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Nicole/Disturbing History

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In Fiji, as elsewhere in the world, numerous signs and inscriptions, including the major landmarks, statues, building and street names, public holidays, and school textbooks, denote the triumph of authority. By comparison, little is known of those historical figures who dared to be different and defiant—Fiji’s rebels and dissidents. These individuals and their deeds have been edited out of history, out of Fiji’s landscape, and out of its people’s memories and historical consciousness. This book uncovers the nature of resistance in Fiji between 1874 and 1914 and discusses who rebelled, what they were disaffected about, why they resisted, how they went about challenging their opponents, and what happened to them as a consequence.

When I came out of high school, my view of Fiji history was largely derived from Kerr and Donnelly’s Fiji in the Pacific: A History and Geography of Fiji, the core textbook from which generations of Fiji citizens acquire their formal knowledge of Fiji history. My image of Fiji’s past was of a country that excelled under British tutelage, where indifferent villagers obeyed the wise rule and exemplary leadership of their chiefs, and where Indian labourers toiled endlessly in the sugar plantations to build the colony’s economic prosperity.

Imbued as they were with elements of Marxism, my tertiary studies at the University of the South Pacific induced a profound transformation in the way I understood colonialism. Belief in British benevolence gave way to a conviction about the pervasiveness of unequal power relations in all contexts, including Fiji’s colonial past. I began to suspect that, contrary to public discourse, a massive undercurrent of resistance to colonialism existed but that the capitalist class, with the complicity of mainstream historians, had conspired to hide it from posterity. With Durutalo and other Marxists of the time, I wanted to
see Fiji as “a country whose people have a heroic history of struggle”, and I looked with envy at third world icons of resistance such as Mahatma Gandhi, Frantz Fanon, Che Guevara, and Nelson Mandela.

Although Marxism continues to inform my understanding of the past and the present, post-Marxist and postcolonial thinking has since moved the debates beyond the antithetical binaries and determinism of classical Marxism. Today, historians can draw on the histories of the everyday lives of ordinary people from the work of Edward Thompson, Eric Hobsbawm, Eric Wolf, Howard Zinn, and James Scott, the theories of power drawn from Michel Foucault, the historiographical work of Ranajit Guha and the Subaltern Studies School, the influence of Homi Bhabha and other postcolonial scholars, the important contributions of feminist historiography, and the emergence of similar offshoots in Pacific History and the wider field of Pacific Studies. This book is informed by these post-Marxist and postcolonial frameworks and by a rereading of Fiji’s colonial archive.

As I read through the masses of official and unofficial correspondence and published and unpublished archival materials, the question of the rela-
tionship between the archive and power presented itself with growing urgency. I came to the same conclusions as the Haitian archivist Michel-Rolf Trouillot, that the archive is not a neutral storehouse of information. Rather, it is a politically active repository of historical experiences and facts that are not created equal. In Fiji, as elsewhere, what is deemed important in history is a function of who decides what is worth recording and remembering. It is a function of power in the Foucauldian sense.

The process of historical production in Fiji has made certain people and events visible and important, and others invisible and forgettable. Yet, contrary to my initial expectation, this is not because of a conspiracy by past historians to ignore instances of resistance or to hide ordinary people’s experience of colonialism. It has more to do with Fiji historians being preoccupied with other questions and methods.

To position this book among other histories of Fiji is helpful in acknowledging the efforts and accomplishments of previous historians and in understanding how Fiji history has been written and read in the past, and how this has evolved into the present. This book emerges in a historiographical context that features three broad phases. Following the lead of J.W. Davidson, first professor of Pacific History at the Australian National University, Fiji historians began to represent Fijians and other colonised communities of Fiji as active participants in the making of their own histories. This phase began in the 1960s and replaced previous narratives based around British imperial benevolence and popular images of forlorn natives. Instead, it proposed an understanding of indigenous and migrant populations as clearly intentioned actors with choices in their hands. Together, these histories demonstrated conclusively that the cultures of Fiji were actively responsive to the impact of colonialism and capitalism. They described a complex society whose dynamism and vitality consistently thwarted European attempts to bring Fiji under complete control. Fijians and Indians were shown to have their own motivations and to be active agents in forging their own destiny. The priorities of these early historians lay in questions of policy, frameworks of colonial administration, wars, the Christian missions, the political and economic formation of the Fiji nation, and the biographies of “great” individuals. In this context, resistance received scant treatment.

