



Chapter Title: Coombs 4240: A Room of My Own

Book Title: Intersections

Book Subtitle: History, Memory, Discipline

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Published by: ANU Press

Stable URL: <https://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctt24hbmh.12>

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Coombs 4240: A Room of My Own

*As between clear blue and cloud
Between haystack and sunset sky
Between oak tree and slate roof
I had my existence. I was there.
Me in place and the place in me.*

Seamus Heaney, 'Human Chain.'

Coombs 4240 has been my 'place' for more than two decades. I am talking about Room 4240 in the Coombs Building at The Australian National University.¹ It is my second home. It is where I spend most of my waking hours. It is where all my writing is done. I feel possessive about it. It has long been a silent witness to a large part of my life and work, my thoughts, ambitions, indignations and illusions, my strengths and my frailties. It has seen me laugh and cry, hit the table in frustration when the words have not come, or punch the air with joy when they have. I pace its floor as I compose a paragraph in my head or read it aloud for clarity and flow. It has frequently heard me talk absentmindedly to no one in particular about something that is on my mind, recalling a conversation and rehearsing a reply. Coombs 4240 is more than just a physical space for me. It is my past and present, and my sanctuary from the alienations and asperities of the outside world.

We all shape spaces around us to suit our needs and reflect our temperament. There can be no mistaking that Coombs 4240 is a historian's office. There are books everywhere: on the wall-to-wall bookshelves, on the stand-alone shelves and on the floor for the overflow, monuments of the spirit and thoughts of times past. My writing desk is controlled chaos, papers and jottings in every which direction, piled one on top of the other, books and journals with pages marked

for quotation. Controlled is the operative word, for despite all the apparent chaos, I can put my finger on anything I want with an ease that sometimes bemuses visitors unused to seeing such professorial clutter. ‘Entombed in Catacombs,’ as one of them wrote in an email. On the window wall, there are full page newspaper reviews of my work and stories of my various adventures over the years, photographs of our children: Niraj in primary school smiling innocently with one front tooth missing, Yogi receiving her diploma from some gowned university hierarch. There are framed diplomas and certificates haphazardly parked on the shelves that attest to this achievement or that. They are not for show or to impress visitors, but as daily reminders of my various journeys over the years, connections to different times and places now slowly receding from memory. There are two easy chairs for visitors and colleagues and students. There is an annex to Coombs 4240 which has my lifetime’s research notes and papers piled high up on the floor. There is a table there for the occasional visitor, and I use it for light reading.

Above all, Coombs 4240 is my working library, home to books collected over a lifetime about several places from which I have been removed by history: an ancestral village in India, a home in Fiji, books about many passing worlds: a culture of scholarship, an empire, an aborted postcolonial Fiji. These books are my permanent, irreplaceable companions, always uncomplainingly there when I need them, markers of special moments in my peripatetic life. On the shelf next to me are the very first books I ever read in primary school all those years ago in Tabia: Pandit Amichand’s Hindi *Pothis*, the *Caribbean Reader Introductory Book One* and *The Oxford English Readers for Africa* which we read in higher primary grades. We were a part of the British colonial empire after all, immensely proud of all the red patches on our well-thumbed Clarion Atlas. Beside them are books from my high school days as well as rare Hindi books and pamphlets and songs published in Fiji in the 1950s and earlier, such as *Jhankar* and *Fiji Digdarshan*, now lost to us forever. Next to them are books I have written myself. I have a fairly decent collection of books on the Pacific islands, a reminder of a time when I lectured on the subject to undergraduates. I don’t lecture anymore. These will in due course go to some library somewhere, but I doubt if I will ever be able to part with my Fiji books. They are an integral part of me, indispensable; I can’t imagine my life without them; they made me what I am. What will happen to them when I go, I sometimes wonder idly. Will they find as loving a home as they have found with me? But for the moment, they are safe and secure in Coombs 4240.

