed down and contemplated Jason's calm response to the rumors of anti-Indian violence in Suva and other towns, I reflected on patterns of conversation about farming, agricultural production, and racial tensions throughout the Sigatoka Valley. While in conversation with gardeners, farmers, and hobby agriculturalists I had noticed a deep-seated desire to perform, articulate, and affirm an Indo-Fijian place-based local identity that drew from indigenous cosmologies, while at the same time, working out ways of reimagining indigeneity itself outside of the hard boundaries of statist ethnonationalism (discussed further in Chapter 3). But even when discussing the histories of coups and tensions with local *mataqalis* among Indo-Fijians, or when discussing the histories of land alienation and cultural loss among iTaukeis, I witnessed neither challenge nor disavowal of the significance of the purported "other." Rather, while racial identities were always heatedly debated and discussed within the context of coups that still instigate fear, resentment, and hurt, my diverse interlocutors are always attempting to imagine alternative ways of Indo-Fijian/iTaukei co-belonging that go beyond mere syncretism, historical overlaps, or cultural influences between indigeneity and indenture. Specifically, the agricultural consciousness of the farmscape allows my interlocutors to consider Sigatoka a "safe haven," distinct from the political chaos and racial strife of Suva or the capitalist extraction of

the tourism industry in Nadi, a place where they are specially able to play with and build new racially co-constitutive identities. Kabir Uncle, Jason, and farmers in Nabitu all imagine that the plantation history, agricultural labor, and ethical responsibilities towards crop production in the Sigatoka Salad Bowl place Sigatokans in the unusual position of having the space to re-imagine national belonging in multi-species kinship with each other and budding crops.

Conclusion

In Fiji, the process and method of environmental imagination is entrenched in a complex paradox. While structured by the principles of plantation liberalism, which deepen racial divides and perpetuate liberal notions of land ownership even in conservation and climate change intervention projects, environmental imagination also produces and relies on an agricultural consciousness that brings Indo-Fijian and iTaukei communities together in a national ethos of resilience, solidarity, and post-colonial sovereignty. But still, this agricultural consciousness is linked to the property and racial forms of the colonial and postcolonial plantation—thus, sugarcane and savannah grasslands are deeply related to one another by their post-pandemic absence. The absence of sugarcane signals Indo-Fijian land dispossession, a continuation of a colonial racial plantation logic that disallows Indo-Fijians almost all forms of legal claim to land as property; the more recent absence of savannah grasslands, replaced by widespread subsistence crop cultivation during and after the COVID-19 pandemic, signals the continuation of a plantation labor logic that affirms the moral and liberal values of “hard work.” Importantly, the approaches to environmental imagination and justice outlined in this chapter – while at times contradictory and counterintuitive - resist and challenge Western imposed narratives of Pacific isolation, vulnerability, and climate change induced environmental degradation and destruction.

The conceptual framework of the Fijian farmscape holds these political, environmental, and racial tensions in a place of expanding relational possibilities between iTaukei (indigenous) and Indo-Fijians that imagines Fijian identity outside of categorical and agonistic ethnic accounting. As both Indo-Fijians and iTaukeis think with agriculture to imagine environmental futures, they produce a shared local identity that challenges the ethnonationalist assumptions of who and what can belong in Fiji today.

Chapter 2 - Motherland and Mother Earth: Indo-Fijian Claims to Belonging Through Agricultural Labor and “Hard Work”

“We Toil, in the Soil”

The sun was setting after a long day of farmwork, and I lay resting on a *voi-voi* mat on the verandah of the farmhouse. Finally, the dusk had broken the monotonous heat of the day, allowing the initial whisps of a cool night breeze to filter into the house. My arms and back were sore from the chores of the day—throwing, planting, and watering seedlings in a line—and I groaned as I attempted to get up and make my way downstairs for dinner. Still, even after months of living and working in the Sigatoka highlands, the view from the verandah made me pause: mountain peaks poking into low hanging clouds at oddly beautiful angles, like random brush strokes painted by the Earth gods; covers of green forest, so dark and thick they were sure to hold great mysteries; and farming lines stretching into the horizon, waiting in anticipation to grow the next tomato, eggplant, cabbage, or okra. My reverie was interrupted by my host mother, Bhumi Aunty:

“It’s beautiful, isn’t it? But you wouldn’t have seen this fifty years ago. When we came, we used our bare hands, no machinery, no tractors to clear the wild forest here—all Fijian guava fruit trees. Slowly, we collected tin to make our makeshift homes, and built a dirt road that led all the way into this last Indian settlement in the highlands. We built the bridges over the brooks and streams one needs to cross to reach Nabitu, and we turned this land into a farm. We raised families and built a community and now we feed not just our mouths but the whole country.

That's who we are. Indians. We toil, in the soil, we worked, and we built this country."

Bhumi Aunty didn't wait for me to respond: she went down the stairs, back to the kitchen, leaving me to ponder the significance of labor and work in the self-narrative of my Indo-Fijian interlocutors, and to consider who might be missing from her story. Who were the silent majority against whom Bhumi framed her conception of "hard work"? And how do these unnamed specters shadow and shape the rhythms and history of Indo-Fijian identity?

The Colonial Racial Imagination in Fiji

By the 1860s, several individual European planters had already claimed swaths of arable Fijian land by dubious means, and contracted indentured laborers from the Pacific Islands now known as Kiribas, Vanuatu, Tokelau, and Solomon Islands. These European planters had recognized an economic opportunity in the downturn of the cotton industry, precipitated by Southern states in the US who were failing to meet international demand during the American Civil War.

Through the 1860s and 1870s, Fiji was ruled by a volatile succession of governments that ostensibly catered to both Fijian and European interests; most often, these governmental infrastructures failed to mediate between European planters and Fijian chiefs and the British empire intervened in a series of escalating conflicts (Routledge 1974). In 1874, Fijian Chief Cakobau's government was nearing bankruptcy and offered cession of the entire Fijian kingdom to the British Empire, reeling from a measles epidemic that caused a population decline of 15 to 20 percent among iTaukei villages, fearing economic and political collapse, and dreading an impending war with European planters. The British had already refused an offer of cession in 1862, citing the financial burdens of acquiring a new colony, and the colloquial understanding

today is that they hesitantly accepted the second offer in 1874 out of a sense of “moral responsibility” to “look after” Fijians who were at risk of anarchy and in order to gain greater control over labor traffic in the Pacific Islands (Hunt 2007, Siegel 1985, Florence and Sama 2021). There were 648 plantations (mostly cotton and coconuts) in Fiji by the time of the 1874 Deed of Cession, most of which had recruited laborers on three-year contracts from neighboring Pacific Islands. Imported labor was considered “more reliable,” as laborers were thought to be less likely to be “distracted” by the responsibilities and pleasures of “home and communal living” (Gillion 1962).

Sir Arthur Gordon, the first British governor of Fiji (1875–1880) and a prior governor of Trinidad and Mauritius, was most concerned with preserving, conserving, and protecting the land, traditions, and rights of the iTaukeis (Sohmer 1984). While he recognized the shameful colonial history of indigenous genocide—writing to his friend Selbourne, “I see too plainly that it is only a question of time how soon another page is added to the dark record of the triumph of greed and selfishness. How dark that record is in our colonies you at home have little idea” (November 30, 1881)—Gordon had several political and economic motivations (not just moral ones) for allying himself with the Fijian chiefdom. First, Gordon did not have a British regiment with him to fight against Fijian warriors in the case of a rebellion or uprising, and British losses in the Maori Wars of the 1860s in New Zealand were still fresh. Second, while Fijian chiefs had voluntarily ceded the colony, they maintained a degree of skepticism toward Europeans and the British Empire due to previous experience with land grabbing, and Gordon therefore determined that to ensure that Fiji remained a profitable colony with little need for armament or fiscal support from the Empire, he needed to align the British government of Fiji with the interests of the Fijian chiefdom. Gordon’s resulting strategy, with its emphasis on maintaining a close

relationship with Fijian leaders, would later prompt historians to credit him with inventing “indirect rule” in the British Empires (Davie 2005).

Gordon was provided only £100,000 as grant-in-aid for upkeep of the newly acquired colony, a paltry sum compared to other colonies of the British Crown. Thus, Gordon’s three primary goals as the first governor of Fiji were to: (1) Bhumise a taxation scheme that secured and increased the colony’s revenue; (2) pacify tensions between iTaukei villages and individual European planters; and (3) work in allyship with the Fijian chiefdom to protect iTaukei interests. By the time Fiji was annexed, the price of cotton had significantly decreased and Fijian plantations run by individual European planters were no longer profitable; Gordon hence looked primarily to overseas investment of capital for the development of Fiji’s plantation resources (Thomas 2010). The Colonial Sugar Refining Company (CSR, or the Company) of Sydney began operations in 1880, and the Colonial Office in Levuka (Fiji’s colonial capital) pressured Fijians to lease or part with land so the CSR could build mills, railroads, and establish sugarcane plantations (Moynagh 1981, Rokolekutu 2017). Large-scale agricultural development, however, posed a significant problem to early colonial administrators: who would labor on these sugarcane plantations?

In 1878, John Bates Thurston—who was then employed by the British consulate, helped build the failed Cakobau Fijian government, and would later serve as Governor of Fiji—described what he saw as the root of the problem:

“The fact is that no Fijian will go from home to be worked from morning to night, upon paltry pay, indifferent fare, and frequently anything but mild treatment, if he can avoid doing so. His wants are few and he is indisposed to sustained labour . . . the cultivation of his own Qali land is infinitely more interesting to him and more

in accordance with his proclivities, than the cultivation of a stranger's land, distant a hundred miles perhaps from the place in which he was born. The native villager is a member of a commune, and to move out of that commune is opposed to his natural instincts and habits." (Thurston to Des Voeux, November 25, 1878)

The way that early colonial administrators like Thurston perceived Fijian culture and capacity to labor would shape racial logics, constructing indigeneity in terms of (1) an unwillingness to labor intensely enough to meet plantation task requirements; (2) a preference for subsistence agriculture and traditional cultivation methods in a landscape of lush bounty; and (3) a "natural" or biological incapacity to untether oneself from the landscape of one's birth. Gordon's perception of Fijian indigeneity was even more rigid: he was convinced of the Fijian's primitivity, writing to his friend Gladstone in 1876, "If they are at present, treated as 19th century British subjects, their extinction in a short time is inevitable" (October 12, 1876). Gillion, a British historian of the mid-twentieth century, elaborates on Gordon's teleological vision for the evolution of Fijian society out of primitivity and toward modernity. According to Gillion, Gordon argued against continued Pacific Islander labor import after the CSR expanded its operations in Fiji, believing "that the Islanders, being uncivilized and inferior in intelligence to the Fijians, would be unlikely to make good settlers, and would retard the Fijians' advance in civilization" (1962). Apparently, Gordon—a great proponent of Indian indenture in Fiji, given his previous experience as governor of Trinidad and Mauritius, two early British colonial sites of Indian labor import—considered Indian (rather than Pacific Islander) labor import as both an economic opportunity for the British Empire and an evolutionary opportunity for Fijians, in addition to being of political import in assuaging Fijian chiefdoms.

The first Indian indentured laborers arrived aboard *Leonidas* on May 14, 1879 (Mishra 2014). Still, Pacific Islander labor import continued alongside Indian labor import, and was even preferred among individual European planters who could not afford the greater upfront costs of Indian indentured laborers, whose ship fares were more expensive and contracts longer (five years, with option for renewal). The CSR Company, however, now expanding across Fiji and eventually to subsume individual planters, preferred Indian labor (Kelly 1999). In 1882, while waiting to receive 250 Indian indentured laborers, the Company had brought in Islander laborers to clear land for sugarcane cultivation. Of the 587 Islanders indentured to the CSR, 220 passed away within one year of arriving in Fiji, most probably due to the introduction of pathogens and disease, and widespread sickness (CSR Notes on General Manager's Trip to Fiji, 1881). The Company never employed Islander laborers again, and Indian indentured laborers were assumed to be "hardier" or more biologically resilient to sickness and disease (Gillion 1962), in addition to more intelligent and culturally advanced. (Ironically, however, Fiji was later known among British colonial administrators to have one of the highest mortality rates among Indians due to suicide and murder in the plantation line (Naidu 1980).)

Indians were also considered more profitable due to their perceived increased capacity for hard labor. In the late nineteenth century, recruiters in India sourced Indian indentured laborers primarily from the rural proletariat of Bihar and the United Provinces, known colloquially among colonial administrators as "the land of sorrow" (Gillion 1962). Administrators assumed that the North Indians' experience of drought and hardship and their resulting resourcefulness increased their capacity to labor on plantations determined by task work (i.e., where workdays were determined by completion of a number of tasks, rather than amount of time labored). Other than

for the brute force required for land clearing in the early stages of establishing a plantation estate, Indians were preferred over local Fijians or Pacific Island indentured laborers.

Despite recurring attacks on plantation overseers, violent rebellions, and a high mortality rate due to suicide and murder within the plantation estate, the Indian laborer emerged as the ideal plantation worker in Fiji. Not only were they “hardy,” biologically resilient, willing to labor, and thus enormously profitable (Buckingham 2024), they were culturally “advanced” and intelligent enough to help Fijians emerge from primitivity and rise to the model of a British subject (Routledge 1974). In the British colonial imagination, the indigenous Fijian became the slow, primitive, landscape-tethered, lazy brute (Kaplan 1989), while the Indian became the crafty, resourceful, detached, hardworking laborer.

Work, and its Paradoxes

In this chapter, I explore how my interlocutors narrativize and embody farmwork as a marker of Indo-Fijian identity and how they operationalize farmwork to claim spiritual, social, and political belonging to the Fijian nation-state. Especially following decades of political volatility and civil unrest—as a result of which Indo-Fijians have been crafted into second-class citizens, face diminishing prospects for land leases or ownership, and have emigrated en masse to escape racially motivated public discrimination—Indo-Fijians are rearticulating how they frame their desires and attachment to the Fijian landscape, polity, and history. In this context, the farm and the work that Indo-Fijians perform there have emerged as key sites for claiming national belonging. Importantly, I argue that the distinct rhetorical connection between work and Indo-Fijian ethnic formation is a contemporary extension of colonial labor histories and plantation racial logics.

First, I investigate how Indo-Fijians narrativize their history as indentured laborers, borrowing from biologically determinist tropes of Indian intelligence and cultural superiority to claim their historical importance in building the modern Fijian nation-state. I delve into how this remembrance of indenture as nation-building shapes ideas concerning the optimal postcolonial citizen-subject and the extent to which Indo-Fijians belong to this category. Next, I draw from ethnographic examples of Indo-Fijian “resourcefulness,” “industriousness,” and “hustle culture,” and the affective experience of *jugaad*—a Hindi word that defies translation but roughly means “to frugally innovate, hack, or solve”—to explore how my interlocutors transform “work” from a narrativized history of indenture to an expanding horizon of possibility within a globalized imaginary.

Despite their power to engender new possibilities, though, both of these race-defining narratives and experiences of “work” among Indo-Fijians reify colonial racial stereotypes that construct the Indian as the crafty capitalist, detached from the landscape and willing to build worlds for the profit of others. Thus, a dichotomy emerges: the “hard work” of imagining alternative possibilities and life otherwise allows Indo-Fijians to claim innovation and creativity as ethnic markers, but also points to a disloyal detachment from country and landscape. I analyze how, in response to accusations of detachment, narratives of hard work reinscribe the landscape as a site of Indo-Fijian homing desires (Bates 2001, Brah 1996). Through farmwork, my interlocutors experience a bodily connection with the soil and articulate an ancestral, biological descendancy from Fiji, who becomes both Motherland and Mother Earth. Farmwork therefore helps my Indo-Fijian interlocutors embody nativity by exemplifying a natal tethering to the land. Ethnonationalist indigenous politics, however, have frequently challenged Indo-Fijian belonging and social acceptance in Fiji via military coups that have upturned any national election resulting

in an Indo-Fijian prime minister or majority government. Among ethnonationalists, indigeneity is performed and articulated as the antithesis to Indo-Fijian history.

My Indo-Fijian interlocutors face yet another paradox: “work” is what defines them as Indo-Fijian, but it is also what keeps them from true nativity, because an “indigenous orientation” to the landscape as defined by plantation racial logics would require a slow, appreciative reliance on seasonal foraging, subsistence farming, and a divestment from ideals of productivity. Addressing this paradox, I draw on ethnographic encounters with Indo-Fijian farmers who refuse to work to argue that this mimetic instability reifies plantation racial logics produced by colonial tropes.

Building Worlds: Hard Work and *Jugaad*

Aakash Uncle is a retired architect who made his fortune at an architecture firm in New Zealand, but returned to Fiji because “life is bland around white people, and why should I serve them when I can help my own people?” Living on his great-grandfather’s land, he operates a “hobby” farm where he experiments with the newest farming technologies arriving in Fiji and helps farmers along Valley Road—the hotbed of agricultural activity in the Sigatoka Salad Bowl, the colloquial term for the Sigatoka highlands—find ways to make their tired soil more productive. Aakash also serves as the Special Administrator for the Sigatoka Town Council: in this role, he oversees Town Council projects, which most recently included the destruction of the historic sugarcane railroads leading into and through Sigatoka Town Centre to make way for a parking lot. Aakash was my neighbor, and I eventually made it a habit to walk down the steep hill where my host family’s house perched, into the valley where Aakash had built his home. He is a short, quiet, pudgy man whom I mostly found to be good company; on hot days, we sat on the porch,

and I listened to him analyze the deteriorating political situation in Fiji and the impacts of Fiji's "coup culture." Then, one day, thinking aloud and almost as if he was speaking to himself, he reflected, "When we [Indian ancestors] were building worlds and civilizations, they [indigenous iTaukei] were in nappies, still learning to walk: our cultures are incomparable. You don't have to know history and culture to know who is the more advanced people. So it seems obvious to me, as it should to you, who made this country what it is. Fiji is an invisible dot on the map. But because of Indians, Fiji is the center of the South Pacific." I sat next to him, stunned into silence. Smoke from Aakash's cigarette made my view of the horizon blurry, but I could make out the outlines of the hydroponic nursery, the most recent of his agricultural experiments.

On a different occasion, Charvi Aunty (Aakash Uncle's cousin) was in the kitchen, in one of the few brief moments of respite she found in her busy day. Across different eras in her lifetime, Charvi Aunty had owned a sari shop in Sigatoka, worked as a receptionist in her husband's medical clinic, and raised four children. Now she was retired, but no less busy. Charvi Aunty hosted a rotating series of guests and visitors in her home, always welcoming and feeding distant family and friends who stopped through Sigatoka either to visit her or as a break on their road trip, on their way to Suva from Ba or Nadi. It is a hurried rhythm of life: pots clanging for morning chai at 5:30 a.m., breakfast to make and grandchildren to help prepare for school, lunch to prep and cook, and then lunchtime visitors to entertain. In the hours between lunch and dinner prep, the heavy heat of the Fijian day lies languid in the apartment. Situated in the main concrete thoroughfare of Sigatoka, the apartment rarely invites a cool breeze, although the windows are thrown open in anticipation, through which one can see the tantalizing blue of the Sigatoka River just three hundred yards down the road. In these quiet, hot moments, between lunch and dinner, Charvi Aunty and I would spin yarns over chai. The heat of the chai, the humid air, and the

sweltering heaviness of the Fijian summer meant that sweat beaded on our temples, greasing the wheels of the lazy afternoon's conversation. We had recently visited her childhood home in Nasau, a small farming village in Sigatoka Valley, where Charvi Aunty had grown up laboring in the fields alongside her siblings and extended family. While the family farmhouse still stands and serves as a joyful site of reunion and celebration on festival days, the Narra family no longer farms, but leases out their land to local farmers. Charvi Aunty and her extended family speak with pride about their great grand-uncle who arrived in Fiji as an indentured laborer and, following his indentured contract, purchased "freehold" land. Her father became a prominent farmer and philanthropist in the Sigatoka Valley area, supporting and building local infrastructures—roads, bridges, Indo-Fijian settlements, cultural organizations—in Sigatoka Town.

I scratched my back, flicking off a mosquito as it threatened to puncture my thin, sweat-dampened cotton dress. Lazily stretching my arms wide, I asked Charvi, "It must have been hard, *na*, to build all this with the pain of indenture still fresh. How do you think he must have done it?" Charvi Aunty took a final sip from her chai and set the cup down. She busied herself in the refrigerator, pulling out vegetables for dinner and pointing me toward the cutting board, signaling that it was time to begin prepping. She grabbed a kitchen towel and starting wiping down the stove, this new frantic energy a startling departure from the idleness of a moment before. Finally, she answered me. "Hard work, Ipsita. Hard work builds worlds." She pointed to the okra and I started chopping, clear that the time for conversation had passed. Among my interlocutors, "hard work" is a signifier of many things: the memory of indenture, the precondition of nation building and state crafting, a marker of Indo-Fijian identity, and a

collapsing perspective on Indo-Fijian history. “Hard work” punctuates conversations about indenture and futures of Indo-Fijian possibility.

