PACIFIC ARTS
Journal of the Pacific Arts Association

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Fijian Urban Youth Futures: Arts | Transmission | Resilience

Abstract

The online exhibition iSausauvou: Arts | Transmission | Resilience *(2022–ongoing) was organized in the framework of "Urban Pathways: Fiji. Youth. Arts. Culture.," a collaborative research project funded by the British Academy's Youth Futures program. Following an overview of the project and its core activities, this article focuses on the online exhibition, which showcases artworks created by young people who live in Fiji and its diaspora communities. Asked to reflect on urban youth culture, these young artists contemplate the social and cultural expectations that come with being youth in a multifaith, multilingual urban environment during the COVID-19 pandemic. By putting these youth artistic expressions within the framework of scholarship of "the future," this paper aims to move away from the tendency to associate youth with problems such as youth unemployment and lack of education, and instead focus on how youth imagine the future through art.*

Keywords: *Urban identity, Fiji, exhibition, youth art, future*

> *The connection we have to our countries of heritage is a part of our very souls. It enables us to see our identity as one of our greatest strengths. It grants us fearlessness, authenticity, self-acceptance, power, and a voice. It is the very best part of who and what we are, rooted in culture, language, history, tradition, [and] custom, but most importantly, ancestry. For our ancestors gave us more than trauma, they gave us a future.*[1]
>
> *—Salaima Raluvenitoga Kanasalusalu Tuisovivi*

Hope for the Future

Salaima Raluvenitoga Kanasalusalu Tuisovivi wrote the above words in the artist statement that accompanies her acrylic painting *Yalewa Kaukauwa* (meaning "strong woman") in the online exhibition *iSausauvou: Arts | Transmission | Resilience* (2022–ongoing). The exhibition, showcasing artworks created by young people that reflected urban youth culture, was organized in the framework of the

collaborative research project "Urban Pathways: Fiji. Youth. Arts. Culture.," which was funded by the British Academy's Youth Futures program.[2] Tuisovivi's statement refuses to reduce the past to trauma. Focusing on the future, it re-centers the historical narrative away from colonial interventions. She highlights continuity and resilience through one's heritage and identity as being powerful.

Figure 1. Salaima Raluvenitoga Kanasalusalu Tuisovivi, *Yalewa Kaukauwa,* 2022. Acrylic paint. Photograph by Salaima Raluvenitoga Kanasalusalu Tuisovivi. Courtesy of the artist

After an overview of the larger research project and its work placement program, I will analyze the online exhibition by drawing on anthropological scholarship regarding the concept of "the future."[3] Critical future studies emerged in anthropological scholarship in the 2000s, when the repercussions of a global financial crisis, a "war on terror," and climate change prompted academic reflection on uncertain futures. Faced with the difficulty of—even an inability to—anticipate the future, anthropologists became interested in the subject and moved away

from the tradition/modernity dichotomy that characterized anthropological thinking.[4] Closely linked with this study of the future was scholarly interest in temporality and nonlinear chronology.[5] As Tuisovivi reminds us in the quote above, time is cyclical rather than linear. Her reference to her ancestors in relation to her future echoes Ailton Krenak's work, which—drawing on the ever-shifting form of rivers as analogous to nonlinear temporality—proposes that the future is ancestral; it is rooted in ancestral knowledge.[6]

Temporality is also important in Indigenous futurism scholarship, which uses the tropes of science fiction to reimagine the future through the perspectives of local and marginalized voices. When Fijian author Gina Cole wanted to write science fiction but was confronted with the lack of Pasifika writers, characters, or stories, she coined the concept "Pasifikafuturism."[7] Cole put forward Pacific knowledge as the "science" in science fiction, demonstrating that ancestral knowledge informs the future.[8] What makes Pasifikafuturism unique is the centrality of the Pacific Ocean. Cole is inspired by ancestral practices of wayfinding. Drawing on the work of master navigator Hoturoa Barclay Kerr, she argues that wayfinding is an ancestral practice that demonstrates that "Pacific peoples and teachers have always been and continue to evolve as futurist thinkers."[9] Cole's concept is valuable in this paper on youth seeking guidance when considering the future.

Youth Futures

Between October 2020 and October 2022, the British Academy's Youth Futures program funded the collaborative research project "Urban Pathways: Fiji. Youth. Arts. Culture." Supported by the UK government's Global Challenges Research Fund, the Youth Futures program was set up in response to the high unemployment and underemployment rates of youth who live in developing countries. The program sought to sponsor projects that offered a youth-led perspective on the United Nations's 2030 Sustainable Development Agenda. Projects needed to be genuinely interdisciplinary and based on collaborative work with young people that extended beyond the standard research model.[10] Through collaborations with urban Fijian youth, the Urban Pathways project aimed to bring youth communities into Fiji's cultural heritage institutions and help them consider these environments as potential employment opportunities. The project brought together scholars in arts, anthropology, education, museum studies, and marine science.[11]

Project partners were the Sainsbury Research Unit at the University of East Anglia (Norwich, United Kingdom); Fiji Museum (Suva, Fiji); The Pacific Community (SPC, Suva, Fiji); the School of Agriculture, Geography, Environment, Ocean and Natural Sciences at the University of South Pacific (Suva, Fiji); and VOU Dance Fiji (Nadi, Fiji).

