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While the gun is still smoking¹

History is the long struggle of man, by the exercise of his reason,
to understand his environment and to act upon it.

— Edward Hallett Carr²

Throughout my research and writing career, I ranged freely between matters more historical and topics in contemporary history, from writing on the experience of indenture to the analysis of general elections in recent times. Often I was a close observer from the sidelines, but on some occasions I was actively involved in political issues, such as my role as a commissioner on the Reeves Constitution Commission in the mid-1990s. In the 1999 general elections in Fiji, I actively campaigned for the National Federation Party in support of its commitment to making the 1997 Constitution work. All this raises the question about whether I can write 'objectively' on events in which I was intimately involved. There is also a school of thought that holds 'contemporary history' to be a contradiction in terms, advocating the view that 'proper' history can be written only after the dust has long settled and the guns are silent. I address these questions here.

1 Originally appeared as 'While the gun is still smoking', in *Pacific Lives, Pacific Places: Bursting Boundaries in Pacific History*, ed. Brij V. Lal and Peter Hemptenstall (Canberra: The Journal of Pacific History, Inc., 2001), pp. 70–87.

2 Edward Hallett Carr, *What is History?* (New York, NY: Random House, 1961), p. 178.

'A lot of history is concealed autobiography,' the distinguished Australian historian Ken Inglis once wrote.³ That observation rings true to me. So, too, does E.H. Carr's contention that every historian is in some sense 'a social phenomenon, both the product and the conscious and unconscious spokesman [*sic*] of the society to which he belongs'.⁴ And Jim Davidson seems right as well when he says that the 'initial impetus towards the study of modern history not infrequently derives from the students' own sense of involvement in his [*sic*] own society'.⁵ The nature and quality of that engagement, I would argue, shape our understandings and assumptions about the world we live in, and frame the identity, orientation and style of our work. I do not wish to suggest a simple mechanistic correlation between class, ideology and intellectual work. History is a liberal, broad-minded discipline of multiple, overlapping identities, which admits a variety of approaches, techniques and sources. Its boundaries are porous and flexible. What I do suggest is a dynamic dialectical relationship between social and historical experience and intellectual endeavour, underlining the fundamental truth that we live in our own histories.

The subject of this chapter is contemporary history, eyewitness history and participant history. It is necessarily autobiographical, as these projects usually are,⁶ but I use my experience to raise issues about the limitations, attractions and opportunities that present themselves to historians who live at the interface of history and practical action. What forces and impulses pull them in the direction of practical engagement? Does participation or engagement hinder or help one's understanding of the society's history? How does it affect the analysis and interpretation of the event in which one is a participant? Does engagement provide new

3 Ken S. Inglis, assisted by Jan Brazier, *This is the ABC: The Australian Broadcasting Commission, 1932–1983* (Melbourne: Melbourne University Press, 1983), p. 1.

4 Carr, *What is History?*, p. 35.

5 J.W. Davidson, 'Understanding Pacific history: The participant as historian', in *The Feel of Truth: Essays in New Zealand and Pacific History*, ed. Peter Munz (Wellington: AW & AH Reed, 1969), pp. 27–42, at p. 34.

6 For typical examples, see Arthur Schlesinger, Jr, 'The historian and history', *Foreign Affairs* 41(3) (1963): 491–97, doi.org/10.2307/20029635; 'The historian as participant', *Daedalus* 100(2) (1971): 339–58; David Butler, 'Instant history', *The New Zealand Journal of History* 2(2) (1968): 107–14; Davidson, 'Understanding Pacific history', pp. 25–40.

insights into the dynamics of the practical affairs of state, or does it simply reinforce existing prejudices? There is, in my case, the added complication of being a historian participating in the affairs of my own country.⁷

Participant and eyewitness history of the types I discuss here, without drawing a sharp distinction between them, are decidedly out of fashion even, or especially, among historians. The conventional, not to say unconvincing, objections are well known. Participant and eyewitness accounts are partial and biased; they distort; they lack perspective; they are unable to separate matters of residual moment from matters of cardinal importance; they are, at best, the first primitive draft, a small building block, nothing more, in the larger edifice of later historiography produced in the course of time by detachment and objectivity. Attachment, it is argued, constricts accuracy; and advocacy, of whatever kind, is the stuff of propaganda. History should be objective, not reductionist or directly utilitarian in intent, and the historian should try to tell ‘how it actually happened’. Disapproval also comes from cultural relativists and the new social historians who decry the narratives of ‘total’ history and the search for complete explanation, wary of creating structures and imposing interpretations that suffocate variety and deny diversity. Scepticism, doubt, ambiguity, tentativeness and partiality of knowledge, a firm belief in the impotence of human reason and the injustice of universal moral judgements, are markers of this discourse. These words and concepts would seem incongruous to most participant historians. And *their* organising concepts—political power, the nation state, democracy, human rights, for example—and *their* efforts to search for patterns and meanings, to create structures that unite and enlarge the common space, are dismissed as hopelessly obsolete, relics of a past long gone and mercifully forgotten. I exaggerate slightly, but the suspicions and the tensions are real.

In the Pacific Islands many scholars, including historians, have been active participants in the affairs of their societies. Nowhere in the region has this been more marked than in my own country of Fiji, where the list is impressively long. The drift began with Rusiate Nayacakalou, trained in anthropology at the London School of Economics by Raymond Firth and tenured at Sydney, who gave up a promising academic career to return to

7 As opposed to, say, Jim Davidson, O.H.K. Spate, Harry Maude, Ron Crocombe and David Stone were all expatriate advisors and experts. Alan Ward, who engaged as a consultant to the Waitangi Tribunal in his native New Zealand, also worked as an advisor and consultant on land issues in Vanuatu and Papua New Guinea. See Peter Hempenstall, ‘Tasman epiphanies: The “participant history” of Alan Ward’, *The Journal of New Zealand Studies* 4–5 (2005–06): 65–80, doi.org/10.26686/jnz.v0i4/5.107.

Fiji to head the Native Land Trust Board.⁸ Isireli Lasaga, with a doctorate in geography, left an academic position at the University of the South Pacific for a senior position in the Fiji public service.⁹ Ahmed Ali gave up academia for national politics, followed by Satendra Nandan, Tupeni Baba, Jo Nacola, Meli Waqa, Ganesh Chand, Isimeli Cokanisiga, Biman Prasad and, for a while, Wadan Narsey. I mention only the names of those who took the direct plunge from university teaching into parliamentary politics, but many Fiji staff, both Fijian and Indo-Fijian, have long been politically active in a variety of capacities. One hopes that in due course some of them will reflect on their transition and transformations and tell us how their training and experience as academics has tempered their practical work.

