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*Becoming Educators in Oceania:
From Ridge to Reef to the Region
and Then Returning Home*

Rosarine Rafai,
Jiokapeci Qalo-Qiolevu,
and Maca Radua-Stephens

The Oceania Centre for Arts, Culture and Pacific Studies at the University of the South Pacific (USP) became a flourishing hub of creative thought and practice under the direction of founder Epeli Hau'ofa. Much has been written about the visual and performing art that has emerged from the center—work that has helped to realize Hau'ofa's vision of USP as a “hatching ground” for a powerful new sense of regional identity (2008, 51). This dialogue piece focuses on an aspect of the center's work that has received less attention: academic teaching. It is based on a conversation between Rosarine Rafai, Jiokapeci Qalo-Qiolevu, and Maca Radua-Stephens, three educators who teach a compulsory second-year class called “Pacific Worlds” (UU 204), which is run through the Oceania Centre and enrolls thousands of students across thirty-three million square kilometers of ocean and four time zones on USP's fourteen regional campuses and at its ten smaller in-country centers.¹ Their conversation shows how some of the creative and relationship-building processes that have been described in relation to the center's artistic production are brought into the classroom and maintained amid the challenges of online delivery.

The Oceania Centre was indelibly shaped by Hau'ofa's own mana as Oceania's most celebrated scholar-storyteller. Its creative production was also enabled by its position on the margins of the formal structures of the university. As Lea Lani Kinikini Kawaka observed, the center “was a learning space that showed us just how, for the large majority of learners, classroom-style brick-and-mortar learning imported by nineteenth-century missionaries was not working as well as it ought to” (2016, 144).

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Hau'ofa's students and colleagues have recalled that he was determined not to ask for too much from the university administration so that the center could fly under the radar, welcoming artists without formal training or accreditation to learn and work together (Naidu 2019, 27; White 2008, xvii–xviii; Teaiwa 2010). Katherine Higgins observed that “Hau'ofa had a limited budget but plenty of time to imagine something unique: a home for Oceanian arts and culture” (2009, 41). In her rich descriptions of the work of the Red Wave Collective, a group of painters and sculptors working at the center in the 2000s, Higgins highlighted how the center's physical space and architecture helped create an environment that “fosters the potential of each individual while simultaneously forming a dedicated community of artists who learn from one another” (2009, 39). Situated on the geographic edge of the university's Suva campus, the center features meeting spaces without walls that draw on Pacific vernacular architecture. Over the years, these open spaces have brought together a range of creators—dancers and welders, musicians and painters—to work across genres and generate a unique contemporary Oceanic vision.

The openness of the center's physical structures has been mirrored in broader approaches to Oceanic identity. In 1996 and 1997, Hau'ofa declared, “As far as I am concerned, anyone who has lived in our region and is committed to Oceania is an Oceanian” (2008, 51). His words were particularly powerful in the context of the deeply divisive racialized politics of Fiji and Solomon Islands at the turn of the millennium. Artists at the center have also grappled with their own hybrid identities and have sought to articulate visions of a more inclusive Oceania in song, dance, and images (Higgins 2009, 45–46).

Some observers praise the Oceania Centre for maintaining integrity in an era when larger forces were undermining USP's core mission. Vijay Naidu described changes in the university in response to the rise of free-market approaches to education, the growing influence of donor nations on USP's administration, and constraints on discussion of politics, economics, and policy on USP's Suva campus in the years since Fiji's interim government came into power after the 2006 coup (2019). He lamented, “Instead of promoting Pacific values, epistemologies and ontologies, there has been a tendency to become like any other internationally recognised university desperately trying to get into the international university league table” (Naidu 2019, 31). Naidu singled out the Oceania Centre as continuing to foster a vibrant intellectual life in both creative arts and undergraduate teaching (2019, 28). In contrast, Kawaka was pessimistic about the

center's ability to maintain a community of artists within an "increasingly neoliberal, post-traumatized academic-industrial complex" (2016, 143). Reflecting on her own feelings of impotence, she recalled staring at the Moodle learning management system on a computer screen while teaching *Pacific Worlds* to twelve hundred students in 2011. Just outside her window were carvings produced by some of the center's best-known artists, now "chainsawed and dismembered" and left to disintegrate (Kauvaka 2016, 145).

In this dialogue piece, Rafai, Qalo-Qiolevu, and Radua-Stephens offer a far more hopeful vision of possibilities for transformative teaching, even within the flawed structure of the contemporary university. The teaching and learning spaces of the *Pacific Worlds* class seem far removed from the open architecture of the Oceania Centre. To enter online learning management systems, students must qualify and be enrolled; they cannot wander in and decide to stay around. Some are uninterested in, or even resistant to, the idea that they live within a Pacific world and share some form of Oceanic identity. Yet Rafai, Qalo-Qiolevu, and Radua-Stephens, and their colleagues are able to open up the boundaries of the online classroom for creative work and collaboration.