I clearly remember the first time I entered Coombs 4240. It was in 1981 for my viva, now known colloquially in Australia as the ‘oral.’ Unlike now, viva was a common practice then no matter how good a thesis. The great Oskar Spate was

the chair of my examining committee, and 4240 was his office at that point. The other examiner was the South Asia historian Sinappah Arasaratnam, from the University of New England. (The third examiner, Ian Catanach of Canterbury, had sent his questions in writing). The feeling of trepidation is still vivid in my mind. Will I pass? Was I good enough to pass? Were there some hidden gremlins in the thesis that I might have overlooked? I had stayed up late the previous night fielding imaginary questions, reading over the text looking for typos, and feeling depressed at the few that I did find, hoping desperately that these would go unnoticed by the examiners (they were). Oskar opened with a few questions about why I had undertaken this study, about methodology and then went on—and on—about something else while I sat and nodded in deferential silence. Oskar, the geographer of the Indian subcontinent, knew the region I had written about in my thesis very well.² The longer he talked, I guessed, the less curly the questions I would have to answer! Arasa gently quizzed me on indenture historiography.³ This was the easy bit, I thought; I was being softened up for really tough grilling that was surely bound to come. Mercifully, it did not. After about half an hour, I was asked to leave the room for a few minutes. When I was called back in, Oskar told me that I had passed, but nothing would be formal until I heard from the Registrar. Oh, and I could go to the University House and relax with a drink. That I certainly did, to my body and heart's content (and to my head's throbbing displeasure the next morning)!

I have vivid recollection of Spate's Coombs 4240. It was a spartan room, with hardly any books on the shelves. That seemed very odd to me: an academic office without books. On one wall there were specially built little cubby-holes filled with odd bits and pieces of paper and what I later came to know as off-prints. Oskar kept in his office only things he needed for his current project. His extensive private library was at his Black Mountain home. Oskar would now find his old office unrecognizable, alien to his geographer's neat temperament. I later found out that Coombs 4240 was once occupied by Ken Gillion, one of my mentors, while Oskar was on a study leave to research his magnificent trilogy, 'The Pacific Since Magellan.'⁴ Ken had a very utilitarian approach to books. His office, too, was bare, and he sold his library to a second hand book seller when he retired and left Canberra.

Both Ken Gillion and Oskar Spate were scholars of the older generation. Ken was, of course, the author of the pioneering study of Indian indentured immigration and settlement in Fiji.⁵ After teaching Indian history at the universities of Western Australia and Adelaide, he returned to the ANU to research the sequel to his first book.⁶ When his five year research fellowship expired, and was not renewed, he retired from the academy at just forty nine.

Oskar had come to the ANU in 1951 as the Foundation Professor Geography, with his monumental general and regional geography of India in press. He was the author of the classic 1959 report on the social and economic problems of the Fijian people,⁷ and was a member of the Fiji Education Commission in 1969. While Ken was shy and reserved, Oskar was formidably erudite and eccentric: he had the disconcerting habit of passing you in the corridors and seemingly failing to recognize you at all. In seminars he would doodle on a piece of paper, drawing the contour map of an imaginary 'tight little, right little island,' or perhaps jotting down a ditty, apparently absorbed, and then asking the most penetrating question that went straight to the heart of the talk.

Both these one-time inhabitants of Coombs 4240 taught me things that have stayed with me. Oskar was famous for saying 'One doesn't have to be solemn to be serious,' and he lived up to his credo. And Ken believed in 'Wearing your learning lightly.' Oskar was very witty, highly intelligent, extremely well read, and delightful company in his good moods: he was fully aware that he had a 'propensity to cantankerousness,' but a marvellous man: a true polymath. Both were craftsmen of a high order, especially Oskar, and from them I learnt the importance of clarity and economy of expression. I can never match them, of course, but I try to emulate their example. It grieves me that so few people in my College, of Asia and the Pacific no less, have no idea who Oskar was, what his accomplishments were: this man who was truly one of the intellectual giants of the ANU and whose work will be remembered and read long after many of us are gone. When I suggested to a colleague that our 'School of Culture History and Language' might be named after Oskar Spate, he thought that I was mischievously putting forward the name of George Speight, the Fiji coupster!

