All culture is originarily colonial. —Derrida

For two years, 1962 and 1963, I was a student in the multiracial sixth forms of Suva Grammar, Fiji's best school. The teachers were all white, and only European students or those of European descent could do all their schooling there. But each year children from other schools who had gained a first or second division pass in the Senior Cambridge examination would be invited to join the lower sixth form to study for the New Zealand University Entrance exam.

I want to share two dialogues from that time. The first was with Mr Webb, the school principal. A compassionate but severe-looking man, almost totally lacking in humour, he called me into his office before announcing to the school that I had been appointed a school prefect, the first, it seemed, who had no European blood: 'You'll have problems from the part-Europeans, they're less likely to accept you, but they are really of no consequence, so don't worry about them.' But I had no problems with them. Keith Williams, Bill Heritage, Molly O'Connor, Robert Southey—the half-castes referred to by Mr Webb—used to travel in the same Shere Punjab bus with me and understood Fiji-Hindi. Keith and Bill had had many a mackerel curry and roti lunch at my home. It was the children of powerful colonial civil servants who were impossible to handle and not beyond sly racist remarks.

The second dialogue was with Mr Huddleston, the maths teacher.
He wasn't a political person at all, but he once pulled me aside and said 'I wish you Indians would leave politics alone, you are causing the Fijian so much distress, and they need to be looked after. Perhaps the best thing is for them to rule and you to till.' He didn't mean to hurt, he wasn't that kind of a person, but I recall his words because he echoed the sentiments of Europeans in Fiji generally.

After this year's 19 May coup, no-one from Australia or New Zealand referred even remotely to inalienable rights for the Fijian; everyone spoke about human rights and democracy, about legitimately elected governments and so on. Any concession to primal rights would have been an acknowledgement of the special status of indigenous communities in their own countries. I make these observations to indicate the winds of change. Thirty years ago, the Indians in Fiji were blamed for everything, now they are seen as possessing the same spirit that drove the white men to open up new frontiers and colonise new lands. A personal prelude ('to the swelling act' of national themes) denudes the power of scholarship in what follows; in the context of this essay, perhaps there is a place for precisely that kind of reminiscence.

The Speight coup of 19 May was a kind of compulsive repetition of the Rabuka coup of 14 May 1987. Both came as a shock, and drew extensive Australian media coverage. But neither coup has yet been the subject of serious theoretical or comparative study. There are few theoretical studies of Fijian politics and culture or the creation of the Fijian nation-state. There are no comparative models, no daring analyses, subaltern or humanist, that could blast open the national repressed, that could, as Walter Benjamin observed in another context, remind us of the documents of civilisation as simultaneously documents of barbarism. How then do we frame a moment that signifies a compulsion to return to some lost nirvanic past, when that moment is simultaneously one of redemption (for the Fijian) and betrayal (for the Indian)?

What follows is an attempt to explore some theoretical premises that may help us understand the recurring rebellions in Fiji. But first some political facts need to be reprised. In the 1998 general elections, the first under the revised 1997 constitution, Mahendra Chaudhry's Labour Party won thirty-seven of seventy-one seats. Wisely, it seemed then, Chaudhry entered into a people's coalition government with three Fijian parties—the Party of National Unity (PANU), the Fijian Association Party (FAP) and Veitokani ni Levenivanua Vakaristo (VLV, a Christian Party). The existence of these parties indicates the fragmentation in the Fijian body politic as a result of the tedious and rudderless Rabuka years. Rabuka's own party won a mere handful of seats, and the oldest political party in Fiji, the National Federation Party, won no seats at all. Chaudhry's huge mandate to govern was not founded on an unequivocal desire on the part of Fijians to embrace a government with an Indian prime minister but on Fijian apathy and internal discord, strategic use of preferential voting and coalitional alignments. The support that came from the Fijian president, Ratu Mara, was crucial for Chaudhry's elevation as prime minister, but Mara's power-base had been severely eroded during the Rabuka ascendancy. With the decline in Mara's moral authority over the Fijian people (he had to be secretly whisked out of Government House by the Fijian military during the coup) the claim by Chaudhry to govern because of an electoral mandate stood on shifting sand, especially in the context of Fiji's recent tempestuous political history and Fijian phobia about the spectre of socialism behind any social-democrat party. Brij Lal has carefully summarised the political background to the Speight revolt. My interest here is in the archaeology of a revolt.