Just as artists bring their own individual experiences into their creative work, Rafai, Qalo-Qiolevu, and Radua-Stephens infuse their teaching with their own lived experiences as Pacific Islanders. Their schooling journeys have taken them through near and distant spaces of Oceania. As Rafai puts it, they travel from the inland ridges to the coastal reefs, out to regional centers and to metropolitan universities, and back again. Many of their students are on similar journeys, and this shared experience helps Rafai, Qalo-Qiolevu, and Radua-Stephens establish a sense of understanding and community among learners. And while they distinguish formal Western schooling from Indigenous Pacific ways of learning in order to reclaim Pacific perspectives that have been devalued (an approach articulated by Thaman 2003), it is clear that these two realms are intrinsically entwined, particularly in light of the crucial role that extended families play in supporting schooling.

The *Pacific Worlds* pedagogy takes up the resonant pan-Pacific imagery of a shared journey. The class introduces students to Hau'ofa's canonical essay on Oceania as an interconnected sea of islands (1994), and it is modeled on Teresia Teaiwa's vision of the classroom as a canoe, with students working together with tutors to get to a destination (2005). The canoe metaphor helps to ground university education in Islander students'

experiences; it is intended to help Pacific Islands students, who may feel that they must leave behind both home and culture to pursue formal education, to reconnect university to their lived experiences. Yet, Rafai, Qalo-Qiolevu, and Radua-Stephens are well aware that not all USP students come from canoe cultures. As Vicente Diaz (2019), Tarcisius Kabutaulaka (2015), and Kauvaka (2016) explored in different ways, overemphasizing the ocean as what connects people of the region can downplay the importance of land, particularly for the hundreds of thousands of people living inland on the large landmasses of the island of New Guinea, as well as in Solomon Islands and Vanuatu. Too much emphasis on travel and mobility directs attention away from processes of anchoring, berthing (Kauvaka 2016), and setting down roots (see McDougall and Zobule, this issue, 414–416, on tree metaphors mobilized in learning). Part of the work of teaching, then, is orienting all students to the shared metaphor of the canoe and invoking other words and images that help students see themselves as working together, a point Radua-Stephens draws out in her discussion of “solesolevaki,” an iTaukei Fijian concept that refers to coming together as a community and working as a family to help those in need.

More difficult than unpacking Oceanic images is encouraging students to feel that they really belong in Pacific Worlds. Some worry about whether their mixed ancestry means they are not real Islanders. Others see their sojourn in Suva as merely a stop on a journey somewhere else. Still others have been denied a sense of belonging for generations. Qalo-Qiolevu recounts how difficult it is for Fijians of Indian descent to see themselves as people of Oceania after a lifetime’s experience of being asked where they are really from or, as Rafai observes, being challenged by Indigenous Fijians to name their clan and land. Rafai, Qalo-Qiolevu, and Radua-Stephens draw on Kabutaulaka’s discussion of the way racist colonial stereotypes of Melanesians have been taken up by other Pacific Islanders to understand prejudice against Solomon Islander students (2015). In this conversation, we see that the three educators listen to the experiences of their students and are working to foster a more inclusive and engaging community in the class—a community that they hope may help to transform students’ views of themselves, of others, and of the region.

The conversational format of this dialogue seemed an appropriate way to convey the intertwined experiences of Rafai, Qalo-Qiolevu, and Radua-Stephens. The conversation pulls together issues that we have been talking and writing about together for several years. The dialogue’s structure is also influenced by decades of work by Pacific Islander scholars that

considers how Indigenous traditions of learning, listening, and engaging might be brought into scholarly research and writing (for recent overviews, see Anae 2019 and Naepi 2019). We are aware that even when Indigenous researchers seek to mobilize Indigenous ideas of relationship-building engagements within contexts of academic research, the fit may be awkward (Fa'avae, Jones, and Manu'atu 2016), and "offering a Pacific name does not necessarily ensure alignment with Pacific thought or practice" (Sanga and Reynolds 2017, 201). Yet, we are tempted to frame this piece as the product of a tok stori (to borrow from Melanesian Pijin; see Sanga and others 2020) or talanoa (from Polynesian languages; see Havea 2010; Sereana 2019; Vaioleti 2006). These terms evoke the way that, over the past two years, Rafai, Qalo-Qiolevu, and Radua-Stephens have brought us into a free-flowing and critical dialogue about contemporary schooling journeys that has shaped the direction of this volume. Rafai, Qalo-Qiolevu, and Radua-Stephens have invited the editors, and now their readers, into conversations that the three of them have engaged in for many years.

DEBRA MCDUGALL, DAVID OAKESHOTT,
AND RACHEL EMERINE HICKS
Special Issue Editors

LEAVING THE RIDGE

Our journey, both professional and personal, has led us through many crevices. Here we describe the journeys that led each of us to USP, our current resting point.

MACA RADUA-STEPHENS: I was brought up in a traditional setting in the outer islands. There is only one town on my island, Levuka town, which is on UNESCO's World Heritage list. It was the original capital of Fiji during the colonial period. Through my schooling years, I basically had a very traditional upbringing. I was exposed to a Western education system through a Catholic school run by the Marist nuns in Levuka town. There were Indigenous Fijian nuns, a few Indo-Fijian nuns, and European nuns who were mostly Irish. On our island, we were exposed to Indo-Fijians as well; as the old capital of Fiji, we had many mixed ethnicities and settler communities.