Participation came naturally to the generation of students attending the University of the South Pacific in its salad days of the 1970s. The regional university, which opened in 1968, was required by its founding mission to train people to meet the anticipated development needs of a rapidly decolonising region. A Programme Planning Seminar at the Laucala Bay Campus in May 1968 took its cue from the Charter of the University, which provided that the objects of the University shall be:

the maintenance, advancement and dissemination of knowledge by teaching, consultancy and research and otherwise and for the provision at appropriate levels of education and training responsive to the well-being and needs of the communities of the South Pacific.¹⁰

At the seminar, 'the decision was taken to adopt the general organisation of groups of discipline located within Schools of broad developmental rather than the more common departmental and faculty structure'.¹¹ The initial schools, which have been renamed since, were Education, Natural Resources, and Social and Economic Development.

8 Rusiate Nayacakalou, *Leadership in Fiji* (Melbourne: Oxford University Press, 1975), p. v.

9 Lasaga wrote a book, *The Fijian People: Before and After Independence, 1959–1977* (Canberra: Australian National University Press, 1984). Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara, in the Preface, writes:

Dr Lasaga is an academic who has the sobering experience of finding himself being translated into the field of administration and he has distinguished himself in both. But this means that he has been able to bring to his writing of his book both intellectual and practical disciplines, and his academic studies have been tried and tempered in the field (p. v).

Lasaga himself does not reflect on this beyond saying that he is attempting to represent the Fijian point of view.

10 University of the South Pacific, *Calendar 1983*, p. 315.

11 *ibid.*

The developmental intellectual climate set the framework of learning in practical ways. Specialisation was discouraged; a broadbased education was deemed the best preparation for training future administrators and teachers. The actual political environment of decolonisation provided an affirming context for the intellectual course charted by the new university. My own evolution as an historian engaged in practical issues derives largely from that experience.

Like other Pacific Island historians—Sione Latukefu, Malama Meleisea, John Waiko—I focused on the history of my own people for my first piece of sustained graduate research, writing my dissertation on the social and cultural background of the Indian indentured migrants to Fiji. At the same time, I expanded my research to include the workings of contemporary politics, which began through a series of election studies and commentaries. Living in Fiji, and called upon to comment on the political campaigns, I could not, nor did I want to, escape the challenge and opportunity to participate, albeit as an interested bystander, in contemporary debates in my own country; and what could be more interesting than covering a heated political campaign? With time, an incidental interest evolved into a major professional preoccupation, resulting in a series of detailed political studies, and culminating in my appointment to the Fiji Constitution Review Commission in 1995. That appointment itself was preceded by several years of active opposition to the coups of 1987 and the divisive public culture of governance they spawned. From the very beginning, I was opposed to the overthrow of the Labour Coalition Government. I felt then, as I feel now, that there was something profoundly wrong about overturning the verdict of the ballot box by the bayonet.

The coups presented, for me, a deep political as well as moral crisis. One either supported the coups or opposed them. There could be no middle ground. I lost patience with those who treated the coups as an ‘on the one hand and on the other’ kind of discourse. Perhaps I spoke too firmly, but at least there was no doubt in anyone’s mind about where I stood. Taking a stand! Those words have a familiar ring to those caught in the middle of a fray—both participants and historians. My opposition intensified with time. I intervened through radio and television interviews, mostly unsuccessfully, to correct what I construed to be misrepresentations and misconceptions. I learnt the rude lesson that in the public domain facts, when they get in the way of a dramatic story, are not welcome. Complex facts do not engage the public imagination, which wants

simple, vivid, preferably provocative answers to quotable ‘newsworthy’ questions, delivered in attractive sound bites. By intervening the way I did, I may have compromised my objectivity, but I remained staunch in my support for liberal, representative democracy while emphasising the need to acknowledge and celebrate constitutionally recognised sacred and important institutions of Fijian society. In this respect, I share Oskar Spate’s wise advice to declare one’s hand to the readers:

The impartiality which evades responsibility by saying nothing, the partiality which masks its bias by presenting slanted facts with an air of cold objectivity—these are a thousand times more dangerous than an open declaration of where one stands; then at least those who disagree can take one’s measure with confidence: ‘that is why he said thus’ ... The important points are that inference must be based on evidence, as carefully verified as possible; and that the choice shall be made from the evidence, and not from pre-conceived ideas.¹²

This is the approach I used in my *Power and Prejudice: The Making of the Fiji Crisis* (1988).¹³ I was a target of the coup perpetrators because of my ethnicity and political stance; the book was written while the gun was still smoking. Nonetheless, I brought to my analysis the training and approach of the historian. I gathered all the available evidence as assiduously as I could against which I tested a number of prevailing hypotheses, many of which failed to measure up. One such, which had reached melodramatic proportions soon after the coups, saw the American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) as the principal instigator of the overthrow of a left-leaning government supposedly hostile to American strategic interests in the Pacific. The presence in Fiji around the time of the coups of some senior American officials, alleged to be veterans of coups in other parts of the world, added fuel to the fire.¹⁴ Nothing that I saw convinced me that the hypothesis was tenable. Americans may have known, perhaps given a knowing wink or looked the other way when they knew that something was afoot, but they did not mastermind the coups. The search for the extent of foreign involvement, I argued, should not be allowed to distort

12 R.G. Ward and O.H.K. Spate, ‘Thirty years ago: A view of the Fiji political scene: *Confidential Report to the British Colonial Office*’, *The Journal of Pacific History* 25(1) (1990): 103–24, at p. 103, doi.org/10.1080/00223349008572628.

13 Brij V. Lal, *Power and Prejudice: The Making of the Fiji Crisis* (Wellington: New Zealand Institute for International Affairs, 1988).