THE CHARTER OF THE LAND

In the highly charged context of Fijian emotion and Fijian phobia there is no concept of a mandate to govern that does not simultaneously include other mandates held by the Native Land Trust Board, the army, and the Great Council of Chiefs. What unifies these instrumen-
talities, which have considerable historical force and mandates not based on democratic principles, is the mystique of the land—Fijian land as exclusively the property of the Fijian and the foundation of the Fijian sense of the nation-state.

For a Fiji Indian to raise the subject of land is anathema to the Fijian; nevertheless, the question has to be raised for two reasons. First, every Fiji Indian has a connection, directly or indirectly, with the Agricultural Landlord and Tenant Act (1969), under which thirty-year leases were granted to Indian farmers. Since 1999 these leases have begun to expire. Second, Fijian land tenure—and its guardian, the Great Council of Chiefs—has dominated the discourse of the crisis. Mataqali, tokatoka, yavusa, vanua, matanitu, tabua, vakalutu: the language of the native participants (or informants) in the crisis has been littered with Fijian words specifically relating to land. For many Indians the persistence of these terms in the media and in the language of demagoguery for which George Speight became famous meant that for the first time they began to think through the relationship between Fijian social forms and what can only be defined as a mystical sense of land ownership. For the 60,945 landless indentured labourers from the Indo-Gangetic plain and Southern Indian valleys who arrived as indentured labourers between 1879 and 1917 the narrative of land ownership was different. For them land ownership was a point of entry into the psyche of a feudal (zamindari) system from which, in India, they had been excluded. Viewed primarily as a commodity, land had yet to be transformed into a mystique.

'The charter of the land' is a term from Peter France’s invaluable book of that name. The supporters of the 2000 coup obviously believed in the timeless validity of land tenure without critically addressing


that land, too, had been 'chartered', its mystique a colonial construction and its identification with everything Fijian only a reaction to the alien (Indian) among us. In Peter France's highly cadenced and balanced prose:

The land tenure system which exists in Fiji today evolved from the varied administrative decisions of a colonial government; it has been adopted as a protective device into the Fijian ethos. It has come to be regarded as immemorial tradition. For the strength of tradition depends less on its historical accuracy than on its social significance. And the tradition that is held to enshrine the ancient land rights of Fijians is a powerfully cohesive force in Fijian society. That tradition has withstood the protestations and denigrations of a generation of economic advisers, and will, no doubt, survive the demythologizing labours of historians.*

As modernity hit Fiji and the nation's multiracial character became self-evident in the mid-twentieth century, even colonial administrators attempted to free up Fijian land for cultivation. (Eighty-three per cent of land in Fiji is Fijian-owned, a further 8.6 per cent is Crown or state owned, and just over 8 per cent freehold.) The Spate and Burns reports of 1959 and 1960 were critical of Fijian land tenure and its adverse impact on economic development but were rejected outright by the Great Council of Chiefs, an artificial body created by the colonial administration, which demanded that 'the present system of Fijian land tenure, ownership, administration, and reservation be rigidly maintained'. The Great Council of Chiefs became the guardian of the land and defended reactionary land tenure practices even when they clearly inhibited economic growth. In opposing change of any kind the Great Council of Chiefs reaffirmed the colonial transformation of a loose landowning structure into a rigidly feudal one.

As the charter of the land becomes part of Fijian national consciousness and the basis of Fijian rights, it becomes difficult, even impossible, to rethink the Fijian nation-state in terms of the democratic Enlightenment ethos. In the latter definition, the nation-state is
not linked to atavistic claims about land, which although crucial to its formation are not its condition of being. The claims of the landowning class are not identical with the claims of the nation-state, which, being an abstraction, an imagined community, comes into being because the people who make up that nation share values that they want to maintain, and project a common ideal. In Fiji the nation-state, defined in these terms, has failed to take shape because the idea of the nation-state was mapped onto a fiction of a charter that functioned as social reality. This social reality arose out of an absence of a critical theory of the nation and out of a response to real or perceived threats from a migrant community that within sixty years of its arrival became the dominant racial group. A system that is meaningless at village level is defended at the national level as a hallowed and timeless feature of Fijian national ethos, easily invoked to destroy reason and common sense.