The Urban Pathways project team worked with Fijian urban youth. The term "Fijian" was used to encompass all ethnicities in Fiji; what unified the group was not the tenacious binary of Indigenous/non-Indigenous but their status as young people who live in a hierarchical society. While urbanization only developed in Fiji in the 1950s, after the colonial government lifted limitations on the mobility of Indigenous Fijians from villages, currently half of the population lives in urban areas.[12] The urban environment in Fiji is a multifaith and multilingual environment where youth might be "less bound by cultural expectations" and have easier access to higher education.[13] However, urban centers also attract rural youth who might lack any relevant qualification to find employment, resulting in a high level of youth unemployment.[14]

Statistics indicate that urban youth is a considerable demographic in Fiji. The nation's population as of 2017 was just under 885,000, with more than half (55.9%) living in urban regions. Half the population at that time was younger than 27.5 years old, and 69% were under the age of 40.[15] Statistics appear similar today, with the population now approximately 936,000 and the median age now at 27.[16] Fiji's statistics correspond to those of other nations in the Pacific. In fact, there are growing concerns about the "youth bulge" in Pacific populations, a phenomenon that is believed to occur when the number of people between the ages of 15 and 24 exceed 20% of the total population. This ratio is often used in discussions that consider the youth population a problem to be managed.[17] As Helen Lee and Aidan Craney point out, the emphasis in Pacific-related development literature since the 1960s is on "youth problems," a term used to refer to complex concerns such as youth unemployment, street-frequenting and crime, lack of education, risky behavior, youth mental health issues, substance abuse and teenage pregnancies, which are often treated as stand-alone issues.[18] Some of the supposed underlying causes of youth problems are "poverty, education systems focused on white-collar employment skills, stagnating economies that do not provide enough employment opportunities, and rural/urban inequalities."[19] This specific focus on youth problems ignores the positive contributions young people make to society.[20]

While the UN's definition of youth is people ages 15 to 24, in Fiji the non-governmental definition of youth is people between the ages of 18 and 35;

governmentally, the age range shifts to 15 to 35 years old.[21] This broader age range reflects Fijian cultural and community values and speaks to stages of important life cycles experienced in Fiji, as well as iTaukei (Indigenous Fijian) hierarchical structures. A person can still be considered a youth if they are unmarried, living with parent or parents, married without children, or not yet in a position of authority. Consequently, as Aidan Craney writes in relation to urban youth in Fiji and the Solomon Islands, "although youth are numerically significant, the power they exercise and the extent to which their civic engagement is encouraged are extremely limited."[22]

Following an opportunity-oriented approach, rather than a problem-oriented one, the Urban Pathways project aimed to reach youth who do not consider the arts and cultural heritage sector to be a viable employment option by offering youth a paid work placement program. In Fiji, youth generally do not visit museums and cultural heritage institutions, apart from school trips. This has long been a global trend, as youth feel that museums do not cater to their interests.[23] However, museum-based youth programs that target skill development, professional learning, and cultural and social inclusion support youth engagement with museums and have been proven to have a positive impact on youth.[24]

The Urban Pathways project enabled paid placements for fifteen youth at three partner institutions—the Fiji Museum, the University of the South Pacific (USP), and VOU Dance Fiji—over a set number of days in a twelve-month timeframe between March 2021 and June 2022. The participants were an even mix of male-identifying and female-identifying people who represented diverse ethnic identities from urban areas in Viti Levu (Suva, Nadi, and Lautoka). At the Fiji Museum, six youth were completely integrated into the museum's work force and took up positions as technical interns in six museum departments: conservation, collections management and exhibitions, education, policy and legislation, library and archives, and digital media. They actively contributed to everyday work in their assigned departments, as well as the refurbishment of the museum. VOU Dance Fiji created five positions in arts and events management, focusing on areas of the sector that were undervalued and without representation in Fiji's cultural industry. The four youth based at the USP worked with the marine collections and conducted individual and group research projects that explored the cultural significance of natural heritage. Fully immersed in their organizations and treated as fully-fledged staff members, youth in the work placement program learned about career opportunities in the arts and cultural heritage sector. The program also taught the organizations how to value and champion youth engagement and

participation. The youth produced wide-reaching outputs; through their work placements, they hosted online open days, conducted research projects linked to their cultural heritage, undertook fieldwork trips, and created an exhibition.[25]

Overall, the youth work placement program went beyond merely work experience, as youth realized the potential of heritage as both a profession and as a tool to own their unique multicultural identity.[26] Interns at Fiji Museum, for instance, brought the collections out of the museum, both metaphorically and literally. Each of the Fiji Museum youth interns completed a fieldwork trip in which they focused on community outreach. Intern Inise Kuruwale accompanied Fiji Museum staff on a fieldwork trip to Nairukuruku to accompany a civa vonovono (composite whale tooth and pearl shell breastplate) for use by its traditional owners. In a blog post of her experience, she wrote, "Going up to Nairukuruku made me appreciate the uniqueness of our itaukei culture and tradition even more."[27]

The youth at USP conducted individual research projects on animal or plant species. Abraham Waqairoba selected the vermiculated rabbitfish (*Siganus vernmiculatus*), locally known as nuqa-ni-vei-dogo. This fish is not only an important food source, it has cultural significance in the Fijian lunar calendar (vula vakaviti). In his blog about the experience, Abraham wrote about how he mostly enjoyed the different ways of gathering information. Not only did he retrieve information from scientific journals and social media posts, he had discussions with family members, elders, friends, and people from his community. In his words, "It made me understand the value of traditional education to me as a person and as a Fijian."[28] Zelda Rafai has always had an interest and passion in learning about her Rotuman culture, which is why she chose to base her research project around three local birds of cultural significance based on discussions with elders, mentors, brothers, and sisters.[29] These examples demonstrate how youth appreciated the significance of intergenerational knowledge exchange, and temporal and geographical crossings by drawing on cultural heritage.

iSausauvou: Arts | Transmission | Resilience

The Urban Pathways project team had always intended to reach wider youth groups beyond those involved in the work placement program, but their goals were complicated by the COVID-19 pandemic. The team managed to organize three short online placements for youth of Fijian heritage living in the UK at the UK's Cambridge Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology (MAA), which holds

the largest Fijian collections outside of Fiji Museum, but most of the originally planned events to attract broader groups of urban youth in Fiji had to be canceled or moved online. Subsequently, an online exhibition competition was organized to showcase more youth voices. A way to celebrate arts, culture, and creativity in the time of COVID-19, the competition call invited young Fijian artists—ages 15–25 and living in Fiji and its diaspora communities—to send in submissions that illustrated the theme of "urban youth culture." Artists were allowed to submit a maximum of two works and were asked to include an artist statement of a maximum of 500 words with their submission.