These early studies are valuable as building blocks without which research such as mine would be impossible. Yet, as valuable as they are, they suffer in varying degrees from several limitations. Most of them have a heavy coastal, eastern Fiji, and Viti Levu bias. This reflects the location of the seat of power in Fiji, capitalist economic development, the interests of Europeans, and consequently the weight of the archive.
They also tend to be preoccupied with the ruling families. As such these “island-centred” histories are also histories “from above” rather than “from below”. Because most of these historians were periodical visitors to Fiji and spoke neither Fijian nor Hindustani, few of them ventured into the large oral archive that lies deceptively dormant in popular consciousness.

These histories also show a marked preoccupation with warfare and other large conflagrations. This emphasis on cataclysms gives the impression that Fijians were constantly at war and that European intervention restored peace, law, and order. This book will show that all sorts of states are possible between extremes of war and peace.

There has also been a tendency to see Fiji as a plurality of racial groups and to understand Fijians, Indians, and Europeans as homogenous ethnic groups. Several scholars have succumbed to this orthodoxy and reinforce it by inscribing ethnic difference as the primary factor in Fiji’s colonial history. These histories also suffer from a strong male gender bias. Women are often left out or included only as minor characters on a stage where the protagonists are all men.

Among the first to challenge mainstream historians in the 1970s and 1980s were Marxists offering class-based approaches. The main argument proposed in this second phase was that ethnicity-based models of historiography were masking class interest and privilege. Marxist historians also replaced empirical precision with theoretical rigour. Fiji history was explained in the wider context of global capitalist and colonial expansion, where capitalism and colonialism commanded monolithic power and acted as the twin drivers of history.

Yet, although one senses the Marxist historian’s sympathy and solidarity with the “masses”, the voices of ordinary people were seldom heard. It is as if they were buried under the insurmountable weight of capitalist exploitation. By emphasising the colonial machinery and its exploitative character, Fiji’s Marxist histories left too little room for the release of suppressed characters and voices, or for uncovering the complexities and ambiguities of people’s responses to domination. Marxist historians thus opened themselves to the charge that rather than producing “alternate histories”, they engaged in an exercise of rhetorical reaffirmation. This does not mean that Marxist approaches are useless as analytical tools. They form more of the historiographical building blocks that make Fiji’s current histories possible. They allow historians to ask different questions and to continue the endless process of historiographical revisioning and refining.

Studies have since shown that colonial control was always imperfect. This third historiographical phase features postcolonial cultural historians...
who have enlarged the scope for reading and writing colonial Fiji. Grounded in the development of poststructuralist and postcolonial theory, and building on the anthropological approaches pioneered by Marshall Sahlins and Greg Dening, these scholars are more attuned to the fragmented and contradictory nature of colonialism and have helped to unsettle and challenge linear histories of colonialism’s authority and power.

In *Colonialism’s Culture* for instance, Nicholas Thomas draws attention to the messy nature of Fiji’s colonial encounter. His findings emphasise the practical and discursive fragilities, fractures, and contradictions of the colonial enterprise. Martha Kaplan and John Kelly show that the projects of the colonisers could never completely organise all areas of the practice of the colonised, nor could the colonised ever again make their history in terms unaffected by colonialism. They explore the strategies employed by colonised Fijians and Indo-Fijians to challenge colonial authority and to remake themselves in a context where they were denied any political space.

Among those who resist easy classification is Brij Lal, Fiji’s most productive and accomplished historian. In this regard, the collection of his most important articles in *Chalo Jahaji* constitutes Fiji’s only broad-ranging “people’s history”. His interest in matters of resistance and his concern with women as agents of history make his work an ideal springboard from which to launch new propositions.