The charter of the land became a catch-cry around which self-interest, especially of the Fijian civil-service establishment, congealed. The marriage of the two—defence of the mystique of the land and defence of civil-service privileges; one emotional, the other pragmatic—produced the constant refrain from both chiefs and bureaucrats during the coup: 'We agree with the ends (of the terrorists), but not the means.' Many who voiced this defence were young civil servants, 'babies of 1987' as they have been called, who had grown to believe in the Fijian divine right to rule, both as permanent secretaries and as superannuated civil servants-cum-government ministers.

Upon the election of the Chaudhry government, the civil service felt terribly threatened. Chaudhry saw that the civil service was bloated and not very effective; he saw that it was becoming a racialised enclave. Readings of the Africanisation of the civil service in parts of the world with large indentured Indian populations—Trinidad, Guyana, Surinam

would have convinced him that a civil service that does not reflect the racial composition of the nation is both ineffectual and politically and racially biased. But the civil service, the military and politics were places that could give Fijians—without ready access to jobs in the private sector, except for the hotel industry—positions of power and prestige. In these areas they excelled, especially as the best Indian minds had been leaving the country since 1970. The reduction of the compulsory civil-service retirement age from 60 to 55, which freed up positions for the growing number of Fijian graduates from the local university, also began to create a large class of Fijian ex-bureaucrats who looked for salaried jobs in areas still dependent on government patronage: Parliament, government-funded statutory bodies, and nationalised institutions such as the Fiji Sugar Corporation and the National Bank of Fiji.

If you agree with the ends, then the means may well justify them. With the sacrosanct template of the charter of the land to invoke, the ultimate defender of the charter, the Great Council of Chiefs, is, according to interim government minister and former leader of the Opposition Ratu Inoke Kubuabola, inviolate and effectively above the constitution of the land. Writing in 1964, Rusiate Nayacakalou, arguably Fiji's first indigenous intellectual, made the prescient observation that 'there are very strong demands by Fijians for leadership which will guide them back to a pre-eminent position, and continuously affirm their political demands at the national level.' Absent from his foresight was the need for a continuing and indeed post-charter-of-the-land critique of Fijian leadership. In its absence, Fijian leadership could not be a political fact based on the goodwill of the constituency; it required the symbolic (but now progressively real) support of Fijian feudal overlords.

**The Pax Britannica**

For all its ills the Pax Brittanica, from 1874 when the Deed of Cession ceded Fiji to Great Britain until Fijian independence in 1970, brought
peace and prosperity, what V. S. Naipaul in *A bend in the river* referred to as the 'miraculous peace of the colonial time.' The intrusion of white traders into the Pacific had begun early in the nineteenth century, initially as beachcombers, subsequently as small-time planters, fortune hunters and, of course, missionaries. The white men bought tracts of land from Fijian landowners, using muskets, food and European consumer commodities for barter. Since there was no overarching structure of land ownership in Fiji, chiefs simply sold land at whim without consulting their subjects or neighbouring chiefs. Many white traders and planters, especially those from Australia who had internalised the discourse of the Aboriginal 'native problem', simply believed that 'the native population [was] doomed to the melancholy fate of the aboriginal inhabitants of those doomed countries where the sons of Japheth have settled without having to encounter the heat of the tropics.' There were also land grants in return for other favours. Ratu Seru Epenesa Cakobau, the senior chief in Fiji and the first Vunivalu, gave William Berwick, an Afro-American, a grant of 3000 acres on Koro Island in return for being built a boat. Tui Kilakila granted the island of Kioa to William Owen in return for a trip on Owen's ketch. These acts of generosity on the part of native peoples throughout the world are not unusual and should not be read as a weakness. Chiefs gave these grants as personal gifts unrelated to consent from their subjects. The Deed of Cession probably forestalled massive land sales to European settlers and missionaries. Without the deed it is quite possible that Fijian alienation from arable land would have been complete.