14 James Anthony, a Fiji expatriate living in Honolulu, was the principal proponent of this theory.

the larger picture. Often those who pursue the theory of external causation pay insufficient attention to the role of local forces and local leaders in the making of their own history.¹⁵

Three decades later, I have no reason to change my view, but at the time I was accused of being a puppet of the State Department for not holding the United States responsible for the Fiji crisis. Another hypothesis portrayed the coup as a simple racial conflict, between indigenous Fijians and Indo-Fijians, an assertion of indigenous power against an economically powerful and demographically preponderant immigrant-derived community. On the surface, the hypothesis sounded convincing, but was superficial upon closer analysis. Ethnicity was both a cause as well as a scapegoat of the crisis. I saw the coups as flowing from a complex interplay of a range of factors, none of which themselves could be sufficient. I argued:

The Fiji coups were more about frustrated politicians bent upon recapturing power lost at the polls than they were about ethnic prejudice, the importance of the latter cannot be—and here it is not—lightly dismissed. I argue further that the basic reasons for the coups will be found not so much in the machinations of outside agencies—which no doubt played a role in aiding and abetting forces opposed to the Coalition Government—as within the dynamics of local history and politics, and in the actions and machinations of specific individuals within Fiji without whose active participation nothing could have been accomplished. It is possible to discern the premonitions of the present crisis in the silent footsteps of modern Fijian history; but to argue that the coups were historically predetermined is to falsify a very complicated story and misjudge its essence. There was nothing really inevitable about the Fiji coups. In the ultimate analysis, the Fiji crisis was caused by a complex combination of incipient class conflicts, provincial tensions among the indigenous Fijians and deep-seated racial antagonisms long embedded in the very structure of Fiji's society and politics.¹⁶

Almost 30 years since this analysis was first drafted, many books, some by participants, have been published and some new information has come to light, but my fundamental thesis stands. At least, I stand by it. Indeed, I am tempted to say that it grows stronger as new information comes

15 Lal, *Power and Prejudice*, p. 36.

16 *ibid.*, p. 7.

to light. An important reason is that I wrote the account as a trained historian. We do not deal with certainties but with probabilities. We try to draw conclusions from the facts, as carefully and objectively assembled and verified as possible, rather than fit them into preconceived conclusions. No one explanation by itself ‘will satisfactorily account for the complex character of the Fijian crisis’, I wrote in 1988, nor was ‘it desirable to put the Fijian story into the straitjacket of political and social theories derived from other contexts and experiences’.¹⁷ This is no unique insight; it is simply sound historical practice of the type we employ in the course of our regular work.

While historians are good at predicting the past, they by and large make bad prophets, especially historians of the contemporary scene. Engrossed in the details and drama of events unfolding before their eyes, they miss the wood for the trees. I was no exception. When I wrote, I was deeply pessimistic about Fiji returning to normalcy in my own lifetime. In 1988, the architects of the coup were in power, implementing policies designed to entrench Fijian paramouncy. The economy was on the brink of collapse. Fiji was out of the Commonwealth. Capital drained out of the country and people queued outside foreign embassies seeking visas for permanent migration. The army was on the streets. The opposition was demoralised. The world did not seem to care. But Fiji, within a decade, returned to embrace a new constitution, without violence and bloodshed, to launch the country tentatively in a new direction of inclusive multiracial democracy, only to have it shattered by George Speight’s intervention—another case of historians not seeing what was coming. With hindsight, I should have glimpsed the shape of future developments. I had argued that provincial tensions, class interests and individual ambitions for power had led to the coup, along with ethnic fears. It should have been apparent that once the fears that had sparked the crisis had gone, these interests and concerns would have, in the course of time, gone on their own divergent paths. I should have seen that the politically expedient unity of Fijian interests was a chimera; that politics among Fijians, like any other community, were driven by vested social interests and personal ambitions. And my knowledge of history should have taught me that authoritarian structures imposed on a populace through force do not enjoy a long and happy life.

17 *ibid.*, p. 6.

As I read the accounts of the coups, including my own, long after the dust had settled and the army returned to the barracks, I am impressed by the depth and detail of the narratives produced while the gun was still smoking. They convey passion, urgency and immediacy that are difficult for me to conjure up now. The authors argue different theses. There were few points of agreement between them then, and they remain as far apart even now. Time has not erased the difference, and it never will. The idea that one day when all the facts are available, when the first primitive drafts of contemporary, or eyewitness, history have been transformed by a master historian into a standard, universally uncontested account, about the full significance of what happened in the past, is mere fantasy.¹⁸ Three of the earliest accounts of the coup were written by professional historians.¹⁹ The imprint of their training and approach is clear. The texts are well documented, but they also rely on types of evidence that go beyond the narrow range of sources typically deployed in conventional political histories.

My own analysis draws upon newspaper accounts and other published sources in the public domain. But it also draws upon other material, much of which is now probably lost to posterity: handbills, draft copies of speeches, transcripts of radio broadcasts, television footage and interviews. In the future, those wanting to know the initial reaction of the people might turn to the handbills distributed on the streets of the major towns and centres. I reproduced two in my book to give the reader a sense of what was being said and heard as the crisis was unfolding. They capture some of the anxiety, frustration, suppressed anger and trauma at the time in a way that a latter-day historian working from conventional sources might be unable to construct. I also used personal observation: the shops clogged with frenzied people buying emergency food supplies; shop windows barricaded behind hurricane shutters; the commandeered vehicles speeding along deserted streets; anxious, armed, balaclava-clad

18 Among the influential historians of the past who hold the hope of ultimate history is Herbert Butterfield. See his *History and Human Relations* (London: Collins, 1951):

If we consider the history of the historical writing that has been issued, generation after generation, on a given body of events, we shall generally find that in the early stages of this process of reconstruction the narrative which is produced has a primitive and simple shape. As one generation of students succeeds another, however, each developing the historiography of this particular subject, the narrative passes through certain typical stages until it is brought to a high and subtle form of organisation (p. 10).

19 Besides me, see Deryck Scarr, *The Politics of Illusion: Military Coup in Fiji* (Sydney: NSWU Press, 1988); Robbie Robertson and Akosita Tamanisau, *Fiji – Shattered Coups* (Sydney: Pluto Press, 1988).

soldiers atop strategic buildings; long queues seeking to emigrate; hushed conversations in cars. These are the kind of details a future novelist writing about this event might find to be of primary importance. A contemporary historian, especially one working in societies where the culture of preserving the historical record is undeveloped and unappreciated, carries the dual burden of being an archivist and an observer as well as an interpreter of events.

Eyewitness history also provides the historian with the opportunity to corroborate evidence through interviews—a technique that is unavailable to those working on more remote periods. A case in point is the role of the judiciary in resolving the early stages of the first (May 1987) coup. The matter was understandably shrouded in secrecy, encouraging rumours and false impressions about what was happening at Government House. What advice had the judges given the governor-general? Had their advice been sought? What was the legal status of the suspended constitution and other authority flowing from it? Wanting to find out, I rang the chief justice at his residence, and, much to my surprise, he readily agreed to see me that very morning. When I met him, the chief justice not only gave me a detailed account of the difficulties he had encountered in contacting the governor-general—he gave me the names of individuals impeding that effort—he also gave me a copy of the high court judges' submission to the governor-general, which is reproduced in my book, *Power and Prejudice*.²⁰ The judges' advice that the 'purported suspension of the Constitution of Fiji by the military regime which has assumed de facto power is illegal and invalid', and that the independence constitution 'remains in force and unchanged', when it finally reached the governor-general, changed his mind. He proclaimed himself deeply disturbed by the 'unlawful seizure of members of my government ... which must not be allowed to continue'. The role of the judiciary was a crucial one, and one which I would not have understood properly without the assistance of the chief justice. I would be surprised if the chief justice would still be able to recall all the details and the emotion as vividly as he did a few hours after the event.²¹

20 Lal, *Power and Prejudice*, p. 81.

21 In pre-electronic days, when people often kept daily diaries and wrote letters with greater frequency, such details might be there for the taking by later historians among private papers, assuming, of course, that these were preserved for posterity.