I returned to the ANU and to Coombs permanently in 1990. Oskar was still the occupant of Room 4240, to the chagrin of some senior faculty who did not approve of the idea of a long-retired academic occupying a professorial office, even if it was someone of Oskar's eminence and a former director of the Research School of Pacific Studies to boot. Oskar had by then completed his magnum opus and was in frail health, barely able to walk up the stairs even with the help of walking stick (but with a pipe seemingly permanently clenched between his teeth). As a visitor to the department (from the University of Hawaii on a year's sabbatical to work on my history of twentieth century Fiji⁸), I was asked to share Oskar's office. This arrangement worked well. Oskar came in infrequently, mostly around mid-afternoon to check his mail and to attend seminars and then, after a few months, stopped coming in altogether, having moved into a nursing home where he unhappily lingered for another ten years (saying more than once 'How I wish I could go to sleep and don't wake up the next morning'). I now became

the sole occupant of 4240. This did not go down well at all with some of the hierarchs: a visitor occupying a professorial office. Word was heard of someone asking for my removal so that he could occupy an office befitting his status. Spare rooms were in short supply. By the time I had filled the room with my books and research notes, the matter of occupancy was settled firmly in my favour.

As I imbibed the folklore of the place, I became acutely aware of the arcane protocols of status, at least in the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies. There was a marked hierarchy of status. The distinction between sahibs and subalterns was still alive and well though not publicly talked about and even disavowed. At the departmental pinnacle were the professors, God-professors, who automatically acted as heads and exercised great influence on the careers of their colleagues. Their authority was unchallenged; they were the acknowledged leaders and intermediaries to the outside world. Below them were Professorial Fellows, senior academics with still a few rungs to climb to the top. Below them were Senior Fellows and Fellows, roughly equivalent now to Associate Professors and Lecturers. All these were tenurable positions. At the top of the untenured ladder were Senior Research Fellows (Ken Gillion being an example) and Research Fellows. These untenured members of staff were often academics from other universities on sabbatical or extended research leave to write their books and then return to their home universities. Each department had a certain number of rotating, short-term fellowships for this purpose, reflecting ANU's Institute of Advanced Studies' unique role in Australian higher education, performing a role other teaching universities could not. Now the ANU is simply one among several universities, *primus inter pares*. This perhaps is the most depressing change I have witnessed in my time at the ANU over the last two decades: the steady diminution of a great institution, still leading the way but just barely. I can hear the detractor say, 'If at all.'

Hierarchy and difference were expressed in subtle ways. Professorial offices were of a certain size. Usually, they had two windows, not one. They had carpets whereas non-professorial offices did not. Their desks had a certain number of drawers, one or two more than those issued to scholars on the rungs below them. Professors were entitled to research assistants as well as secretaries who typed their work and borrowed books from the libraries, organised their travel and did the acquittals. Not all professors were of a type. Some were eccentric and deliberately unorthodox in their mannerisms. Jim Davidson, the Pacific history professor, I was told, delighted in flouting convention. He wore very short shorts to work which outraged his sartorially more conservative colleagues. On the other hand, Sir Keith Hancock was a pucca sahib who dressed accordingly and treated his junior staff in a suitably donnish manner: he would introduce himself

as 'Professor Sir Keith Hancock.'⁹ He was the pope of the historical profession in Australia.¹⁰ The distinctions and hierarchies of yesteryear have now vanished almost beyond recall. Some of the old nomenclature survives in the Coombs Building though: we still have Fellows and Senior Fellows, but ranking and the protocols which went with it have become obsolete. The surprise colleagues expressed at my occupying a 'professorial' office in 1990 would hardly raise an eyebrow today.

All the old colleagues who were in the Coombs Building in 1990 when I returned are now gone or in retirement. Among the former are Dorothy Shineberg, the historian of sandalwood and Melanesian labour trade, and the indefatigably independent-minded Robert Langdon who ran the Pacific Manuscripts Bureau from its inception in 1968 until his retirement in the 1980s. Donald Denoon, Hank Nelson, Niel Gunson and Deryck Scarr have retired. I miss Hank Nelson the most, the boy from Boort in the Mallee country, humane and generous and dependable, who always read my work with care and who would be happy to know that I have not used 'however' in much of what I have written in recent years on account of his advice that it was a lazy writer's word, superfluous. Deryck's office, Coombs 4239, was directly opposite mine. We maintained civil relations and drank polite cups of tea in the Coombs Tea Room, but as students of Fijian history would know, we were, and are, chalk and cheese in our views about Fijian history and politics, and the gulf sadly has widened over time. Everyone knew that Deryck, the heir apparent to Jim Davidson, felt cheated of what he thought was his just due: the chair of Pacific history, which instead went to Gavan Daws and later to Donald Denoon. But personal differences aside, our corridor had a collective sense that the centre of the discipline of Pacific history was right here. There were other Pacific historians elsewhere, but they were our offshoots, people who lived in the provinces. That sense of confidence, not to say arrogance, is now a thing of the distant past.