Formal cession to Great Britain brought entry into an imperialist economy of classic capitalism, followed by the introduction of sugar as the base economy and the arrival of Indians. I don’t want to dwell too long on the history of indenture from 1879, but some points may

be readily reprised. Most Fiji Indians trace their ancestry to the indentured labourers, or *girmitiyas*, who arrived in Fiji between 1879 and 1917. While north/south divisions substantially persisted in matters of marriage, there was little sense of communal difference because they shared Fiji Hindi as their mother tongue. The Muslims among them, however, although speaking the same language, were divided by strict religious rules, and the creation of Pakistan effectively created a distinct homeland for them. Neither colonial nor Fijian administrations created political constituencies on the basis of religion, but demands for separate Muslim constituencies have persisted. In spite of these differences, however, the descendants of girmitiyas have an identifiable ethos that goes back to their brief lives as *jahaji-bhaís*, or ship-brothers. A further group of Indians came from 1914 onwards as free migrants. Christians came as helping hands of missionaries, Sikhs as part of the police force, even a few Gurkhas as part of the colonial military regiment, but most of these free migrants were Gujarati migrants from Surat, who quickly established themselves as small-time traders in the towns and, although never reaching the heights of European capitalists, became the face of Indian commercial success.

A relatively small trading community needs endogamous coherence to maintain its commercial advantage. Because they were already established in East Africa, Singapore, Hong Kong, even New Zealand, Gujaratis could bring husbands and wives from either the transnational diaspora or India if a spouse were not available in Fiji from within their caste. They were the only Fiji Indian community to maintain their separate language, and in matters of identity their relationship to Fiji was rather different to that of the other Fiji Indians. Nor was their commercial self-interest necessarily identical with that of the other Fiji Indians, which is why in Fiji the term ‘girmitiya’—a neologism formed from the word ‘agreement’—or even ‘Hindustani’ is never applied to them. A trading class is largely indifferent to political change, provided that the capitalist economy is not threatened.
These distinctions are matters of Fiji Indian ethnic demography. So far as the Fijians were concerned, the Indian working class (with whom the common Fijian had much in common) and the Indian business class (which gradually included Gujeratis as well as girmityias, and with whom the Indian lumpen proletariat had nothing in common) were equally Kai Idia vulagis, or 'foreigners from India'. I make these points to underline the tenacity of racial politics against the more sensible politics of class. Of course, there is more to it than that, because self-interest always produces demagogues who can manipulate race.

The Pax Britannica, a remarkable colonial interregnum, created just the right kind of peace for the Indian community to flourish. The colonial order established the rule of law and the sanctity of property, as well as the principle of the right to self-rule. In law, in politics, the Fiji Indians excelled. Fiji Indians fought wonderful political fights like a version of the Ramlila, and became immensely litigious. In A house for Mr Biswas, Naipaul looks at the mystique of law with reference to Biswas's failure to insuranburn ('insure and then burn') his shop. Trinidadian Indians, after all, shared the same ethos. A 'race' dragged into modernity from parts of India unaffected by the great nineteenth-century reform movements embraced colonial practices with a vengeance. Whereas the Fijians were still trying to work through quasi-feudal structures with the help of a benign colonial administration and had no electoral franchise until 1960, Indians began to vote for their leaders, although in a limited way, from the 1930s onwards.

With the constant movement of politically astute people from India, Fiji Indians easily invoked the language of Indian nationalism. This rhetoric conflated nationalist needs in India with those of the diaspora. It has been said by Fijian nationalists that Indians in Fiji refused

to contribute to the Second World War effort, regarding the British with the Japanese as bad imperialists. In 1941 perhaps there wasn’t a fully articulated ethos of defending a homeland other than India, but the absence of Indian involvement in the war meant a failure to produce local heroes; there was no chance of a mini-Gallipoli that could act as a collective myth of the foundational moment of the nation-state. In the absence of that shared myth of heroism, however, Indians gradually finessed the political apparatus, forming political parties and mastering its discourses. They genuinely believed, after Machiavelli, that politics was man’s highest calling, without recognising that in a racialised Fiji politics might well be, to rephrase Derrida’s thinking on war, ‘a further experience of the gift of death’ (I give my own life in sacrificing myself for a country that is also mine).”