Artist/Artist Collective Name	**Artwork Title**	**Medium**
Anthea Reddy	*Rewrite the stars*	Poem
Blackwater Triad	*Na Noqu Vosa*	Video Performance
Blackwater Triad	*Eyes*	Photograph (black and white)
Epi Vuruna	*My Ball*	Film (2:19)
Epi Vuruna	*Cula*	Film (17:46)
James Rabuatoka	*Expressionist*	Photograph (animated)
Jonathan Tudreu	*Passing Time**	Digital illustration
Keresi Vosa	*Everything will be Owl Right*	Painting
Salaima Raluvenitoga Kanasalusalu Tuisovivi	*Yalewa Kaukauwa*	Painting
Takenivula Rakei	*Rogoci Viti*	Video Performance
Takenivula Rakei	*Raici Au*	Photograph (color)
Teresa Regina Vaka'uta	*Dis Connection**	Digital illustration
Teresa Regina Vaka'uta	*Promises*	Digital illustration

Table 1: List of contributions to the online exhibition competition. Asterisks indicate the prize-winning entries.

Participation was open to anyone who met the criteria, and participants therefore self-selected by entering their work. It should be acknowledged that because pandemic-related restrictions required that the project team could only

accept entries online, entry was limited to youth who had access to the required technology. While this kind of access is less of an issue in urban areas, which this competition targeted, the online-submission requirement affected youth from disadvantaged backgrounds with limited or no access to technology. Nine artists submitted thirteen artworks using different types of media, from paintings and digital work to film and performance (see Table 1). There were two prizes of FJD $500 available for winning entries, which were chosen by an independent international jury.[30]

The exhibition's title*, iSausauvou*, is a polite Fijian honorific expression that refers to young people of high status, with the implication of them having future leadership roles. Usually the terms cauravou (young men) and goneyalewa (young women) are used to refer to youth, but the term iSausauvou was chosen by Fijian speakers on the project team to empower youth.[31] The subtitle, *Arts | Transmission | Resilience*, conveys the youth's tenacity as well as their desire to be surrounded by strong holistic education and governance systems. The artworks, with the artist's statements, are viewable online, with the choice to view the artworks as standalone images or to experience the virtual exhibition—the latter being an effort to provide a gallery space for the artworks.[32]

Within the limitations of an online system, the focus was on the artworks and the accompanying artist statements as expressions of youth identity. The aim of the exhibition was to amplify young voices, which often remain unheard in a society structured around age hierarchy; to show that youth have valid ideas that are worth listening to; and to engage youth through the arts.

The Artworks

The short film *Cula* (meaning "needle, injection") by Epi Vuruna tells the story of an anti-vax preacher, and his shock when he discovers that his son agreed to get the COVID vaccine. The artist's first drama, it was shot over five nights and in post-production for three months. The film expresses a pressing problem in Fiji, which Vuruna summarizes as "To jab or not to jab, that is the question."[33] In his accompanying artist statement, Vuruna explains that in Fiji, as elsewhere in the world, people were conflicted over whether to get the COVID vaccine: "As hundreds move in droves to vaccine stations to take their jab, hundreds more remain skeptical about the drug for their own reasons and choose to sit on the side-lines still wondering."[34] The film conveys how the preacher's son felt confident in his

decision, but that confidence disappeared quickly when his father reprimanded and punished him. The short film painfully shows the reality many Fijian youth were living at the time, when decisions were influenced by generational gaps or religious beliefs.

Figure 2. Teresa Regina Vaka'uta, *Promises*, 2022. Digital illustration. Courtesy of the artist

Other works in the exhibition reflect on general issues that youth face, which were only exacerbated by the pandemic. Teresa Regina Vaka'uta's *Promises* (Fig. 2) is a digital artwork that shows a young male standing in a flooded landscape with symbols of unfulfilled promises floating by while the sun is setting. In her words:

> Urban youth now more than ever are struggling with lack of employment and job security. From a young age we are fed an idea and promises of what a good future looks like, what a successful adult looks like, etc. . . . we are told if we go to school, study and work hard, if we stay healthy and do X, Y, Z, we're promised a better future. This piece is based on the Fiji flag, and these ideals being challenged by climate change, an economic crash, COVID, illness, etc.[35]

The flooded landscape is a clear allusion to the threat of climate change. Vaka'uta also refers to the country's coat of arms on the Fijian flag, reducing the lion, which tops the coat of arms, to a skeleton, and showing the banana bunch damaged, the coconut palm uprooted, and the doves of peace flying away.[36] The young male in the center of the artwork holds pieces of red thread referring to the use of red in both the British flag in the upper left corner of the Fiji flag and in the coat of arms. The emblems of two nations, now reduced to remnants, symbolize high hopes of opportunity that dissolved into empty promises.

Figure 3. Blackwater Triad, *Eyes*, 2022. Photograph. Courtesy of the artists

The black-and-white photograph *Eyes* by Blackwater Triad—a portrait of three women with white face paint that highlights their facial features (Fig. 3)—emphasizes that youth want to be seen. In their artist statement, the makers explain that this photograph was made once work resumed during the pandemic. They especially want to call attention to the eyes of the women in the photograph: "The eyes are like books that are being written continuously yet aren't told. You wish someone could listen to you through your eyes at times because they are the very windows to your souls."[37] While eyes might reveal a great deal about someone, this does not necessarily mean that people are seen. The artists refer to the fact that youth voices are not necessarily heard or valued, and, consequently, many youths do not feel seen.