I would not today be able to write the book I wrote in 1988. Is that an indictment of contemporary history? I do not think so. My own response is well put by David Butler:

If one is trying to summarise an event as it seemed at the time, trying to get the facts together, the less one is contaminated by posterior wisdom, by looking back at the events with a knowledge of the consequences, the greater the force and immediacy of one's narrative.²²

Events and emotions that loomed large at a critical moment in time have a reality and identity of their own, irrespective of their place in the later assessment of history. Their meaning and importance, ethnographic historians will argue, should not be contingent upon the meaning placed upon them by posterity. To 're-present what actually happened in its specificity'²³ is important in its own right. But, having said that, I am also mindful of Doug Munro's contention that 'contemporary or participant history should not necessarily be regarded as intrinsically deficient or as de facto primary source material for future historians'. And neither, he argues, is there a perfect time to take stock: one always writes from the perspective of the time of writing.²⁴ 'Historians,' as Greg Dening has reminded us, 'live with the certainty that they will one day become someone else's historiography.'²⁵

Writing about your own society as a participant historian requires great sensitivity and tact and a certain degree of self-censorship. The quest for truth and objective understanding has to be balanced against the demands of other, sometimes equally, demanding factors. In a small island state, everyone is known to virtually everyone else, and news travels fast on the coconut wireless. Criticism and adverse comment, no matter how justified, are often taken personally. And they can easily be misconstrued in a country like Fiji, which has two contrasting traditions of discourse.

22 Butler, 'Instant history', p. 109.

23 Greg Dening, *The Bounty: An Ethnographic History* (Melbourne: University of Melbourne, 1989), p. 109. Dening argues:

History is a way of knowing, an act of consciousness, constantly repeated, never the same, always relative to the language in which it is expressed, always relative to the audience to whom it is given, itself a cultural artefact of an age other than the one whose story it tells. History is reductionist insofar as it transforms the totality of the past into words.

24 Personal correspondence, 5 July 2000.

25 See Greg Dening, 'Reflection: On the cultural history of Marshall Sahlins and Valerio Valeri', *Pacific History Bibliography and Comments* (Canberra: Journal of Pacific History, 1986), pp. 43–48, at p. 45.

One, practised by the Indo-Fijian community, is at home in open, robust, democratic debate. The other, rooted in traditional communal culture, is presented in subtle, indirect ways, conscious of the rank and status of both the speaker and the person spoken about. Commenting on electoral politics in Fiji in the early 1980s, I was acutely conscious of the need to be cautious in my comments and analysis for fear of being misunderstood or, worse still, labelled. I practised a degree of self-censorship in my public comments though not in my writing, performed in the safety of a foreign university. In a divided society such as Fiji, everything is seen and assessed through the prism of ethnicity. Public memory is racially archived. Birth and death certificates register ethnicity; one is asked to indicate one's ethnic identity when opening a bank account or when taking out a driving licence. Upon leaving and entering Fiji, the citizens are required to declare their ethnic identity. In South Africa, the immigration forms distinguish five categories of ethnicity. In Fiji, the number is seven.

Markers of ethnicity are everywhere. In the mid-1990s, the National Bank of Fiji was on the verge of bankruptcy, brought about by breathtakingly bad management. The matter was raised in parliament by the Indo-Fijian Leader of the Opposition, Jai Ram Reddy. The indigenous Fijian Foreign Minister (Filipe Bole) attributed the criticism to racism because the employees were Fijians and Rotumans.²⁶ When some opposition Indo-Fijian Members of Parliament criticised French nuclear testing in French Polynesia, Rabuka denounced the critics as anti-Fijian, because his (Fijian) government had tried to cultivate relations with the French. I dared to suggest that Ratu Sukuna's policies had, at least in part, disadvantaged many ordinary Fijians because he saw no value in academic education for his people—as distinct from chiefly Fijians, who, thus equipped, could then go on to perpetuate chiefly dominance—while other ethnic groups were marching ahead in the professions. I was labelled anti-Fijian for my audacity to criticise the work and legacy of a high chief.²⁷ Physical distance now diminishes the impact of these criticisms, but they can be oppressive and dangerous to those living with them on a daily basis.

26 See Brij V. Lal, *Another Way: The Politics of Constitutional Reform in Post-Coup Fiji* (Canberra: Asia Pacific Press, 1998), p. 54; Roman Grynberg, Doug Munro and Michael White, *Crisis: The Collapse of the National Bank of Fiji* (Suva: USP Book Centre, 2002), pp. 42, 148.

27 For an example of distorted criticism, see Ropate R. Qalo, *Small Business: A Study of a Fijian Family* (Suva: Privately published, 1997), p. 5; 'The stamp of the man: Initial impressions', *Journal of Pacific Studies* 22 (1998): 207–12.

Academics resolve the dilemma in several ways. Some present their views openly, without being overly concerned about the consequences. Isireli Lasaqa, analysing the development dilemmas facing the Fijian people, writes forthrightly about 'Fijian life and thought, Fijian needs and aspirations, how they see their neighbours, and the Fijian scene and beyond'.²⁸ If one is labelled a racist for representing a racial point of view, so be it. Some attempt a 'middle course between partiality on the one hand and impartiality on the other', satisfying no one, while others take the grandiose view that 'there is a lot to be said on both sides'.²⁹ Some resort to anonymous but editorially sanctioned essays in the newspapers, getting their ideas into the public arena without revealing their identity. This approach, to me, seems cowardly. Others have used the path of fiction to circumvent the dilemma. The best exponent of this approach in the Pacific Islands is Epeli Hau'ofa. His justifiably well-known satire, *Tales of the Tikongs*,³⁰ deals with the problems of aid, development, corruption and mismanagement, and conflict between traditional customs and modern attitudes, in the tiny island of Tiko. The issues are identified, and the message gets across without the messenger being persecuted. Sudesh Mishra's searing poems on the coups and subsequent developments also achieve the same goal, but whether his work is read by those who are its target is another matter.³¹