When I began tertiary education, it was a bit of a culture shock. I came to the bright city lights of Suva, and I didn't manage well. I was away from the cocoon of my family, and the freedom became a bit too much to handle. There

were a number of years where I was just floating between university and a waitressing job. And then I made a decision to go into teaching. I enrolled in a teaching college on the western side of Fiji, and my life was more grounded. I was posted to teach in traditional Fijian villages in the islands, and I blended in well because that was the kind of community that I grew up in. While I was teaching, I was also studying by distance, and then I came back to Suva and taught in an urban school, continued my degree in secondary teaching, and then was posted to the interior of the main island. I went right up to the highlands and then right down to the coast; I went to an all-boys boarding school and then back to Suva to an all-girls day school. By that time, I had already completed my postgraduate studies.

I fluctuate between a more traditional upbringing and a Western influence, so sometimes now I call myself a chameleon because when I'm in a group that's more urban and Western, I change my whole way of speaking and talking, but then I go back to my traditional roles when I attend family functions. It's a balancing act.

JIOKAPECI QALO-QIOLEVU: My parents were both primary-school teachers who taught in the outer islands of Fiji, so I was raised by my aunt and grandmother. When I was three months old, my aunt took me from my mum and brought me with her to Suva, where she was coming to look after my grandmother. When I visited my parents in the islands, I would tag along with my mum to class, helping to collect chalk and books and running errands for her. I would sit with the rest of the students and learn things like the alphabet and colors. I started formal schooling when I was six. My parents transferred to Suva, so I did my primary and secondary schooling in Suva, finishing secondary school in a boarding school. I came to USP to do my degree, spending one year in the United States as an exchange student. I started teaching in Suva, and I taught school for twelve years. Like Maca, while I taught, I was also completing my postgraduate diploma and my master's degree. I resigned and went to Nauru, where I taught for a year. I then returned to Fiji, where I worked part time as a graduate assistant while enrolled in the PhD program. I lasted about three months because the allowance wasn't sufficient for a sole earner—I was the only one working in the family and needed to support the kids.

ROSARINE RAFAI: My whole life has been in two different yet complementary spaces. My childhood was spent mainly in the rural areas, where I was very close to the Indian and Fijian community and my people, the Rotuman people. And then secondary school was in an urban center. I had to stay with extended family and then visit my biological family in rural areas during the school holidays. In secondary school, I went to Aotearoa/New Zealand, where my parents were still studying. I spent four years in Australia helping out at Queensland University of Technology with international students and spouses

of international students. This led to tertiary education at USP and then going out to teach in Fiji—in island, rural, and urban settings—and then coming back again to teach in the tertiary institution. I’ve always seen my learning journey as something that took me from the ridge on top of the mountain, to the reefs, and then beyond, out to the wider region, before returning. Four rs: from ridge to reef to region and return.

I feel that teaching Pacific studies is an extension of the life I have lived. It gives me the space to look at Pacific worlds. I am passionate about teaching students who bring their cultural richness and can still thrive in the Western world.

RADUA-STEPHENS: It’s our journeys that define us as individuals and as Pacific Islanders. And our experiences assist us in our teaching, especially in teaching Pacific Island students who were raised in their villages, because we have gone through what they are going through. So we have that connection, that kindred spirit.

QALO-QIOLEVU: The other experience we share with students is the role that our family members play in school. Westerners would probably define them as extended family, but for us they’re just family. Either they looked after us because our parents were working or studying elsewhere, or we lived with them because we needed to move to the city to study. So they were part of our learning journeys as well. I think as Pacific Island women and Pacific Island educators, as has been mentioned already, our life experiences influence our teaching to a great deal.

For us as Pacific Islanders, we see modernization or globalization as an external force. Many times, we interpret globalization as a threat to our culture and our way of life. We feel intimidated by it. We teach students to think about how modernization or globalization affects us as Pacific Islanders. We feel we are dominated by Western ideas. As Pacific educators, we need to be able to manage that: How do we teach Western ideas and at the same time do justice to our own culture? We don’t have the perfect answer for that, but our life experiences have equipped us to be able to grapple with that very pressing question.

The roles and responsibilities we have taken on as women are an inherent part of our being and something that shapes who we are as educators.

QALO-QIOLEVU: My mum told me that I don’t need to look after people, because she and my father looked after our cousins and aunts and everyone who needed a place to stay when they came from the village, the outer islands. But that impulse to care is just kind of inbuilt in me. I’ve looked after my husband’s and my own nieces and nephews. Sometimes I try to change and focus

on my nuclear family, but I feel like I'm doing something wrong. In this day and age, it is expensive taking on these obligations, but I'm still doing it.

RADUA-STEPHENS: Like Jiokapeci said, if we don't assist our family from the islands in terms of education, it's like we are doing something wrong, even though in a Western value system it's perfectly fine to be concerned only with your own immediate family. It is the women who shoulder the responsibility for education. Even in situations where men make the decisions, at the end of the day, it's us women who actually do the groundwork of assisting with the education of our extended family. However, this may differ with different families.