With the gradual fading of the older generation has gone a world of academic life, the world of unhurried scholarship and of the virtue of curiosity-driven research and wide ranging erudition. It would be difficult to say now of a colleague what Hancock said of Oskar Spate: that he would be as much at home in a chair of English as he was in the chair of Geography. In my own time, Mark Elvin, an eminent professor of Chinese history, could publish three volumes of science fiction under a pseudonym (John Mark Dutton). I cannot think of many younger colleagues who will be able to match the literary accomplishments of my colleague Tessa Morris Suzuki who, in addition to writing path-breaking books in her field of Japanese and Korean history, has published fine poetry and children's stories.¹¹ Times have changed. By today's standards, the older generation might

appear less productive (though, as I endlessly point out, they did not have the advantage of word processors and the internet). That was certainly true of some of them, but they produced scholarship which has stood the test of time and which will not be surpassed. More by any stretch of the imagination does not necessarily mean better. There is a difference, as the English historian David Cannadine has said somewhere, between the 'culture of productivity' and the 'culture of creativity.'¹²

Life in Coombs 4240 begins early, around eight, and ends about six. This has always been the pattern of work for me. Some colleagues use their offices to check emails, or attend to administrative duties but do all their writing at home. I now draw a sharp distinction between home and work, not the least in deference to my family who have suffered enough from my periodic bouts of absentmindedness. There are inevitable distractions and diversion from phone calls and casual visits. Discipline is crucial to manage time. Intrusions of the external world have to be dealt with promptly and archived. Like most people, the first thing I do, almost as a ritual, after a cup of tea, is to read my email. Routine matters, such as notices of meetings or edicts from the hierarchs about this change or that new policy, are noted and deleted. Personal queries are answered, but it is emails from complete strangers seeking information that tests the patience. Hardly a week goes by without a request from someone in the Indo-Fijian diaspora wondering how they might be able to trace their roots back to India. Often the request is hopeless because they have nothing beyond the name of the person who went to Fiji, and even that is unreliable. I always provide pointers for more specific information. The profound yearning of the heart to know about one's roots is genuine and it is deeply felt.

Then there are elementary requests from students, mostly from North America, about research papers and dissertations they are writing on Fiji, requests for relevant sources and to read and comment on drafts. It is all so anonymous and distant; I am almost expected to put aside everything and attend to their requests. From academic journals from around the world come requests to review submissions made to them. Less frequent but very time-consuming are requests from academic presses for review of book manuscripts. The good publishable ones are not a problem; it is the bad ones that require detailed comment. Such obligations come with the territory. It is a part of one's professional obligation but none of it is taken into account by the bean counters of the educational bureaucracy or in the promotion stakes by Promotion and Selection Committees. The university is an enterprise that runs on paper, I was once told, and the more refereed paper you have under your name, the better. That is the brutal truth of academic life, rhetoric about service and outreach and teaching notwithstanding.

Such 'teaching' as I do is confined to Coombs 4240. That is where I interact with my 'students' most intensely. I am uncomfortable with the word 'student.' I arrived at the ANU more than thirty years ago not as a 'Student,' but as a 'Research Scholar.' That was our official designation. We were being trained for a lifetime of scholarship and expected to participate fully in the scholarly life of the department to learn the protocols and rituals of academic culture. We belonged to a community of scholars, and it helped that the formal conventions and protocols of relations between the senior staff and younger scholars were very relaxed, at least in Pacific History. We addressed each other by our first names, though behind the appearance of relaxed informality and cheerful banter at morning tea was an unstated expectation that at the end of our term of three years (extensions were rare), we would, as a matter of course, produce a world-class thesis. I recall Ken Gillion's words to me vividly when I arrived at the ANU: 'If you are not on top of the literature on your subject in six months, you should not be here.' I was despatched to the library to read everything there was to read on my subject and to prepare a thesis proposal for public defence before heading off to the field. It was daunting thought at the time, but I now appreciate the confidence my mentors had in me and the freedom they allowed for me to pursue my thoughts.