For Indians, independence in 1970 (and the first post-independence elections in 1972) came after some forty years of political participation; for Fijians, only seven.

Law, litigation and politics create original positions from which one can talk about the common good and the fairness of society. Feudalism, consensus and parochialism, the defining characteristics of the Fijian world order, are less likely to do so. In the colonial narrative of the reduction of the Other to the One, to what Derrida had termed the ‘Monolingualism of the Other’, Indians were willing participants. So why did Indians fight for independence against the serenity of Pax Britannica? The Indian argument has always been based on the necessity of a just society and the Indian nationalist reading of the evils of imperialism. For the Fijians, who came to universal franchise only in 1963, Indian idealism was read as Indian duplicity and an extension of Indian acquisitive ethos, which the Fijian imaginary created, quite mistakenly, out of the successes of the business community. Although when independence came in 1970 the Fijians got everything they wanted, the nature of the political process, its language, had been the language of Indian bourgeois individualism. Unfortunately, that lan-
guage could only survive in the post-colonial nation-state as a discourse of opposition. The Fijians, as members of the ruling party, ruled; the Indians opposed. They learnt very little of parliamentary strategy. Cabinet, almost exclusively Fijian, made decisions under an imperious prime minister, and simply suffered through the ranting and ravings of the Indian parliamentary Opposition. No-one recognised the need for a government of national unity.

The peace of the Pax Britannica was shattered and fears of an Indian-dominated government set in as early as 1977 when, after the second general elections, the primarily Indian National Federation Party increased its seats. Then, the Governor General probably avoided a military coup by appointing Ratu Mara again as prime minister. Ten years later, the Pax Britannica would become a matter of even more prolonged nostalgia. That nostalgia had been taking Fiji Indians to white settler dominions since independence. The movement became a rush after the 1987 coup and may now become an avalanche.

One may wonder why Indian politicians, aware of interracial tensions elsewhere and the history of partition in India, did not work towards a pact or an understanding with the Taukei, the native Fijians. This may well have required some kind of territorial concession on the part of the Fijians, some kind of movement of Indians to Indian-dominated areas, and the granting of some degree of political autonomy to them. That these accommodations didn't ever occur to Indians in Fiji may be due to the lack of race riots during the colonial period; the dispersal of Indian communities throughout Fiji; the self-interest of the Indian bourgeoisie; and a genuine belief on the part of Indians in Fiji that democratic institutions and the rule of law would prevail. As the history of the post-Soviet world has shown, territorial rights are crucial. This is the legacy of the post-colonial world, a sad statement about definitions

of the nation-state. In emergent nations, the nation is now being pro-
gressively read as an absolutist ethnic state—precisely what reactionary
nation-state theoreticians had always maintained: each people has a
nation; multicultural nation-states are a contradiction in terms.

THE FIJIAN POST-COLONIAL
Rabuka and 1987 created 2000; without the first there would not have
been the second. All things being equal, the second time around tragedy
becomes farce, but all things are never equal, and between 1987 and
2000 much had changed. I have suggested that independence in Fiji
was fuelled primarily by Indian desire for change. There is little evi-
dence in the print media of pre-independence Fiji of sophisticated
Fijian discourses on the subject. The Fiji Times, under the editorship
of the highly partisan, anti-Indian L. G. Ussher, tried to correct this
through its editorials and coverage of Fijian political views but these
were neither as sophisticated nor as highly nuanced as the views
expressed in the Indian weeklies. Moreover, Fijian politicians until
1963 were ‘nominated members’, non-elected civil servants who lacked
the agonistic spirit that can only come from someone outside of the
civil service.

The postcolonial moment in Fiji therefore bypassed the Fijian.
Protected by patronage and the umbrella of the Great Council of Chiefs,
the Fijians had no cause for an anti-colonial struggle against the British.
In spite of the colonial peace, Indians were always at the vanguard of
struggle against colonial oppression. So imagine a postcolonial sce-
nario in which, to recall Chateaubriand on the French Revolution, the
plebians begin a revolution and the patricians finish it. The girmitiyas
began the struggle, the Fijian civil servants finished it, winning the
Treasury bench without even a hint of anti-colonial struggle. The final
irony is that the plebians, the girmitiyas, are gradually reconstructed
as symbolic colonisers and the patricians as defenders of the charter
of the land. The narrative is not as simple as that, but the logic is clear:
the Indian emerges as the colonial wishing to alienate the Fijians from
their land. Combined with Fijian internal dissension and the continued feudal concerns of the Great Council of Chiefs, the Indian as scapegoat is both inevitable and useful to demagogues.