RAFAI: We continue what the elders started. The "hotel" is still open for the extended family who come in from the island. The four of us siblings have to look after people from our region when they come; we still feel it's our duty to do that. It's a blessing but also a burden. I come from a Western-educated family; my dad was a doctor, my mum a retired matron, and now my siblings are professionals, but I'm the eldest, and the responsibility for looking after the extended family falls on the eldest. So it's not only gender but also where you stand in the family—as the eldest, I just have to take it on. You whinge, but after you have fulfilled your obligations, you feel good. This sharing is extended to the classroom.

SCHOLARLY ANCESTORS

Our journey has been tremendously influenced by Pacific authors, whose writing directly impacts our lives and the work we do.

QALO-QIOLEVU: Epeli Hau'ofa and Teresia Teaiwa both had very interesting backgrounds. Hau'ofa, as I understand it, was the son of missionary parents and raised in Papua New Guinea—a Tongan from Polynesia raised in Papua New Guinea. Teaiwa was the daughter of Rabi Islanders, Fiji citizens. Her father was originally from Banaba in Kiribati, and his family moved to Fiji in the 1940s after the island was mined for phosphate. I think they identify themselves on three different levels: as Banabans first, then as I-Kiribati, and finally as Fijians. Her mother is an African American woman. Their life experiences and academic qualifications resonate well with young Pacific Islanders and with us educators.

Hau'ofa delved into sensitive issues in his writing, often in a humorous way. He made us, as Pacific Islanders, face our own ways of thinking. He pushed us away from a victim mindset, asking, "Are you going to buy these ideas that outsiders have been telling you? Or accept the labels they apply to us?" Like

Tarcisius Kabutaulaka (2015), he challenged us Pacific Islanders to look at the way we see each other: Do we see each other as equals? He forced us to confront issues such as Polynesians' views of dark-skinned people and the resulting discrimination among themselves and against Melanesians. That's a very real problem here at USP. In an end-of-semester reflection, a Solomon Islands student once complained that whenever they had group discussions, there was a group of students who didn't want to be with Melanesians. The student said he felt belittled by that. After reading that student's reflection, I always worked to convey to students, "These walls are coming down, the walls of ethnicity. Even forget about your own country. We are Pacific Islanders when you enter this bure, this classroom." Hau'ofa did that. He forced us to take responsibility for our destiny and confront our own prejudice and discrimination. Forget about the outsiders, how about discrimination among ourselves?

RADUA-STEPHENS: Teaiwa's concept of cooperative learning (2005) is one of the foundations of the course. Cooperative learning is not a new concept for us as Pacific Islanders. When we talk about group activity and peer learning, some Fijian teachers think, "Oh, that's something new!" but actually it's not new—it was with us before the arrival of the first Europeans who came into the Pacific. It's been part of our culture. In week one of the course, students read Teaiwa's paper about the classroom as a metaphorical canoe (2005)—a concept that helps us emphasize that cooperative learning is in our culture. In Fiji, there is a term for this cooperative learning, which is "solesolevaki." I used this when I was teaching high school. I taught in an all-boys boarding school with Indigenous Fijian boys, and we ran a program that used that term. We used Indigenous learning concepts, and we found that at the end of the year, these Indigenous students did really well within the Western form of education. In UU 204, we are finding that it works for our Pacific students.

RAFAI: The work of these scholars helps our students think critically about where they're grounded. Hau'ofa and Teaiwa were both from Fiji; Hau'ofa went to school at Lelean Memorial School, and Teaiwa went to St Joseph's. They are not just icons; they are ancestors. The legacy they left behind is real. Both Teaiwa and Hau'ofa walked through our corridors. People who were at USP when I came through as a student will remember Hau'ofa's in his long black sulu, a tailored skirt-like garment worn in formal contexts by Fijian, Samoan, and Tongan men. He had such optimism, with his "I am a Pacific Islander, and I am happy about myself" attitude. He would just stop and nod at you. He was respectfully assertive. Teaiwa's work helps ground our students, showing them that they can bring in their creativity and assert a space within Western academia—a space that is valuable within the Pacific world. We emulate her "Akamai" to bring out the creativity in the Pacific person and break a mindset that you have to write everything for assessment (Teaiwa

2017). We encourage students to tell their stories their way and to retell stories that others have told about them. They come in their chants, they come in their songs, and they come in their narratives their way, for example their Solomons way, their Pacific way. We seek a balance, the best of both worlds, to help the student thrive in the modern-day world and remain grounded in the culture. It is not negating colonization; it's about getting them to think critically about where they're grounded.

One of the ways that we build on the work of these scholarly ancestors is by bringing song, dance, poetry, painting, sketching, and drama into our teaching.