These connections, of course, are rooted in a longer history of colonial racial logics. Following the 1874 Deed of Cession, Sir Arthur Gordon established a number of measures that functioned to “protect” iTaukei communities from the plantation labor that Indo-Fijians consequently found themselves tied to: there was the Native Lands Commission to settle land disputes between Fijian *mataqalis* (iTaukei landowning units) and individual European planters, and prevent further land alienation from *mataqalis* (Banner 2007); the Great Council of Chiefs, a hierarchy of iTaukei chiefs that represented and spoke on behalf of Fijian people; and strict labor restrictions on sourcing plantation workers from indigenous *mataqalis*. Meanwhile, following a period of five years of contracted labor, Indian ex-indentured laborers were allowed to lease land from the CSR company or from local *mataqalis* as small-scale sugarcane farmers. Other ex-indentured laborers remained in Fiji and, joined by Indian economic migrants (primarily Gujarati and Punjabi traders), formed the beginnings of a service and market class in early colonial Fiji. Labor restrictions on iTaukei participation in the sugarcane industry, ostensibly enacted to “prove that you [Gordon] can govern the natives instead of killing them off” (Herbert to Gordon, June 9, 1876), denied iTaukei participation in the capitalist enterprises of the colonial state and upward mobility within the colonial social hierarchy. Gordon’s “protective measures” effectively froze iTaukei communities within colonial tropes of primitivity (Rokoloketu 2017). Following the end of their indentured contracts, Indo-Fijians became independent small-scale sugarcane farmers, established stores and import/export businesses, and climbed through colonial ranks in Fiji’s state government.

Both Aakash Uncle and Charvi Aunty, alongside many of my other Indo-Fijian interlocutors, assert that Indo-Fijians “built this country” with “hard work,” referencing the role of the ex-indentured in the economic, infrastructural, commercial, and industrial development of the colony post-1879. Drawing from this history, Indo-Fijians rely on a settler-colonial interpretation of the ideal citizen-subject as a patriot building the nation-state, performing civic duties, and establishing infrastructural systems of market, trade, and education – posing that colonial values of work and industry supersede claims to native place as a measure of patriotism. “Building” on colonial frameworks of governance and teleological visions for cultural advancement, Indo-Fijians fashion themselves as responsible for the global expansion, economic improvement, and developmental progress of Fiji, claiming both the category and role of ideal citizen-subject.

Accordingly, many of my interlocutors argue, their political acceptance within the postcolonial nation-state should be not only undisputed but also guaranteed by any redrafted constitution. If they “built” Fiji, becoming in the process Fiji’s ideal citizen-subject, then they must be Fijian: Indians, by this logic, have become Indo-Fijian through the remembrance of indentured labor as “hard work” and post-indentured work as “nation-building.” This process of claiming belonging should not be characterized as a perverse appeal toward the moral values and social practice of the colonizer (Fanon 1967); nor is it a victimized response to a psycho-pathological colonial racial logic and legacy (Magubane 1969, 1971), or resistance to colonialism refashioned through political farce, caricature, or parody (Stoller 1984, 1989, 1992, 1995). Rather, the inscription of indentured labor within the framework of a nation-state’s developmental history points to the increasingly territorial racial identities of the postcolonial era. The making and policing of nation-state boundaries produces the image of the native and the

ideal citizen-subject; Indo-Fijian historical consciousness of indentured labor offers evidence to claim either or both of these images in the aspirational longing of social belonging.

But “hard work” takes on different flavors among younger generations of Indo-Fijians, whose commitment to innovation and resourcefulness in the pursuit of economic opportunity produces a global imaginary (Steger 2009), not a romantic vision of service and domestic patriotism. Charvi Aunty and her son Sumit had a heated disagreement when Charvi Aunty uprooted his sandalwood tree in the family’s backyard during a construction project; Sumit had plans to grow the internationally high-valued tree and sell it to the Ministry of Agriculture for a small fortune. Sumit, a practicing medical doctor who runs multiple clinics throughout the Western Division in Fiji, has cartloads of gloves and masks sitting in his office, remnants from a Chinese cargo box of pandemic supplies he had ordered during 2020 at the height of the COVID-19 pandemic when he recognized a financial opportunity in the distribution of personal protective equipment. Sumit’s entrepreneurial ambitions and their international scope (Fiji imagined as a well-positioned node in global trade networks) are far from exceptional among his generation of Indo-Fijians. Nakul, Charvi Aunty’s nephew and Sumit’s cousin, works a full-time desk job at the Tappoo’s department store in Sigatoka from Monday to Friday, but during the *daruka* (sorghum stalk) season he runs an agricultural export business shipping frozen *daruka* to Indo-Fijian emigrants in Australia and New Zealand, whilst also attempting to run a part-time hobby farm on informally (undocumented) leased land. Rajat studied to be an electrician in Suva (Fiji’s capital city), but returned to his family’s farm in the Sigatoka Valley region during the COVID-19 pandemic to help on the farm. In hushed tones, he told me his future plans: after earning a certificate in electrical work, and living and working on a commercial farm with his family, he intends to work in Suva as a taxi driver to earn “quick money” and build savings to

possibly emigrate abroad. From sandalwood dealings, Chinese cargo boxes, *daruka* export businesses, to taxi futures, Indo-Fijian young and middle adults are finding new ways to build wealth and expand their horizons globally, through entrepreneurial endeavors termed *jugaad*.

Jugaad is simultaneously a design aesthetic, a rhythm of life, and a personal quality of enterprising resourcefulness that escapes translation into English, but roughly means frugal innovation, workaround culture, hacking, or do-it-yourself (Radjou et al. 2012). Recently, scholars have reframed *jugaad*, understanding it not just as a moral-individual practice enacted by isolated social or material tinkerers, but as a form of distributed agency spread across an assemblage of ecologies, materials, and “shifting human and non human time-spaces” (Rai 2019) such as rituals, histories of subjugation and violence, subaltern identities, and networks of social power (Dharia 2022, Jauregui 2014). I find it most useful to think of *jugaad* as individual labor practices that produce a communal and rhizomatically expansive (Deleuze and Guattari 1987) Indo-Fijian affective experience focused on “getting over the next hurdle . . . rather than competing or winning” (Rai 2019). Short-term *jugaad* approaches to confronting injustice, inequity, and marginalization through inventive labor practices build an anxious energy and fervor, which often violently erupts in disappointment when the global imaginary remains unrealized (for example, when Charvi Aunty cut down Sumit’s sandalwood tree to build an outdoor garage, erasing Sumit’s aspirations for backyard agricultural entrepreneurship).

And yet each of these young men, and Charvi Aunty, Aakash Uncle, and countless other interlocutors, recognize a grim irony in their communal narratives of indentured history as nation-building “hard work” and their *jugaad* innovations for building personal wealth. Defining one’s value (to a nation-state) by the capacity to labor is also a position that reduces one’s identity—both personal and communal—to that of an ideal productive worker: transient in the

face of the whims of capitalism, rootless, never belonging to a place, only loyal to money, in chase of economic opportunity. Not only would committing to such an identity relegate Indo-Fijians to a future of continuous metaphorical indenture while reifying colonial distinctions between Indian and indigenous, always delaying a sense of belonging—it would also exemplify the contemporary stereotype of Indo-Fijians in the Fijian imagination as shrewd hustlers without affective ties to people and place. My interlocutors have already run the dark thought experiment: if they are but laborers and hard workers, then is their goal to emigrate to Australia, New Zealand, or America for higher wages, Fiji only functioning in their collective consciousness as a 150-year pitstop on their travels across oceans to build capital and “build countries” for other people? Are they always only colonial subjects, trapped in worlds made through indenture and imperialism?

Motherland and Mother Earth On National Soil

Sumit, Nakul, Rajat, Charvi Aunty, Aakash Uncle and others would be among the first to reject this functionalist argument and defend Fiji as a site of affective attachment and cultural roots. To claim belonging to the Fijian nation-state outside of labor logics and citizen-subject ideals, my interlocutors imagine the farmscape as not only a site of productive capacity but also a locus of desire for home and placemaking. In and through farmwork, Indo-Fijian farmers find a space to claim an embodied relationship with the physical and metaphysical landscape, as well as claim an ancestral descendancy from Fiji, who figures as both Motherland and Mother Earth.

Sojan Bhaiya (Brother)’s feet and hands were caked in mud when he came back from the farm. Between his fingers, the dark brown of the soil had yet to dry, but the rest of his body was covered in the dull grayish hue of dirt. He doused himself with a hose at the back of the house,

but kept scratching himself long after the dirt had been cleaned off—and I knew then that he had gone out either to add fertilizer to newly planted seedlings or to spray pesticide on the crops. In Nabitu Village of Sigatoka Valley, the largest commercial producer of vegetable crops in Fiji, farmers face significant health risks, including arthritic joint pain, heat exhaustion, skin damage from lack of sun protection, and skin diseases from topical exposure to fertilizers and pesticides. Sojan Bhaiya's scratching, which he paused only to douse more cold water on his body at sites of burns and cuts amassed through the day, was a telltale sign of skin irritation caused by direct contact with *masala*, the term locals use for artificial fertilizer. Masala looks like white, pink, and purple pearls, easily mistakable for the candy Nerds.

Later, Sojan Bhaiya and I accompanied each other on a long trip from Nabitu to Suva, the capital, to deliver and distribute the week's harvest. As the truck slowed to avoid potholes and ridges carved by a fierce rainstorm the week before, I noticed Sojan again scratching at himself. "Why don't you wear gloves, Bhaiya?" I asked him, having wondered for weeks now why my interlocutors refused to wear personal protective equipment when on the farm or working with heavy machinery. Sojan scoffed and looked taken aback, answering, "If it wasn't for my bare feet touching this soil, I would have died a long time ago. Working on the Earth is like suckling from my mother's teat. The day I put on gloves and boots is the day I stop living in the protection and care of my mother; it will be the day I die."

Sojan Bhaiya embodies the land: he is willing to be wounded, and ready to be healed, by the soil, water, sun, and elements of the farmscape. Work both hurts him and saves him; there is no possibility for life outside of labor, especially on the farm in direct contact with "the Earth." A historical materialist position would assume that the agency of "Mother Earth" in this example only appears in dialogue with the farmworker's labor for agricultural goods and profit. Marx, in

this vein, describes how labor imbues raw materials with agency: “as soon as it emerges as a commodity, it changes into a thing which transcends sensuousness” (Marx [1867] 1976). But for Sojan Bhaiya and other Indo-Fijian farming interlocutors, “Mother Earth” enacts agency not, as per Marx, in the production of a commodity but in the cosmic protection of the laborer, who relies on sensorial experiences to define their umbilical relationship to the landscape. “Mother Earth” is conditional to the labor-*er*, not necessarily the form, method, or process of labor-*ing*. This non-discursive practice accentuates a “naturalized identity between people and place” (Malkki 1992) that emphasizes a metaphysical tie between a person and the territorialized “soil” of a nation-state.

Such embodied identification with the landscape notably extends beyond life and into death: when families insist on conducting final rites for their loved ones in their “homeland” or on their “national soil,” they articulate and demonstrate the deceased’s spiritual bondage with the land. Professor Brij Lal, a famous historian and Pacific Islands scholar, was banned from Fiji in 2009 following his outspoken critique of the Bainimarama government, which had come to power through a military coup in 2006. Following his death on December 25, 2021, the Fijian government disallowed Brij Lal’s family from conducting final funeral rites (the spreading of ashes) in Fiji, prompting uproar on Fijian social media. After the democratic election of a new government in December 2022, Brij Lal’s family brought this “true son of Fiji’s” ashes to the “birthplace he longed to come back to” (Kumar 2023), which made national news and received extensive attention on social media platforms.

Sojan Bhaiya suckles from his Mother(land)’s teat like a dependent child, unable to survive without her, and Brij Lal returns in death as the “true son of Fiji.” Sojan Bhaiya and Professor Lal embody a nativist position that reifies themselves as “not only persons who are

from certain places, and belong to those places, but . . . who are somehow . . . confined [to] those places” (Appadurai 1988) through a cultural rooting process and ecological immobility. These practices attract arborescent metaphors that figure Fiji as a mother tree with roots penetrating deeply into the soil; my interlocutors establish genealogical descendancy from the metaphysical conception of Fiji through their self-narrative as seedlings, or children, of the Mother(land). Esteemed Indo-Fijian poet Bhagwanji Kantilal Bhindi of Labasa condenses these themes into his widely lauded and popular poem “*Matrabhumi* (Motherland): The Land of My Birth”:

The dream of my *Matrabhumi*, a looming illusion

This is the land of my birth, a land so dear to me.

Grew I on this seemingly divine land

With visions multifarious.

Inspired my ancestors to toil with stoicism

Toiled they ungrudgingly.

Struggling to extricate

From fetter of painful bondage.

A promising land of nourishment

To body, mind and soul.

Prop of our existence lay on this land

An emotional bond was writ spiritually.

Lasting well over 120 long years

In the history of man and land.

Uprooted from one land, planted on another

Roots have grown deeper and dear.

There is no other mother that can succour
Fiji is the land of their sweat and life.
Disillusioned, disenchanted and dismayed souls
Searing the roots that sustained them.

Importantly, these nationalist metaphors of root and soil, articulated through my interlocutors' desires to work on the farmscape, enable a particular "consolidation of national geography that reaffirms the segmentation of the world into prismatic, mutually exclusive units" (Malkki 1992) of the nation-state. The framework of the "ideal" nation, produced via the process of territorial decolonization and state formation following World War II (Kelly 1991), also requires a demonstration of "ideal" citizenship and subjecthood. So even as Indo-Fijians articulate metaphysical claims to landscape as a challenge to the colonial stereotype of Indians as "detached" laborers, they reaffirm settler-colonial frameworks for patriotism and national belonging. Still, the farm's "material qualities interact with local histories to create a variegated sense of citizenship" (Marston 2021): farmwork keeps Sojan Bhaiya alive through a purifying and also wounding bodily contact with the soil (Mother Earth), identifies his genealogical roots within the Fijian landscape (Motherland), and confirms his fealty to the Fijian nation-state. If Sojan is not "native," who is?

Indigenous Ethnonationalism and the Indo-Fijian Other

In this section, I trace the postcolonial history of how indigeneity has been politically constructed and mobilized in support of anti-democratic nationalism and hostility toward Indo-Fijians.

Since 1987, Fiji has undergone four coups: two military coups in 1987, conducted by Lieutenant Colonel Sitiveni Rabuka; a civilian coup in 2000 by iTaukei ethnic nationalists, led

by George Speight; and a military coup in 2006, led by Frank Bainimarama. Each coup, and every iteration of the Fijian constitution since 1987 (1990, 1997, and 2013) has been motivated by the desire to reposition indigeneity in Fijian politics, often escalating racial tensions between Indo-Fijians and iTaukeis. Despite the frequent instability of Fiji's national government, one thing has remained reliably secure: Indo-Fijian claims to political acceptance, equal citizenship, and national belonging are consistently questioned (Sukhdeo 2016). The Indian indentured laborers' belated arrival seems to unequivocally deny them "local" identities.

In this imaginary, however, "indigeneity" collapses into a category of identity politics (Lawson 1996) that is almost singularly defined by opposition to the "other": the Indo-Fijian, often vilified as *vulagi* (guest, foreigner) in the Fijian language. The possibility of debating, adjudicating, or expanding ideas of self-determination and sovereignty among the iTaukei population is thereby foreclosed. This dynamic can be observed most clearly in the conflation of indigenous protection promised in the 1874 Deed of Cession with political paramountcy, which began with the 1965 constitution and under which Fijians were given two additional parliamentary seats over Indo-Fijians, despite being fewer in population. While Fijians and Indians were given an equal number of parliamentary seats in the 1970 constitution following independence from the British Crown, the eight seats allotted to the "General Voter" category ensured that Fijians always remained in power (Bhattacharya 2012). Additionally, the Great Council of Chiefs were not only responsible for iTaukei affairs but also given senior positions of power within the national government, "assuring Fijians of continuity with the past" (Lal 2000).

On April 1, 1987, the multiracial yet Indo-Fijian majority National Federation Party–Labour Coalition won the national election in a shocking upset victory over the Alliance Party, which had been in power for twenty-one years. At the time, 49 percent of the population was

Indo-Fijian and 46 percent was iTaukei, and the NFP-Labour Coalition's win placed Timoci Bavadra (founder of the Fiji Labour Party) as Prime Minister. The "Taukei Movement," an ethnonationalist indigenous group, staged several protests through April and May 1987, chanting "*Vaka Vanua, Vaka Viti*." While this can be approximated most directly as "My Land, My Fiji," a more accurate cultural translation of the ethnonationalist chant would be: "Return to the Fijian Way: Laid Back, Slow, Casual, Passive—the Fijian style of doing things." In his memoir, Peter Thomsen, then permanent secretary to the minister of information for the soon-to-be deposed Bavadra Government, writes: "The way the Fijians saw it, the 1987 general elections had shown gross disrespect to them as hosts, because for the first time since our nation's independence the Fijian dominated government had been voted out of office and a *vulagi* dominated government was installed in its place" (Thomsen 1999).

A first coup on May 14, 1987, to depose the NFP-Labour Coalition Government, coupled with another coup in September of that year to depose the British Crown and declare an independent republic, sealed the beginnings of Fiji's forthcoming decades of "coup culture" and "indigenous paramountcy." In an ironic twist of fate, Fiji's first ethnonationalist military coup occurred on May 14, 1987, on the 108th anniversary of the arrival of Indian indentured labors in Fiji (108 is considered among the luckiest and holiest numbers in Hindu religious practice). The 1990 constitution required the prime minister of Fiji to be iTaukei, allotted a majority of parliamentary seats for iTaukei representation, and legislated racially exclusive employment and education opportunities for iTaukei communities. While the 1997 constitution removed the stipulation for an iTaukei Prime Minister, removed parliamentary seat imbalances, and stipulated a multi-party cabinet that would require power sharing, it constitutionalized the Great Council of Chiefs (GCC) and gave the GCC power to nominate fourteen of thirty-two senators (Scarr 1997).

In 1999, Fiji's first Indo-Fijian prime minister, Mahendra Chaudhry of the Fiji Labour Party, assumed office after a democratic election and a promise to uphold the 1997 constitution. On May 19, 2000, George Speight led a civilian coup against the Chaudhry government, citing the "gradual erosion of things that are important to Fijians in their own country" (*Fiji Sun*, June 10, 2000) and referring specifically to the "gradual disintegration of rural Fijian society" (Lal 2000). The next six months were the bloodiest in postcolonial Fijian history: Indo-Fijians were brutally attacked, their businesses burned, homes looted, and temples desecrated, and they stayed isolated within their homes by a government-imposed curfew and overwhelming fear (Trnka 2008).

The most recent coup of 2006 resulted in a conditional democracy run by Frank Bainimarama under the Fiji First party (Alley 2010), and the 2013 constitution. While the 2013 constitution removed ethnically labelled electoral rolls (all voting citizens are called "Fijians"), race-based parliamentary seat numbers, and all references to indigenous paramountcy, Bainimarama ruled with an iron fist. Media and press were heavily regulated, corruption rampant, and "traditional chiefly privileges entrenched at the expense of non-aristocratic indigenous political influence" (O'Sullivan 2018). In December 2022, a historic coalition between the National Federation Party, the People's Alliance Party, and the Social Democratic Liberal Party, helmed by Prime Minister Sitiveni Rabuka (the same person who led the catastrophic 1987 coup) came to power, defeating Bainimarama's Fiji First Party and completing the first democratically elected change in government in the history of independent Fiji.