Such anti-elitist approaches to history writing are not new. Among other lineages, they originate with E. P. Thompson and the later development of the Subaltern Studies collective in India, which placed subaltern groups at the centre of historical enquiry. Yet they are still rare in the Pacific. Robert Borofsky remarked in 2000 that subaltern studies had only slowly moved into the Pacific region’s scholarly writings. Among the historians who have developed some sensitivity for subaltern history, Peter Hempenstall, Bronwen Douglas, and Klaus Neumann are the most prominent. In his influential essay “The Ocean in Us”, the Tongan philosopher Epeli Hau‘ofa calls for more “people-centred” histories. He speaks of the duty of Pacific scholars to write about “ordinary people, the forgotten people of history...their resistance and struggles”. At a time when dominant local and international powers are so effective at imposing their truths and wills, cultures of resistance must be strengthened for the sake of present and future generations. He adds that “in order to bring into the center stage grassroots resistance and other unnoticed but important events for our peoples, we must refocus our historical reconstructions on them and their doings.” I share this opinion.

Hence, reading “against the grain” and writing “people’s histories” are not new propositions. They simply have not yet been applied consistently in
interpreting the Fiji archive. In this book, reading against the grain recognises that a multiplicity of contending voices, stories, and truths inform the archive; that these contending voices do not carry equal power or resonance; and that the archive consists of a hierarchy of truths, the most powerful of which acquire legitimacy and are easily discernible, while others are less detectable and often obscured.

Using these approaches involves unsettling the authority of received notions of the past and combing the archive with a view to restoring visibility to those characters and stories that have been previously bypassed or relegated to the margins of history. A historian who reads against the grain will seek those moments where ordinary men and women interfered with the otherwise monotonous yet fractured narratives of colonial pacification and ordering. This is not the role of a saviour or a preacher, but rather that of an intellectual self-consciously involved in the production and distribution of knowledge about the past and whose purpose is to confront and disturb existing hierarchies of historical truths.

Such a position presents a number of challenges. How does one decipher the voice and practice of ordinary people in an archive weighed down by the unrelenting inscriptions of colonial officialdom? How does one read Fijian and Indian thoughts in European documents? How can one evoke the daily experiences of village and plantation women when most accounts are written from the vantage point of powerful men? How can a historian today claim to know the motivations and aspirations of individuals who lived in a world so far removed from his or hers? What kind of power relationship is the historian establishing with these colonised individuals as he or she writes from the comforts and privileges of twenty-first-century postcolonial academia?

I do not claim success or finality in the methodological position adopted in this book. These questions are part of ongoing debates about the nature of history and the universal question about how the past is or should be represented. The past is not a static, transparent object whose complexity can be unfolded with a ready-made formula. Many parts of society and its past remain opaque and inscrutable to the gaze of historians. This is particularly so of the experiences of individuals discussed in this book. The challenge is to draw credible inferences from the available evidence.

My own subjective position and personal history with Fiji is fraught with shortcomings. I do not know the Fijian and Hindustani languages well enough to understand the nuances that occupy the small but important sample of archival documents produced in Fiji’s vernacular languages. This is a serious handicap because Fijians and Indians, when they wrote, did so mostly in their mother tongue. Only a small portion of these texts
were translated into English. Nevertheless, these cultures are not hermetically sealed and this book reflects my own specific engagements with Fiji in the past thirty years.

How, then, do the voices and actions of ordinary people infiltrate the powerful writing machine of colonial officialdom? Typically the experiences of ordinary people were mediated by colonial officials, missionaries, chiefs, plantation managers, and the newspapers. In that sense, subaltern people rarely spoke and were mostly spoken for. And yet the colonial state’s formidable network of information and intelligence also produced signposts that suggest other stories. When a historian follows these leads consistently and rigorously, he or she has begun to read against the grain. The fragments of these stories can then be used to reconstruct, at least partially, the world of ordinary men and women in a way that simultaneously draws them away from the periphery and reconfigures them at the centre of history.

For instance, the *Proceedings of a Native Council* constitute a record of all the sittings of the Bose Vakaturaga (Council of Chiefs). The Bose Vakaturaga was the principal channel through which powerful Fijians and Europeans articulated their authority over the people. Yet when the *Proceedings* are read against the grain, numerous examples of organised and petty forms of resistance become instantly visible and useful in reconstituting the lives and experiences of the ordinary folk.

The archive also contains a small number of documents originating from subordinate people themselves. These include letters, petitions, and oral testimony. When this evidence is juxtaposed with the subtext of dominant narratives, the blurry image acquires a little more clarity. Hence, sources as diverse as a governor’s despatches and a *girmit* labourer’s court transcripts can be used together to reconstruct the world of ordinary people.