Participation enables one to see history in the making. It is a sobering experience to see how 'truth' emerges from a vast, chaotic mass of experience and activity, how small things get magnified, torn out of context and used in unexpected ways that change the course of history. One example will suffice. In 1982, Jai Ram Reddy, the leader of the National Federation Party (NFP), was fighting a tough election against the ruling Alliance Party, which, for its part, wanted to wean away sufficient Indian voters from Reddy's party to destroy, once and for all, the NFP's claim to be the voice of the Indian community.³² The campaign was closely contested, tense. In the course of one speech in Labasa, Reddy

28 Lasaqa, *The Fijian People*, p. xii.

29 The quotes are from David Thomson, *The Aims of History: Values of the Historical Attitude* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1969), p. 27. Without meaning to be unfair to him, I have the sense that Ahmed Ali held back from pursuing a searching enquiry into Fiji politics in the 1970s because he had been closely allied to the Alliance Party under whose banner he would enter national politics later.

30 Epeli Hau'ofa, *Tales of the Tikongs* (Auckland: Longman Paul, 1983).

31 See Sudesh Mishra, *Tandava* (Melbourne: Meanjin, 1992); and his poems in *With Heart and Nerve and Sinew: Post-Coup Writing from Fiji*, ed. Arlene Griffin (Suva: Christmas Club, 1997).

32 See Brij V. Lal, 'The Fiji General Elections of 1982: The tidal wave that never came', *The Journal of Pacific History* 18(2) (1983): 134–57, at p. 150, doi.org/10.1080/00223348308572463.

said that Mara was so desperate for Indian votes that he would even open a toilet block in order to capture Indian votes! A harmless enough remark given the context, but printed in the papers next day, it aroused more emotion and acrimony than I had ever seen before. Reddy, many Fijians said, had committed a serious breach of protocol, which in ancient times would have seen him clubbed. He had insulted not only a great man, but also insulted the *vanua* (province) of Lau, of which Mara was the paramount chief and the Fijian people generally. How dare an Indian suggest that a high chief like Mara would ever stoop so low to get Indian votes. Seizing the moment, Mara said in a deeply injured tone that those who had attacked him will not be forgiven or forgotten. Protest marches were held throughout Fiji, demanding Reddy's resignation. Racial rhetoric reached dangerous levels. Up went the call for Fijian unity. Reddy lost the election, winning 24 seats to Alliance's 26, but his words remained firmly in people's minds for a long time. Indeed, a few months after the election, at a meeting of the Great Council of Chiefs (GCC), opened for the first time by a reigning monarch, the chiefs vented their anger at the remarks made by *kaitani* (foreigners), and passed resolutions demanding Fijian dominance in parliament.³³ A stray comment, uttered in the middle of a heated campaign, inflamed racial passions and brought Fiji to the brink of potentially explosive political conflict. Such is the nature of politics in an ethnically divided society.

The participant historian also learns from personal experience that sometimes the public record does not reflect reality, and may in fact be contrary to it. When that happens, should the participant expose the facts and face the consequences, knowing that left uncorrected the historical record would forever remain distorted? One example will suffice. During the course of public hearings organised by the Fiji Constitution Review Commission, I was attacked several times by a number of nationalist Fijians, who questioned my credentials and credibility and integrity to be on the Commission. The attacks were vicious and hurtful, accusing me of being an incompetent, anti-Fijian bigot. They were broadcast on television and published in newspapers, and people still remember the incident several years later. The Commission expressed full confidence in me, but I was discomfited by such brutal and unfounded attacks, especially when I could not respond without damaging the standing of the Commission. Much later, when I met one accuser in an airport lounge, and another at a

33 See Brij V. Lal, 'The 1982 Fiji National Election and its aftermath', *USP Sociological Society Newsletter* 5 (1983): 3–17.

social gathering, I gently asked why they had been so hard on me. The first, wrapping his arms around my shoulders said that he was trying to ‘soften me up’, a routine tactic politicians use against all new opponents, trying to get their measure. That came as a surprise to me. The other, equally frank, regretted attacking me, but revealed a personal agenda. He was contesting a by-election in Tailevu, one of several caused by the disqualification of Adi Samanunu, as a member of the Fijian nationalist organisation Vanua Tako Lavo Party, a nationalist Fijian political organisation. Attacking me, he said, would assure him automatic publicity and national news coverage as a champion of the Fijian people, standing up against this ‘smart Indian’. Not that it did him any good, because he lost the by-election by a huge margin.

Serving on the Commission also made me realise how limited, and limiting, media coverage is or can be. Things are done on the run, deadlines have to be met, there is limited space in the news column, the story, important in its own right, does not have ‘sale’ value. Often, only the sensational bits and pieces get reported, and even then they are torn out of context. For instance, the future historian of the Fiji’s constitutional evolution will read, from the newspapers, that the reason why the Commission was unable to submit its report on time was that Tomasi Vakatora and I were bitterly opposed to each other and were unable to agree on the most important points.³⁴ I will not deny that we had our difficult days, but the reason for the delays had nothing to do with us: the delays were caused by the sheer amount of work we were asked to accomplish. For the record, the main details about the structure of the executive and legislative branches of the government were resolved by January 1996, several months before we submitted our report! This fact will be known only to those who care to comb the record of the Commission rather than relying on newspapers. Sometimes, what is said never comes to light, again distorting the public record. Let me illustrate this with an example. One prominent advocate of separate representation for Muslims, then a civil servant, asked for a private audience with the Commission to plead his case. The request was granted. He repeated the usual arguments: Muslims were a separate group, apart from the larger Indian community into which they were

34 Doug Munro, in a review of my book *Another Way*, likened my working relationship with Tomasi Vakatora to that between the German Stresemann and the Frenchman Briand, as a meeting of minds between two seeming irreconcilables who put aside national differences in the quest for the greater cause of a lasting peace in Europe. Munro’s review appeared in the *Pacific Economic Bulletin* 14(1) (1999): 115–17.

lumped for the sake of administrative convenience. He also favoured making Fiji a Christian state, largely to win the support of the Fijians for his cause. How could he, a Muslim, agree to Fiji becoming a Christian state? Was there not a contradiction here? His response, his exact words were, ‘No, because Islam is a heresy of Christianity anyway! Christians we don’t mind, it’s the Hindu gatekeepers we cannot abide.’