Ethnic division of parliamentary seats during the majority of Fiji's postcolonial history has meant that vestigial colonial racial logics (Kaplan and Kelly 1994) and claims to "primordality" (Lal 2000) have become the basis of political affiliation, rather than ideology. This has collapsed the politics of "indigeneity" in Fiji into a politics of ethnic exclusion (Rames

2016) rather than a discursive and reflexive exercise in considering the diversity and changing nature of iTaukei interests (Ratuva 2012), such as the impact of rural to urban migration on indigenous land tenure policies or iTaukei individual interests in owning land outside of the *mataqali* (O’Sullivan 2017). Notably, discourse on indigenous rights is still relegated to the affairs of land tenure, fishing boundaries, and the continuation of the Great Council of Chiefs (as Sir Arthur Gordon envisioned in 1874). Several Pacific Island scholars have argued that “indigenous paramountcy’s isolationist approach to self determination is not compatible with the genuine and substantive political authority pursued by indigenous peoples . . . under the UN’s Declaration on the Rights of Indigenous Peoples” (O’Sullivan 2018) and “no political community, by reference to either self determination or sovereignty, can legitimately claim it has political rights that entitle it to a position of dominance over other groups forming part of the same national society” (Lal 2000).

Perhaps more disturbing is that, in a scene of misrecognition or misplaced mimetic practice, contemporary iTaukei politics has adopted the position of the “primitive” from the colonial imagination to assert an indigenous identity. As George Speight rejected democracy (Hereniko 2003), he romanticized “rural” Fijian life ruled by hierarchy of traditional chief leadership, and appropriated colonial assumptions which sought to construct the indigenous as tied to land through communal living and unwilling or unable to imagine possibilities for life and labor outside the traditional village. The ethnonationalist chants echoing through the streets of Suva in 1987—“*Vaka Vanua, Vaka Viti*”—romanticize precolonial Fiji as “slow” and “passive,” thereby mimicking colonial racial logics that defined Fijians as incapable of plantation labor. Fijian “indigeneity” becomes oxymoronic: indigenous paramountcy requires a cultural “return” to a primordial vision of first occupancy (O’Sullivan 2011), while multiple coups were

performed and Indian-led governments ousted with the intention of giving iTaukei communities greater access to capital and economic opportunity in global markets.

Indigeneity arrives in contemporary political discourse as a colonial reKabire, a performance of inventive tropes of the plantation industry that conceived indigeneity in a particular manner of labor, land, and chiefly subservience.

Mimesis and Indigeneity

On a late afternoon, after I had spent the morning completing chores in the Nabitu farmhouse, I walked to the edge of the settlement. Usually at the end of the dirt road there was only the babble of the Sigatoka River, the occasional distant hum of a tractor, or the sharp “ting” of a cane knife slicing through foliage. But on this day, I heard the pained groans of Chetan Kaka (Uncle), an elderly man with an unidentified illness that caused his arms to swell after a few hard days on the farm. I walked over to his house to find him, his wife, and his mother sitting on the porch.

Kaka’s son poured out a bowl of *nagona* (Hindi: *nagona*, Fijian: *yaqona*, English: *kava*, *grog*) for me and I downed the bitter drink under the shade of the farmhouse, sitting beside the front entryway. Kaka lay on his back, with his feet inside the house, his head on the threshold hanging over the doorway, and his left hand clutching his rapidly swelling right arm. I was alarmed by his obvious pain, and unsure of how to make eye contact with his upturned head. Kaka turned to me and said, grimacing through his clenched teeth as a wave of pain hit him, “I could have moved to America you know. A long time ago. I’ve got family in Sacramento and they probably would have found some kind of job for me, as a janitor or cab driver. I probably could have found a way to live without this kind of pain. But would it have been worth it? Do you like living in America, Ipsita?”

I didn't know how to answer, and Kaka didn't wait through my pause to find out. "No, you don't. And I'll tell you why—America is *Aa-marke-khaa*. [translation: come, work until you die, and then have a chance to eat] What's the point of that? In Fiji, we don't have much, but we have enough to survive. Why do you always want more, more, more? I'm happy with enough, enough, enough. Look around you." He pointed to the lush greenery that covered the side of the mountain in front of us. "We have everything you don't have. I don't need to go to your country and work until I die. I trust that I will be fully provided for, and I don't have to feel guilty that the pain in my arms kept me from working on the farm today. I'll make a little less money. Is that so bad when I have all this?" Kaka's rejection of the rhetoric of hard work, and his association of this rhetoric with America rather than Fiji departs significantly from the narrative of work that animates life and hopes for national belonging among others in the Sigatoka Valley.

The rearticulation of indentured labor as a nation-building project, the fashioning of Indo-Fijians as the ideal citizen-subject through their assumed proclivities toward "hard work," the desire to labor in ever more inventive ways in the pursuit of personal wealth, and the process of embodied identification with the landscape through farm labor—all of these tactics fail to position the Indo-Fijian as truly native to Fiji because indigeneity, in the colonial plantation logic, requires a dissociation from the moral value and socio-cultural ideal of "hard work." Rather, as iTaukei ethnonationalists have repeated through decades of military coups, indigeneity is defined by a "slow, casual" dependence and reliance on the "natural" bounty of a landscape rather than the codified, coordinated, and cross-industrial efforts required to participate in agricultural production. Thus, Kaka's rejection of work—quite legible as an anti-neoliberal critique of capitalism's demand for efficiency and productivity—is further entangled in plantation racial logics. In dismissing "*Aa-marke-khaa*," Kaka was performing a perceived

colonial trope of indigeneity, and engaging in a mimetic practice—defined as an unconscious representation of the “other” in personal behavior or “mediation . . . between different symbolic systems” (Huggan 1997). Imitating the “ecologically noble savage motif” in this way, I am suggesting, emboldens an Indo-Fijian “sense of legitimacy through deep emplacement in the local environment” (Gressier 2020). My research departs, however, from previous scholarship on mimesis of indigeneity, which has largely focused on “white” settlers seeking native identities and a romanticized return to a more “authentic” form of living in and engaging with “nature” (Gressier 2020; Uusihakala 2008; McIntosh 2016, 2017) because my interlocutors, both Indo-Fijian and iTaukei, are colonial subjects in politically and historically marginalized positions who do not have access to the social, cultural, and institutional privileges of whiteness. Rather, Indo-Fijians and iTaukeis have inherited a colonial racial logic that divides and insulates the collective narrative of each group on the teleological premise that neither has “achieved” full modernity as a British citizen-subject, which permits their subjugation either through violent labor practices or economic and political neglect disguised as protection of the “primitive savage.” However, whiteness remains conspicuously absent in Indo-Fijian and iTaukei reflections on alterity, both in mimetic practice and self-representation. This matters because previous ethnonationalist coups in Fiji have indelibly fixed the performance of indigeneity (which is of more than symbolic consequence) to hierarchies of power, citizenship, and political recognition in postcolonial governance.

While iTaukei participation in large-scale cultivation has increased dramatically in the last decade, especially in the export industry of regional crops such as *dalo* (taro), *tavioka* (cassava), *yaqona* (kava), and *pawpaw* (papaya), colloquial and media portrayals of indigeneity perpetrate old stereotypes of the “lazy, labor averse” iTaukei. In April 2022, Fiji’s ruling

political party of the time, Fiji First, published the controversial 2021–2022 Budget Announcement ahead of election season, which included FJ\$50,000 in federal monies for the installation of a “National Productivity Commission” meant to research and address the nation’s purported major employment issues of “absenteeism and preference for short term work.” While the government preferred to intervene in this imagined repeating pattern of apathy, indifference, and passivity, Chetan Kaka has adopted its clichéd practice on his farm: a rejection of “hard work,” a renouncement of capitalist desire for increasing profits, a verbalized appreciation of the luscious gifts of the surrounding landscape, and a refusal to aspire toward emigration. Even Aakash Uncle qualified his earlier claim that “because of Indians, Fiji is the center of the South Pacific”: “But what was it all for, now most of us are landless and country-less,” he later reflected. “Maybe they [the iTaukei] have the right idea, maybe we should take it simple and just live off the land.”

But this mimesis of the perceived indigenous “aesthetic” within some Indo-Fijian farmers’ agricultural practice is ultimately a failing endeavor. It fails on three counts: (1) the rejection or refusal of “work” on the farm contradicts and/or disproves Indo-Fijian claims to nation-state belonging articulated through the remembrance of Indian indentured labor and cultural narrative of “hard work”; (2) the reliance on “lush greenery” for “full provision” of survival needs, while rebuffing the commodity fetish of agricultural production, displaces “Mother Earth” from ancestral originator to mere provider; and (3) in pursuing claims to belonging through mimesis of “indigeneity,” those who engage in such mimesis reproduce a biologically and racially deterministic colonial plantation logic. Simultaneously, the mimetic practice directed toward perceived indigenous aesthetics also illustrates a collective critique of Indo-Fijian emigration and emigrants: Chetan Kaka remains in Fiji by choice, continues to

advocate for Indo-Fijian social and political recognition through his long-term dwelling at “home,” and is disappointed by the perceived arrogance of “kids from Nabitu—who I saw grow up in these fields—who move abroad, and all of a sudden when they return here, they won’t leave the air conditioning to step foot outside.” Chetan Kaka denies the perceived disdain and aloofness of the “returning” Indo-Fijian, insisting that he has not been left behind, but has succeeded in his responsibility to preserve and imagine new possibilities at “home.”

Though my interlocutors’ mimesis of an indigenous refusal to “work” is often hypocritical, they are “asserting rights to the city [or state] and pressing, by their conduct, claims to the political and social rights of full membership in wider society” (Ferguson 2002). Desire to become the “other” unstably reconstitutes Indo-Fijian collective self-representation in relation to the iTaukei, through incongruous perspectives on the character-defining qualities of farm labor. My interlocutors concurrently profess teleological theories of cultural evolution, claiming that Indian civilization is “more advanced” than iTaukei society; remember indentured labor as patriotic service toward Fiji’s industrial development; collect evidence for and demonstrate spiritual and affective attachment to Fiji’s landscape through farmwork; and refuse to participate in efforts to scale up agricultural labor into the profit-driven enterprise of expanding global economies. While binaries between Indo-Fijians and indigenous iTaukeis have been “punctured porous by the global market and multinational corporations” (Taussig 1993), volatile national politics haunted by ethnonationalist narratives of Fijian belonging trap both constituent groups into a colonial regime in which the pursuit of an imagined “indigeneity” marks possibilities for civic power, political representation, and social acceptance. Both will perform “indigeneity” and fail, ultimately reinforcing a biological and racial binary between Indo-Fijians and iTaukeis that

inhibits any radical reimagination of liberal sovereignty and social belonging in the postcolonial state.

Still, however, “mimetic excess” (Taussig 1993) on the Fijian farmscape has the potential to “work its uncanny magic and to undermine the naturalness of all of our social and cultural arrangements” (Ferguson 2002). Perhaps recognition of the futility in clinging to colonial definitions of indigeneity can open new time-spaces and speculative moments where an alternative category of belonging can emerge that honors specific local histories but denies ethnonationalism. In this chapter, I have explored how agricultural work—which has emerged with new fervor during the COVID-19 pandemic (discussed in Chapter 1)—reconfigures relations between Indo-Fijian farmers, diasporic migration histories, contemporary race-defining plantation logics, and the Fijian nation-state. In their quest for social belonging, how does the Indo-Fijians’ mimetic instability open space for questioning what it means to be “Fijian” outside of colonial racial definitions and plantation logics, categories of “indigenous” and “other”? Poet Jason Tutani, of *kailoma* origin (mixed Indian, European, and iTaukei heritage) writes: “And again I wonder if you are / Seeing what I am seeing? / Perhaps this time, / It’s the same stars / in the same dark night sky / And the distance between us / doesn’t change anything / Or does it? / I do wonder.”

Chapter 3 - “We Worship the Same God!”: Indo-Fijian Eco-Religious Claims to Primordality

Opening: Kaliya and Degei

The old myth, which I heard repeated in bits and pieces in retellings across my field sites and interlocutors, goes something like this: Kaliya, a multi-headed ferocious snake monster, lived on the island of Ramnik Dweep, and consumed almost everything alive. Garuda, the great Eagle and vehicle of Lord Vishnu, picked Kaliya up with his giant talons and dropped him in the Yamuna River, close to the village of Vrindavan in ancient India where the young Lord Krishna was a cowherd boy. Here, Kaliya tormented the villagers of Vrindavan, and Lord Krishna grew impatient with Kaliya’s antics, eventually waging a great battle. Krishna danced atop Kaliya’s many snake heads, beating and wringing out the poisons of ego, envy, and arrogance. Eventually, as Kaliya neared death, he begged for forgiveness, promising to serve Krishna and His devotees for the rest of Kaliya’s life. Lord Krishna, offering great mercy to Kaliya, sent him back to Ramnik Dweep, where Kaliya still lies waiting patiently to be in service of Lord Krishna (avatar of Lord Vishnu). Ramnik Dweep is considered paradise: a land of endless bounty, no poisonous creatures (as Kaliya ate them all before Garuda moved him to Vrindavan), a place of mercy, devotion, and second chances. Indo-Fijian Hindus believe Fiji is Ramnik Dweep, the paradise island and Kaliya’s home. Local Indo-Fijians believe that Kaliya is Lord Krishna’s secondary vehicle: when Garuda is unavailable, Lord Krishna uses Kaliya to travel across cosmic dimensions.

But the myth is incomplete without another deified snake character, from the indigenous Fijian (iTaukei) mythology: Degei (Fiji Times 2016). There are many retellings, that differ even

at the most minute detail among *yavusas* (indigenous groups sharing a common mythical ancestor). Degei brought forth Fiji from under the sea so that the Great Hawk Turukawa had a place to lay her eggs. Degei reared the first two humans, born of these eggs, to whom he gave the gifts of fruits, fire, and agriculture. Degei lies nestled in the Nakauvadra Mountains, in a cave at Mt. Uluda, and when he moves in slumber he is said to create earthquakes, storms, and seasons. Degei judges all souls, most of whom he places in a nearby lake that is a portal beyond the Earthly material realm, to heaven and hell. Indo-Fijian Hindus believe Kaliya is the great snake of this lake: local lore mentions that a devotee of Krishna tried to climb to Degei's cave on a mission to find Kaliya, with the help of a few reluctant iTaukei villagers, but returned unsuccessful after a torrential rainstorm forced him to abort plans.

The spirit path that leads to Degei's cave starts at a rock marked with grooves and etchings, also said to be the source of the Sigatoka River (Thomson 1999). Degei/Kaliya's blessings pour from the Nakauvadra Mountains and into the Sigatoka Valley. The Sigatoka River Valley, throughout Fiji, is colloquially heralded as the most fertile region in Fiji: the dry and wet season allows for the most productive planting and harvesting schedules; soils are continually replaced by nutrient-rich muds from the river; and the more temperate weather conditions make the sun more friend than foe. Today, the Sigatoka Valley – colloquially termed the Sigatoka Salad Bowl – is the center of the commercial agricultural industry in Fiji and farms of every shape, size, and form (large-scale commercial, small-scale family, hobby, subsistence, even those focused on biodiversity conservation) cover the Valley. In the following chapter, I discuss how the syncretic mythology of Degei/Kaliya is lived among Indo-Fijian farmers in the Sigatoka Valley, and how it shapes Indo-Fijians claims to a cosmological, “primordial” relation to the (agrarian) landscape.

“We Worship the Same God!”

On a late afternoon in June 2023, I visited the Radha Damodar Temple in Sigatoka, an ISKCON (International Society for Krishna Consciousness, popularly known as the Hare Krishnas) temple close to the Sigatoka town center. It was an unusually rainy day in June, in the middle of an unusually rainy dry season, and I clutched an umbrella in my right hand as I made my way up the steep hill towards the temple gate. Radha Damodar Temple stands atop a large hill, overlooking Sigatoka town, and from where – on a clear day – you can see all the way to the Sigatoka River mouth. Large windows beckon in sea breezes in rooms floored with cool tile, making the *darshan* (deity viewing) experience comfortable even on hot days. Today, however, I walked in with an umbrella clutched in my left hand, ready to take shelter if water poured through the sky in an unpredictable torment. One of the temple founders, who I call Dr. Devaki, is a doctor by trade, a farmer by hobby, and mother to several adopted local children—and I heard her call out to me as I walked through the temple gates: “Ipsita, up here!” I gazed upwards and found her peering through a screened window, beckoning towards the elevator and indicating that I was welcome to visit her in the temple residential quarters.

On this slow afternoon day, too rainy for a visit to the temple farm as Dr. Devaki and I preferred and enjoyed, we sat in the temple residential quarters. An Indo-Fijian with indentured ancestry, Dr. Devaki began to share her family history. Like many Indo-Fijians, her ancestry is unclear – the result of poor institutional record keeping and lack of public awareness regarding archive resources, the gray areas and blurry edges of oral history, and the inevitable (re)traumatization of remembering the violence of indenture. Parsing through her own and her family’s memories, Dr. Devaki can piece together the history of her father, who arrived in Fiji as a young child from Kolkata as an indentured laborer. After a few years of working off his

indentured contract on a sugarcane plantation, like many ex-indentured, he transitioned to industrial, working, and service class labor like construction in the capital city of Suva.

Though Dr. Devaki grew up as a “city girl” in Suva, she remained close to her familial past in sugarcane cultivation and farmwork: as a senior student in secondary school, she studied Agriculture as a main subject before entering medical school at the Fiji School of Medicine (FSM). At FSM, as student leader of the local Hindu society, she was introduced to the International Society of Krishna Consciousness and later took initiation from Tamal Krishna Swami, promising to serve the Hare Krishna movement for the rest of her life. Her career brought her to Sigatoka, where she was an on-call doctor for resorts in the area. She has lived in Sigatoka for more than two decades now, building a towering local temple, an orphanage, a medical clinic, and during the COVID-19 pandemic, a fully functioning farm on temple grounds.

Indo-Fijian Hindus believe that Kaliya and Degei are the same cosmic being; this is a non-scriptural oral storytelling tradition unique to Indo-Fijian religious and diasporic history. Dr. Devaki was the among the many who narrated to me the stories of Kaliya and Degei, and she emphatically punctuated the end of our conversation with:

“See, we worship the same Gods! Kaliya and Degei, they are one and the same. But the iTaukei have forgotten: after the Christian missionaries arrived, they were taught that their old Gods were demons and evil spirits. But we [Hindus] know these shared stories are not coincidences. The Indians know that Fiji is ancient, and we keep our connection to this land and its deities, and these stories and memories alive.”

In this chapter, I explore how diverse Hindu beliefs and practices are articulated through narratives of syncretic indigenous and universal “spirituality” to establish Indo-Fijian metaphysical ties to agricultural landscapes. In the first section, I argue that the syncretic and interfaith Hindu narratives found on farms today are part of a political project that ties Hindu Indo-Fijians to the creation mythology and ancient fables of indigenous Fijians (iTaukeis), allowing Indo-Fijians to claim primordial origins in both the cosmology and geographical place of Fiji. I analyze how this articulation of Indo-Fijian “primordality” is in response to indigenous ethnonationalism and a decades long “coup culture” featuring frequent racially motivated violence and discrimination against Indo-Fijians, and where Indo-Fijian ties to land and country have been continuously challenged. In the second section of this chapter, I probe how claims of primordial origin and spiritual ties to the landscape are materialized through the belief that Indo-Fijian farmers have been specially gifted with “green thumbs” via their faithful relationship with the agricultural landscape, allowing them to coax out plants and crops from farmlands despite frequent flooding, infertile soils, and other risks. Thus, this chapter draws from ethnographic material on Indo-Fijian Hindu practices in the Sigatoka Valley to discuss how the farmscape (introduced in Chapter 1) is a site of shared speculative racial, environmental, and political futures.

Part 1: Syncretic Theologies

Indo-Fijian Primordial Beginnings and Hindu Universalisms

In ancient Fijian mythology, most *mataqalis* (native village) can trace their ancestry to Degei. In one version of Degei’s story, Degei is considered the first settler in Fiji (Parke 2014): thus, as an iTaukei belonging to a *mataqali*, one can trace descentance from the original settlers or from

Degei himself. Indo-Fijian Hindus who consider themselves *Vaishnavas* (devotees of Lord Vishnu), are compelled to worship Lord Vishnu in all his forms. As Kaliya is both a secondary *vaahan* (vehicle) to and devotee of Lord Krishna (Lord Vishnu's avatar), Kaliya is worshipped as a divine cosmic being, although he is neither a deity nor a demigod. If, as most Indo-Fijian Hindus believe, Kaliya is the same cosmic being as Degei, then the logical conclusion is also that Indo-Fijians are sacredly bound to Degei/Kaliya through their worship of Kaliya. This establishes Indo-Fijian "primordial" relation to the Fiji Islands, or ancestral claims to Fiji's origin story (Jacobsen 2023). Why does this matter, in the contemporary construction of Indo-Fijian identity? I explore how Indo-Fijian retellings of syncretic myths and faith in a universal theology that professes the equivalency and indistinguishability of iTaukei *vanua* spirits and Hindu deities, produces an ethic of cosmic belonging in Fiji, even as Indo-Fijians face racial discrimination and political marginalization.