RAFAI: “Akamai” was Teaiwa’s term for a student performance she did in New Zealand. Like “akamai” in Hawaiian, “matai” in Fijian means “knowledgeable or skillful.” We fashioned our Matai after that model in order to bring a creative element into the assessment and to emphasize that cultural forms of learning are just as valued as Western forms. So, for example, you might chant the seasons that are now related to climate change, or you might create your own choreography that lets you dance your history, or you can perform your genealogy or talk about sustainable development. It gives students a sense of pride, a way out of the usual long essay assignment, and a way to show themselves, in a sense, to rest of the cohort. We used to have judges or assessors other than the navigators—people from the community who we felt were more knowledgeable about the genre or the topic. It was an evening event, and it created a community of learning in which the students’ parents, friends, and classmates could get on stage and help them out. It was not an individual performance. We’d have the stage full of thirty Tongans, twenty I-Kiribati students—the whole USP community and others on stage.

Starting in 2018, this community approach was changed, and students now submit their own recordings via YouTube. With this change, fewer students opt for a group performance. The main genres for submissions in the Matai production are now poetry, painting, and sketching—dance, singing, and drama have disappeared. It is missing that one-on-one human sharing, but it can reach a wider e-community.

Now that the Matai happens online, the videos are accessible to a wider audience; there is a collection of UU 204 presentations from past years.² Now that we can’t go to the region because of COVID-19 (Coronavirus Disease 2019), this access is even more important. In previous years, we would time our visits to be on the regional campus for the performance. At Laucala, it was an ongoing event. We organized the sharing of fruit and food and tea, so it was like a village affair—you know how at the end of a big function, we thank each other through feasting and mixing and getting to thank each other more. These

items draw people together: all the Tongans together, for example, rekindles their Tonganness, their Islandness away from home. It is an opportunity for a co-national cohort to meet and rekindle connections in a so-called foreign land in Fiji. So you have the I-Kiribati really happy about getting together, and then the Tongans, and then the Samoans and Solomon Islanders. In practice, they create interconnection and warmth, and then the final presentation is on stage. They connect to students from other islands and to their own people here in Fiji, and they can fall back on these connections when they are away from home.

CONNECTING ACROSS DISTANCE: A SENSE OF COMMUNITY

In the Pacific, connections are important. On first contact, we try to establish a way we are connected to one another, which in turn creates a sense of belonging and a grounding of self.

QALO-QIOLEVU: For us, the first thing we navigators need to know is the greetings of all of the USP member countries. In our first message, we greet everybody in their own language. It is something like, “Dear Vaka crew, Tālofa lava, Mālō e lelei, Bula vinaka, Fakaalofa lahi atu, Kia orana, Fakatalofa atu, Mālō ni, Mauri, Iokwe, Halo, Ekamowir Omo, and warm Pacific greetings to you all! Welcome to our Vaka group.” Straight away you make that connection—language is a big bonding factor.

Second, each week we are assigned a specific region, and we conduct a Zoom session there, an online tutorial. So you have about 120 students under your care, and they come from different campuses, different countries. This semester I have Solomon Islands, so I googled common phrases in Pijin, like “thank you” and “good afternoon.” Using the students’ language helps to establish a warm relationship. Even though I’m on Zoom and not everyone wants to show their face, I try to act as if I’m in a normal classroom. If I see someone is smiling, I acknowledge them by name: “Bill, it’s really good to see that you’re happy. It’s good to have happy students in the class.” Being prompt in responding to students who send you questions is also important. They can’t see you, and you can’t see them, so the way you can establish a good working relationship with them is to be prompt, because then they feel that they are important.

RADUA-STEPHENS: Jiokapeci has been talking about Zoom, but there are also other aspects of the online course. At the beginning of the course, we have an introductory forum in which students introduce themselves to their peers. From this, we as navigators can gauge where our students are by getting a

sense of their backgrounds, how far along they are in their undergraduate degrees, and where they are originally from. In addition to this, it encourages students to form connections within their own groups. We also have a unit discussion forum, called the “talanoa discussion forum,” in which students ask questions and share their views on concepts or issues. Sometimes I feel that students are disconnected on an online platform, especially Pacific Island students. They drift away from the course. Constant communication is a way that we can get them to keep up with the course in this online setting. Sometimes it’s very difficult. Sometimes we get students at the end of the semester who never participated all throughout the course. COVID-19 did not change very much—we were already engaging online for years before COVID-19. Every day we still learn, and we still have to reevaluate the way that we teach, the way that we communicate.

Teaiwa envisioned the classroom as a canoe, a vaka, in order to create a sense of community among her students (2005). We use this powerful metaphor in our teaching in UU 204. Everyone works together to paddle to reach a certain destination. Everyone is working together to arrive at a common goal. Our students, divided into groups, are the crew members, and we call our teaching assistants “vaka navigators.” We challenge the students and navigators to see themselves as working together toward our end destination, which is the end of the semester. In order to reach our final destination, we have to work cooperatively within our vaka, within our canoe, within our own classroom; this leads back to the solesolevaki concept of cooperative learning or working together. They are familiar with this traditional way of learning.