Encounters with present-day communities whose ancestors shaped local history more than a century ago had a profound effect on my understanding of history. *Talanoa* (storytelling) sessions revealed a keenness to share versions of their own history and to acquire new knowledge from my own archival search. In this dialogue, there were the inevitable embellishments and exaggerations. More striking, however, was a sense of urgency in ensuring that their stories, places, and people acquire greater visibility in Fiji’s history books. Official documents often vilified and criminalised acts of resistance and the communities that were responsible for them. These *talanoa* accounts acted as counterhistories that effectively peeled off decades of social stigma and demonstrated the resilience of local knowledge in the face of colonial suppression and adverse historical representation.

Aside from multiplying the sites of historical investigation and amplify-
ing the voices of marginalised communities, these encounters were valuable for other reasons. While essential details of all the events were similar, notable discrepancies existed between oral accounts and written archival records and between the interpretations and memories both of competing and of proximate villages and communities. These differing versions of history confirmed the danger of insisting on singular histories of Fiji. They also underlined the existence among ordinary people of divergent experiences of colonialism. This adds value to the practice of seeing contending versions of the past as complementary rather than contrary in the exercise of writing history. It also raises serious questions about the assumption often made by Marxists and in popular culture about the existence of a homogenous subaltern class.

Firsthand observation and interaction with the topography of the land was also useful in understanding nuances that could not have been discerned from the comforts of an academic office. Being on location highlighted the dangers and limitations of “armchair history”, of confining research to archival reading rooms and university libraries. Yet for all the value of being on location, this book is not about oral representations of Fiji’s past. Oral history and onsite visits were used as complements to archival research.

The book is about resistance and examines how subaltern people disrupted and challenged colonialism’s power. Definitions of resistance have changed over time, reflecting changes in our understanding of it. In the 1970s and 1980s, historians were preoccupied with organised and spectacular forms of resistance such as mass protest and rebellion. Radical history consisted in championing and glorifying occurrences when colonised people rose against all odds to challenge their masters. This understanding of resistance as a neat, unproblematic, and unambiguous opposition to a colonial, capitalist, and patriarchal monolith has since been discredited.

Scepticism came from several directions. Some critics pointed out that the meaning of acts of resistance is not fixed. As Ortner argues, “the intentionalities of actors evolve through praxis and the meaning of acts change over time, both for the actor and the analyst”. To compound difficulties, much of resistance is inscrutable to historians because it depends on anonymity and secrecy for its effectiveness. Thus, as Scott argues, everyday observable resistance only forms the tip of an iceberg. Ann Stoler has shown that homogenising versions of domination and resistance accord poorly with the fact that both their quality and intensity varied considerably in different cultural, geographical, and historical contexts. These are conclusions that Pacific historians had also arrived at by the mid-1980s.

Another limitation of the binary model is that resistance is often assumed to be progressive and the resister always right. In the Pacific, the assumption
that a militant stance is generally the most worthy or the most historically consequential has been warned against by Thomas. Celebrations of resistance, he cautions, can obscure why particular regimes were actively supported and complied with by disaffected people.\textsuperscript{35} It also tends to sanitise the internal politics of the dominated. Douglas has shown that resistance histories have tended to prioritise and emphasise conflicts between Islanders and Europeans while disregarding the internal complexities of many of these conflicts.\textsuperscript{36} As will become apparent throughout this book, ordinary people fought oppressive authority irrespective of its ethnicity. Yet they also formed complex alliances with those in power. This and other self-generated impediments made intra-subaltern solidarity difficult to coordinate and points to an inherent fluidity in the complex world of subaltern people.\textsuperscript{37}

In the same vein, Hempenstall questions the wisdom of placing collaborators and resisters in separate categories. In the Pacific, they were often the same men.\textsuperscript{38} Munro points out that resistance and accommodation cannot be regarded as polar opposites. When studying the activities of plantation workers, the distinction between resistance and accommodation becomes blurred. Most workers chose a course of action based on careful calculations aimed at maximising benefits and minimising disadvantage. In some situations, compliance and collaboration were more advantageous and choosing the side of dominant power was more rewarding. The outcome was a hybrid that fit neither the category of accommodation nor resistance.\textsuperscript{39} There were, as Borofsky observes, “degrees of resistance, degrees of accommodation, with a host of subtle complications in between”.\textsuperscript{40} One of these complications is that subordinate groups do not constitute a single unitary group and cannot therefore be expected to have single unitary motivations and responses.