In her poem *Rewrite the stars*, "a story narrated by the moon personified," Anthea Reddy reflects in free verse on "the predicament of two people from different religions yet the same gender being denied the one universal language which is love."[38] She expresses this in the poem's verses, including part of its ending:

> *Soul mates*
> *anticipating*
> *for their pathways to align,*
> *to be reborn in another time,*
> *in a foreign land*

Reddy reflects on social and cultural expectations that come with being youth in a multifaith and multilingual urban environment. The issues and stigmas surrounding same-sex relationships in Fiji are obviously not limited to youth or the urban environment, but in Fiji the urban environment brings more opportunities for multifaith and multiethnic social interaction.

Some youth problems begin on the playground, as the short film *My Ball* by Epi Vuruna shows. It focuses on young boys who try to take another boy's ball, an act that results in martial arts fighting accompanied by cartoon noises. While Vuruna explains in his artist statement that this was just a fun film he made because his cousins and their friends requested it, the playground is a social setting that can have a lasting impact on someone, particularly if they had a negative experience.[39] This work also expresses a longing for innocence, which is also present

in the work *Expressionist* by James Rabuatoka, a short video compilation of photographic portraits of a young child.

Teresa Regina Vaka'uta's second entry, a digital illustration entitled *Dis Connection*, explores (dis)connection that comes with technology (Fig. 4). The work shows two young people embracing, resting their heads on each other's shoulders while looking at their phones. In a video uploaded as a blog entry, Vaka'uta explains that the competition theme reminded her of social media, screen dependency, and economic/stability fears that developed during the COVID pandemic. She intentionally spelled her artwork's title as "Dis Connection" to refer to the act of detaching one thing from another, the feeling of isolation, and dis/"this" connection between us. She states that more and more youth are hungry for genuine connection and not just talking to a screen.[40]

Figure 4. Teresa Regina Vaka'uta, *Dis Connection*, 2022. Digital illustration. Courtesy of the artist

Figure 5. Blackwater Triad, *Na Noqu Vosa*, 2022. Video still. Screenshot taken by author. Courtesy of the artists

Communication was also at the center of the performance piece *Na Noqu Vosa* (My Language) by the collective Blackwater Triad (Fig. 5), which uses dance as a language to express the potential loss of spoken word. The artists state that they aimed "to highlight a challenge we believe some of the youths in Fiji face which is having knowledge of your mother tongue, the language spoken by our forefathers."[41] The artist collective addresses the fact that English is the most widely used language in Fiji, particularly in educational, government, and professional contexts. This can lead to a loss of one's mother tongue. They demonstrate that, for some youth, dance can be a form of expression that supports a reconnection with the mother language that they may have forgotten. The two artists' dance space is the side of a road next to a field of tall grasses; this positioning could be interpreted as the contrast between urban and rural environments. Cars pass while the dancers move to the spoken words "Na yacaqu—my name" (this is the only phrase that is also uttered in English), "Vakamacalataki iko"—explain yourself, or explain about yourself (to one person—iko); "Na noqu vosa" (my language).

Jonathan Tudreu's digital illustration *Passing Time* shows a turtle at the center with Indigenous Fijian wooden clubs and coconut trees, one flying the Fijian

flag, sprouting from its shell (Fig. 6). The turtle is depicted on a blue and green background with rows of patterns usually found on Fijian barkcloth. The turtle, as a long-living creature, Tudreu states, "represents time/strength/knowledge of culture and preservation while the things on its shell represent our traditional practices."[42] Tudreu's message is an appeal to preserve culture and traditions and to transfer this knowledge to subsequent generations.

Figure 6. Jonathan Tudreu, *Passing Time*, 2022. Digital illustration. Courtesy of the artist

The main theme of the performance piece *Rogoci Viti* (Listen to Fiji) by Takenivula Rakei is rebirth (Fig. 7). In her artist statement, Rakei describes how the inspiration for her artwork came to her during her internship at the Museum

of Archaeology and Anthropology, University of Cambridge, through the Urban Pathways project. At the start of her video, Rakei uses historical photographs of meke (movement including song/dance) performances from the museum's Fiji photograph collection. Rakei then performs a meke she choreographed in a British garden wearing masi (barkcloth), a hibiscus flower salusalu (garland), a magimagi (coir) belt with pearl shell, a white cowrie shell neck ornament, and vau (hibiscus fiber) armbands and leglets. In her words:

> I felt that my understanding of my own culture was lacking in some areas and the internship represented that promise of a fresh start. To reconnect with my roots, building upon all that I knew so far, in a safe space, free from judgement. I chose the song "Rogoci Viti" because to me the internship was about listening to Fiji, to my history and culture and reconnecting with it.[43]

Figure 7. Takenivula Rakei, *Rogoci Viti*, 2022. Video still. Courtesy of the artist

The acrylic painting entitled *Yalewa Kaukauwa* by Salaima Raluvenitoga Kanasalusalu Tuisovivi, who also lives in the UK, was "inspired by the homeland that I continue to long for each and every day" (Fig. 1). While the work—which shows the back and partially concealed facial profile of a woman with a flower in her hair amidst vividly colored tropical foliage—might remind viewers of popular

representations of Pacific women, the title refers to a yalewa kaukawa, a powerful woman, and reflects, according to the artist, "what it means to be an Indigenous young woman who chooses to turn her back on colonialism, as she slowly navigates her way through life and strives to preserve the authenticity of her identity."[44]