Sita grew up on a large commercial farm in Nabitu, on freehold land—meaning, her parents owned the agricultural land where they lived and farmed. We were enjoying a lazy afternoon in the sun, watching the clouds shift in the sky and leave shadows on the mountains below. Sitting in her farmhouse's front porch, she explained to me:

"I think Indo-Fijians, and especially those of the older generation, are scarred by the adversarial relationship we have had for so long with the local *mataqalis* (indigenous land owning clan units). We've been reminded that we are different, that we do not belong, for so long. Even during the most recent election, in December 2022, we couldn't trust that our lands wouldn't be taken from us, that the *mataqali* would demand something once the new government came to power."

That anxieties about land tenure continue contemporarily, and even among those who own and live on freehold land, show how present and intense histories of racial division continue to take hold of Indo-Fijian consciousness, especially in times of political volatility. Sita continued,

“I think if you asked my father, or people in his generation, they might be hesitant to admit that we are all connected to each other and that our racial divisions are political illusions. But I think the younger generation is starting to believe differently. We [Hindus] do our Dharti Maiya puja (worship ceremony to Mother Earth) and our Ganga Maiya puja (worship ceremony to the River Goddess); aren't we all praying for the same things, and to the same spirits but by different names?”

Dharti Maiya puja is common among Indo-Fijian Hindu families in Fiji, especially during a yearly Hanuman puja (worship ceremony for Hanuman, a Hindu deity) or during weddings. During Dharti Maiya puja, devotees dig a small pit and place a *diya* (sacred fire) inside, offering sacred ritual materials such as rice, flowers, and ghee to the Earth. Dharti Maiya puja is an expression of gratitude and a request for abundance in the time to come. Ganga Maiya puja, often celebrated at the end of Ram Navami (festival celebrating the birth of Lord Ram, one of Lord Vishnu's avatars), includes an offering of all sacred materials used for the Ram Navami puja to the Sigatoka River and a prayer requesting protection and healing from the River Goddess. Ganga, the River Goddess, is present within and invoked in offerings to all bodies of water, including local rivers, streams, lakes, lagoons, and oceans. Indo-Fijian Hindus, following local legends of syncretic Hindu and indigenous origin mythologies, believe that Kaliya and Degei are the “same” cosmic being; like Sita, many Indo-Fijian Hindus similarly believe that Hindu deities like Dharti Maiya (Mother Earth) and Ganga Maiya (River Goddess) are the same

as those referenced in the iTaukei *vanua* framework, which ties indigenous people to land and local spirits.

I am not interested in excavating anthropological debates on the cultural classifications of primordiality (Geertz 1973, Smith 1987, Scott 1990), but rather the context of Indo-Fijian *desire* to establish and articulate primordial ties to a place in search of a non-settler native identity. In the indigenous Fijian *vanua* framework, *vanua* represents “not only land in its material form, but land as Place of Being, as Place of Belonging, as spiritual quality”, where indigenous peoples are considered “the flesh or inner part, the very substance of the land” (Ryle 2005). In the *vanua* framework, “ancestral spirits [are] often perceived as integral to the social equilibrium and protectors of tradition to the extent that they have been used discursively to affirm ethno-political demands and lend legitimacy to both traditional [Fijian chiefs] and [indigenous] political leaders” (Presterudstuen 2014). In previous chapters, I have explored the politicization of *vanua* and the derogatory term often used by indigenous politicians to describe Indo-Fijians in times of heightened racial tension: “*vulagi*”, or guest, which implies that iTaukei communities are enfolded within the *vanua* while Indo-Fijians are always outside of it. This vilification is often accompanied by the fascist and amnesiac rewriting of Indo-Fijian plantation history, where Indian laborers and their descendants are fashioned as settler-colonialists rather than the subjects of the British Crown’s violent “new system of slavery” (Tinker 1974). In this context, it is not surprising that Indo-Fijians are searching for ways to prove their belonging to the *vanua*, as Sita signals when she rhetorically asks, “Aren’t we all praying for the same things, and to the same spirits but by different names?” The imagined universalism of Hindu theology ties Indo-Fijian Hindu practice to ancestral spirits of the *vanua* framework, thus producing a specific, particular

form of primordial relation between Indo-Fijian and Fijian landscape that allows for a local conception of shared Indo-Fijian and iTaukei spiritual identity.

Hindu universalist theology and politics has a long and storied history in the post-colonial context of iTaukei and Indo-Fijian communities, aptly characterized as “intimate enemies” (Nandy 1983) in Fiji. John Kelly (2011) has argued that a gendered dialogic between *mana* (translated roughly as “power”, or a pan-Pacific ritual of “political charisma, capacity, and force”) and *shanti* (translated roughly as “peace,” or an “intense longing and despair to make peace”) has characterized relations between these intimate enemies. Gandhi writes (1958):

“After long study and experience, I have come to the conclusion that all religions are true, all religions have some error in them, all religions are almost as dear to me as my own Hinduism, in as much as all human beings should be as dear to one as one’s own close relatives.”

A historiography on how Gandhian politics arrived in Fiji is beyond the scope of this chapter, but it is precisely the co-optation of this universalist theology in colloquial Indo-Fijian Hindu practice that forms the “basis for a claim of Hindu superiority—Hindus being more tolerant, loving, and forgiving than Christians, who only claim to have these qualities, but condemn their enemies to eternal torture in hell” (McDaniel 2011). Thus, Ghandhian interpretations of Hindu universalism have produced an Indo-Fijian “androgynous ethic of nonviolent and spiritual superiority” in response to the “hypermasculine self-justification” and “chauvinist insistence on the truth of power” clearly visible in Fijian totalitarian indigenous politics (Kelly 2011). Sita’s insistence on the universal and interchangeable nature of Indo-Fijian and indigenous Fijian eco-cosmologies, between Hindu ritual practices in devotion to Dharti and Ganga Maiya and participation in the Fijian *vanua*, are emblematic of Indo-Fijian political tactics of “aggressive

pacifism” (Kelly 2011) in asserting a native, primordial identity in Fiji. In previous chapters I have discussed how the colonial plantation racial logic produced an ethnic divide between “civilized” Indian indentured laborers and “primitive” indigenous Fijians; contemporary Indo-Fijian political commitments to *shanti* challenge and resist this narrative to produce an “ethic...that denies that the civil is made, protected, and owned by wielders of martial force” (Kelly 2011).

Especially in the last decade, since the rise in popularity of social media applications and proliferation of repackaged Hindu theology in bite-sized new age philosophy videos, Indo-Fijian Hinduism is now not only universalist but has been rebranded as a spiritual “lifestyle” that at once complements and subsumes Fijian indigenous religious traditions. Most interestingly, contemporary Hindu influences include the proliferation of social media stars such as Sadhguru, Peepal Baba, and leaders of the Chipko movement and their Instagram, TikTok, and YouTube content. These “new age” Hindu interpretations, often branded as self-help spirituality (Kaur 2020), are consumed by and capture the fantasy of a “nature-loving way of life” (Bhan and Govindrajan 2023) that appeals not only to Indo-Fijians but the broader, non-Hindu-identifying public in Fiji.

Jason Tutani, Park Manager of the Sigatoka Sand Dunes National Park (SSDNP), is of kailoma origin (mixed Indo-Fijian, European, and iTaukei ancestry) and speaks often and fondly of his maternal grandfather—a stalwart and benefactor of the local Indo-Fijian Muslim population in Sigatoka. Raised by his maternal grandparents, Jason was heavily influenced by Islam (from his maternal grandfather) and Christianity (from his maternal grandmother). In my time with him, however, I learned of his more recent spiritual influences, and how they impact his passion and commitment to conservation projects in Fiji. Jason proudly follows Sadhguru, an

Indian Hindu guru with massive global reach via social media (totalling over 13 million subscribers on his YouTube channel, and many billions of views spread across YouTube, WhatsApp, and Instagram). Inspired by Sadhguru’s #SaveSoil initiative, Jason has developed several conservation programs at the SSDNP—including the agro-forestry initiative introduced in Chapter 1—to “raise human consciousness and inspire responsible action” by “soil revitalization” (consciousplanet.org, #SaveSoil website, 2024).

Some of the SSDNP is covered in the remnants of a mahogany plantation run by the Ministry of Agriculture in the 1950s and 1960s. The mahogany forest is now the main habitat for a local fruit bat population, and one can observe them hanging down from branches in the upper canopy of the dry forest. Along the trail, however, the most compelling vision is an art project: vines, twigs, and coconut husks arranged into the figure of a woman hugging the trunk of a mahogany tree. The “tree huggers”, as the Park rangers have named them, are the handiwork of young students in the Heritage in Young Hands Program (HIYHP), an environmental education program founded by Jason and run jointly by the National Trust and a local resort, Shangri-La.

When introducing students to the tree hugger activity, Jason narrates the origin story of the Chipko movement in India: the Khejarli massacre, where 363 Bishnoi villagers lost their lives protecting a sacred forest when a local Maharaja had sent soldiers to fell the forest for lumber. Bishnois are devotees of Guru Jambheshwar, a Vaishnav (devotee of Lord Vishnu) who wrote the *Shabadwani*, a list of religious tenets that focus on environmental and animal protection, ecological conservation, and nonviolence. Eventually, the Bishnoi Hindu faith spawned the Chipko movement of the 1970s (and which continues today), where local communities participate in “tree hugging” to prevent the destruction of local forests.

Jason always ends the story along the same lines: that we are all responsible for protecting our environment and forests, and that our duty to Mother Earth is to remind each other that we are dependent upon Her gifts. Hundreds of Fijian students—Indo-Fijian, iTaukei, kailoma—hear this story every year, and I find it ethnographically curious that Hindu theologies and histories of environmentalism are pedagogically compelling in conservation initiatives in Fiji. Would not it be more profitable, given the politics of indigenous ethnonationalism, to focus on indigenous *vanua* frameworks (sacred relationships between person, place, and living beings) to teach environmentalism in a tourist spot as frequently visited as the Sigatoka Sand Dunes National Park? But, Jason explained to me,

“I think we have to be careful citing and talking about the *vanua* in public contexts, because we can alienate local [iTaukei] Christians who have been taught to distance themselves from the animism of Fijian religious traditions. Of course, people in the [indigenous] village still participate and call upon the *vanua* in their own Christian ways, but they may struggle to acknowledge the *vanua* spirits in a public context. The tree hugger activity allows me to convey a lesson of environmentalism without troubling the history and politics of Christian nationalism in Fiji.”

Jason finds the tree hugger activity a useful pedagogical tool precisely because of its history in environmental activism but non-obvious ties to specific sectarian theology. The diffusive goal of “raising human consciousness” as espoused by modernist Hindu gurus like Sadhguru, encourages the production of homogenous environmentalisms between ethnic communities in Fiji.

Indo-Fijian Hinduism is an eco-cosmology that ties Hindus to the Fijian origin story through the worship of local religious figures, such as Degei/Kaliya or Dharti Maiya/Ganga Maiya/iTaukei ancestor spirits. The imagined syncretism of indigenous/Hindu deities stems from a universalist Hindu theology that professes that “all religions are true” - this universalism also frames an Indo-Fijian sense of “spiritual superiority” to Christian fundamentalism and a political ethic of *shanti* (or the pursuit of peace) in response to indigenous ethnonationalism. Simultaneously, Indo-Fijian Hinduism is rebranded as an “interfaith” “lifestyle” by the influence of modernist new-age interpretations of “spiritual” human-ecological relations and thus serves as an effective locus for shared Indo-Fijian and iTaukei environmental futurisms.

Indo-Fijian Hindus as Cultural Protectors of Indigeneity

In this section, I probe Jason’s claim that iTaukeis “may struggle to acknowledge the *vanua* spirits in a public context”: How has indigenous Christian identity distanced itself from Fijian mythology? How have Indo-Fijian Hindus perceived this as a cultural loss imposed by colonialism, and positioned their faith as a post-colonial liberation practice?

Elenoa is an iTaukei field ranger at the Sigatoka Sand Dunes National Park, where I conducted fieldwork on the nation-building ideologies and implementation practice of agro-forestry biodiversity conservation projects in the Sigatoka area (discussed in Chapter 1). Elenoa and I had just returned from an interview for an ethnobotany project related to the larger agro-forestry project, where we were collecting narratives from local iTaukei, Indo-Fijian, and kailoma villagers about the historical and contemporary presence and use of plants in the Sigatoka Sand Dunes dry forest areas. Kailoma villagers and local Indo-Fijians will tell you many ghost and spirit stories about the forests: the Park is alive with old myths, fables, and warning tales. One kailoma’s grandmother witnessed the ghosts of an old Fijian war party

traipsing along the coast of the Sand Dunes, close to an archaeological site where Lapita pottery shards are frequently excavated; an Indo-Fijian friend saw the spirit of an old Indo-Fijian lady who lures local villagers and traps them in the bush; another kailoma interlocutor told me about the friendly divine beings in the forest that protect visitors, but only if they approach the forest with the intention of giving, rather than taking. Curiously, among the interviews we had conducted with iTaukei villagers in the area, none had mentioned any ghosts, spirits, or divine beings in their oral histories of the forest—instead, as Niko (an iTaukei Field Ranger at the Sigatoka Sand Dunes National Park) paraphrased in an eloquent mime—they pointed to the sky and mentioned “We don’t have such beliefs. It’s all up to God.”

Elenoa and I had just conducted an interview with Tai Bulou (Aunty Bulou), an elder from the chiefly family of the Nadroga Province (home province for the Sigatoka Valley). I asked her about the origin story of the Sigatoka Sand Dunes, hoping to hear about Degei and the creation story of Fiji, and Degei’s sacred relationship to the Sigatoka River, but instead I was surprised by Aunty’s recollection: the great tsunami of 1846 destroyed the coral reef system surrounding the Coral Coast region, producing one of the only high powered and unsheltered coastlines in Fiji. Over time, as the waves poured on the coast bringing sand and soil with them, the Dunes formed. I’d heard another story of the region involving two giants running across the Pacific Ocean with a bag of soil, forming islands along the way and final dropping the last remaining bits of sand near the Sigatoka River, forming the Sand Dunes. Aunty Bulou waved away my story saying, “Ahhh, that’s just a story from our *tau* (rival clan) Kadavu, because they want to claim the Sigatoka Sand Dunes comes from them. God knows what He is doing, these Sand Dunes are His gift to us, since the coral reef is no longer there to protect the local villagers.”

After the interview, Elenoa and I walked to the Sand Dunes coastline and sat near one of the beach teepees volunteers erected, part of a Sand Dunes conservation project to trap sand and promote the formation of dunes. At high tide, the waves crashed with such force that we had to enunciate over their sounds to make conversation; our heads turned away from the gusts of wind that stung viciously as tiny sand granules pelleted us from behind. I asked Elenoa, a devout Christian, about why old myths, fables, and mystical characters were missing from Tai Bulou's story.

“See, we know now, Ipsita, that the old gods were naïve. They were not good spirits...that's why we had such things as cannibalism. Imagine, we used to eat our own people! So many people suffered! But when the word of Jesus arrived, we learned a new way. We kept from our ancestors the things that were good – we were givers, honest and hospitable people who thrived in kind and generous relationships with other people – and we left behind the bad things. That's why you won't hear about Degei and these other Gods.”

While Dr. Devaki, and other Indo-Fijian farmers in my fieldsite, claim that their worship of Degei (in the form of Kaliya) affirms their primordial relation to the Fijian landscape and parallels indigenous ancestral and spiritual connections to the Earth, Elenoa denies Degei as a central character in indigenous religious frameworks, instead marking Fijian indigenous identity as the explicitly Christian denial of Degei and mythological characters from other ancient legends (Presterudstuen 2014). In a moment where we can observe the continued social influence of colonial narratives of indigenous primitivity (Banivanua-Mar 2010), Elenoa references histories of Fijian cannibalism to mark Degei as a sign of pre-Christian savagery. The political rise of the Christian ethnonationalist Social Democratic Liberal Party (SODELPA) in recent

years has furthered solidified this racial logic: to be Fijian is to be iTaukei (Emde 2005), to be iTaukei is to be Christian (Tomlinson 2009), and to be Christian is to categorically deny the worship of Degei and other ancient Gods (Ryle 2005). Of course, there are several case studies of contemporary religious practices shaped by both Christian and indigenous traditions (Ryle 2010, Tomlinson 2009), but because Degei was specifically labeled by early Methodist missionaries in the 19th century as emblematic of “savage” religion, Degei continues to occupy a special “taboo” status in iTaukei communities.

Returning to the opening vignette, Dr. Devaki says, “But the iTaukei have forgotten: after the Christian missionaries arrived, they were taught that their old Gods were demons and evil spirits...The Indians know that Fiji is ancient, and we keep our connection to this land and its deities, and these stories and memories alive.” While the contemporary worship of Degei/Kaliya removes Indo-Fijians from the Christian fundamentalism central to Fijian indigenous ethnonationalist identity today, I argue that Indo-Fijian Hindus perceive their worship of Degei/Kaliya as a radical and decolonial “act of rememory” (Mishra 2018) that protects and restores an imagined “ancient” (Miller 2008) spiritual practice and identity. Hindu Degei/Kaliya worship, then, is also an Indo-Fijian political project that responds to and rejects indigenous ethnonationalism, redefines “indigeneity” through Hindu eco-cosmologies, and positions Indo-Fijians as cultural heroes that are “protecting” indigenous practices. That Hindu Degei/Kaliya worship is a noble post-colonial struggle offered to the spiritually righteous is a common allegory in Indo-Fijian colloquial interpretations of Hindu epics, the most salient of which is the Indo-Fijian community’s narrative self-identification with the hero’s arc of Lord Ram, who was unfairly banished from his kingdom and waged war against evil from exile (Kelly 2001). Thus Hindu Degei/Kaliya worship is not only a marker of Indo-Fijian primordality but also a

demonstration of Indo-Fijian service and sacrifice to Fiji, both the nation-state and metaphysical landscape.

As Bhan and Govindrajan (2023) urge, we must “make room for skepticism and critique in analysis of cosmopolitical formations instead of prematurely celebrating ‘eco-politics’ as anti-Western and anti-colonial.” Drawing from this scholarship, I explore how Indo-Fijian narratives of primordiality both draw and divert from Hindutva politics in a supremacist response to indigenous ethnonationalism. The Hindu extremist project in India (Hindutva) is primarily concerned with establishing the moral onto-ecological claim that Hindus are indigenous to India. More-than-human relations, such as the sentience and intersubjective relations of rivers, rocks, plants, and animals, are appropriated into a project of determining—and discriminating against those who do not fit into—the “socio-natural order guided by Hindu cosmology” (Bhan and Govindrajan 2023). In India, this results in the production of a Hindu nationalist rhetoric disguised as anti-colonial cultural restoration, and the targeted discrimination and marginalization of non-Hindus such as Indian Christians and Muslims.

While the indigenous ethnonationalist framework of determining who can belong in Fiji and deserves political representation is prejudiced, the Indo-Fijian cosmopolitical response (De la Cadena 2010) of subsuming indigeneity is supremacist in its representation of “autochthonous nonhuman Hindus” (such as Kaliya, Ganga Maiya, and Dharti Maiya) as cosmic beings that “signal the intrinsic Hinduness of the region” (Bhan and Govindrajan 2023). The claim that Indo-Fijian Hindu practice protects indigenous religion from colonial erasure is supremacist in that it re-orientes indigenous history in Indo-Fijian terms. An important distinction between Indo-Fijian cosmo-political formations and Hindutva projects in India is that Indo-Fijians do not have the “political, judicial, police, and vigilante power” (Bhan and Govindrajan 2023) to marginalize

and perpetrate violence against the “other”. Rather, Indo-Fijians utilize eco-cosmologies to imagine a shared ancestry and co-constitutive cosmological relationship with iTaukei communities that is not post-racial but reconfigures the assumptive terms (ancestry and metaphysics) of “indigeneity” (as reproduced by indigenous ethnonationalist politics in Fiji).

Part 2: Agricultural Miracles

In this section, I present ethnographic scenes to analyze how Indo-Fijian Hindus claim that worship of local deities allows a uniquely spiritual relationship between them and the agricultural landscape, evidenced by (miraculously) successful cultivation practices of Indo-Fijian farmers. I argue that the quotidian and commonplace quality of miracles witnessed or experienced among Indo-Fijian Hindu farmers is a central factor in how Indo-Fijian’s narrate their place-based belonging in Fiji.