Much of the stimulus for rethinking the nature of resistance has come from late-twentieth-century theories about power, agency, and the subject. Michel Foucault’s work on power and Bhabha’s notions of subjectivity and agency are among the most prominent.\textsuperscript{41} This transformation has seen the singular category of resistance dissolve into multiple points of resistance, or resistances. For instance, when Foucault redefined power to draw attention to the multiple ways in which it is deployed in minute and intimate everyday relations, he also wrote, “[W]here there is power, there is resistance”.\textsuperscript{42} It follows that if power is variable and fragmented, so is resistance. Scott’s study of everyday forms of resistance and Genovese’s study of the world that African American slaves made for themselves fall into this category.\textsuperscript{43} Yet if Foucault acknowledged the pervasive presence of resistance, he also doubted the existence of a subject with will and intentionality. In this, he was joined by Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, and Dipesh Chakrabarty, among others.\textsuperscript{44}
This pessimism about the ability of the subaltern to speak has come under attack from several quarters. Ortner, for instance, argues that by refusing to attend to her as a person, subject, agent, or any other form of intentionalised being with her own hopes, fears, and desires, a strict poststructuralist position leads to the “de(con)struction of the subject”. The disappearance of the individual actor as a subject of history allowed “resistance” to be replaced by such phrases as the “failure of the pacification process”, and it shifted the debates back to how forms of domination are sustained and reproduced, rather than how they are contested. This problem has been highlighted by Gyan Prakash, who observes that “while there are scrupulous accounts of Western domination, we have yet to fully recognize another history of agency and knowledge alive in the dead weight of the colonial past”.

Several scholars have sought to salvage the subject in the wake of its erosion under poststructuralism and to reassert resistance as a vital area of investigation. As recently as 2000, Edward Said wrote in a collection of essays dedicated to Pacific History:

I think resistance is terribly important because in no place did people just give up and say: OK, you can have the land, we are leaving. They always stood and fought. And with that resistance came a culture of resistance, a history of opposition.

Other scholars have argued that the “subject” and the notion of agency must be granted a sense of autonomy that goes beyond “conformity to dominant cultural norms and rules”.

It is largely in these terms that I understand the subjects whose experiences form the basis of this book. There is a certain autonomous power in subalternity, among which is the power to resist. Hence where Foucault posited the pervasiveness of power in the most minute of relationships, thoughts, and practices, I want to explore how subordinate groups consciously or unconsciously, selectively or haphazardly, critically or uncritically, variously avoided or rejected such invasions and refused to function as passive receptacles for the effects of power.

I see resistance and power as phenomena that are constantly conditioned and shaped by one another in all aspects of human interaction. They form an inseparable relationship in which neither is ever complete. Power is constituted and reconstituted partly as a result of the tests it endures and erosions it suffers from the contestatory actions of the subordinate. It also exerts itself differently across all kinds of contexts and induces various collaborative and resistant behaviours in response. In the same way that power is never totally unified and coordinated, much resistance is piecemeal, fragmented, tentative,
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ambiguous, and filled with imperfections. Just as domination is not an over-
arching superstructure, resistance is not an overarching understructure.

Periods of dissent have continuities that extend well beyond the artificial
cutoff dates of 1874 (when Fiji was formally ceded to Great Britain) and 1914
(the beginning of World War I). These dates are used only to maintain the dis-
cussion within practicable limits. As practicable as these limits are, the colonial
terrain was far too complex to attempt to reproduce it as it actually was. I make
no attempt to reconstruct a holistic image of the colonial encounter. While
I acknowledge many “intermediate attitudes” between accommodation and
resistance, this book is a survey of the latter. This is because if resistance and
collaboration are two sides of the same coin, one side has remained faceless.
This study is an attempt to rectify this, and it sets out to sketch the complex
face of resistance. As a survey, it sets out to reveal the interconnectedness in a
range of Fiji’s insurgent histories.

Magnifying resistance without reference to the other constituent parts
of the colonial encounter is hazardous. It could result in the production of
a skewed image of the colonial past and reduce a highly complex character,
such as the colonised being, to a mere one-dimensional combatant perpetually
opposed to authority. To avoid creating this impression, the reader’s attention
is hereby drawn to the existence of numerous other aspects of the colonial
encounter that, when assembled together, will depict a more complete image
of the colonial encounter.