Figure 8. Takenivula Rakei, *Raici Au*, 2019. Photograph. Courtesy of the artist

Culture, tradition, and their transmission are also themes of *Raici Au* (Look at Me), another work by Takenivula Rakei. She took the photograph of Emele Robanakadavu and Mary Patricia after the two, together with Ana Lavekau and Rakei, had performed a meke at Westminster Abbey, London, on February 22, 2019. The two women are in their performance attire: feathered headpieces, shell necklaces, barkcloth skirts wrapped with salusalu (garlands), and hibiscus fiber armlets. The event reminded Rakei of the fact that two Fijians had been chosen to attend the coronation of George VI at Westminster Abbey in May 1937, but that no meke had been performed there since. Performing her meke more than eighty years later at the same location was a momentous occasion that Rakei wanted to capture. She states that the photograph represents resilience. On the one hand, she wants to refer to the resilience of meke as an art form that has changed over time and has crossed boundaries, as Fijians took it with them to diaspora regions. On the other hand, Rakei suggests that the photograph expresses the resilience of the two young women depicted:

> The title of this photograph is *Raici Au* which means "look at me." Look at these two young Fijian women who even when surrounded by a culture that is not their own, they still had the courage to make that first step and say "yes" to performing a meke in Westminster Abbey to a large audience.[45]

Overall, the online exhibition features artistic expressions by young people from Fiji who raise awareness of issues that they are facing or that they feel will chart their future. In her painting of a white owl on a black patterned background, entitled *Everything will be Owl Right*, Keresi Vosa expresses hope for Fiji's urban youth's future.[46]

Urban Displacement: Longing for Belonging

In times of uncertainty, hope is a way to face the future. Hope has been defined as "a desire, longing or aspiration for something and the confidence that its fulfillment is possible."[47] Hope is about possibility, and even though not all possibilities are necessarily actualized, these in turn create new hope.[48] Referring to Ernst Bloch's philosophical writings on hope, anthropologist Hirokazu Miyazaki observes that a philosophy of hope is "open to the future" and "entails a commitment to

changing the world."[49] Writing about Suvavou people in Fiji, Miyazaki demonstrates that hope was a method of self-knowledge, "that is, knowledge about who they were."[50]

Youth is a transitory stage in life, a phase that is betwixt and between. It is this liminality that makes it an uncertain stage and one during which hope is important. Equally, it is that liminal status that implies that youth are not always heard. Indeed, while hope is commonly seen as an aspiration linked to possibility, when not linked to action it can also lead to an overwhelming feeling of being stuck.[51] The youth creations at the center of this paper need to be considered in this context.

As anthropologist Michaela Haug writes, "studying the aspirations that people have for the future and how they inform their actions in the present reveals a great heterogeneity," which "allows us to explore their entanglement within existing power relations and inequalities."[52] By organizing an exhibition competition, the Urban Pathways project team hoped that it would provide a space for dialogue around issues facing urban Fijian youth. As much as "youth" is not a homogenous category, these artworks resist any singular conclusion about what it means to be an urban Fijian youth today. Yet within this diversity, there is a unified strength connected by a love for cultural origins and how these origins are in dialogue with present-day challenges and desires.

What the youth generally highlighted in their artworks and artist statements was a need for transmission and connection in times of displacement. For some, displacement was caused by the pandemic (e.g., Vaka'uta's *Dis Connection*, Blackwater Triad's *Eyes*, Vuruna's *Cula*). Indeed, the pandemic was the closest we have all come to a futuristic dystopia or the apocalypse in science fiction. When COVID-19 spread across the world, quarantines, curfews, and lockdowns were put in place. People lost their jobs or were told to stay home, and people died. Social distancing became the norm and mask-wearing was introduced. While much of the world lost all sense of normality, the list of rules that were put in place aimed to generate a "new normal." No wonder that sociologist Daniel Briggs writes that reporting on the virus and the pandemic followed similar scenarios to dystopian future films.[53]

However, in science fiction, an apocalypse typically not only leaves devastation, but leaves survivors who endure and persist, who are guided by hope, and who eventually orchestrate a new future.[54] Rakei refers to a similar situation in her artist statement of *Rogoci Viti*. As mentioned, her video begins with

photographs from MAA's Fiji photograph collection, which Rakei accompanies with an audio track of lali (drum) beats:

> The lali beat [in the beginning of the video] describes a village which has burnt down. For me, that burnt village represented the understanding and confidence I had in my culture and identity before the internship. When you picture a burnt village, it conjures feelings of hopelessness. But on the other hand, however devastating a burnt village may be, there's also a sliver of hope in the promise of a fresh start over the horizon. A new beginning doesn't necessarily mean going back to square one and losing all the progress that you've made, but rather an opportunity to start again with the knowledge and lessons you have gained from the first try.[55]

Rakei imagines her future by drawing on her ancestral past and cultural identity as drivers for the future. This is a common characteristic of the artworks submitted to the *iSausauvou* exhibition, although the artists' reasons for that feeling of displacement differed.

Other artists expressed a sense of displacement by focusing on the fact that being a youth is to be in a transitional status. It is a stage in one's life when one feels old enough to make one's own decisions yet is not necessarily free to do so, and this ranges from decisions about vaccines (Vuruna's *Cula*) to choosing one's partner (Reddy). Some artists expressed disappointment in previous generations' choices and their impact on youth today, such as in Blackwater Triad's *Na Noqu Vosa*, which critiques the dominance of the English language in education institutions, and Vaka'uta's *Promises,* which reflects on the unfulfilled promises of the new nation.