RAFAI: It is not easy; the navigators also need to prepare themselves for the class. We know that not all have come from a canoe culture. Even within Fiji, inland people may not have been exposed to the canoe. If you have lived in the mountains, you may know only of the bamboo raft: is the bamboo raft similar to the canoe? You have Asian students who may not see themselves as really belonging in the Pacific. As navigators, we have to know where our crew members have come from, including their campuses and whether they are from coastal or inland areas on the big volcanic islands or from coral atolls. Students may not really understand ideas like vaka, navigator, coxswain, cooperation, or crew if they have no idea where they are paddling, what the wind direction is, or where the canoe will go. So we have students draw that canoe—from the paddle to the pole, including the mast, the sails—so that they can make use of the metaphor. The sail is the assessment, the wind is the time and energy they spend on activities, and so on. So the navigator has to do the work to ground the canoe metaphor for all of the diverse students of the Pacific.

QALO-QIOLEVU: Can I just add on to what Rosarine and Maca have said about cooperative learning? I’ve found myself emphasizing that students must

make sure that everybody pulls their weight in the group work. One of the criticisms of our communal way of doing things is that it enables people to be lazy and take advantage of others' work. I have 130 students based in Honiara, and I conduct a two-hour weekly Zoom session for them. I suggest that they form study groups and share responsibility for summarizing readings. I always emphasize at the beginning that they should select somebody as group leader to hold everyone accountable. If they set up a meeting time—say, two o'clock at the canteen area—and only three out of five students show up with their summaries, I tell them to only circulate their work among the three who have done the work. If they are not going to do the work, they don't get any information.

This connects to the larger challenges of living in town and accommodating relatives who come to stay. We make sacrifices to look after them; it is expensive. My parents were both government workers and were able to buy a home, and they shared this with their relatives. It used to be that family from the villages would come with root crops, with smoked fish, with coconuts, with sasa broom. They would come and stay, and we would provide the house and daily food. But that has changed, and not everyone does that anymore. With that in mind, we have to teach our Pacific Island students to hold each other accountable.

WHO IS A PACIFIC ISLANDER?

As educators working in the Pacific, we recognize the tension between cooperative learning in the classroom and individual assignments that are assessed. It is also important to be sensitive to the varying backgrounds of our students.

QALO-QIOLEVU: When we talk about the different Pacific Islanders and identity, we have categorized Pacific Islanders into three general categories: Indigenous Pacific Islanders, settlers, and recent migrants. We know that those are really general categories, so we tell the students, "OK, first ask yourself, are you part of the Indigenous community, are you part of the settler community, or are you part of the recent migrants community?" "Indigenous community" refers to the Indigenous people of each country: Indigenous Fijians, Indigenous Tongans. Settler communities are those who arrived during the colonial period. They include Asians and Indo-Fijians whose families have lived in Fiji for more than a hundred years. Some groups are both. For example, we have people from Banaba who originated in Kiribati but settled in Fiji. They are Indigenous Pacific Islanders, but they are living away from their home country. And then you have the recent migrants, including transitory migrants who use the Pacific

as a stepping-stone to Australia, New Zealand, or the United States and thus don't see themselves as Pacific Islanders—they get their citizenship here, and then they can migrate elsewhere.

It can be simple for some students, who say, "OK, my parents are both Indigenous Fijians. I'm an Indigenous Fijian." But sometimes a parent is non-Indigenous. Or you may be non-Indigenous, but you've lived in a village setting, you speak the language, and you have adopted the culture. Where do you fit in? This is where it gets really messy. We cannot force them into a little box. We tell them, for the sake of clarity, that these are the three general categories of Pacific Islander, but we understand that you may not belong in just one—you can be a bit of all. With the issue of a student's identification, we as navigators play a very critical role. We must be sensitive enough to understand our students' insecurities, the baggage that they bring into the classroom.

RADUA-STEPHENS: Some students take the approach as an affirmation of ancestral values. For example, in a reflection paper, one of our Samoan students last year wrote about the importance of preserving ancestors' values and skills by practicing and passing them down from generation to generation—values such as love, respect, and honor and skills such as fishing and planting. Others come to appreciate the power of their local languages, like a student from Vanuatu who wrote about how difficult it is to translate expressions from her own language into English or other colonial languages. Many students discover commonalities across Pacific cultures through the Pacific Worlds class—similar moral values, a shared emphasis on caring for the elderly, even similar traditional handicrafts. A sense emerges of students being one Oceanic people.

RAFAI: Some of the assignments that come in are very shallow, with students identifying themselves as Pacific Islanders because they wear the sulu or speak the language. Then there are deeper ones, in which the students question their identity as someone in a mixed marriage between two Pacific Islanders or as someone coming from an urban center. Some write of having a heart for the Pacific.

QALO-QIOLEVU: One mixed-race woman recalled that she grew up feeling like she belonged in Fiji until she went to school, where she was called a "dirty European" and some Indigenous Fijian students asked her in the Fijian language where her land was. She started her reflection by saying that she didn't feel she had the right to call herself a Pacific Islander, as she didn't look like an iTaukei woman. But by the end, she acknowledged that she was coming to terms with her diverse heritage and developing a sense that a true Pacific Islander is someone who embraces different aspects of Oceanic identity.