Something else had happened globally: land rights. Fijians began to hear calls for indigenous supremacy as a way of preventing perceived indigenous decline. The old politics of colonial struggle based on utilitarian principles of the common good is placed in an arena where the rhetoric is of persecution of native peoples. In settler nation-states this took the form of an anti-colonial struggle (which is why First Nation peoples feel uncomfortable with the term 'postcolonial') against the dominant white community. In Fiji, the native Fijian, denied the nationalist legacy of anti-colonialism (Frantz Fanon was meaningless to them), used land rights as a means of starting a new foundational narrative of the nation-state on the basis of a new (but fictitious) anti-colonial struggle. In this narrative, the Indian is the object of derision and the coloniser, the Fijian the ultimately triumphant slave.

All the participants in the incarceration of the Chaudhry government were Fijians: the police, the military, the chiefs, the proletariat, the politicians, even the cook and the butler. And they were all complicit. The air was one of carnival and theatricality, of sly mimicry and parody; the coup was framed, self-consciously, as a local, indigenous uprising against colonial spectres. In this political theatre the exclusion of the Indian was complete. To change this political theatre of the absurd would require the mobilisation of the Indian as the real, landless underclass. Failing that, it required individual sacrifice—the gift of death to their people by Indian politicians. Which raises the following questions: when do we die for a political party? when do we die for a nation? when do we die for a cause? Diasporas, of course, refuse to die: during the period of incarceration, Indian politicians were the first to leave, signing affidavits relinquishing their parliamentary status. A Fijian woman politician, on the other hand, insisted that she return to be with the captives after a two-day ‘freedom’ on compas-
sionate grounds, and return she did. The Indian anti-colonial struggle could take place only within the Pax Britannica, not outside it.

**THE KAILOMA**

George Speight is a Kailoma (literally 'child of love'), a part-European, derisively referred to in colonial days as half-caste. Symbol of white man's guilt, of his phallic power, the Kailoma, like part-Europeans elsewhere, were treated with unusual care by the colonial masters. Their women, it was claimed, desired nothing better than being accepted into the fold of the white coloniser; their men worked tirelessly as second-order colonial functionaries. They could attend Suva Grammar School (though invariably placed in the B streams) and swim in the Suva Sea Baths. They have a long history in Fiji, longer than that of the girmityiyas. One of their more common surnames goes back to David Whippy who arrived in Levuka in 1824 and was given protection by the Tui Levuka, who came to be called Tamani-kaivavalagi ('Father of the white men'). Other names—Simpson, Williams, Walker, Lobendahn, Pickering, Speight—can be traced to beachcombers or planters. In colonial times they saw themselves as a race apart, and certainly not Fijian.

Their privileges were on the wane after 1970 when the postcolonial Fijian nation-state began to be perceived as a product of a partnership between the indigenous Fijian and the migrant Indian. Politically defined as 'general voters', they had neither the erstwhile imperialist clout of the European nor the entrepreneurial skills of the Chinese, races who were politically categorised as 'general'. Since they had always depended upon patronage, their decline was dramatic. They were among the first to migrate in relatively large numbers because as part-Europeans they were readily accepted into Australia and New Zealand. Those who remained attached themselves initially to foreign companies and disappeared from sight. To them the Fijian nation-state had become very much a Fijian-Indian affair.