Youth also reflected on the urban environment (Rakei's *Raici Au*, Tuisovivi's *Yalewa Kaukauwa*). In their performance piece *Na Noqu Vosa,* Blackwater Triad shows that the urban experience influences the knowledge of language. Accompanied by Fijian spoken language, the two performers emphasize the power of dance as a visual language. They state that, "In dance our forefathers were able to use chants to pass on the stories or legends of our people. It is through these mediums that most Fijian youths who are dancers feel a slight bit . . . closer towards their cultural roots."[56] The artworks in the *iSausauvou* exhibition expressed youth resilience by drawing on the transmission of culture as ways of dealing with challenging issues.

In his digital illustration *Passing Time*, Tudreu's message is an appeal to urban youth to preserve knowledge of culture and traditions in an urban environment: "We won't be on this earth for long, but the knowledge of our traditions and culture can be preserved and passed down from generation to generation."[57] In other words, to use Pacific Studies scholar Lana Lopesi's phrasing, while the urban environment can result in feelings of loss of language and cultural roots—which is reflected in the submitted artworks—the creations are equally "unapologetically urban."[58] In her description of the development of the Pacific arts scene in Aotearoa New Zealand in the last six decades, Lopesi describes how Pacific people were making their place in Aotearoa as expressed in urban-flavored art works: "The lingering question of Pacific identity could have been the cause of inner turmoil and self-implosion. But for the musicians, designers and partiers, it led to an explosion of infinite possibilities."[59]

When Adi Lewa Boginisoko completed a work placement at the Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology, she came across a music recording in the museum's collections that was made in her ancestral village. Her mother had learned to perform a Tongan-style lakalaka dance to this song, which she then taught Boginisoko during her placement. This was a deeply personal experience that bolstered Boginisoko's confidence, as conveyed in her blog post about the experience: "It has enabled me to connect with my culture on a deeper level."[60]

Part of the placement program for UK-based Fijian youth was a talanoa (open, inclusive, participatory dialogue) session with the Fiji-based youth participants. Together they discussed the impact of growing up in their respective social settings. About this experience, Boginisoko wrote: "I had assumed that [the interns in Fiji] had a stronger connection with their culture, whereas in reality we [the interns living in the UK] were a lot more similar than I had thought, in terms of trying to preserve our culture and traditions for the future generations in our continuous fast-moving world."[61] Because people in diaspora can no longer practice their traditions in their homeland, Pacific Studies scholar Albert L. Refiti writes that they "'coil' them into concepts, carry them in a 'tool box' of theory, then unpack, operate and perform with them when required," using them as tools to create a new home.[62] And this is exactly what the young artists featured in this paper are doing; their stories are not merely stories of displacement but stories of mobility, of resilience, creativity, family, and urban identities.

Conclusion: Youth Are the Future?

This paper aimed to move away from regarding youth—in Fiji and globally—as a problem to be managed by arguing that youth should be viewed as having great potential to make valuable contributions to their communities and their futures. In other words, while youth should certainly be considered as embodying the future, their consideration should not be limited to the future—they should be heard in the present, too.

While the artworks discussed in this paper reference youth problems and issues, they mostly center reconnection. Created at times when the artists were feeling disconnected either because of the COVID-19 pandemic, geographical distances, or other forms of detachment, the youths' future-oriented creations were neither fantasy nor speculative fiction. Rather, these creations were aspirational; they expressed a prevailing sense of hope. In trying or difficult times, hope can be a tool of empowerment. Scholarly writing on hope reminds us that uncertainty or disappointment can be engines of hope.[63] The status of youth, which is transitional and therefore uncertain and trying, is important in this regard. The Fijian youth who participated in this project reflected on this status and showed their resilience.

The artworks and the discussions in the collaborative research project at the basis of the exhibition demonstrate that youth connect to different temporalities in order to build a future. The youth involved were forward-looking, yet they sought guidance and direction through their artistic imaginaries of the future. Their future was an ancestral future, to use Krenak's words.[64] Youth drew on their past, on their ancestors, while dynamically moving forward, transforming along the way. While imagining the future involves contemplation of temporality, what the youth in this exhibition and project have shown is that it equally implies reflection about place. Diasporic youth outside of Fiji and urban youth in Fiji perceived the urban and diaspora environment in similar ways. Both felt that they are living away from their cultural homelands and are making efforts to maintain their cultural affiliations. Their reflections on displacement are expressions of possibility, hope, and resilience, which should be transmitted as much as being influenced by transmission of cultural knowledge.

Acknowledgments

I am grateful to the British Academy, the Urban Pathways project team, and the youth interns, artists, and judges who were involved in the project: vinaka vakalevu. Thank you also to Clementine Debrosse, Garance Nyssen, and the two anonymous peer reviewers for their helpful comments.

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Notes

[1] Salaima Raluvenitoga Kanasalusalu Tuisovivi, *Yalewa Kaukauwa*, artist statement, accessed May 23, 2025, https://fijiyouthculture.wordpress.com/yalewa-kaukauwa/.

[2] The official project title was "(Re)Defining Culture: Engaging Urban Fijian Youth in Sustainable Employment Opportunities in the Cultural Heritage Sector," but the project team changed it to "Urban Pathways: Fiji. Youth. Arts. Culture." to make it more accessible. The project was supported by the British Academy's Youth Futures Program, under the UK Government's Global Challenges Research Fund, Grant YF\190078. Ethical approval was granted by the University of East Anglia's Faculty of Arts and Humanities Research Ethics Sub-Committee (reference: SREC 20-015).

[3] The focus on "the future" was also inspired by a call for papers on futurism by *Pacific Arts* journal.

[4] Rebecca Bryant and Daniel M. Knight, *The Anthropology of the Future* (Cambridge University Press, 2019), 6–9. See also, among others, Arjun Appadurai, *The Future as a Cultural Fact: Essays on the Global Condition* (Verso Books, 2013).