There were many others like him, saying one thing in public and another in private for reasons of pure political expediency that perplexed me. Take the Sunday Ban, for instance, a strict observance of the Sabbath, which came into force in 1988, proscribing all unauthorised commercial and recreational activity on Sunday. Many people, including, especially, indigenous Fijians, suffered from the ban on public transport, making it difficult for them to attend church or go to hospitals or access other essential services, and the closure of shops denied them the normal foodstuffs such as bread, tea, sugar—all staples in the countryside. They wanted the ban removed, they said in private, but in public they remained steadfast in support of it. It was a similar situation on provincial representation. Many Fijians in private deplored its deleterious effects, sowing the seeds of provincial division and rivalry, impeding the development of an effective national political party not tethered to local provincial interests. They wanted us to recommend reversion to the constituency-based electoral system of the precoup era. Yet, these same individuals remained disconcertingly silent in public or actively joined the chorus to retain the status quo. In a meeting of the Joint Parliamentary Committee, one participant arguing for change pointed out the absurdity of Filipe Bole not being able to stand from Suva, where he lived, but standing from Lau, where he was born but where he had not lived for decades. Many members agreed with the absurdity of the situation but voted against the proposal. The public heard that the Fijian Members of Parliament were unanimously in favour of retaining the provincial system of election. Some of the most eloquent defenders of the status quo were among the most passionate pleaders for change in private.

For an historian, it is interesting as well as instructive to see how history is understood and used at the popular level. I was both impressed and dismayed by what I saw and heard during the Commission’s hearings. Historical facts and events were often invoked in support of various demands. Often, the seemingly incontrovertible truth being presented was either wrong or misleading, acquired through hearsay, prejudice masquerading as principle, but the submitters did not know or care. The most troubling

example of this was the Soqosoqo ni Vakavulewa ni Taukei (SVT) submission, which used, unacknowledged, some 30 quotations from my book *Broken Waves*.³⁵ Wrenched out of context, the words were used to support themes that directly contradicted my own position. So, Governor Sir Murchison Fletcher is quoted saying that Indians who had gone to Fiji had come from ‘the most ignorant and backward part of India’, and he saw danger in ‘placing power in the hands of untutored people’. But Fletcher wrote this to argue the more limited position that Indians were not worthy of equal franchise. Sir Maynard Hedstrom, an implacable foe of Indo-Fijian demands for political equality, is quoted approvingly. The ‘British race’, Hedstrom was quoted as saying, must continue to govern Fiji to safeguard the paramountcy of Fijian interests, because ‘the Indian race has not yet in modern times completely proved its capacity for self-government’. And yet the same person wanted more native land to be converted to freehold title! The GCC resolution of 1933 is quoted: ‘The immigrant Indian population should neither directly nor indirectly have any part in the control or direction of matters affecting the Fijian race.’³⁶ The chiefs were asserting the right to complete unfettered internal self-administration, but now those words were stretched to mean denying the Indo-Fijians equal political rights. Ratu Epeli Ganilau is quoted as objecting ‘to being ruled by Indians, as we always have regarded British to be sole foundation of honour, justice and fairness’.³⁷ But Indians were not demanding the right to rule Fijians; they wanted equality with other British subjects. The context of these quotations is missing, the political and ideological logic behind them ignored.

Elementary errors of composition and argument are accompanied by more serious and deliberate misreading and manipulation of history. I will cite two examples mentioned most frequently to the Commission to illustrate the point. One concerns Lord Salisbury’s Despatch of 1875, in which the Secretary of State for India asked the Government of India whether it would, after consultation with the various provincial governments, intervene to facilitate the recruitment and emigration of Indian indentured labourers to the British colonies.³⁸ In return, the India

35 The SVT’s remarkable submission is among the Commission’s papers at the National Archives in Suva.

36 Great Council of Chiefs, Proceedings, 1933, Resolution 19, C.P. 8/34.

37 In SVT’s submission to the Fiji Constitution Review Commission. I was a member of that three-member commission chaired by Sir Paul Reeves of New Zealand.

38 See Brij V. Lal, *A Vision for Change: A.D. Patel and the Politics of Fiji* (Canberra: ANU E Press, 2011), pp. 5–6, doi.org/10.22459/VC.11.2011.

Office promised to ask the colonies to grant the Indian settlers ‘rights and privileges no whit inferior to those of any other class of Her Majesty’s subjects resident in the colonies’.³⁹ The provinces declined the request, the Government of India advised London accordingly, and the matter was dropped. The SVT argued that the promise made in the Despatch also lapsed, forfeiting any claim to legal authority. But this reading ignores the crucial fact that the intention of equality was never abandoned by India. In fact, it underpinned India’s policy on indentured emigration throughout. Indeed, in 1910 the value of the Indians as permanent settlers was recognised. It was agreed in correspondence between India and Fiji that equal civil rights had been granted to the indentured immigration in Fiji and that any measures that lead towards lowering the political status of the immigrants or reducing their economic freedom would have involved a breach of faith with those affected.

The vagueness of the promises in Salisbury’s Despatch is contrasted with the firm assurances given in the Deed of Cession by which the leading chiefs of Fiji ceded the islands in 1874.⁴⁰ That important document has been invested with a range of meanings, beyond the weight the document itself can reasonably be made to carry. It has come to be seen as a document of trust between the Fijian people, a compact, a solemn pledge, a charter that not only promised to protect Fijian rights, but also guaranteed the paramountcy of Fijian rights over all. What many Fijians wanted, they told the Commission, was an unequivocal restatement of that right, fulfilling a solemn pledge made by Queen Victoria. To those unfamiliar with the document, the supposed promise of paramountcy and the British failure to fulfil it would seem a grave breach of trust. But, in fact, the words ‘paramountcy of Fijian interests’ are nowhere mentioned—not even once—in the Deed of Cession. The Deed acknowledges the unconditional surrender of the islands to the United Kingdom, promises to promote ‘civilisation and trade’ in the islands, while Fijian rights ‘shall be recognised so far as is and shall be consistent with British Sovereignty and Colonial form of government’.⁴¹ All claims to financial liabilities made by the chiefs would be carefully scrutinised according to principles of justice and sound public policy.

39 *ibid.*, p. 6.

40 See Brij V. Lal, *Broken Waves: A History of the Fiji Islands in the Twentieth Century* (Honolulu: University of Hawaii Press, 1992), pp. 11–12.