Prior privileges are hard to forget, and the Kailoma who stayed behind gradually began to redefine themselves. The Kailoma estab-
lishment became obsessively Fijian nationalist and virulently anti-Indian. On formal occasions they discarded trousers and opted for the sulu, as Speight himself did during the coup. In 1987 their support of Rabuka was strong, although not visible. During the Rabuka years they re-entered the Voka Ni Kawa Bula, the register of Fijian genealogy, and flourished once again. Like the Great Council of Chiefs this register was a colonial invention, recording the names of all Fijians at birth and classifying them in terms of their clan. Illegitimacy was never an issue: recognition by the clan was all that mattered. Speight redefined himself as an indigenous Fijian of the Tailevu province, dressed in a sulu, and styled himself as the saviour of his people. He linked himself to the Kubuna-Bau confederacy, the most powerful in colonial times but on the decline since independence. With an eye to significant profits for himself, he promised Fijian landholders the proceeds of the mahogany plantations that had reached maturity. The money involved would have been hundreds of thousands of dollars, enough for a small country and with careful management, harvesting and replanting probably available in perpetuity. The beneficiaries of any such deal would have been the Kubuna confederacy on whose lands much of the mahogany stood. Speight became the spokesperson for this major prize, having been involved in negotiations with the Fiji government on behalf of Trans Resources Management (TRM) before he was sacked by the Chaudhry government from his position as chairman of the Fiji Pine Commission and the Hardwood Corporation.

The heroism almost worked and the rehabilitation of the Kailoma would have been complete had it not been for Speight (and his chief strategist, the ex-SAS soldier Major Ilisoni Ligairi) pre-empting a swift military coup and the establishment of a government not unlike the present interim one. The Fijian talanoas (discussions around the kava bowl) had been full of talk about a coup once seasoned soldiers overseas on UN peace-keeping work returned home in late June. For while mahogany was attractive to Fijian landowners, political power was
crucial for a Fijian establishment that had grown fat on civil-service pay checks. The chiefs wielded considerable moral power but had no money or legal power. The civil servants had no moral power but had access to money and the nation’s reserves. For taking the wind out of their sails, the Fijian establishment and the military hated Speight and his motley crowd: for what they saw as the outcome, they loved him. Which is why the performance, the theatre, the façade of concern for the overthrow of the Chaudhry government continued for so long. As I write, the theatricality continues with the trial of Speight and his followers. If Speight is found guilty it is not because he committed treason (which is how it will be seen by Australia and New Zealand, Fiji’s strongest critics) but because he made such a mess of the treasonable act.

Ratu Mara understood one thing very well: he recognised the dangers of the Great Council of Chiefs wielding anything but symbolic authority. Once a year it passed motions about Fijian advancement, expressed the usual unease about the rising numbers of Indians, but these results were never debated in parliament. For the Indian parliamentary Opposition, the Great Council of Chiefs was feudal, a colonial relic irrelevant to the modern nation-state. Since 1987, and with the end of Mara’s power, the Great Council of Chiefs has become both moral voice and legislator, counsel as well as parliament. This ascendancy (or fusion of powers) will make democracy in Fiji impossible, something the Indian diaspora never really understood.

THE INDIAN DIASPORA

We were a landless people, we came from parts of India untouched by reform or social change. It was our fate to be thrust into modernity long before our kinsmen back in India, who to this day are living out the life of workers under appalling zamindari conditions, or as fringe workers in the major cities. Indenture introduced us to industrialisation—steam ships, sugar mills, trains—and transformed us from caste-ridden, illiterate rejects to an enlightened, progressive and relatively
homogenous ‘race’. Labourers we remained, and working class in our attitudes as well, but we were all soon brushed with the capitalist economy. We became a working class that aspired to the condition of the bourgeoisie. And like the bourgeoisie elsewhere we commodified everything: land, education, knowledge. Land was not the mystical source of some lost romance, it was a necessity for good living; as was education. And herein lies a question that may also be posed as a dilemma: can diasporic peoples be anything else but travellers, happy in their travel/travail; the nation-state simply an anchoring point for material advancement and the homeland always something other than the land of our birth? If transience is our condition, if diasporas can reconstitute themselves wherever they are, can diasporas die?

To grasp hold of a nation one has to lay claim to it, establish moments of heroism that are equally part of the nation’s history. The coloniser did this through brute force, through territorialisation, through phallic power along with the musket: Australia, Canada, New Zealand, South Africa and the USA are testimonials to that. The diaspora, more passive, created economies, perhaps even saved native peoples, races from extinction, but never affected the imaginary of the peoples with whom they lived. In the absence of a narrative of heroism there was no respect.