[5] Bryant and Knight, *Anthropology*, 14.
[6] Ailton Krenak, *Ancestral Future* (Polity Press, 2024).
[7] Gina Cole, "Wayfinding Pasifikafuturism: An Indigenous Science Fiction Vision of the Ocean in Space," in *The Routledge Handbook of CoFuturisms*, ed. T. J. Taylor et al. (Routledge, 2023), 55.
[8] Gina Cole, "'Pasifikafuturism': The New Genre of Science Fiction Invented by Author Gina Cole," *Stuff*, October 29, 2022, https://www.stuff.co.nz/lifestyle/130306614/pasifikafuturism-the-new-genre-of-science-fiction-invented-by-author-gina-cole.
[9] Cole, "Wayfinding Pasifikafuturism," 55.
[10] For more information on the Youth Futures program, see https://www.thebritishacademy.ac.uk/programmes/youth-futures/.
[11] In the UK, the project team consisted of Karen Jacobs, principal investigator, and Katrina Igglesden, postdoctoral research associate, at the Sainsbury Research Unit, University of East Anglia. In Fiji, the project's co-investigator, Frances C. Koya Vaka'uta, is team leader of the Culture for Development in the Human Rights and Social Development Division at the Pacific Community. The team further comprised Sipiriano Nemani, director of the Fiji Museum; Sachiko Soro, director of VOU Dance Fiji Company; and Kelly Brown, curator of the Marine Collection at the University of South Pacific.
[12] "Fiji," Country Reports (website), accessed May 23, 2025, https://www.countryreports.org/country/Fiji/population.htm.
[13] Patrick Vakaoti, "Young People's Participation in Fiji: Understanding Conceptualizations and Experiences," *Journal of Youth Studies* 20, no. 6 (2017): 700, https://doi.org/10.1080/13676261.2016.1260695.
[14] Patrick Vakaoti, *Street-Frequenting Young People in Fiji: Theory and Practice,* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2018), 27.
[15] "Population Census 2017," Fiji Bureau of Statistics, accessed May 23, 2025, https://www.statsfiji.gov.fj/census-surveys/census-of-population-and-housing/#2017.
[16] See https://www.countryreports.org/country/Fiji/population.htm
[17] See Patrick Kaiku, "A Critique of the Youth Bulge Theory in Papua New Guinea and Melanesia," *Pacific Studies* 41, no. 3 (2018): 188–98; Aidan Craney, *Youth in Fiji and Solomon Islands: Livelihoods, Leadership and Civic Engagement* (ANU Press, 2022).
[18] Helen Lee and Aidan Craney, "Pacific Youth, Local and Global," in *Pacific Youth: Local and Global*, ed. H. Lee (ANU Press, 2019), 6–8.
[19] Richard Curtain and Patrick Vakaoti, *The State of Pacific Youth 2011: Opportunities and Obstacles* (UNICEF Pacific, Secretariat of the Pacific Community, 2011), 5.

[20] Secretariat of the Pacific Community, *Pacific Youth Development Framework 2014–2023: A Coordinated Approach to Youth-Centred Development in the Pacific* (Secretariat of the Pacific Community, 2015), 6.
[21] Government of Fiji, *Situational Analysis of Youths in Fiji 2011* (Ministry of Youth and Sports, 2012), 3.
[22] Craney, *Youth in Fiji*, 13. An edited volume on Pacific youth by Helen Lee demonstrates that understanding the impact of ignoring youth is essential when considering the future of Pacific countries. See Helen Lee, ed., *Pacific Youth: Local and Global Futures* (ANU Press, 2019).
[23] Kathleen McLean, "Museum Exhibitions and the Dynamics of Dialogue," *Daedalus* 128, no. 3 (1999): 83–108; David M. Mason and Conal McCarthy, "'The Feeling of Exclusion': Young Peoples' Perceptions of Art Galleries," *Museum Management and Curatorship* 21, no. 1 (2006): 20–31; Emily Dawson, "'Not Designed for Us': How Science Museums and Science Centers Socially Exclude Low-Income, Minority Ethnic Groups," *Science Education* 98, no. 6 (2014): 981–1008.
[24] Alison L. Mroczkowski et al., "Youths' Perceptions of Features of a Museum-Based Youth Development Program That Create a Supportive Community Context: A Qualitative Case Study," *Journal of Adolescent Research* 37, no. 4 (2021): 1–36, https://doi.org/10.1177/0743558420985462.
[25] For examples, see the blog posts written by youth on the Urban Pathways website: https://fijiyouthculture.wordpress.com/.
[26] See Karen Jacobs, "Youth as a Community at the Ethnography Museum: Urban Pathways: Fiji. Youth. Arts. Culture.," *Journal of Museum Ethnography* 35 (2022): 63–74.
[27] Inise Kuruwale, "Nairukuruku Fieldwork – the story of a civa vonovono," blog post, accessed May 23, 2025, https://fijiyouthculture.wordpress.com/2022/02/09/nairukuruku-fieldwork-the-story-of-a-civa-vonovono/.
[28] Abraham Waqairoba, "My research experience on the nuqa-ni-vei-dogo, the vermiculate rabbitfish," blog post, accessed May 23, 2025, https://fijiyouthculture.wordpress.com/2021/10/05/my-research-experience-on-the-nuqa-ni-vei-dogo-the-vermiculate-rabbitfish/.
[29] Zelda Rafai, "A youth's experience as a Marine Studies intern working on a research project," blog post, accessed May 23, 2025, https://fijiyouthculture.wordpress.com/2021/09/29/a-youths-experience-as-a-marine-studies-intern-working-on-a-research-project/.
[30] The committee members—Lambert Ho, Jerry Wong, Tarisi Vunidilo, Arunesh Kumar and Josaia Tokoni—judged each artwork on four main criteria: interpretation/relevance of theme, originality/creativity, quality of artistic composition—skill and technique, and overall impression (including artist statement).