“It is From Her We Receive These Gifts”

Situated next to the Muasara lagoon, Tarun’s land is sandy, notorious for poor water retention and infertile soils. Still, he is committed to organic farming: he fertilizes the soil with chicken and cow manure; he uses neem leaf extract, which he makes himself, as a natural pesticide; and he turns his soil with frequent crop rotation. An ardent follower Peepal Baba (Swami Prem Parivartan of Pune, India), he learns most of his organic agriculture techniques from Peepal Baba’s various social media accounts. Like Sadhguru, Peepal Baba is a Hindu guru whose videos about tree planting have reached a global scale of influence. While Peepal Baba’s environmentalist media presence does not explicitly contribute to divisive rhetoric about Hindu nationalism in India, his correlative rise in popularity over the last three decades as Hindutva extremism has gained foothold in Indian politics influences how people come to map and relate

to landscapes as unmistakably “Hindu”, where agricultural and geographical features are bound to Hindu memories and practice. This approach to environmental imagination travels from India to Indo-Fijian backyards and gardens through social media and shapes how Indo-Fijian Hindus articulate their distinctive connection with local topographies.

A few days before, the air smelled hot and thick; Tarun had just spread chicken manure in his backyard garden. When I later returned to his farm, the seedlings had been hand-planted in neat rows, surrounded by the protective shade of kumquat, lime, papaya, and guava trees. A patch of green towards the corner of the plot signaled the growth of new seedlings, to be planted in the coming days. A section of the plot shined bright green with what I recognized as white radish leaves, and I delightfully exclaimed, “The *mooli* has grown so fast, Tarun! Wow, they are ready to eat in just a few weeks.” I have always been astonished by the speed of crop growth in Fiji. Compared to my parents’ backyard tomato gardens in the San Francisco Bay Area that fruit only a few times over long spring and summer seasons of diligent care, Fiji was magical.

“What’s your secret, Tarun?” Tarun chuckled in response.

“*Mooli*’s easy, you won’t believe the other things I have seen. Everyone knows that *paan* (betel leaf) doesn’t grow here [sandy soil], but I had used *paan* for puja in the *thhaan* (a small outdoor temple often found in the frontyard of Indo-Fijian Hindu homes). I thought to myself, ‘Let me just try, who knows what could happen.’ So I buried the *paan* leaf in the soil, over in the corner by the passionfruit tree, and covered it. And now I have a *paan* tree.”

His eyes glimmered with pride and I asked, “What do you think it was? Your strong *bhakti* (faith, or love for God) from the puja?” Tarun grew quiet, and the rhythm of our conversation

changed. Whereas before our laughs had betrayed the fickleness of small talk, now his voice lowered and opened a more intimate space.

“Honestly, I don’t know Ipsita. But I can tell you this much: the first thing I do when I wake up in the morning is touch my hand to the floor, then my head, and my heart. First I offer my *pranams* (respectful salutations) to Dharti Maiya (Mother Earth) and receive her blessings, because it is from her we receive these gifts and to her we must return.”

Here, I explore the Indo-Fijian Hindu cosmology that affirms the agency of other-than-human actors, such as soil or Dharti Maiya, to provide and produce in a reciprocal relationship with human beings. The multi-species turn in anthropology has taken on the “crucial political task...to distribute agency as far and in as differentiated way as possible” (Latour 2014) in an ontological project that “hopes of imagining and enacting an ethics...that can make room for these other beings” (Kohn 2015). But I am not interested in debating the parameters of a “multiple worlds thesis” (Viveiros de Castro 2014, De la Cadena 2015)—rather, I am concerned with the convergence of identity politics and eco-cosmologies, where reciprocal relationships between Indo-Fijian devotees and Mother Earth provide evidence of primordality and define Hindus as non-settler natives in Fiji.

First, that Tarun’s sectarian (Hindu) prayers are received and responded to by an Earthly divinity affirms the Hindu universalist position that the deities that embody the Fijian landscape are Hindu *and* indigenous. This validates Dharti Maiya as a local spirit that enters into particular relation with Tarun (and other Indo-Fijian Hindus) because of a primordial metaphysical connection.

Dharti Maiya responds to Tarun's religious discipline with the reward of a betel tree, specifically on sandy soils that "scientifically" should not be able to support the growth of this plant. Tarun's daily *pranams* transform the quality of the soil and construct a new "place", a garden with a holy betel plant growing in the corner of the *thhaan*. This "place", with its (miraculously) productive soil, is wholly dependent on Tarun's continued devotion to Dharti Maiya. Extrapolated further, Indo-Fijian Hindu religious practice has produced a new environmental-agricultural landscape that requires Indo-Fijian participation and stewardship (i.e. without Tarun's continued *pranams*, his garden may not continue to sustain the betel tree; the garden's fertility and agricultural capacity has been transformed by Tarun's prayers and requires his continued spiritual devotion). Within this logic, it follows that the arrival of Indo-Fijians in Fiji has so irreversibly transformed land and country that Indo-Fijians not only belong but are indispensable to ecological and industrial futures of Fiji. This is not only a political project, but also a local response to the desertification/grassland-ification of Fijian ecologies and other perils of the Anthropocene—a call "to share agency with other subjects that have also lost their autonomy" (Latour 2014).

There is a discursive tension between the "old" and "new" as we can observe in Tarun's ecological politics. Dharti Maiya's presence Herself is emblematic of the primordial; yet Her particular relation with Indo-Fijians produces a "new" place, beyond the plantation racial logics that determine national belonging in Fiji. Thus, the post-colonial context of Fiji suggests that Indo-Fijian Hindu practice is not a fascist quest for "an organic reversion to an indigenous moral-natural order" like found in nationalist Hindutva narratives in India, or an idealized "decolonial ecologic" (Bhan and Govindrajan 2023), but an "indeterminate" (Nadasdy 2021)

more-than-human assemblage that reconfigures Fiji as a “place” of belonging for Indo-Fijians and iTaukeis alike.

“These Plants are Eager to Serve Krishna”

I was ill prepared for this visit to the temple farm: in a dress I scampered up the hill on my hands and knees, my legs scraping against thorns of the bush and my Crocs slipping quickly under my sweaty feet. The air was hot and sticky, as expected during the peak of the wet season on a late afternoon in January. Dr. Devaki stood atop the hill outside the Radha Damodar Temple, watching as I struggled my way up the steep incline. “Grab that branch that is sticking out, and put your feet on that root over there!” Eventually, I found my way through the bush and onto a sloppily hand terraced plot of land surrounded by the wild growth of the Fijian wet season. I noticed rows of recently planted seedlings beneath me, but in a daze of fatigue made more intense by the heat and infinite cuts I gathered on my way up the hill, I stumbled around attempting to catch my breath. Dr. Devaki yelled out, “Careful, don’t step on the seedlings! I just planted them!”

Some plots were recently planted, others were already covered in the rainbow colors of fresh vegetables. Cassava trees bordered the small farm, branches intertwining with the metal fence that constructed the border between temple grounds and the neighboring property. The planting was haphazard, and difficult to make sense of: indefinite lines of seedlings, mixed with mature crops, and large green foliage that to my untrained eyes looked like bush but were actually wild corn.

By now I had caught my breath, although that was when the sun had started to settle in the sky and the mosquitoes had found me. I danced in an odd series of claps and stomps trying to

avoid getting bitten, and laughed, “This must be a great workout for you, *Mataji* (term of respect offered to women, meaning mother)!” She smiled and said, “Of course, and meditative as well.”

I could see the tracks on the hillside where I had made my way up from the bottom gate. The rains this season had been heavy: it had been months since I was able to visit some of my interlocutors in Nabitu, because Kava Nagasau Road (which led deep into the heart of the Sigatoka Valley) had flooded repeatedly. Among farmers in Nabitu, flooding during the wet season is enough of a deterrent to farming (despite mostly flat land) that both planting and harvesting seasons are postponed to the dry season between May and October (and this time frame gets shorter and shorter every year). I wondered aloud how Dr. Devaki’s farm resisted the dangers of the torrential rains of the wet season and the risk of mudslides on such a steep incline, staying active even in January. Dr. Devaki smiled playfully and responded,

“Oh, that’s no worry. We’ve never had flooding or mudslide problems here. We are lucky. These plants are eager to serve Krishna. So much so, that if we’d been allowed to open our doors during the pandemic, we could have served food to the entire local community.”

Thinking alongside Dr. Devaki, I will focus on the quotidian, or everyday phenomenology of what I have termed “agricultural miracles” – i.e. Tarun’s betel leaf plant growing in sandy soils, or Dr. Devaki’s garden growing lusciously despite the flood risks of farming on a steep hill in the wet season – events that elude scientific reasoning or expectations following statistical patterns. I argue that such miracles are not aberrant moments of surprise or celebration, but rather an enduring feature of Indo-Fijian agricultural consciousness (discussed in Chapter 1). It is important to note here that the miracles themselves do not conform to a

predictable pattern within the Indo-Fijian community, but are individualized: while farmers in Nabitu, like the Singh family, still fear floods during the wet season, Dr. Devaki is unconcerned and plants during the wet months from November to March. So, while the miracles themselves do not conform to a pattern, there is a pattern in that all Indo-Fijians have experienced reliably miraculous agricultural growth. Thus it is the reliability of miracles, not the form of miracles, that is of ethnographic interest. I argue that the perception of continuous cosmological interventions in everyday life affirms not only the material rewards of devotional “discipline” among Indo-Fijian Hindus but a specific emplacement of Indo-Fijians within local landscapes. If these agricultural miracles are happening everywhere, all the time, across the farmscape—this implies, to my interlocutors, that the landscape is “meant to be” agrarian, Indo-Fijians are “supposed to be” farmers, and the local environment is a material reflection of a (syncretic) divine, mythical world. Agricultural miracles in Sigatoka are taken-for-granted because Indo-Fijian relations to landscape are not outside, external to, or “unnatural” in the local cosmic order.

In this example with Dr. Devaki, these reliable miracles are explained within the syncretic Degei/Kaliya cosmological framework. Just as Kaliya lies in the Nakauvadra mountains, waiting to be of service to Krishna, Dr. Devaki’s plants are “eager to serve Krishna.” More-than-human beings, such as garden plants, enact their agency by growing abundantly to feed devotees of Krishna, i.e. the temple and local community. Like in the previous ethnographic example of Tarun’s relationship with Dharti Maiya, the garden becomes a Hindu landscape that validates Indo-Fijian belonging.

Throughout this chapter, I claim that Indo-Fijian Hindu syncretic eco-cosmologies include religious traditions that are political both in their history (drawing from Gandhian Hindu universalist theologies and influenced by the secularized neoliberal spirituality models made

famous by Hindu social media gurus) and practice (shaping how Indo-Fijians imagine their special primordial status in/through agricultural encounters). Here it is necessary to emphasize that these religio-political formulations are not only narrative projects or performances in establishing Indo-Fijian belonging, but also a place-based habitus that “offers a foundation for resistance and the transmission of...culture and ontology through everyday practices and experience” (Donaldson 2022). The omnipresence of agricultural miracles in Indo-Fijian Hindu experience suggests that my interlocutors live inside this eco-cosmology, which shapes not only their perceptions of weather (flood risks during the wet season), but also serves as a “basis for asserting their cultural identity...in the face of oppressive...power” (Donaldson 2022). Daily agricultural miracles - that mitigate environmental risk, sustain economic and agricultural livelihoods, and defy prescribed sterilities of soils – are not *requested* but *expected*, because Indo-Fijians are already and always in intimate (or primordial) relationship with Fiji and as such are uniquely positioned to care for and worship local landscapes. This Indo-Fijian eco-habitus renders the perennial political question, “Do Indo-Fijians belong in Fiji?”, absurd.

Conclusion

I began this chapter with an amalgamated retelling of Kaliya and Degei’s stories which I heard often while conducting fieldwork with Indo-Fijian farmers in the Sigatoka Valley. In the section “Indo-Fijian Primordial Beginnings and Hindu Universalism”, I explore how Indo-Fijian Hindus’ perceived “sameness” between Hindu and imagined “ancient” indigenous religion allows Indo-Fijians to articulate their metaphysical attachment to and ancestral descendancy from the Fijian landscape. I also analyze how Indo-Fijian perceptions of “sameness” between iTaukei and Hindu religious practice stems both from Gandhian universalist theologies and a

new-age brand of Hinduism made popular recently by the proliferation of Indian social media gurus who produce spiritual self-help content on apps such as TikTok and Instagram.

In the section “Indo-Fijian Hindus as Cultural Protectors of Indigeneity”, I discuss how contemporary indigenous iTaukei identity, especially as it dovetails with fundamentalist Christian indigenous ethnonationalism, specifically attempts to dissociate itself from Fijian legends and mythological characters (considered “naïve” spirits). I then ask and answer the question: if Indo-Fijians desire to articulate and emphasize an indigenous-like metaphysical relationship to the landscape, yet contemporary iTaukeis distance themselves from the worship of mythological deities, why do Indo-Fijian Hindus envision that their worship of Kaliya/Degei brings them closer to a non-settler native identity? I posit that among Indo-Fijian Hindus, worship of Kaliya/Degei is considered a decolonial “act of rememory” that protects and preserves an imagined “authentic” Fijian indigeneity. As protectors and restorers of ancient worship practices, Indo-Fijian Hindus fashion themselves as patriots and cultural heroes.

In the last section, “Agricultural Miracles,” I discuss how Indo-Fijian spiritual relationships with the landscape are most often memorialized through the frequent discussion of agricultural miracles, or anecdotes of success in crop cultivation despite risks such as low soil fertility and flash flooding in the wet season. I claim that such narratives position Indo-Fijians as people uniquely rewarded with agricultural success and environmental protection because of their intimate devotional relationship with the landscape. There is an indefinite feedback loop in the process of Indo-Fijian identity construction on the farm: Indo-Fijian Hindu worship practices towards deities (Kaliya/Degei, Dharti Maiya, Ganga Maiya, etc.) sustain and strengthen their spiritual connection with the Fijian landscape, while the successful cultivation of crops despite hazards and risks confirms their particular relation to Fiji. Thus, as agricultural miracles are

narrativized as evidence of Indo-Fijians' metaphysical attachment to place, the farm serves as a key site where Indo-Fijians can articulate a form of place-based belonging that parallels and co-opts contemporary indigenous *vanua* cosmology.

Coda: “Those of Us Who Call Fiji Home”

A broken tractor stood in the corner of the farmhouse, tools and broken metal littered on the floor underneath. The bush in the distance shifted and trembled with a mind of its own, as wind passed through, animals moved, and laborers from neighboring iTaukei villages traversed their way towards the main road to catch a bus home. After months of living in Nabitu, I had come to love the aesthetics of a small farming town and the surrounding wilderness, where I had found interlocutors I considered family, a home, and ethnographic questions to keep me pondering all day. A friend of mine from San Francisco, named Betty, was to briefly visit me in Nabitu during the dry season in July.

My host family and I sat around a plastic table, laden with homemade sweets and snacks, waiting for Betty's arrival. Soon she joined us, and my host family was extremely excited to meet someone from my life outside Fiji. When the conversation lulled, Betty took a pointed look at the tractor, the bush, my mud stained white rubber boots, my sun burnt skin, and a *basthuiya* (wall lizard) scampering across the wall in front of me—and whispered: “How could you live here, Ipsita?” She chuckled to herself. She knew me when my pre-teenage blood curling screams used to awaken the entire summer campsite in the Sierra Nevadas, and I would be found sheltered in a corner of the camp bathroom, afraid to move or breathe in fear of spiders, lizards, bats, and other wildlife.

Sojan Bhaiya, my host brother, was sitting on the other side of the front yard with the men as they drank *nagona* (kava). He heard the question—a tease between friends meant only for my ears—and he quipped back in a lighthearted tone: “There is nothing to fear here, Ipsita knows that. This is her home. This is her farmhouse, we are just her guests.” He winked at me and I was once again overwhelmed by the warmth of their welcome: we were strangers just a few months before. His tone changed, and he spoke directly to my friend: “The truth is, this is Ramnik Dweep, nothing can hurt you here. For those of us who believe, and who call Fiji home, we know: this is paradise, and there is nothing to fear.” He finished with a chuckle, “Don’t worry, no snakes!”

Fiji is colloquially identified as the “land of no snakes”—the small Indian mongoose, introduced to Fijian sugarcane plantations in 1883 to eradicate farm pests, led to the disappearance and extinction of local snake species. However, Indo-Fijian Hindus believe that the reason for Fiji’s lack of serpents is tied to the island’s history as Ramnik Dweep, or Kaliya’s home. Before his epic battle with Krishna, Kaliya was a ferocious demon who ate almost all animals in his home before he was carried to Vrindavan by Garuda, a half-man half-eagle deity considered the primary *vaahan* or vehicle for Lord Vishnu. After Kaliya and Krishna’s epic battle, and when Kaliya became Krishna’s devotee, Kaliya was shown mercy and sent back to his home of Ramnik Dweep. My interlocutors, like Sojan Bhaiya, believe that nothing too terrible can happen in Fiji because they are protected by the paradise properties of Ramnik Dweep. Locals do not fear the attacks of poisonous animals, as Kaliya had already destroyed them all before he was in Vrindavan; locals do not fear the desertification of the landscape, as Ramnik Dweep is promised to be a place of luscious greenery and bounty to sustain Kaliya as he awaits to be in service of Krishna.

In this chapter, I consider Indo-Fijian Hindu practices within the larger religio-political context of indigenous ethnonationalism in Fiji. In response to discriminatory politics, Indo-Fijians have turned to worship practices that integrate elements of indigenous cosmology and have understood their successful agricultural practices in light of these beliefs, thereby strengthening their sense of attachment to the Fijian landscape. But as Sojan indicates, syncretic religious beliefs not only shape Indo-Fijian racial and ethnic identification but also environmental imagination. For Sojan and other interlocutors, faith and devotion in unique Indo-Fijian mythologies (like Kaliya in Ramnik Dweep) protect them from apocalyptic imaginations of climate change and landscape degradation that have become popular in environmental narratives of the Pacific Islands. Syncretic eco-religious cosmologies, then, are not only relevant to how Indo-Fijians define their connections to the land, country, and nation-state, but also how locals produce a sense of hope and resilience in the face of crisis. As Indo-Fijian and iTaukei communities struggle to negotiate Fiji's national identity as it emerges from a racially divisive totalitarian government and into a global climate emergency, syncretic eco-religious cosmologies offer a site for communities to imagine shared political and environmental futures.

Chapter 4 - Indo-Fijian Embodied Relations to Farmscapes as Local Knowledge of the Environment

Seedlings, at Dusk

The sun was setting behind the mountains, leaving an orange haze among the clouds. As the day slowly turned to night, Bhumi Aunty and I sat on upturned boxes and bricks near young cabbage seedlings still in the soil. After a day of heavy work, our arms were sore, our legs aching—I felt that my body could have melted through the bricks and into the muddy Earth underneath me.

Although the other farm laborers from nearby iTaukei villages had gone home, as they needed to cross the River and catch their bus before the sun set, our day was not over yet. While the men in the family had gone to finish the last remaining chores on the farm, Bhumi Aunty and I were to pick seedlings for planting the next day. While sitting, we bent under the netting to gently pluck seedlings from the ground.

In this brief moment we had to ourselves, I asked Bhumi Aunty to tell me more about how she came to Nabitu. I knew from previous conversations she was born to a sugar family in Cuvu, a coastal town on the outskirts of Sigatoka. Her father was a train conductor for the sugar railways that once ran across the Fiji Islands, but now are mostly defunct, some reconverted into eco-tourist attractions. After a long day on the farm, I did not expect the openness with which Bhumi spoke of her past. Our tiredness had given way to intimacy—work made us too exhausted to filter our words. While picking seedlings, she shared with me the pain of her childhood—violence she witnessed between family members in her home, the untimely end to her education when her family no longer could pay her school fees, the difficult days of her early marriage

when she and her husband built their farmhouse in Nabitu, and established agricultural trade networks in Sigatoka Town, without access to infrastructural or technological support.

I moved slowly—in the fading light, it was difficult to distinguish between blades of grass, weeds, and the cabbage seedlings. I was, also, finding it difficult to multitask as I paid close attention to Bhumi Aunty's life history. The heaviness in her voice settled in me—it felt impossible to continue working. I did my best to feel for the stalks, picking only those that were thick enough to be ready for planting the next day. In the time it took me find a handful, Bhumi Aunty's black crate was almost halfway full.

She moved, while speaking to me, with a dexterity that I could not match. With a quick graze of her palms, she gently uprooted seedlings from the ground in bunches. She held the newly uprooted seedlings in her left hand, and picked an individual seedling between the tips of her index and middle fingers and thumb on her right hand. She rolled the seedling in her fingers, wiping off dirt and feeling for the thickness of the stalk. Those deemed ready for planting, she placed in the crate. Her micro-movements were fast and deliberate—transfixed in conversation with me, and without the aid of sunlight, she could sense (through her fingers) the next crop.