41 The full text is in the Appendix to R.A. Derrick, *A History of Fiji* (Suva: no publisher, 1950).

Throughout the twentieth century, the colonial government and especially the local members of the ‘British race’ continually invoked the concept to forestall Indo-Fijian claims for elected political representation on the basis of universal franchise and a common roll. To acquiesce in that project would be to relinquish a solemn pledge to the Fijians and safeguard their own vested interests, allowing political change to proceed at a pace acceptable to the colonial establishment. Nonetheless, the concept of paramountcy was used in a broadly protective sense. That is, in matters pertaining to the internal structure and administration of Fijian society—determination of land and chiefly titles, the drawing of traditional land boundaries, the allocation of the roles and responsibilities within society, sanctions for breaches of traditional, customary practices—the Fijian people themselves, through their customary elders and the GCC, would exercise the paramount power. In this protective sense, it was intended to shield the Fijian people from the demands and corrosive pressures of the modern world. As independence approached, paramountcy was transformed from a protective sense to an assertive one. The Fijian leaders began to argue that the paramountcy of Fijian interests could only be guaranteed if Fijians had political paramountcy. Legislative and constitutional safeguards were deemed to be insufficient. A concept, not found in the document to which its origin was attributed, was transformed from a protective instrument into an assertive tool for political dominance, and invested with historically unsustainable meanings and symbolism.

My second example is the now famous Wakaya Letter, which was also invoked before the Commission on numerous occasions.⁴² This was a letter, signed by the members of the Fijian Affairs Board, the administrative and policy advisory arm of the GCC, and which had as its members all the highest ranking chiefs of Fiji, including Ratu Mara. It was presented to Nigel Fisher, the Parliamentary Undersecretary of State for the Colonies in 1963. The signatories demanded certain preconditions before Fijians would discuss even the possibility of independence. Fiji, they said, had a special relationship with the British Crown, which had to be clarified and codified. Fijian ownership of native land should be guaranteed, in consultation with the GCC. The Fijian Affairs Board should have veto power over all legislation affecting Fijian rights and interests. Fijian wishes for Fiji to be declared a Christian state should be recognised, and the Public Service should ensure racial parity in the public sector. ‘Subject to a satisfactory resolution of the issues we have raised in the foregoing

42 A copy is reproduced in Lal, *Broken Waves*, p. 189.

memorial,' the signatories concluded, 'we would be prepared to initiate, in co-operation with the other principal races, further moves towards internal self-government.' The fact that Fijian leaders cooperated actively in the movement towards greater self-government from the mid-1960s onwards suggests that their preconditions had been met, if not in full. The Wakaya Letter was only a negotiating document. But many people kept reminding the Commission of the document in support of their claim for political paramountcy, and especially in support of making Fiji a Christian state. It was difficult to convince the people that the Wakaya Letter was designed for a specific purpose for a particular moment, and that its import was now purely historical, superseded by another compact—the constitution that gave Fiji its independence. Assertions get transformed into unassailable facts before your eyes, one learns quickly; historical truth is a matter of perception.

A participant is privy to information given in a variety of ways: a heavy hint, a slanted joke, a throwaway remark masking a serious point or indicating a point of view to be noted, malicious gossip of no permanent value but clearly intended to harm an opponent (though it is of permanent value to the perpetrator!). It is often assumed, although seldom explicitly articulated, that things are being said in confidence. Much of this kind of evidence can be discarded or forgotten. But some information, from recounted conversations, and eyewitness accounts about important players or critical events and episodes, raise troublesome questions. Uttered in confidence, or the expectation of confidence, how does one use it, especially if it relates to something of great public importance? An example. During the 1999 election campaign, Sitiveni Rabuka claimed that he had not acted alone in carrying out the coups, that in fact he was the 'fall guy' who had refused to fall. He named some of the co-conspirators and left others unnamed.

A year later, through his authorised biography, he implicated Ratu Sir Kamisese Mara in the precoup machinations, recounting a conversation he had had with Mara on a golf course where Mara had tried to sooth the nerves of a clearly worried colonel about the possible intervention of foreign countries, especially the United States and the United Kingdom in the event of a military coup in Fiji, by saying, 'Leave these to me'.⁴³ For the record, Mara has denied the conversation. The accusation caused an uproar in Fiji, but Rabuka's account was a public secret in Fiji long

43 See John Sharpham, *Rabuka of Fiji: The Authorised Biography of Major-General Sitiveni Rabuka* (Rockhampton: Central Queensland University Press, 2000), p. 105.

before it appeared in print. Some years ago, he had told me—and several other people as well—what his recent biographer has since revealed: that his biography, if ever one was written, should be titled ‘The Fall Guy’ or ‘The Kleenex Man’, the allusion to being used and then discarded like paper tissue. As an historian, I noted his remark, because in my own account of the Fijian coups, I had written generally that Rabuka could not have acted alone, and that circumstantial evidence pointed to the involvement or, at the very least, the acquiescence of others. But important as Rabuka’s information was, I could not use it. First, I could not document or verify it. Second, since the information was given privately, and thus off the record, Rabuka could, if he so chose, deny it, leaving me to face the very likely prospect of a libel action. So both personal interest as well as ethical concerns about broadcasting the contents of a private conversation led me to commit the information to my files.

I was chastened from an earlier experience, when a speaker flatly denied saying what he had, in fact, said. In the early 1980s, a former Fijian colleague from the University of the South Pacific visited the East-West Center in Honolulu. During the course of an informal presentation, he was asked about the increasing rate of Indo-Fijian emigration, and its effects on the Fijian economy. The sooner more of them leave the better, he said, to uneasy laughter from the audience. I thought the remark inappropriate. I cannot now recall when or how I recounted this conversation to an acquaintance. The next day, to my horror, an Indian candidate at the Civic Auditorium in Suva recounted the substance of my conversation, alleging that the Fijian candidate was anti-Indian. The accused candidate, of course, denied the allegation the next day, and threatened a libel action. Fortunately, the allegation was never repeated, and soon swamped by other issues and forgotten, but the pragmatic need for discretion has remained with me ever since.

The possession of privately acquired, potentially explosive information creates its own problems. The obligations of scholarship, the disinterested pursuit of knowledge and truth should require full disclosure. This obligation, however, has to be assessed in the context of other competing obligations. Will the release of the information do more harm than good? Might it, for example, lead to civil strife, loss of life, poison race relations, affect the welfare of innocent people caught in the cross fire, or bring down a government? The question is: who is to act as arbiter? What right does the possessor of important information have to withhold information from the public? The answer can never be clear cut. In my own case as a Constitutional Commissioner, there are certain things that my oath of

secrecy requires me never to make public, however important they are. Some discussions treating sensitive issues were never recorded. Such was the case with the proceedings of the Joint Parliamentary Committee, which deliberated on the Reeves Commission Report and produced the draft constitution. Recording the proceedings, it was felt, would impede free flow of discussion, and make people wary of the fact that their words were recorded, which might harden positions. In the Commission's own deliberations, discussion was recorded without attribution for the very same reason. But having said that, I should state that the substance of what I saw or was told and believed, I have reproduced in an indirect, allusive way, without specifying details. This is unsatisfactory, to be sure, but there does not seem to be any way around it.