Globalisation and transnationality have now produced the twice-displaced diaspora of indenture. In the end, I suspect, the Indian diaspora in Fiji will become even more of a minority as Fiji is read as a place of betrayal. Our numbers in the settler dominions will increase: Canada has 50,000 Fiji Indians, Australia some 20,000, New Zealand another 20,000. There are about 360,000 in Fiji. Between 1987 and 1999, Fiji’s Indian population dropped from 49 per cent of the total to 43 per cent, and could drop to about 35 per cent by the end of this decade.

CONCLUSION

My interest here has been in the archaeology of a revolt, in trying to
theorise the Fiji crisis, not in recounting a chronology of events or even offering possibilities for the return of democracy in Fiji. Every historical moment carries within a kernel of the history of a nation. That history, largely diachronically presented in school texts, suddenly becomes contaminated by the synchronic moment of a crisis. We rush to our history books and begin to see another pattern, another way of ordering, of interpreting, facts. A postmodern historiography needs to address minor and alternative narratives, subaltern voices; it needs to examine the power of the electronic image that transforms, with additional political commentary, each synchronic fragment into codified history. Historical nodal points shift as we are asked to address contingent moments and contrary points of view that force us to rethink the discourses of received, empirical histories.

How can one construct a narrative that is beyond falsification when the parties engage in readings of history that are incommensurable? Is this again a case of what Lyotard referred to as the differend: a case of discourses so mutually exclusive, because they begin from such radically different first positions, that there can be no consensus? Indians aware of the partition of the subcontinent on the grounds of religious incommensurability know this only too well.

The difficulty with reducing the Fiji crisis to a single narrative relates directly to the incommensurable definitions of the nation-state given by the two dominant races in Fiji. The sense of theatricality and even the lack of seriousness of purpose that one saw in the electronic images of carnival around the Fiji parliamentary complex certainly pointed to this divergent reading. At one level the elements of feast, of magiti, of ironic undercutting and mimicry of cherished (colonial) institutions hold up exceptionally well to dominant postcolonial theorisations about counter-hegemonic and counter-cultural discourses and acts. In this sly mimicry (where brown men replace white men as objects of derision) even an outdoor Sunday church service is framed in the bizarre narrative of exodus and return (of the Indian): Paula sa lako
Caesaria, Paula sa kaya ... When the performer’s voice went hoarse and there were no more cattle to slaughter, spectators disappeared.

In the absence of a theory of a nation-state or even an articulated sense of the Fijian’s belated moment of ‘anti-colonialism’, no distinctly recognisable (in Western pragmatic terms) ideology emerged from the crisis: whatever ideology there was simply reprised the discourse of a (colonial) charter and the privileges that accrue to it. Speight spiked his language with the arsenic of racial hatred because he had some vague ideas about ethnically absolute nation-states. Perhaps he simply voiced an unease about the success of a diaspora—how did they manage to prosper since 1997 in spite of every possible impediment?—and because he was a Kailoma, the reactionary side of the postcolonial hybrid, he introduced a disjunctive discourse into Fijian social decorum where certain things always remain unsaid. But Speight was never the Fijian equivalent of ‘world historical consciousness’; he was simply a sign upon whom converged irreconcilable readings of the nation-state and irreconcilable expectations of it.

It may be said that a race needs its anti-colonial struggle, in whatever form, to redeem itself. The Fijian nation-state has struggled twice and made a mess of it on both occasions. Since the Indian diaspora has never been the centre of the Fijian imaginary the ultimate lesson of this most recent farce is that Fijians themselves must critically deconstruct Peter France’s conclusion about the colonially constructed charter of the land: ‘the strength of tradition depends less on its historical accuracy than on its social significance.’ This knowledge can only come to mature nation-states; alas Fiji, the only country that Fiji Indians call home, is no longer counted among them.


I am indebted to reports and commentaries in the following newspapers and websites: the *Age*, the *Australian*, the *Fiji Times*, the *Sydney Morning Herald*, the *West Australian*; http://www.fijidemocracy.asn.au http://www.sbs.com.au/insight http://fijilive.net.