The seedlings felt like delicate strings. We rubbed them between our fingers—but not hard enough to crush the thin layer of cellulose that allows the stalk to stay taut. The seedlings were so thin, they made us keenly aware of the grooves in our own skin - a paper cut on my index finger threatened to swallow the seedling every time it passed over. Sometimes the fragile roots took the shape of our fingerprints as they brushed over the oil and texture of our hands. The scars we bore helped determine which cabbage would come to fruit and feed us. Bhumi Aunty did this all, in a fraction of a second, engrossed in the aching memory of a still-fresh past, a single tear escaping from her eye.

In what felt like mere seconds, her crate was full.

It was almost nighttime, by the time we heard the lorry come up the dirt road that led towards this plot of land. As we trudged through the uneven ground on our way up to the lorry, I asked myself: How did Bhumi Aunty know which seedling would sprout, and how did this inarticulate expertise redefine economics of the agricultural industry according to moral/sacred terms of food production? Bhumi cried, as she worked. She picked seedlings through her pain. Memories of worlds ending—the end of her innocence in witnessing familial violence, the early end to her youth in discontinuing her education—gave birth to new life in adulthood, in the form of cabbages on her farm. How did Bhumi Aunty, and her ancestors in indenture, imagine possible environmental and political futures when life-as-they-knew-it already ceased to exist? Bhumi Aunty’s fingers, as they pass over seedling after seedling, index not only the rise of the agricultural industry, the labor required to feed domestic populations, and the ever increasing demands to supply export quality foods for the international trade of tropical fruits and vegetables—but also Indo-Fijian embodied knowledge of built landscapes, the rhythm and stoicism of plantation labor. In this chapter I consider the plantation not as a historical condition or theoretical category, but as a lived form of embodiment that contextualizes local environmental knowledge and the continuous contestation over native-ness that takes place through working and feeling the farmscape.

The pace at which Bhumi Aunty works to prepare the seedlings for the next harvest day is a vestige of plantation systems that organized labor by task based work, not time. Thus the pace of labor, and “quitting time” is set by what needs to be prepared for tomorrow, not by the setting of the sun. This pace is also not disturbed or impacted by physical or emotional discomfort—Bhumi Aunty continues sifting through seedlings even as tears fall from her face as

she recounts her past, as her shoulders squeeze painfully in a muscle spasm. Plantation labor does not stop for the sun, or for tears. Instead, the ache of her past—marked by physical scars on her hands—shape the roots of seedlings, planted into the Earth and giving rise to the next crop. The rubbing together of fingers, with a seedling in between, is a movement form that precariously holds together the history of task-based plantation labor, Indo-Fijian sensorial relationships to plants and surrounding physical elements, private and personal memories, and communal imagination for the agricultural possibilities and environmental future of Fiji.

Indigenous, Embodied, and Local Knowledges in Environmental Discourse

Indigenous knowledge in Fiji is defined not only by specific expertise (signs of incoming hurricanes and cyclones, farming techniques, food preservation strategies, methods for durable shelter construction, etc.), but also oral history customs and traditional labor sharing practices (*solesolevaki*) that scholars claim build “social capital” (Movono and Becken 2018) and “adaptive capacity” (Warrick et al. 2016) in iTaukei rural communities. Thus, especially in scholarship about climate change and disaster resilience (Campbell 2006, Takasaki 2011, Johnston 2014, McNamara and Prasad 2014), iTaukei communities are heralded as prime sites to think about local knowledge of the environment, cultural restoration, community sharing practices, and crisis mitigation in the Pacific Islands. Studies claim that because Indo-Fijian settlements do not have the same chiefly structures and kin-based relationships as found in iTaukei villages, Indo-Fijians “lack...social bonding,” have “individual and independent attitudes”, and do not have the structural frameworks for community sharing and thus are market oriented rather than subsistence driven – making them especially vulnerable to cyclone/hurricane damage and natural disasters (Nakamura and Kanemasu 2022). Such interpretations are so

widely accepted in Fiji—by both Indo-Fijian and iTaukei communities—that Indo-Fijians are not only presumed to be without significant environmental knowledge and largely ignored in discussions about local adaptation to climate change (Reddy 2020), but also devoid of noteworthy socio-cultural value systems like the Fijian *vanua* that metaphysically ties persons in kin relationships with each other, the land, and local spirits.

Seema Bhabhi, Bhumi Aunty's daughter in law, earned a certificate in tourism and worked in the tourism industry before she married Sojan Bhaiya and came to Nabitu to live permanently on the farm. Most often, she brought tourists in resorts around Nadi and Denarau to rural areas of Fiji for “cultural tours” including walking excursions to nearby iTaukei farms, food tastings, cooking classes, and highland treks. “You won’t believe how easily entertained these people are. I just showed them a *vudi* (plantain) plant and they were so amazed by the number of shapes and sizes a banana can come in.” I asked her, once, if there were any Indo-Fijian settlements included in the cultural tours offered by her company. Seema Bhabhi was holding a glass of water in her hand and was mid-gulp when I asked the question—she laughed so hard that water shot out of her nose and she barely managed to rest the glass on the table before she answered me, in between breaths, “What...would those...white people...even...do here [in Nabitu]?” Tears were streaming down her face - the idea that an Indo-Fijian settlement had any “cultural value” for tourists, or the tourism industry, was laughable. While an analysis of the racialized politics of the Fijian tourism industry is beyond the scope of this chapter, I include this brief ethnographic moment to illustrate how Indo-Fijians are considered peripheral and insignificant not only in discussions about indigenous and traditional knowledge of local environments but also more colloquially in their contributions to Fijian history and cultural heritage.

This chapter, in which I theorize Indo-Fijian embodied knowledges in and of the farmscape as forms of Fijian local knowledge, is divided into three sections. In the first section, I explore contemporary Indo-Fijian farmers' sensorial attunements to the landscape, which I theorize as an embodied connection between farmers and the *panchabhoota* (five elements: earth, water, fire, air, and space). I analyze how this Indo-Fijian sensoriality is measured and reflected through *swad* (taste) of agricultural products; across Fiji, Sigatoka Valley's vegetables are known to be *bohot swad* (very tasty) as a result of Indo-Fijian farmers' manual labor and relation to soil. This is frequently framed in contrast to foreign commercial agriculturists in the region supplying *pheeka* (tasteless) products grown using hydroponics and other industrial technologies. Thus, repetitive movements set to task-based schedules on Indo-Fijian farmscapes are representative of sensorial attunements to cosmic elements, reinscribing farm work as Indo-Fijian embodied knowledge that provides Fijians "tasty" foods.

In the second section, I analyze how current Fijian indigenous/traditional knowledge paradigms further perpetrate a teleological framework that synonymizes "indigenous" with "pre-modern." Even as conservation and environmental specialists turn to indigenous knowledges in thinking about climate change "*adaptation*" and disaster "*resilience*" (Ratuva 2014, McMillen et al. 2014), this scholarship can attempt to imagine and glorify a pre-colonial past that can be restored and commercialized (Grosfoguel 2019) in anticipation of future environmental crisis in the Pacific (Klaasen 2020). This framework denies indigenous knowledge a fluid and negotiated form, instead marking it as a fixed vocabulary or inheritance. Importantly, this selective (re)reading of indigenous heritage transposed onto speculative environmental imagination almost fully dismisses Indo-Fijian history and futurity in Fiji. While Indo-Fijians do not claim indigenous knowledge, Indo-Fijian farmers hold generational and embodied knowledge of built

environments that are holdovers of colonial influence and plantation infrastructures—like railroads and dirt lanes, home gardens at the peripheries of the estate/homestead, and introduced plant species such as mango, tamarind, and banyan trees. These built environments—of which Indo-Fijians have intimate familiarity and local knowledge of—are permanent fixtures in Fiji’s landscape and are necessary to think with when considering environmental futures.

In the last section, I consider how scholarship on indigenous knowledge frameworks in Fiji has focused on the “adaptive” potential of communities amidst growing social instability and environmental disturbances/unpredictability. I conclude by exploring how Indian indentured laborers in Fiji imagined futures in “worlds on edge” (Biehl et al. 2020) decades before climate change rhetoric brought sustained political and economic interest to the Pacific Islands. Contemporary Indo-Fijian embodied knowledges of plantation labor, migration, and social adaptation in the face of cultural loss and dehumanizing violence might complement indigenous knowledge frameworks and offer insight into “arts of living” (Tsing et al. 2017) in times of collective, communal, and planetary upheaval.

Part 1: From Soil to *Swad*: “Knowing” Agricultural Landscapes through Taste and Touch

“You Can Taste the Farm in the Fruit”

When I wasn’t in Nabitu, I lived in Sigatoka Town with Charvi Aunty and her extended family, including her son Sumit, her daughter-in-law Palak, and Sumit and Palak’s two children. Every Saturday morning, Charvi Aunty went to the local farmer’s market to buy fresh fruits and vegetables from trusted sellers—usually Indo-Fijian—in stalls she’d frequented for the last 60

years. Whenever I was in town, I accompanied her. Charvi's favorite fruits are lady fingers, a local variety of bananas that are short, plump, slightly tart, and very sweet.

"I can't eat bananas anywhere else [but Sigatoka]. The bananas you have in America, oh my, I've never eaten such bland bananas in my life. You must try bananas from Nadroga [province that is home to Sigatoka]. You can taste the farm in the fruit. Fijian air, water, and soil is so sweet."

But every time we walked through the market, searching for lady fingers, she'd wrinkle her nose in disgust at a few stalls and whisper to me,

"See, Ipsita, those are not sweet bananas. I know because the edges of the banana are still green but the middle is bright yellow. That means they used those Chinese chemicals to ripen the banana, instead of giving it time in the sun. These new Chinese farmers, they are trying to cheat us however they can. Those bananas taste horrible."

In describing the taste of lady fingers, Charvi Aunty connected the sweetness of local bananas to the elemental properties of Fijian farmscapes. Her ability to identify "local" sweetness is also tied to her own embodied relationship with the air, soil, and water of Sigatoka, whose taste she can distinguish from other locations (like "American" bananas). Crucially, she also links agricultural technologies (chemical ripening, racialized as a form of Chinese "cheating") and farm labor (the willingness to patiently wait and work for fruits to ripen on "God's time", essentialized as an Indo-Fijian work ethic) to the taste of fruits. Charvi's ingestive practices bring her embodied knowledge of Fijian terra, aqua, heat, and atmosphere in connection with the sacred qualities of Indo-Fijian farm labor and a critique of the state's

welcome of overseas (Chinese—and Korean, as described below) investment in the agricultural industry.

Later in the week, we ran out of *karomwa bhaji* (a local variety of water spinach) at home. Palak was digging through the refrigerator to find a different leafy green for her son's dinner. As it was after the market had closed, I offered to accompany her to Grace Road, a Korean grocery store down the road that stayed open late and often stocked *karomwa*. Palak shook her head and pursed her lips in contempt. "I can't eat anything from Grace Road. It's just so...bleh." Grace Road produce is famously grown in mass scale using hydroponic technologies, a method of growing plants without soil using mineral nutrient solutions in an aqueous solvent, usually in a greenhouse without direct access to the Fijian sun or air. "It's true, their *bhajis* (leafy greens) are so clean, beautiful, and always available"—hydroponics have faster growth rates and higher yields than plants grown with soil cultivation—"but I don't taste any magic. *Hame pheeka lagta* [It feels bland to me]. I can't feed my son that, he's a growing boy!" Palak's embodied knowledge of the Fijian landscape alerts her to the lack of taste and nutrition in Grace Road products.

Swad (tastiness) requires the embodied touch of an Indo-Fijian farmer's manual labor as well as the crops' interdependent relationship with the *panchabhoota*. Across Fiji and its diasporas, people assume that Sigatoka's chilis are more spicy because they ripen under the hot Nadroga sun; Sigatoka's papayas are sweeter because of the sandy soils and fresh water on the Coral Coast (another colloquial name for the Sigatoka region); and that anything grown by a farmer in the Salad Bowl who "works in soil" will be more robust in flavor and nutrition than those crops grown via mass production on Chinese or Korean farms. (The sensorial, social, and moral value placed on *swad* in local relation to *panchabhoota* in Fiji is in stark contrast to the

rising global popularity of “organic” products that rely on legal frameworks for certification, bio/agro-tech experimentation, and farm labor control/policing techniques that increasingly alienate food from not only land and place but also embodied forms of labor and environmental knowledge (Galvin 2011).) When I was returning to America after one of my first stints of fieldwork, Charvi Aunty packed me a jar of *amra achaar* (pickled June plums), an Indo-Fijian delicacy made of native Polynesian fruit fermented with a savory *masala* (spice) mix. I hand delivered the box to a distant relation of Charvi’s in the San Francisco Bay Area, who opened the jar, smelled the *amra*, took a bite, and heaved a sigh: “Now, that tastes like Fiji. We [in America] don’t have the soil to grow these amras, the sun to dry them, or even the effort to prepare them.” Diasporic Indo-Fijian families often return home with checked-in suitcases filled with local fruits and vegetables fermented into *achaar* (pickles) or preserved as *chutney* (jam). *Swad* links colonial ideals of task based plantation labor with sensory experiences of place.

Among my Indo-Fijian interlocutors, taste is used to determine where food came from, who produced it, under what labor conditions, and using which agricultural methods. A lady finger banana without taste did not ripen through the sacred gift of fire from the Fijian sun or grow under the careful touch of a farmer who has a long-standing, ancestral relationship with the landscape. *Karomwa bhaji* without taste was not cultivated in soil, in relation to *Dharti Maiya* (Mother Earth), and this lack of “grounding” not only reduces *swad* but also the perceived nutritional quality. Drawing from Hannah Garth’s work on how “sensory perceptions are accumulated and communicated with others to develop embodied knowledge, which can form the logics for shifting behavior” (Garth 2022), I argue that Indo-Fijian tastes for *swad* embody local knowledge about land, labor, and place that emphasizes their phenomenological connections to the “homeland”, Fiji.

Swad in Fijian fruits and vegetables is perceived only if the following two conditions are true: (1) that the taster has a personal relationship to the *panchabhoota*, and can distinguish the taste of Fijian soil, water, air, and sun from other landscapes; and (2) that the farmer who labored to produce the crop is in such intimate multi-species relation to elements on the farm that they know how to ensure that the crops receive the full potency of the *panchabhoota* even in unpredictable climates. Thus, taste is but one example of Indo-Fijian embodied local knowledge of “place” or “home”; touch—from as gross a level as handling cabbage seedlings to as subtle a level as perceptions of slight changes in wind and humidity—is also essential to living, eating, and laboring “well” on and with the landscape. In the following ethnographic vignettes I think with commonplace moments of weather prediction in the Sigatoka Valley to analyze how farmers’ readings of clouds and skies establishes an Indo-Fijian sensory knowledge of place. Weather prediction is a frequent conversational past time and necessary skill that determines the cadence and tempo of tasks in Indo-Fijian communities, from chores as mundane as when to take clothes off the laundry line to planning which crops to plant when and where on the farm. Weather prediction relies on inarticulable sensory attunements to air pressure, temperature, wind, atmospheric colors, and intuition.

“Reading” Clouds

The sun that had burnt the back of my neck while foraging for local greens was suddenly covered by a gray blue cloud that seemed to have transmuted itself out of thin air. I looked around wildly at my now shaded surroundings, my eyes still adjusting to the lack of sunlight. Where could the cloud have come from? Suddenly, I could hear the ferocity of the ocean—no, it couldn’t be, we were much too far into the highlands. Strong winds rippling through palm trees sounded like crashing waves to my untrained ears.

I ran into the backyard of the farmhouse. The laundry I had put out to dry was hanging on the clothesline, still-damp t shirts and pants waving in the air several feet above my head. I started to unclip a few clothes from their clothespins when Seema Bhabhi (Bhumi Aunty's daughter-in-law) called out from the kitchen window: "What are you doing, leave them there, they won't be dry yet!"

Hadn't she seen the clouds and heard the wind and felt the chill when the sunlight vanished? I asked her, "Bhabhi, come see the clouds in the sky. It's going to rain." She slowly made her way to the doorway that separated the kitchen from the backyard. She placed her left hand to rest on her pregnant belly and looked up at the sky. The wind now had slowed down, little rays of sun poked through the seemingly thick clouds, and I was confused. A moment before I was sure there was to be a torrential downpour. Now, with bits of sun starting to speckle my face, I was less confident. "Ipsita, I knew it the minute I saw these clouds. They are not for us; see they are heading towards Bila Levu." Bila Levu is the agricultural settlement right across from Nabitu, on the other side of the Sigatoka River. Seema Bhabhi shook her head and made her way back into the kitchen where she was preparing dinner. I returned to the task of elevating the clothes farther into the sky by raising the bamboo stalk placed in the center of the clothesline. Seema Bhabhi knew, much better than me, which clouds were to stay, and which were to leave.

"Reading" Skies

During the harvesting season, Sojan Bhaiya (Seema Bhabhi's husband and Bhumi Aunty's son) and I were returning to Nabitu from Sigatoka at night. As we rounded the last corner on the dirt road and entered Nabitu, Sojan Bhaiya gazed upwards. The stars were bright and moonlight illuminated our way home.

In July, the temperate highland weather in Nabitu creates the perfect atmospheric condition for cloud belts—fog that settles only around the midsection of local hills, like halos. In the early mornings, as the sun’s first few rays break over the horizon, and cast light upon the surrounding mountains, the vision is ethereal. Moist air of the Earth climbs upwards via the mountain’s slope, cools, and condenses into fog that is confined to an altitude with the just-right temperature and humidity for cloud formation. On this night, Sojan and I could see the beginning wisps of these halos taking position, the first few strokes of a painting that would be ready in a matter of hours.

But above the line of fog there was not a cloud in sight. I caught Sojan smiling to himself and relaxing in his posture. Usually, he drove with his upper body pressed closer to the steering wheel, his shoulders pressed against his ears as he either scanned the ground or the sky for signs that would inform his plans for the farm for the next day. Finally, after rounding the last corner, taking a look at the bright night sky, and sighing through a deep breath, he released his shoulders and settled into the backrest of the driver’s seat. “It won’t rain tomorrow. A clear day for harvesting.” But how could he know? He chuckled to himself. “Ipsita, get your hat ready. The sun will shine bright tomorrow.”

Sensory Perceptions and Being-in-Place

I am not interested in deciphering how Seema Bhabhi and Sojan Bhaiya come to know and read clouds—the specific details of how they determine the time, volume, and intensity of rain or sunshine—but rather, what kinds of being-in-place these perceptive abilities imply. Here, it is helpful to think about Seema Bhabhi and Sojan Bhaiya’s responses to cloud signals as rhythmic movements: Seema moves at a slow pace through the farmhouse, proceeding with caution to protect the life growing insider her, and she does not rush to remove laundry from the clothesline

outside because she “knows” that the rain will not fall on this side of the River; Sojan Bhaiya relaxes at the wheel once he sees an open sky hours before dawn as he “knows” that the harvest the next day will proceed smoothly, without rain. Tim Ingold has named this the dwelling perspective, where “a process of working with materials rather than of imposing on them” is dependent upon movement, or “moving along with things rather than taking a stance toward them” (Ingold 2010). To dwell, then, is to “conduct [oneself] skillfully in [one’s] surroundings, deploying capacities of attention and response developmentally embodied through practice and experience” (Ingold 2010). While supply-and-demand economics of the agricultural trade industry in Fiji might determine which and how many crops are planted, the rhythm of farm work is determined first by seasonal cycles and more subtly, the day-to-day fluctuations of elements (soil, water, air, and sun) perceived sensorially.

In this section I have explored how the Indo-Fijian body—through sense perception—produces and stores embodied knowledges of Fiji, imagined as a landscape of particularly potent *panchabhoota* and “home”. This focus on Indo-Fijian local knowledge—produced and circulated between farmers and consumers—intervenes in dominant discourse that defines traditional knowledge in Fiji almost exclusively in terms of iTaukei cultural history, oral traditions, and customary labor sharing practices.

Part 2: Roads, Gardens, and Dirt: Embodied Knowledges of Built Environments

Indigenous Knowledge Framed in “Stasis”

Scholarship on indigenous knowledge in Fiji, even in recognizing the dynamism and diversity of indigenous ways of knowing, often tends toward romanticizing and racializing iTaukei history

and practice as pre-modern. By this, I mean that in emphasizing an ontology of distributed agency among human and other-than-human actors (Nunn et al. 2016, Hviding 2003), scholars and activists inadvertently fetishize an iTaukei harmony with “nature” and “pre-contact lifestyle” that posits indigenous knowledge of place as existing in a vacuum, as somehow non-adaptive to the environments produced by colonialism, trade, and industrial development.