Because pandemic-related restrictions had relaxed by the time the exhibition was launched online, the project team managed to organize an exhibition opening at Fiji Museum for the participating artists, project members, youth

ambassadors, and representatives of the arts and culture sector in Fiji. During the March 29, 2022 opening, the two winning artists, Jonathan Tudreu and Teresa Regina Vaka'uta, were awarded their prizes by the director of Fiji Arts Council. Members of the jury also decided to add personal accolades, and Vuruna, Rabuatoka, Vosa, and Tuisovivi were recommended for further mentoring in the arts.

[31] Vakaoti, *Street-Frequenting, 13.*

[32] To view the standalone artworks, see https://fijiyouthculture.wordpress.com/isausauvou/. To see the virtual exhibition, see https://www.artsteps.com/view/621dfe61884c75c4b6219442.

[33] Epi Vuruna, *Cula*, artist statement, accessed May 23, 2025, https://fijiyouthculture.wordpress.com/cula/.

[34] Vuruna, "Cula."

[35] Teresa Regina Vaka'uta, *Promises,* artist statement, accessed May 23, 2025, https://fijiyouthculture.wordpress.com/promises/.

[36] Karen Jacobs, "Ocean as Pathway: From Museum Collections to Contemporary Creations," in *Transnational Island Museologies: Materials for a Discussion*, ed. K. Brown, J. A. Brown, and A. S. G. Rueda (International Committee for Museology, 2024), 91.

[37] Blackwater Triad, *Eyes*, artist statement, accessed May 23, 2025, https://fijiyouthculture.wordpress.com/eyes/.

[38] Anthea Reddy, *Rewrite the stars*, artist statement, accessed May 23, 2025, https://fijiyouthculture.wordpress.com/rewrite-the-stars/.

[39] Epi Vuruna, *My ball*, artist statement, accessed May 23, 2025, https://fijiyouthculture.wordpress.com/my-ball/.

[40] Teresa Regina Vaka'uta, *Dis Connection*, artist statement, accessed May 23, 2025, https://fijiyouthculture.wordpress.com/dis-connection/.

[41] Blackwater Triad, *Na Noqu Vosa*, artist statement, accessed May 23, 2025, https://fijiyouthculture.wordpress.com/na-noqu-vosa/.

[42] Jonathan Tudreu, *Passing Time*, artist statement, accessed May 23, 2025, https://fijiyouthculture.wordpress.com/passing-time/.

[43] Takenivula Rakei, *Rogoci Viti*, artist statement, accessed May 23, 2025, https://fijiyouthculture.wordpress.com/rogoci-viti/.

[44] Salaima Raluvenitoga Kanasalusalu Tuisovivi, *Yalewa kaukawa*, artist statement, accessed May 23, 2025, https://fijiyouthculture.wordpress.com/yalewa-kaukauwa/.

[45] Takenivula Rakei, *Raici Au*, artist statement, accessed May 23, 2025, https://fijiyouthculture.wordpress.com/raici-au/.

[46] Keresi Vosa, *Everything will be Owl Right*, artist statement, accessed May 23, 2025, https://fijiyouthculture.wordpress.com/everything-will-be-owl-right/.

[47] Michaela Haug, "Framing the Future through the Lens of Hope," *Zeitschrift für Ethnologie (ZfE)/Journal of Social and Cultural Anthropology (JSCA),* 145, no. 1 (2020): 75.

[48] Bryant and Knight, *Anthropology*, 134.
[49] Hirokazu Miyazaki, *The Method of Hope: Anthropology, Philosophy, and Fijian Knowledge* (Stanford University Press, 2006), 14.
[50] Miyazaki, *Method of Hope,* 26.
[51] Haug, "Framing the Future," 75.
[52] Haug, "Framing the Future," 73.
[53] Daniel Briggs, "Hope, Dystopian Futures and COVID-19 as the 'Event' that Changed the World (Forever?)," *Journal of Contemporary Crime, Harm, and Ethics* 2, no. 1 (2022): 78, https://doi.org/10.19164/jcche.v2i1.1220.
[54] Briggs, "Hope, Dystopian Futures," 62.
[55] Rakei, *Rogoci Viti*.
[56] Blackwater Triad, *Na noqu vosa*.
[57] Tudreu, *Passing Time*.
[58] Lana Lopesi, "Urban Pacific," in *Pacific Arts Aotearoa: The Powerful and Dynamic Legacy of Pacific Arts in Aoteroa, as Told by the Artists Themselves*, ed. Lana Lopesi (Penguin Random House New Zealand, 2023), 230.
[59] Lopesi, "Urban Pacific," 230.
[60] Adi Lewa Boginisoko, "Connecting with Culture – thoughts from a UK-based youth," blog, accessed May 23, 2025, https://fijiyouthculture.wordpress.com/2021/11/15/connecting-with-culture-thoughts-from-a-uk-based-youth/.
[61] Boginisoko, "Connecting with Culture."
[62] Albert Refiti, "Building the House of Noa Noa and Lave Lave: A Possible Theory of Pacific Art," in *Home AKL: Artists of Pacific Heritage in Auckland*, ed. R. Brownson et al. (Auckland Art Gallery Toi o Tamaki, 2012), 12.
[63] Ernst Bloch, *The Principle of Hope* (Blackwell, 1986); Rebecca Bryant and Daniel M. Knight, *The Anthropology of the Future* (Cambridge University Press, 2019); Solnit, "Hope in the Dark."
[64] Krenak, *Ancestral Future*.