RAFAI: One perspective I find quite interesting is from our Girmitiyan population.³ There is a mixed feeling around their identity. Some feel that, yes,

they're third or fourth generation in Fiji, so they are Fijians; therefore, they are Pacific Islanders. There are others who still feel quite attached to India. And then the third lot don't feel attached at all; they feel like they are on their way elsewhere. They haven't really grounded themselves, and they feel that they don't have to. So you have the urban and rural identities, the mixed-parentage identity, and the longtime settler identity, and now you have the new migrants transiting through Fiji and even international exchange students. Not everyone sees themselves as Pacific Islanders, and just being born and bred in the Pacific does not necessarily ground a student as a Pacific Islander. As navigators, we need to ensure that we are reading their responses and not pushing our perspective on the question.

One of the most interesting reflections came from a student who had recently migrated from China. She recalled how angry she was at age sixteen to come to this place that she had hardly heard of. She talked about being repulsed by the friendly "bula" at the airport when she arrived. She could not even speak or understand English! She talked about how dancing as an extracurricular activity let her engage with people in Fiji and let her come to love Fiji and live happily here. And she even compared her journey to the ancient Lapita migrations that she was learning about in class.

RADUA-STEPHENS: On a regional scale, students define themselves as Pacific Islanders. But when we move down to a community level, this is where I see differences, especially in terms of settler communities or descendants of migrants and people from mixed ethnicities. So, for example, in Fiji, there is a patrilineal emphasis, and someone may see themselves as an Indigenous person, but if their mother is Indigenous and their father is non-Indigenous, they feel disconnected. It's not that they don't want to participate in their mother's connections, but they feel that the community itself does not include them because of their mixed ethnicity. And, as Rosarine said, students must struggle with these questions and dig deeply to identify themselves as Pacific Islanders.

QALO-QIOLEVU: An issue that we navigators have struggled with is how our Indo-Fijian students seem very disconnected from the idea of being Pacific Islanders, even though they are fourth- or fifth-generation Indians living in Fiji, they consider Fiji their home, and, according to the constitution, they are Fijians. But, as Rosarine has mentioned, when you ask them, many of their reflections are just superficial. So we've been trying to find out what the problem is: Are we not reaching them? Why is it that they feel that way?

And so, we were talking about it over lunch one day. One of our Indigenous Fijian academics said that in order for our students to identify themselves as Fijians and then as Pacific Islanders, those identities must be validated by others around them. But that has not been the case. You know, they have always

been told, “You are Indians, we are Fijians.” They grew up with that. Saying, “According to the 2013 Fiji constitution, you are all Fijian. Now you should magically feel Fijian” doesn’t do the job. Do they get that kind of validation from others?

When I was teaching in Nauru, I had an Indo-Fijian colleague. After school, we were waiting for transport, and we were talking to one of the Nauruan teachers. He turned to my colleague and asked, “Where are you from?” and she said, “Oh I am from Fiji, like Jiokapeci. I am Fijian.” He was like, “No you’re not, you’re Indian,” and she turned and looked at me, and I felt sorry for her. At that moment, I felt protective; I felt I had to speak up for her. You know, I feel very strongly about my Indigenous identity, but I just felt that I had to speak up for her. I said, “Actually, she’s Fijian.” He said, “No. You don’t look like her.” I said, “Well, our constitution says this, this, this, and this.” In Fiji, we may say we’re all Fijians because that’s being imposed on us. But what about other Pacific Islanders? How do they see non-Indigenous people? Do they call them Pacific Islanders?

I had to reflect on the way I had been pushing this Pacific identity onto others. I see myself as an open-minded Indigenous Pacific Islander. In class, I describe the three categories but explain that in Pacific Worlds we are very inclusive, and I give my little sermon: “We’re very inclusive, and we are going to tear down the walls.” From past experience, I see that the non-Indigenous students are the ones who struggle the most with insecurity. We also have Indigenous students who feel disconnected from their villages, but they don’t really struggle the way our non-Indigenous students do. So I target the non-Indigenous students and try to make it a safe learning environment. I take up Hau‘ofa’s very inclusive concept of Oceania (2008). That’s kind of what I preach, you know.

In a way, I’m pushing a Pacific identity onto them. I never really thought about the impact that others’ validation can have on non-Indigenous people. Being an Indigenous person myself, born and bred in Fiji, my identity is not an issue, so I’ve never had that problem. I had to step back and reevaluate, because all this time I’ve been saying, “Hey, you’re a Pacific Islander. You may not be from here, but you’ve lived here. You have lived here for more than a hundred years, and you eat Pacific food, so why don’t you feel like a Pacific Islander?” I had to step back and take into consideration their experience. I want them to assert themselves as Pacific Islanders, but they’re not being validated by others, and maybe to protect themselves they just take on another identity altogether. Maybe for them it’s safer to just say, “I’m not a Pacific Islander.” I’ve always had a positive experience of identity; Pacific identity has never been an issue. But I need to be aware and sympathetic to the issues that non-Indigenous students go through when it comes to their Pacific identity.