To illustrate this, I will offer examples from recent literature on iTaukei traditional knowledge. In 2016, Janif et al. published a study on the “value of traditional oral narratives in building climate-change resilience” and explained that “because the custodians of traditional knowledge were targeted, most interviewees were 70-79 years old”. The underlying assumption to this methodological position is that “traditional” knowledge is confined to experiences of the distant past, hence the reason only elderly participants were recruited for the study. What of iTaukei knowledges of the 21st century: repurposing plastic trash for mechanical projects, fishing in heavily polluted waters, construction projects on coastal land formations, etc.? A study of the “traditional” ignores such forms of living in the present that are entangled in histories of colonialism, exploitation, and global capitalism. In 2021, Kitolelei et al. published a research paper where they claimed that indigenous fishing knowledge is “seriously threatened by factors that are directly or indirectly related to the commercialization of fishing, breakdown of communal living and overemphasis on urban education.” A causal inference that implies cultural stasis of “indigeneity” is implicated here: indigenous knowledge is worth protecting, but requires a “return” to communal and rural living. Further claims that indigenous knowledge “is threatened because of the lack of interest in...fishing stories from majority of the younger generations” (Kitolelei et al. 2021) frames iTaukei youth as lazy, undisciplined, and ignorant (perpetuating

colonial racial stereotypes of indigenous populations) rather than actively engaged in global, entrepreneurial, and adaptive responses to environmental change.

This scholarly tendency to idealize “pre-contact purity” of iTaukei knowledge denies the coevalness that Fabian (1983) posits is essential for an ethical and accurate understanding of ethnographic subjects, and reinforces a static interpretation of indigenous knowledge. This romanticization stems from a scholarly desire to contrast iTaukei ways of knowing and interacting with the environment against the backdrop of contemporary environmental crises and degradation (Raisele and Lagi 2023, Pearson et al. 2020), suggesting that indigenous practices are key to imagining long-term livability in the Pacific. This perspective, however, risks ignoring how local communities in Fiji—including Indo-Fijian descendants of Indian indentured laborers—navigate state infrastructures, built environments, and other colonial networks, systems, and logics that organize everyday life in Fiji.

In the previous section, I explored how Indo-Fijians have an embodied knowledge of “place” in Fiji—this imagined “place”, however, is a necessarily different appreciation of the Sigatoka Valley in contrast to exoticizing visions of Fiji as ecological, social, and indigenous “paradise.” I argue that Indo-Fijian sensory practices in built environments—such as reading environmental cues from transportation infrastructures, or foraging on hard soils and in between invasive plant species at the peripheries of the plantation—undergird a local knowledge that has developed in active engagement with and resistance/adaptation to the colonial plantation industry and changing landscapes. Built spaces, like dirt roads leading deep into the Sigatoka Valley or empty plots of land ignored by industry and deemed to be non-arable, are understood in more than utilitarian terms—and this Indo-Fijian perspective can integrate with indigenous

frameworks to produce a shared local knowledge of environmental management and stewardship in post-colonial contexts.

“Reading” Dirt

It was a wet day during the dry season. I held an umbrella over my head as I waited for Sojan Bhaiya (Bhumi Aunty’s son) to pick me from Sigatoka on his way back to Nabitu. I had come into town to meet with Charvi Aunty, who I hadn’t seen in a few weeks, and Sojan was to pick me up from Sigatoka on his way back from Suva. The time got later and later, and the night darker and darker, as I waited for Sojan Bhaiya.

Finally, I heard the farm lorry’s loud mechanical sounds turning into Narra Lane, the gully behind Charvi Aunty’s house. I jumped in the front, clutching my bag to my lap, and squeezed into the middle seat near the transmission. “What made you so late Bhaiya?” “The traffic coming back from Suva was hell.”

He stopped at the *bowza* (gas station) in town. Sojan handed me a crisp \$10 bill and told me to get a purple Mother (energy drink), cassava chips, and fried peanuts while he filled up the tank preparing for the arduous journey ahead. While Nabitu (Sojan Bhaiya’s home village) was only 10 miles away as the crow flies, the journey took over an hour as he had to carefully navigate potholes on a raw dirt road leading into the highlands. I climbed back into the front seat and handed him the snacks. He threw me a bag of peanuts. I munched. Fresh salted peanuts taste like long, dark road trips with Sojan Bhaiya.

Sojan Bhaiya drove so fast over the potholes a few peanuts jumped from my bag and escaped through the open window onto the road. Under his breath he was planning the next day’s planting schedule. He kept squinting towards the edges of the road, where beams of the

headlights met the dark edges of the surrounding bush. I squinted with him. What was he trying to find?

“I’m trying to see how loose the dirt is. If you look to the edge of the beam, you can see how much dirt becomes air borne once the truck passes over the road.” This required paying extremely close attention: staring out of the corner of the front window, we had to wait and see if the edges of the headlight’s beam would illuminate dirt being disturbed from the truck’s tires rolling on top of or near it. For a fraction of a moment, the golden light would get fuzzy with gray specks.

“I can use the amount of dirt disturbed to predict how much it rained today. If it rains a lot, the dirt stays packed to the ground; this could be bad for planting. It means I have to check on the seedlings—*sakta gul jayenge* (“They might melt into the ground”). [The seedlings might not have grown thick enough to withstand a strong rainstorm.] Then I’ll have to plan to find a nursery and buy seedlings for planting, which means another trip into town or replanning our crops for the plot we are going to plant tomorrow. And if it doesn’t rain enough, I have to plan tomorrow to get the water buckets filled before we go into the field—the ground will be too hard for planting. But it looks good today. Just the right amount of dryness. I think we’ll have a good planting day tomorrow.”

Traveling at night made it easier for Sojan to measure the dryness of the Earth; the headlights against the dark background meant that the gray fuzziness was easier to make out. The bright sunlight of a Fijian day could easily disguise the small differences in the amount of dirt disturbed.

Dirt Roads: Materiality and Metaphor

The materiality of dirt roads is its own “thing”—that moves, shifts, leaks, and transforms in ways that those who drive and walk on these highland trails very quickly come to understand. These roads—carved into hillsides to carry indentured laborers into rural plantations, later remade for lorries when the sugarcane railroads went defunct and sugarcane farmers needed to use a different method for goods and cane transportation—are diffuse. On Tarun, bright, dry days, the dust on the edges of the road leaks into the nearby bush, blurring the lines between plantation and “nature.” On wet days, the dirt on the roads settles down into potholes deep enough to flip fully stocked farm lorries; the injured drivers lie on the side of rural roads, waiting for a good Samaritan to pass by this lonely path, waiting for the local and domestic officials to finally respond to their decades-long plea for the asphaltting of highland roads. Sojan Bhaiya was one of these fallen drivers just a few years ago, as he rushed to deliver vegetables at the border of the Nadroga province during one of the COVID-19 lockdowns in 2020. During cyclone season, makeshift bridges that connect dirt roads across tiny streams that feed into the Sigatoka River disappear under heavy floods; but the sour taste of local dispute remains, as iTaukei villages and Indo-Fijian settlements argue over which is responsible for the maintenance of the bridges and roads. The dirt roads are packed with years of decaying sugarcane; more recently, with vegetables that fall over the sides of farm lorries; and to those that look carefully, signs and cues for the promise of the next planting season.

Sojan Bhaiya knows that the road can tell the past, present, and future stories of the Sigatoka Valley. This dusty, muddy, blurry, bloody experience of dirt is the “generativity” of rural routes that lead into the heart of Fiji’s agricultural industry. To “embrace the materiality” (Millar 2018) of dirt roads—what my Indo-Fijian interlocutors in Nabitu must do every day, as

they imagine possible agricultural and environmental futures in Fiji—is to confront the plantation infrastructures they continue to inhabit as life giving, nurturing, and simultaneously, destructive. “It means refusing to appropriate, glorify, or transcend its abject qualities and instead to engage with the vitality” (Millar 2018) of plantation memory that is obscured when Indo-Fijian sugarcane history and agricultural labor is not considered as part and parcel of the contemporary Fijian environmental landscape. If “people know infrastructures not as networks that cross places, but as interwoven with them” then Indo-Fijian experiences with and of built environments of the plantation and agricultural industry are crucial in understanding the “spatial, temporal, and lived dimensions of environmental problems” (Carse 2016).

An interesting comparative note here is the case of “insurgent geographies”, among quilombolas escaping slavery in late nineteenth century Brazil, where slave resistance “was by no means a ‘restorationist’ effort to preserve or re-create an African based community...but one in which quilombolas sought to live as free agents while deeply enmeshed in that society’s midst” (Miki 2012). The ethical and theoretical challenges in comparing enslaved vs indentured plantation lives are many (Mohabir 2010), but here I am interested in how desires to live-in-place, and “flee into” rather than “flee out” of plantation worlds, has “larger significance as a political expression of citizenship against a nation-building project that was premised on the territorial and social subjugation” (Miki 2012) of particular residents (in Brazil, quilombolas; in Fiji, Indian indentured laborers and their descendants).

Thinking about how Indo-Fijian farmers imagine futures with and in spite of plantation infrastructures brings us back to food—this time, in family gardens on “unusable” plots at the peripheries of the agricultural industry, reminiscent of the vegetable patches indentured laborers

established on the edges of the plantation or in between stalks of sugarcane to supplement their low weekly rations.

Foraging Among Weeds

It was a rare, slow afternoon during the planting season. Bhumi Auntie and I stayed home—her shoulder was hurting, so I offered to stay behind with her in the farmhouse and help prepare food in the kitchen. After lunch we took a short walk to the Sigatoka River, behind the house. Before the borehole water extension installed near the house roughly ten years ago, my host family sourced all their freshwater needs—for cooking, bathing, farming, etc.—from the River. Bhumi Auntie took me to her secret spot at the River’s edge. “I have so many sweet memories here, doing laundry. We women used to meet here and laugh and tell stories together. Everyone has a borehole now so we don’t get to enjoy time together as often.”

We turned around to make our way back to the house from the River bank. The hardscrabble ground was not plowed—it was empty land that flooded too frequently (due to its proximity to the River) to be entrusted with regular crops. Years ago, the Singh family had started to use this land as a makeshift garden for herbs; now these plants grew wild and we frequently came out to forage for greens. In between cracks of dry dirt sprung up little tufts of grass, weeds, and herbs. These green patches concealed a local delicacy—*choraiya bhaji*, or amaranth leaves. Fried into *dhal pakodas* (lentil dumplings), or sauteed with eggplant, or cooked on its own in coconut oil—*choraiya bhaji* regularly adorns Fijian kitchen tables. Bhumi Auntie is a petite woman; with a quick bend of her knees she stooped close enough to the ground to graze her hands across these tufts of grass to pick out the young *choraiya* seedlings. I drew closer to her to see how she identified the *choraiya*, so I could help as we made our way back to the house from the River.

I was foolish for thinking that I could know the difference between weeds, grass, *dhanya* (cilantro), and *choraiya*. I returned to the house proud of the big bunch of greenery in my hand; Bhumi Aunty laughed at me and said, “Well, I guess we’ll have throw out some *dhanya* seeds again because you seem to have picked through all the seedlings. And let’s see here—you’ve also managed to pick some prickly weeds for our salad? Didn’t I show you what *choraiya* looked like?” I looked at her bundle. If I was honest, I would have to say they all looked like weeds to me.

How does the Singh family’s makeshift herb garden transform an “unrable” plot of land into a source of sustenance and nutrition? Bhumi Aunty finds coveted green delicacies in between dry cracked mud, ground that will quickly flood in the coming months when the rains come back. How does Bhumi Aunty know what to forage for, where, when, and how—and how does this knowledge imply an embodied understanding of plants in relation to cycles of soil, water, and sun? On Earth that has been deemed “unusable” for the commercial agricultural industry, Bhumi Aunty and many of my other Indo-Fijian interlocutors continue to forage wild greens that supplement dinner tables and appetites. Plantation creativity—a habitus inherited from ancestors who tended to gardens under barracks for indentured laborers, planted crops for personal use in between stalks of sugar cane, and traded their harvests unlawfully with iTaukei villagers adjacent to sugarcane plantations—imagines land as always more than “empty”. While the plot behind Bhumi Aunty’s farmhouse suffers from an increasingly wet climate and can no longer be plowed for agricultural production, careful eyes and expert fingers can find diamonds in the rough—*choraiya bhaji*, ready for picking.

Living with Dirt and Embodying “Place”

Embodying, reading, and living with dirt together—in such ways that allow my interlocutors to find life and promise in its parched, fissured, and otherwise unpredictable features—underscores how Indo-Fijian embodied knowledges critique the framing of indigenous knowledge as exclusively relevant in discussions about conservation and “sustainability”. Indigenous knowledge, a frequently called upon framework in conservation initiatives in Fiji and the broader Pacific Islands, largely focuses on iTaukei resilience and adaption in the face of environmental degradation today (Begg et al. 2023, Magee et al. 2016, Chand et al. 2014, Veitayaki 2002). Historically, scholars have defined indigenous knowledge by two measures: first, on how iTaukei communities observe and interpret environmental signals to respond proactively to ecological shifts (Johnston 2015); and second, on the iTaukei social structures and kinship systems that enable collective action in times of economic or environmental difficulty (Nakamura and Kanemasu 2020). For example, scholarship on indigenous agricultural practices concentrates on the ancestral and sensorial methods by which iTaukeis are finely tuned to the nuances of local ecosystems (Haukali 2014), demonstrating an intricate understanding of crop diversity, soil health, and water management, and in turn building resilience against droughts and floods. Furthermore, scholarship on the communal framework of iTaukei villages (Yila et al. 2014, Takasaki 2011, Ravuvu 1983), emphasizes indigenous kinship networks and obligatory reciprocity that supports collective action and social cohesion, building adaptive capacity and enabling communities to share resources, knowledge, and support in times of environmental stress. In contrast, scholarship on Indo-Fijian relationships to the Fijian landscape has focused primarily on the destructive environmental history of sugarcane plantations (Mahadevan 2008) and the impact of discriminatory land policies and resulting lack of institutional/state

infrastructures for Indo-Fijian socio-economic development (Kurer 2001, Lal et al. 2001, Naidu and Reddy 2002, Kumari and Nakano 2016, Singh 2020). As a result of the differing focus of these literatures—the former highlighting the form, practice, and application of iTaukei traditional knowledge, and the latter emphasizing the volatile politics and development of Indo-Fijian post-sugarcane agricultural livelihoods—discourse that critiques the exclusivist frame of “indigenous” knowledge, analyzes Indo-Fijian embodied knowledges of environment and place, and explores a more inclusive approach to speculative environmental thinking in Fiji has remained underdeveloped.

Thus, I focus here on Indo-Fijian farmers’ phenomenological (bodily, sensorial, material) and embodied experience of the built environment, established via generations of agricultural labor on plantation infrastructures in Fiji, as well as the immersive and gastronomical experience of “place” felt in the gut (both physical and metaphorical). I argue that these embodied forms of Indo-Fijian agricultural history and practice contribute to a shared Fijian local understanding of “place”, from which communities measure and confront environmental change—while also disrupting an ethnocentric ideal of local knowledge that is bound both in colonial allachronistic frameworks and in ongoing claims to indigenous ethnonationalism.

Part 3: Living “Well” in Worlds on Edge

The Weight We Carry: Laboring Bodies in Pain and Place

The morning after Bhumi Aunty and I had sat together at dusk picking through cabbage seedlings, I climbed into the truck’s front seat, squeezed between Bhumi Aunty and the transmission. Sojan Bhaiya (Bhumi Aunty’s son) grabbed the crate of cabbage seedlings and placed them on my lap (the bed of the truck was filled with water barrels we were going to use

for manual irrigation). The truck rumbled over dirt roads until we reached the plot that Lavraj Uncle (Bhumi Aunty's husband) and Sojan Bhaiya had selected for planting. Mama (Bhumi Aunty's brother) had reached there before us and was using a horse pulled plow to prepare the soil.

One look at the soil, and I shook my head in disbelief. The Earth was dry, cracked, and brimming with yellow straw—remnants of the crop that came before. Despite careful tilling, the soil had caked together in large globules that looked impossibly hard. The dull color of grayish brown looked at best unpromising, at worst infertile. Where would we find the softness to hold the fragile seedlings Bhumi Aunty and I picked yesterday?

I was incredulous when Sojan Bhaiya began throwing the seedlings in a line, spaced roughly one big footstep apart from each other. With the magic of *masala* (fertilizer), apparently anything was possible. Quickly, I followed behind him in the technique Bhumi Aunty had taught me weeks before: with legs extended, I bent towards the Earth throwing my weight onto my extended index finger that slowly bore a hole into a tough mud cake. I placed the seedling in the hole, and still bent over in a forward fold with legs extended, I grabbed a few smaller mudcakes and pressed them around the seedling hoping the seedling would stay upright. Just a few seedlings in on my first line, and I was already in agonizing pain. My lower back strained with the repetitive forward folding motions and my arms were tired from trying to fit mud cakes together like puzzle pieces. The line ahead of me looked like it continued forever. I waited eagerly for the sound of Lavraj Uncle returning from the farmhouse with *laal chai* (red tea) and white bread, our signal for a midmorning break in the shade of the nearby jungle. But that was hours away.

I shuffled my feet to the next seedling, realizing that if I kept my head and arms close to the ground, I could reduce the strain on my back caused by repeatedly standing up between the seedlings. For this seedling, I gave myself a break. I bent my knees and squatted to the ground, repeating the same protocol I knew from before—drill a hole with my index finger, insert the seedling, and place mud cakes around to hold it upright. The squat was so much more comfortable than bending into the seedling in a forward fold position. I wiped my brow of sweat and readjusted my sun hat. A little bit of mud on my gloves left a streak on my face. I welcomed the cool moment of respite.

Bhumi Aunty hurriedly stepped across three lines when she saw me in a squat. “No, no, no, not like that, Ipsita, you have to press your body in.” She moved towards the next seedling. “See? Like this.” With her legs extended she bent forward into the dirt and I saw the mud cakes crumble quickly. Once she placed the seedling, she leaned into the areas around the seedling over and over again—in an up-and-down, bobbing motion—pressing the dirt together with her weight to support the young stalk. Beads of sweat fell perpendicularly, from her forehead into the ground. Unlike me, she did not wear gloves. Her sweat and weight created enough moisture and pressure to create soft Earth that protected the seedling. Through her movements she showed me how in the squatting position, I could not put my full body weight into the ground and my seedlings could not stay upright. Of course, she was right. The seedlings in my line drooped sadly to one side or another, poorly supported by the mud cakes that hadn’t crumbled and pressed together properly under my novice hands. My technique was deficient: the weight I carried, through my body and into the soil, was not enough.

As I think with Indo-Fijian embodied practice as a form of local knowledge and relationship to place, and highlight how farmers’ are more-than-human in their relation to

elements of the landscape, it is crucial that I do not idealize farm labor as beyond or detached from the physical body. Manual labor on the farms of my interlocutors is demanding, exhausting, and commonly injurious. A young family friend of the Singh family worked with us in the fields after he returned from secondary school, hoping to earn some pocket money. He worked without protective equipment, like everyone else, and I watched him cut a gash on his leg when he mistimed a swing with the cane knife. Blood flowed from his open wound and we gathered around him to tie a tourniquet. He rested in the shade and less than 10 minutes later, with the same knife that cut him, was hacking away at overgrowth at the edge of the fields. Bhumi Aunty's husband, Lavraj Uncle, suffered from debilitating hip pain from a lifetime of repetitive motions on the farm. When the discomfort was too great, he would sit in the middle of a "line" (a row of seedlings) with his right leg outstretched. At night, a little *nagona* (Hindi word for kava), rum, and the medicine of "farm-fresh vegetables!" was necessary for a restful sleep to prepare for work the next morning. Bhumi Aunty suffered from long-term diabetes and her right shoulder and arm was often tingling, numb, or stiff (symptoms of diabetic neuropathy). I bought her a mini chiropractic massage gun so she could feel some relief from the pain before repeating her chores on the farm the next morning.