There is an unmatched excitement about doing contemporary history. One sees events in the raw, unprocessed, unfolding haphazardly, with little sense of where they might lead. One thrills to the particularities of events, to their uniqueness and integrity. Human beings can never be reduced to abstract categories no matter how subtle or intricate they appear. One sees how history is created, and how messy and unpredictable the process is. Often what one reads in the media or in the official reports is not how one saw it at the time. One becomes acutely aware of how only a tiny fragment of what happens finds its way into the historical record. One learns painfully how complex seemingly simple things can be. One becomes aware of the role of contingency, fortuity, ignorance, chance and stupidity in human affairs. Participation humanises history, and reinforces belief in human agency. It is humbling to realise the limits and limitations within which instantaneous choices are made.

One begins to develop a more sympathetic understanding of human frailties and human ambitions. Fijians who want political power to control their destiny are not necessarily racist chauvinists, but people who feel besieged, threatened, caught in the grips of forces beyond their control. They are saddened by the sight of their cherished world of childhood vanishing before their eyes, hurt to see things they believed to be beyond comment—the institution of chieftainship, for example—dragged into the cauldron of ordinary debate, thus debasing their culture. They want political power, enabling them to adjust to the world at their own pace. That is the romance of the idea. The Indo-Fijians do not necessarily want power to dominate others. They want equal rights, as human beings, to live with dignity and freedom. They invoke universal principles and their enormous contribution to the country in support of their claims, while Fijians support theirs by invoking the arguments of cultural uniqueness.

Can I be objective about what I write as a participant historian? Partial or biased scholarship is not the peculiarity of any one period or of a particular type of scholarship. As Walter Laqueur puts it, 'Violent prejudices are nursed and maintained more easily in sheltered academic surroundings than on the political stage, which provided on many occasions welcome corrections and may even teach patience and tolerance.'⁴⁴ 'The only completely unbiased historian,' says David Thomson, quoting Mark Twain, 'is the Recording Angel, whose works are unpublished: and even he, said Mark Twain, doubtless has convictions which, to Satan, might look like prejudices.' Thomson goes on:

If prejudice is inevitable, and it comes from the 'spirit of the age' as well as from more individual inclinations, it should perhaps be welcomed and made use of. It may be argued that it is, indeed, as indispensable to the historian as is resistance to the autocrat who knows that, without resistance to his rule, he has no leverage to rely on. The battle against his own prejudices can be invigorating for the historian and an aid to him in his battle to find the truth. But only a few bold spirits among professionals accept the subjective element in historiography as not regrettable and not merely unavoidable, but as positively vitalizing and perhaps indispensable to it as an intellectual endeavour.⁴⁵

Meaningful participation requires attachment and commitment and an informed and long-term engagement with the subject of one's research. And it can never be undertaken from intellectual inertia.⁴⁶ But these qualities are coming under threat from the changing culture within the academy. Financial cutbacks to universities have demanded increasing rationalisation of resources. Classes become bigger and teaching loads

⁴⁴ Walter Laqueur, 'Introduction: Historians in politics', in *Historians in Politics*, ed. Walter Laqueur and George L. Mosse, (London: Sage Publications, 1974), p. 1.

⁴⁵ Thomson, *The Aims of History*, p. 28. See also W.H. Walsh, *Philosophy of History: An Introduction* (New York: Harper Torchbooks, 1958): 'There is no such thing as history free from subjective prejudice' (p. 112). He went on:

Inside any given set of presuppositions, historical work can be more or less well done. The history served by party propagandists to encourage the faithful and convert the wavering is bad history not because it is biased (all history is that), but because it is biased in the wrong way. It establishes its conclusions at the cost of neglecting those certain fundamental rules which all reputable historians recognise: scrutinise your evidence, accept conclusions only when there is good evidence for them, maintain intellectual integrity in your arguments, and so on. Historians who neglect these rules produce work which is subjective in a bad sense; those who adhere to them are in a position to attain truth and objectivity so far as these things are attainable in history (p. 114).

⁴⁶ See Isaac Deutscher, 'From the Introduction (1961)', in his *Stalin: A Political Biography*, 2nd edn (New York: Oxford University Press, 1966), pp. x–xi.

increase, reducing the already limited time for research. In an age of outsourcing, research funding is increasingly becoming outcome oriented. Relevant research, related in some way to Australia's (or the United Kingdom's or the United States's) national and strategic interests, gets priority. And when the currently fashionable research agenda—governance, poverty reduction, capacity building, structural reform—passes, emphasis moves on to some equally fashionable and equally transient topics.

Some of this policy-related work is important, but counterproductive when it is allowed at the expense of more fundamental, long-term, culturally informed research. The culture that nurtures participant history is also challenged by the current intellectual fashion in fields such as cultural studies which:

unsettles, destabilizes, and complicates the discourses of the humanities', where the 'line between words and things, subject and object, inside and outside, humanity and nature, idea and matter becomes blurred and indistinct, and new configuration of the relation of action and language is set in place.⁴⁷

This kind of exercise may be stimulating in a graduate seminar, but unhelpful when dealing with the practicalities of the real world.⁴⁸ Generally, people, I have come to believe, want to entertain the possibility of hope, of change and progress, rather than dwell in the quagmire of self-pity and despair, disabled by doubt. They want clarity, not complication; stability, not uncertainty; rules, not anarchy. But they also want the simplicity that evades truth—that denies the complexities, contradictions and dynamics. That is what makes our task demanding—to get clarity and subtlety; clarity that includes discomfoting exceptions and gaps in the evidence. We want to be able to write so that those who were there say, yes, that is the way it was—and learn something. Participant historians learn to live with the inescapable truth that we all live in our histories. V.S. Naipaul has written, 'The world is what it is; men who are nothing, who allow themselves to become nothing, have no place in it.'⁴⁹ These words provide participant historians with both their challenge as well as their opportunity.

47 Mark Poster, *Critical Theory and Poststructuralism: In Search of a Context* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1989), pp. 9–10.

48 See also Alan Ward, 'Comfortable voyagers? Some reflections on the Pacific and its historians', *The Journal of Pacific History* 31(2) (1996): 236–42, at p. 238, doi.org/10.1080/00223349608572821.

49 V.S. Naipaul, *A Bend in the River* (New York, NY: Knopf, 1979), opening line.

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