Nearly every Research Scholar in the Coombs Building was on a scholarship; private and fee-paying students were not around then as they are now. Getting one of these through open international competition was a mark of some distinction. Doctoral students had no course work, no special reading groups. Scholars were expected to master their fields on their own, in consultation with their supervisor and get on with research as soon as possible. Dorothy Shineberg, for example, agreed with her own PhD supervisor that 'if one couldn't work independently at this level, then one had no business seeking a doctorate.'¹³ It was taken for granted that we had been taught the basics of our discipline at the undergraduate level, that we were acquainted with the philosophies of RH Collingwood, EH Carr and Geoffrey Elton, and if we were not, we would familiarise ourselves with them on our own. The main focus was on the researching and writing of the thesis; everything we did was geared to that end.

The committee system of supervision was slowly coming into vogue, but the model followed in practice was still the Oxbridge one of working with a single scholar and writing your dissertation under his or her supervision. Other senior scholars in the department might enquire politely about your work but refrained from 'interfering.' You were known as so-and-so's student, or working under the supervision of so-and-so. The process of mentoring was personalized. Friends might be prevailed upon to read your drafts, but there was no editorial support

available in the department, even to people for whom English was not the first language. It was expected that as an ANU scholar, you would naturally write a competent thesis, meeting the highest standards of contemporary scholarly practice, in acceptable, error-free prose on your own. Anything less could not be countenanced. And it was let known that some examiners did not take kindly at all to typos in the thesis. Being asked to re-submit for whatever reason was an ineradicable blot on your name and could seriously jeopardise your prospects of employment at a decent university.

Some of the old practice survives. Even with the committee system now formally in place, students end up working closely with one scholar. But there is far more support available to students. Virtually every department has someone who provides editorial assistance. No one now submits hard bound copies for examination; it is soft, spiral-bound copies with the expectation that changes would be required and made to the final version. It may also be the case that the convenience of word processing makes examiners more ready to demand revisions, whereas in the days of typewriting and carbon copies there was an understandable reluctance to take such a step. Perhaps that is why such a premium was placed on fluent, typo-free prose. A certain managerial culture has crept into academic practice. Workshops are held, usually by people who have never supervised any students in their lives, to tell potential supervisors what their roles and responsibilities are, and what legally enforceable obligations the university has towards students. I was once told that we, the university, are 'service providers,' and students are our 'customers.' We were all told of a student who sued the university for not providing adequate supervision which, he said, had impeded his progress: he had put his regular work on hold to do a doctorate, and he was suing for income foregone. In my own time, I knew of cases of difficult supervisor-student relationships, some deteriorating to the point of no contact, but am not aware of anyone being sued. The idea was simply unthinkable. More generally, people of my generation had no sense of entitlement; we were grateful for what we had and the opportunities that came our way.

I have had my share of graduate students. Each is unique in his or her own way. Some have a good sense of what they would like to do and want simply to be allowed to simply get on with research. Others need guidance to help formulate a doable topic. Some brim with confidence, others lack it. Some call me by my first name while to some, usually from Asian and Pacific cultures, I am 'Prof.' or 'Dr Brij.' For them, addressing teachers by their first names is seen to be culturally inappropriate. I am not fussed but I respect their sensitivities. It took me ages to call Oskar Spate by his first name: he was always 'Prof.' to me. Ken Gillion, on the other hand, insisted on being called 'Ken.' Whatever the

academic bureaucrats say, and all the legalese notwithstanding, the supervisor-student relationship must be based on trust and confidence and a large doze of mutual respect. It is an unequal, dependent relationship and it can be fraught. And it is always useful to remind students it is their own thesis they are writing, not their supervisor's. They are spending three years of their life writing their dissertation, and they must make the most of an opportunity that will not come their way again. Most of them do.