Here, I explore the body as site of knowledge production among Indo-Fijian farmers as they continue to participate in the agricultural industry but while working with soils and manual farming techniques that require copious amounts of (quite literally) back-breaking labor. I contextualize the existential weight that Bhumi Aunty carries—ancestral memories of bonded labor, histories of adaptation where Indo-Fijians remade cultural worlds in the face of displacement and plantation violence, and agricultural hopes for a bountiful crop—as generated from the circulation of labor, crops, food, and imagined futures that constitute "moving

materialities” (Hardin 2021) on the Fijian farmscape. Farm work requires repetitive movements of shifting existential and physical weight, drawing upon ancestral histories and embodied memories of monotonous plantation labor to work with “difficult” landscapes. While this labor causes sickness and injury, it is also necessary for the production of crops that are nutritious and *swadisht* (tasty, evoking “local” flavor). Seedlings cannot stand upright unless Bhumi Aunty offers the weight of her body and history into the soil. This grounds Indo-Fijian ideals of health, body, and food in social and historical relation with plantation logics of labor. Thus, Indo-Fijian farm work—in both its discomfoting colonial history, and in its certain physical pain—is imagined as a shared (communal), rather than individual, experience. Memories of worlds ending and being remade are conditional to reframing the bodily pain of farm labor as the weight of Indo-Fijian history, sensorial experiences of place, the success and tastiness of future crops, and agricultural possibilities in challenging environmental and physical conditions.

Oceanic epistemological frameworks imagine the body as *of* place, “meaning the land, food, and families that nourish the body from birth constitute that body as fundamentally located within ancestral relations” (Hardin 2021; see also Nobobo-Baba 2006, Diaz 2012, Ratuva 2007). Contextualizing Indo-Fijian embodied knowledges within this framework brings sugarcane plantation histories to the forefront of discussions about the “constant movement and exchange of bodies, knowledge, and materials” (Teaiwa 2014) across Pacific worlds. Thinking with the plantation, and its environmental impacts, necessarily challenges the presumptions that scholars make by highlighting “change” in contemporary contexts—ecological or otherwise. I join critics of the Anthropocene concept in arguing that framing the present moment as a time of non-reversible, human induced environmental change obscures histories of cultural erasure, displacement, and systemic injustice faced by colonized populations (Gathey 2021, Yusoff 2018,

Baucom 2020). Indo-Fijian embodied knowledges and historical consciousness of plantation memory call attention to the forms of cultural loss, social fragmentation, and environmental adaptation Indian indentured laborers faced during and following their migration to Fiji. Long before climate change rhetoric gained traction and turned its lens towards the Pacific, worlds were ending and reconstructing for those subjugated within imperialist frameworks—in this case, indentured laborers living, working, and dying in unknown and unfamiliar places.

For roughly 60000 Indian indentured laborers brought to Fiji in bonded labor, known colloquially in Hindi as “girmit”, worlds ended in the journey across the *kala pani* (black waters) and in harsh and exploitative conditions on sugarcane plantations. But still, the severing of ties with the “homeland” (without promise of return) and the exhaustive labor practices and dehumanizing humiliation endured under vicious plantation overseers produced a new identity of *jahaji bhai* (ship brotherhood). After months of dwelling in dark, crowded slave barracks (previously used to transport African slaves in the Middle Passage), Indian indentured laborers waded through waist deep waters dragging lifebuoys behind them until they reached the Fijian shore. “[Indentured] people...refer to [this] as the moment of origin or genesis in the new land” (Mishra 1996), often metaphorizing the ship as traumatic womb and the short, wet trip from ship to land as the process of birth, of arrival into a new landscape. Here, Mishra borrows heavily from Gilroy’s theorization of the slave ship as a chronotope (Gilroy 1993), where “time stops and restarts...and linear history is broken” (Clifford 1994). Worlds were simultaneously ending and beginning on island coasts (Lobo and Parsons 2023), where Indian indentured laborers met their new futures on Fijian landscapes, and indigenous Fijians (*iTaukeis*) found plantations at the carefully policed borders of their villages (Durgahee 2017).

Current scholarship on indigenous knowledges in Fiji can fall into two epistemic traps: one, it can potentially perpetuate a form of environmentalism that is disconnected from the long-term social injustices that have given rise to the environmental degradation seen today, effectively racializing climate change solutions as an indigenous responsibility (Belfer et al. 2017) and placing the burden of adaptation on already marginalized peoples (Hereniko 2014); two, it can be politicized in imagining environmental sustainability as a “return” to pre-modernity that ignores the histories of how indigenous and local populations have been adapting to environmental, social, and political change for centuries. As Indo-Fijians have been racialized as people outside indigeneity, their embodied relation to plantation and post-colonial landscapes of Fiji calls attention to these intellectual and political pitfalls and directs attention towards how Fijians—both indigenous and Indo-Fijian—have experienced environmental change across geographic and temporal scales.

Conclusion

In this chapter I have explored how Indo-Fijians’ embodied practices, both in the production and consumption of agricultural products, produces a sense of “home” in the Sigatoka Valley. Through touch, my interlocutors establish a place-based knowledge of the *panchabhoota*, or physical elements in Fiji (soil, water, air, and sun). Through taste, they can differentiate the “who, how, and where” of farm produce, and this sensory expertise reaffirms their metaphysical and cultural connections to the Fijian landscape. Importantly, Indo-Fijian articulations of “place” include a historical consciousness of the sugarcane industry—living and moving with plantation infrastructures has produced an embodied knowledge of built environments that necessarily imagines the local “environment” as fundamentally altered by colonialism. Contemporary

environmental stewardship in Fiji, then, cannot rely on an idealized return to a pre-modern past; it must build on both “traditional” and “adaptive” knowledge practices to care for and imagine futures in radically transformed environments.

Indo-Fijian history and knowledge of local environments is poorly documented and rarely included in conservation or “sustainability” initiatives in Fiji, which prefer to think with indigenous knowledge practices and iTaukei cultural paradigms. The co-optation of iTaukei cultural history in environmental discourse, however, can lead to the “double colonization” of indigenous populations as they: are racialized as pre-modern in thinking and practice; are heralded as the ones responsible for eco-conservation despite bearing histories of exploitation and erasure; and their knowledges are commodified into “resilient” technologies for environmental capitalism. Precisely because Indo-Fijians are outside this colonialist framework for Pacific environmentalism, communal histories of extractive plantation labor and embodied knowledges of built environments have persisted in colloquial understandings of “place” in the Sigatoka Valley. In the last section of this chapter, I argue that my Indo-Fijian interlocutors contextualize the pain and sickness of farm labor (endured for the promise of new life) within embodied ancestral memories of rebuilding physical, cultural, and social worlds during indenture. To conceive, perceive, and interpret environmental “change” in Fiji, then, must acknowledge how Pacific worlds transfigured much before current media and political focus on climate change.

This chapter has considered the sensorial attunements and embodied practices of contemporary Indo-Fijians that complement iTaukei indigenous knowledge but have often been overlooked or marginalized in environmental discourse. Through articulating embodied knowledges of “place”, my Indo-Fijian interlocutors invite a reimagining of what constitutes

local knowledge and underscore the potential for more inclusive and holistic approaches to understanding and addressing shared environmental and social challenges in Fiji.

Conclusion

It is early in the afternoon in the wet season. The sun beats down with a ferocity I have never encountered before. The air is so thick with moisture I feel as though I am permanently in that liminal place - in the shower, but after the tap has been turned off. My heat exhaustion is so intense I can barely inflate my lungs to breathe. (I learn quickly - after this first bout of sickness, I realize I need the electrolyte rich water of at least four young coconuts every day to keep me functioning through the wet season.)

I am curled up on the couch on the back porch, trying to (futilely) invite an ocean breeze into the house. Ronit comes up behind me and says, “Reading group today?” I perk up. I am exhausted and do not have the energy to think. But reading group is as good a distraction as any from the inescapable heat.

Ronit is a middle aged man, a retired Hindi language teacher who is also Charvi Aunty’s childhood friend from Nasau, a small farming settlement a little ways into the Sigatoka Valley. He comes to the house, every single day without fail, for lunch and an afternoon game of Scrabble with Charvi. On the days he arrives earlier than lunch is ready, he and I read “*Dharti Meri Mata* [Earth, My Mother]” together. Written by Jogindar Singh Kanwal and published in 1975 (Kanwal 1975), it is considered “classic” Hindi literature from Fiji and is taught as required reading in secondary school Hindi language courses across the country. It is a story about Nandu (an Indo-Fijian boy in secondary school) and his family who are evicted from their ancestral home by the local *mataqali*, and the painful fallout of this unceremonious severing of family connections to land.

Today, Ronit is reading a passage from Chapter 2. Nandu is giving a speech: “...*Javaan oochhe aur bhadde pahaado se darkar unke pairo mein nahi baitathe. Unke shikharo ko dekhkar sir niche nahi karthe...* [The young do not fear tall and ugly mountains, and then sit down on their feet. They do not look to the peaks and then bow their heads...]”

Ronit pauses. My pink face is scrunched as I squint in the bright yellow sun. He chuckles as I wipe a bead of sweat from my forehead.

“Did you know that the tallest mountain on Earth is Mount Everest in the Himalayas; they say that its peak reaches so far into the sky that it never goes without sun. And Fiji is the first place in the world to see the sun rise. So you see? We [Indo-Fijians] chased the sun, from peaks in India to horizons in the Pacific. We are sun people.” I am not sure if he has said this to make me feel better about my now sunburnt skin.

But his tone is shifting – from light and pleasant, to something else. I am sure he is thinking about the soon-to-come passages, when Jonathe (an iTaukei character from a local *mataqali*) threatens Nandu’s family with an unlawful eviction: “*Bahut baath nahi ham maango suno. Ii jameen hamaar aur hamaar mataqali kai baithe. Tumhaar nahi. Nahi niklo maango tho ham sako tumhei jabran nikalo. Nahi jao mango tho tumhaar chij baahr, humaar chij bhitr.* [I don’t want to listen to your excuses. This land is mine and my *mataqali*’s. Not yours. If you don’t want to leave, we will remove you by force. If you don’t want to go, it’ll be your things outside, my things inside.]”

Ronit says, in a quiet tone simmering with anger: “And this is also exactly what I tell people who dare to tell me that this [Fiji] is not my home. Just as sure as I am that the sun is shining, I am sure that I am of the sun, and that I belong here, in the Fijian sunshine.”

This dissertation explores how Indo-Fijian and iTaukei (indigenous) history, representation, and consciousness in Fiji are always in flux and in conversation with one another, spilling outside of the strictly policed boundaries of identity first imposed by the plantation complex, even as the plantation's afterlives permeate relations with land, property, and bodies. Because Indian indentured laborers and iTaukei villagers were considered racially and biologically distinct from one another in the British colonial imagination, each group was materially and administratively separated from the other. The infrastructural and physical divisions fixed a racial logic of difference and incongruity. This is reflected in academic scholarship on Fiji, where there is a significant paucity of literature that frames Indo-Fijian and iTaukei identities in spiritual, ecological, and communal relation to one another. Studies on indigenous people in Fiji rarely consider how contemporary assumptions of indigeneity as a political and cultural "fact" are deeply intertwined with the perception of Indo-Fijians as a comparative social "out-group", nor deeply ensconced as a perennially explosive issue in Fijian politics, both coups and elections; studies on Indo-Fijians focus sometimes on syncretic religious, linguistic, or cultural phenomena but more often discuss Indo-Fijians, and their settlements, outside of indigenous influence other than in the volatile ethnonationalist politics in Fiji. In probing how Indo-Fijians desire, articulate, and imagine their belonging in and to Fiji – through relations to land via labor, through universalist interpretations of pre-Christian iTaukei religious traditions, or through Ronit's insistence that diaspora is an ethno-solar proposition - this dissertation troubles the binary between indigeneity and Indo-Fijianness. Instead of legislating competing claims to indigeneity, which would uphold the legal, social, and political conditions of plantation liberalism, it poses claims to place as a complex site of negotiations and accountings of history and embodiment in

real time, with ways of accounting for history, future, and Fiji that diverge from the exclusionary and violent teleologies of ethnonationalist resurgence.

Central to this is the farmscape. The farm is an apt place to think about social, environmental, cosmological, economic, and historical relations between Indo-Fijians and iTaukeis. The plantation complex fundamentally altered the contours of local landscape, religion, and conceptions of racial/ethnic difference while setting in place the logics of capitalist extraction, global economic trade routes, and nationalism through which iTaukei communities and Indo-Fijians continue to reconfigure the future of Fiji. Sugarcane plantations put Fiji “on the map”; land arability, knowledge about crop cultivation, and histories of farming now define both indigenous and Indo-Fijian perceptions of possible futures. Farms – the crops produced there, the labor required for them, and the people who live and die there – are the pulse of Fiji’s national identity, especially in the COVID-19 era collapse of the tourism industry. And farms are how my Indo-Fijian and iTaukei interlocutors contemplate personal and communal connections to place.

“Who ‘gets’ to belong to this place?” is a hotly debated and contested question, as evidenced by the Fijian government’s instability and “coup culture” over the last forty years and the resulting staying power of indigenous ethnonationalist discourse in the country. But in my fieldwork, I noticed that rather than participate in these debates and affirm the validity of this now-tired question, my interlocutors – both Indo-Fijian and iTaukei - prefer to unsettle its central assumptions. Environmental and administrative impacts of the plantation industry have produced a new landscape and “place”; plantation logics of the moral value of labor and work have redefined “who” is responsible for Fiji’s current political and economic status as a representative leader of the South Pacific; Indo-Fijian eco-religious claims to ancestral descendancy from local deities has produced alternative claims to “belonging” through primordality; and embodied

knowledges of built environments challenge who and how one can claim “local” expertise. I did not observe any active, resistant organizing to the ethnonationalism of Fijian politics among my interlocutors in the Sigatoka Valley. Instead, the farmscape emerges as a heterotopic site to disturb and redefine “who” and “what” Fiji is and can be, albeit in terms that (sometimes) borrow from neoliberal and settler colonial frameworks introduced by the plantation industry.

If the farmscape holds the potential to reimagine belonging in Fiji outside of an exclusivist paradigm, then what of those who are in diaspora, who do not live on, near, or with the farmscape? Especially for those Indo-Fijians who migrated in duress after the 1987, 2000, or 2006 coups, Fiji is a traumatic place. The political certainty of who does and does not belong compelled their emigration to Australia, New Zealand, the US, and Canada - and this binary is self-evident in the low participation of Indo-Fijian diasporans in Pacifica cultural events and gatherings outside of Fiji. As Indo-Fijians find themselves further from the farmscape – generationally or geographically – they are more likely to remember the distinctions of race, violence of coups, and political disavowal of their roots in Fiji as a desperate situation, without hope. How narratives of race and collective Fijian identity circulate between those abroad and those still at “home” - those witnessing, experiencing, and articulating the liberatory potential of life on the Fijian farmscape - is a question still left unanswered.

Such a reading, however, assumes that the farmscape is a territory marked by a physical boundary – the ocean, then, is a physical separation that distances diasporic Indo-Fijians from a shared local identity with iTaukei people. But, throughout this dissertation, I have argued that the farmscape is more than physical. It is more than the plots of land that grow sugarcane or more recently, eggplants, cabbage, chilis, and pawpaw. It is an orientation to past (migrations across

water, rebirths on new land) and future (continued sustenance of human and plant life via agricultural work) that allows a remaking of the present (Fijian identity outside of ethnonationalist discourse). Such a metaphorical reading of the farmscape takes the ocean not as a boundary that separates, but as the connective tissue that bridges histories of indentured labor and Indian migration with indigenous modes of knowing, living, and being-in-place. How the farmscape extends beyond the coastline, pulling diasporic imaginaries back to Fiji as “homeland”, is a necessary next step for this project.

This dissertation has focused largely on how people in the Sigatoka Valley produce a shared sense of and claims to the “local” through agricultural imagination, labor, and history. My interlocutors’ emphases on the local – on an island that has always been explicitly global because of the colonial sugarcane plantation industry, and more recently, through the tourism sector – is a response to ethnonationalist politics (unambiguous since Fiji’s first coup in 1987) that attempt to disconnect and exclude Indo-Fijians from “place.” And still, each of my interlocutors maintains familial, economic, and aspirational ties outside of the country. Jason is the last remaining member of his immediate family still living in Fiji, as most have emigrated to Sydney, and he spends most of his yearly holiday in Australia; many of Palak’s friends from medical school have emigrated, because both New Zealand and Australia have removed restrictions in the medical degree transferal process making it extremely easy for Fijian educated doctors to practice abroad; Sita receives proposals daily from Indo-Fijian men settled overseas, and Bhumi Aunty hopes that one day her daughter will accept an offer for marriage; Kalesi has the latest iPhone – a defining trademark of one’s diasporic relations as there is no Apple store in Fiji – because Kalesi’s mother works as a home aid in the San Francisco Bay Area; multiple male members in Elenoa’s extended family have gone to Australia on temporary work visas to send

remittances back to Fiji. Indo-Fijians account for the vast majority of Fijian emigrants. So, while Indo-Fijians still make up about 37% of the domestic population (a significant decrease from over 50% in the early 1980s), there is a collective feeling among those that remain that they are the “last ones standing.” For those not actively pursuing emigration, defending their choice to “stay” in Fiji is a frequent topic of conversation. Thus, shared localisms in Fiji are produced not only between iTaukei and Indo-Fijian communities, but also between desires for “home” and international ambitions, at a time when those in Fiji must consistently and consciously articulate why they will not leave (now, or ever).

I begin my late afternoon walk near the Sigatoka River delta, atop a hill that allows me to look over the water slowly making its way to the ocean. Since the river dredging project was completed a few years ago, ostensibly to prevent flooding in farms higher up in the Valley, the shoreline has changed completely. Silt, dirt, and grime from the bottom of the River has settled onto the River banks, creating large expanses of new “land.” In some places, the silt is like quicksand that swallows unwary locals unfamiliar with this new terrain. From where I stand, the silt has added almost an acre of land now overgrown with bush. Locals that once lived in houses feet from the water have now carved trails across this land to reach the River, but they can longer find the crab, shrimp, and river mussels that once populated the brackish water of the delta. Everybody wonders: who will claim this new land, and how?

I slowly climb down from the hill, making my way to the beach on the southern edge of the delta. The coral reef, roughly 1250 feet ahead, breaks the high energy ocean waves so water sits almost still within the lagoon and only laps gently on the beach. I turn to the left and walk

along the shore, navigating the perimeter of the Muasara lagoon – my destination is Olosara Beach, about a mile from where I start.

The ground underneath me is not soft or white. Sharp objects threaten to puncture the thin soles of my Crocs; they are fossils of an ancient coral reef that now sits on the shore, dull, gray, and dry. I need to boulder across this formation for the next few hundred feet. Since I am walking after high tide has passed, water has collected in the crevices of these boulders; the salt water of the ocean burns the cuts at my feet.

I maneuver over the last ledge and jump onto seaweed that the ocean has brought onto the shore. It is soft and slippery, and I know from previous experience that it is difficult to walk on. I play hopscotch along the beach, jumping from place to place where I can see sand still uncovered. The momentum of my jump combined with my weight mean that I sink into the sand with every step. The sand inches below the surface is cold and soothes the sunburnt skin around my ankles.

I am closer to Olosara Beach now. Thus far on my walk, the ancient reef and the high volumes of seaweed have hidden the imprints of waves that passed over the sand just a few hours ago. But now, I can see a curved line where the dark brown color of wet sand meets the tan color of dry sand. This is as far as the water could reach during the afternoon tide. Along this curved line are flowers of every brilliant tropical color: orange marigolds, pink hibiscuses, purple morning glories. The sun is just about to set over the horizon; the flowers mimic the golden hues of the twilight sky.

These flowers are offerings from Indo-Fijian Hindu devotees living along the Sigatoka River. During *pujas* (sacred rituals for birth, death, wedding, and other ceremonies), Hindus offer flowers to deities as representations of their gratitude, devotion, and prayer requests. After the

ceremonies are complete, these flowers are placed in the Sigatoka River where they begin their journey towards the ocean (symbolizing God in its expanse and infinity). But the flowers and prayers return to land after high tide. The ocean and lagoon choreograph this resting place for Indo-Fijian hopes, dreams, and desires.

The Fijian shoreline is always shifting. It expands in quick time as silt from rivers is dredged and packed into new landscapes whose ecological and political futures are yet unknown; it extends further into the ocean in deep time, signaled by the fossilized coral that sits on contemporary beaches, remainders of an ancient coastline. Flowers from upstream Hindu pujas outline the imprints of waves as the ocean creeps onto land at high tide; tomorrow, the waves and flowers together will etch different lines onto the sand. Shifting landscapes point to shifting identities. It is this indeterminacy, between sky and Earth, ocean and land, past and future, that can allow a reimagining of Fijian belonging beyond racial binaries and imposing colonial logics.

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