RAFAI: I just thought of this experience that I had in my class. If you don't control it well, it can be volatile. Indigenous Fijians have flared up when the Indo-Fijians say, "I am Fijian." They ask things like, "OK, where is your mataqali [clan]? Where is your land? Where is your traditional land?" That just shuts the Indo-Fijian students down. Over the years, two terms emerged as "safe nest" terms: one is "hybridity identity" or "Pacific hybrid identity," and the other is "contemporary Pacific identity." "Hybridity identity" is used by students who are of mixed Pacific parentage—for example, having a Fijian father and a Tongan mother. The term "contemporary Pacific identity" is usually used to refer to students who come from a multicultural background or who may have some family connection to the Pacific but do not *feel* any connection to the Pacific. It can also refer to students of Asian or European and Pacific parentage. Similarly, students of recent migrants or those who do not see themselves as fitting in with the Pacific identity usually take up the "contemporary Pacific identity" label. This lets them qualify their identities when they are missing a piece that Indigenous populations or others think they should have. In UU 204, we try to provide an open learning space where the students define who they are, and we encourage an atmosphere for respecting all kinds of identities.

DECOLONIZING EDUCATION?

Critics of the concept of decolonizing education point out that it actually reproduces power imbalances and helps maintain an educated elite. We argue that we must take a pragmatic approach toward the issue in order to make a positive difference in the lives of our Pacific students.

RAFAI: Reading what critics have written, I sometimes wonder, why are they so against decolonizing the curriculum? Why cut out the richness that our students bring into the classroom?

QALO-QIOLEVU: We are Pacific educators teaching in the Pacific, and we teach students who come from across the Pacific, so I think we have something to say.

RADUA-STEPHENS: I think back on what Hau'ofa said in "Our Sea of Islands" (1993). He talked about looking at ourselves not as people from a small place but as part of a huge ocean. His ideas about belittlement come to mind. Of course, there are structural imbalances that we will talk about, and those are evident in our communities in the Pacific. But what are we going to do? Are we going to wait a few hundred more years until they figure out how to fix structural imbalances? For me, here in this class, UU 204, right now, I'm doing what

I can in shifting the way students see things. That is decolonizing education in whatever small way we can. We don't have to wait for the structural imbalances to be fixed by whichever stakeholder or government is responsible to fix poverty, fix the curriculum, fix the social ills. Should we just stop altogether and put, you know, our Pacific ways of learning aside in the classroom? For us, it's working; our students are changing their views, the way they see things. Our curriculum is colonized, our social structure is colonized, and we are trying to get our students to identify themselves as Pacific Islanders, to connect with their cultures, so if we can't do that in the classroom, then what's going to happen in the future if we stop it altogether?

QALO-QIOLEVU: Critics of the idea of decolonizing education suggest that higher education invariably maintains the power of elites and that including Indigenous content won't change that. So, take for example Hau'ofa, Teaiwa, or Kabutaulaka: they might be seen by outsiders as an educated elite, but they are our voice to the outside world. They may not live in the Pacific. Kabutaulaka, for example, may not be living in Solomon Islands right now, but he's the voice of Solomon Islanders in Hawai'i. We don't see them as an educated elite, because they maintain their ties. You can be educated, but you have your links to the land. You will go back there. You maintain your language.

RADUA-STEPHENS: We know we are making a difference. We are decolonizing maybe our classroom and the minds of our students, but then we probably need to look at the impact that we have in turning around these imbalances in our societal structures.

RAFAI: It's only one unit, it's not a whole course. So it's this space we want to give them. Probably just like that basket of food you give to the child on the journey, if they can at least grasp that they are valued, and that the backgrounds they come from are valued, then they can forge forward, even in the Western world. They'll have their feet firmly grounded to support their movement forward. And our contemporary ancestors—such as Hau'ofa, Teaiwa, and Kabutaulaka—are giving us the courage and the space to push forward this thinking. The idea we push in UU 204 is that you don't need to have a tertiary degree to be valued; there is value in your knowledge, your traditional knowledge that you can have. Decolonizing isn't bringing in local culture to push away Western education; rather, it's finding the best of both worlds. UU 204 tries to bring cultural backgrounds back into view because Western forms of knowledge are already there in formal schooling. We are trying to provide that space for students to develop their own critique.

* * *

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Notes

1 The conversation that was the basis for this piece occurred on 11 September 2020 via Zoom. Our discussions began in January 2019, during a session at the annual meeting of the Association for Social Anthropology in Oceania that led to this special issue of *The Contemporary Pacific*. With their colleague Betty Kamoe-Manuofetoa, Rosarine Rafai, Jiokapeci Qalo-Qiolevu, and Maca Radua-Stephens's passion for teaching and their insights into new kinds of Pacific identities pushed the editors and contributors to think seriously about the role of Indigenous knowledge and pedagogy in contemporary schooling across all levels of formal education.

2 Some of these videos are available via the USP website: <https://www.usp.ac.fj/index.php?id=21257> [accessed 9 June 2021].

3 Girmitya is a term of self-identification used by indentured Indian laborers brought to Fiji between 1879 and 1920. The term comes from "girmit," derived from the English word "agreement," referring to the indenture agreement (Lal 2017).

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