Without getting into a lengthy theoretical debate about hermeneutics,
I believe in the possibility, even desirability, of writing about history rather
than confining scholarship to the study of representations of history. While
conceding that all historical utterances, once transmitted, fall into the realm of
representation, this book does not set out to explain changes in the representa-
tion of resistance in Fiji. Underlying this position is a certain confidence in a
past that can be retraced. Yet I make no claims to finality or to a higher truth.

Before starting, several omissions must be signalled. The survey does not
include aspects of cultural and discursive resistance (or contestatory knowl-
dge formations). These are inscribed like graffiti in the heart of colonial-
ism’s mechanics of truth production and challenge dominant ways of seeing
and knowing. Because they are difficult to quantify and verify, they require a
frame of analysis that is markedly different from that which is adopted here.
Hence, the struggle between subjugated and dominant knowledges is alluded
to rather than explicitly discussed.

Culturally conditioned modes of resistance such as those brought by
indentured labourers from Polynesia, Melanesia, and India are also deferred
to a future comparative study. This deferral also applies to such interpreta-
tions of past resistance that are premised on indigenous ways of knowing and remembering. The survey also deliberately omits a study of Rotuma. Although the island was annexed under the ambit of the larger Fijian colony in 1881, Rotuma presents its own distinct historical, cultural, and geographical circumstances, and therefore belongs to a separate study.

Dominant groups and individuals who activated resistance to protect their already privileged position have also been left out of the discussion. This includes most Europeans whom, although heterogeneous as a group, mostly occupied a position of comparative advantage vis-à-vis ordinary Fijian, Indian, and Melanesian people. Discussions will thus be confined mainly to those who occupied the lowest rungs of the colony’s order of things.

In its structure, the discussion combines a chronological with a thematic approach and is divided into two broad sections. The first consists of the first four chapters and explores the organised, confrontational, and often dramatic aspects of resistance. The second, consisting of the last three chapters, examines what happened between the larger conflagrations. This will cover the less spectacular and more mundane everyday resistance.

Chapter one examines the Colo War of 1876. Generous space is allocated to chronicle the context within which the war took place. This is intended to familiarise readers with some of the key political, economic, geographical, and religious circumstances of precolonial mid-nineteenth-century Fiji. Chapter two discusses the Tuka Movement that emerged on the northern coast of Viti Levu between 1878 and 1891. It accounts for the transition from warfare to religious protest as one of the main channels through which Fijians challenged authority. Chapter three is concerned with two popular movements of the early twentieth century. The little-known Movement for Federation with New Zealand (1901 to 1903) was the first countrywide movement to demand the end of British rule. It is an important precursor to the second movement, the Viti Kabani, which emerged in 1913 and which at times functioned as a second government in Fiji. In the fourth chapter, a brief account of the migration of indentured labourers from India between 1879 and 1916 is followed by a survey of strikes and protest marches organised by the colony’s indentured labourers.

History, argues James Scott, teaches that subordinate classes are rarely afforded the luxury of open, organised political activity. He defines such everyday forms of resistance as:

The prosaic but constant struggles between the peasantry and those who seek to extract labour, food, taxes, rents and interest from them....Everyday resistance consists of the ordinary weapons of the relatively powerless
groups: footdragging, dissimulation, false compliance, pilfering, feigned ignorance, slander, arson, sabotage, and so forth. These Brechtian forms of class struggle have certain features in common. They require little or no co-ordination or planning; they often represent a form of individual self-help; and they typically avoid any direct symbolic confrontation with authority or with elite norms. To understand these commonplace forms of resistance is to understand what much of the peasantry does ‘between revolts’ to defend its interests as best it can.53

Chapters five to seven explore the daily struggles of ordinary people that invade periods of normality between larger conflagrations. The three main categories that emerged from the data are everyday resistance in the villages, everyday resistance on the plantations, and women’s resistance. Because of their distinctiveness, they are examined separately.

In framing this survey, I reiterate my opposition to predetermined models of resistance. I simply want to highlight a number of alternate dates, events, and characters that seldom if ever get a mention in our conversations about the past. I begin this exercise with the complex world of mid-nineteenth-century Colo.