From my perch in Coombs 4240, I have noticed profound changes in the culture and practice of the academy. Technology has been a main driver of change. The latest invention when I completed my dissertation was the 'selectric' typewriter that dispensed with the messy whitener, and how grateful we were for it. (The senior academics who had their work typed by the departmental secretaries were less conscious of the change). Publishing regularly at decent intervals was expected and mostly done, but there was no annual accounting for brownie points distributed by the government's educational bureaucracy (although publications were listed in Annual Reports where they went unread). It was understood that decent scholarship would take time to produce; it was like making yoghurt, as one old-timer said to me: it could not be hurried. His own magnum opus came long after he had retired. Historians, as a rule, were expected to write books. Journal articles were small morsels better suited to the various disciplines in the social sciences; it was in the books that the big ideas were presented and upon which reputations were made. I am no longer sure that is the case today. Writing a big book takes time, but accounting of publications is done on an annual basis. Wittingly or unwittingly, we are forced to tread the path of the social sciences. In more recent years, with the advent of ERA [Excellence in Research in Australia] the emphasis is placed on publishing in A and A+ journals. How the journals have been ranked, who ranked them, remains a frustrating mystery, at least to me, but the bureaucrats brook no criticism: rules are rules and they have to be followed. It puts inordinate pressure on the younger faculty for whom such validation truly matters.

The troubling thing is how meekly academics have capitulated to such pressure. By our acquiescence we have been complicit in the making of the mess that confronts us today. We have an obligation to perform at the highest standards of scholarship, but publishing in places not as highly ranked does not diminish the quality of our scholarship. And there is an ethical dimension to our work as well, which may not be the case in the natural and physical sciences and perhaps not even in some of the social sciences. Some of us feel a moral duty to disseminate the fruits of our research among communities where we work. Not many there would be able to access the highly rated learned journals. Perhaps

electronic publishing is the way of the future, but e-books presently do not score well in the prestige stakes.¹⁴

Coombs 4240 is an historian's office. It is also unmistakably a Fijian's office. On the front door is a print of a Fijian exhibition from the Turnbull Library with the words 'The Heart of Fiji' written on it. On top of it is an old print of the Fijian coat-of-arms: 'Rere vaka na kalou ka doka na Tui,' obey God and respect chiefs. Inside, there is a tapa cloth on the wall, and large blown up photographs of the Suva vegetable and fish markets and a clogged Waimanu road, of a village handicraft centre and a lone, loaded cane train with its Indo-Fijian driver standing beside it looking straight at the camera. On one wall is a framed painting of 'Mr Tulsi's Store,' and on another a print of the cover of my 'Bitter Sweet,' a young Indo-Fijian girl looking anxiously, nervously at the camera. These are constant reminders of the spirit, sound, sight and smell of a place that was once home to me, and intellectually and emotionally still is, even though I have been barred by the military regime from returning to it. In the front of a stand-alone bookshelf is a framed photograph of Fiji's first deposed Prime Minister Dr Timoci Bavadra, given to me in May 1987 by an Indo-Fijian clerk in the Ministry of Information's archival section in the basement of the old Government Buildings as a memento to keep of a time, he said, that would never come again. On the wall is a portrait of the multi-party Laisenia Qarase government thrown out of office in a military coup in 2006. On the wall next to my table is a portrait of the Fiji Constitution Commission of which I was a member, and next to it is a small framed photograph of a smiling Sitiveni Rabuka sitting next to me in the Suva Town Hall in 2006. Directly on top is a *Canberra Times* cartoon of the 1987 coup titled 'Paradise Lost' with Rabuka in a tank, driving innocent, unclothed civilians into the bush. All these are constant reminders of the troubled past of my homeland and of the various efforts to fashion a different, more inclusive future for it.

It is in Coombs 4240 that I have done all my writing for the last twenty years. It is here that I have sought to understand the troubled history of my country. It is here, more than a decade ago, that I wrote the life of AD Patel, the Indo-Fijian leader who struggled for forty years for a non-racial democratic future for Fiji.¹⁵ It is here that I wrote the life of Patel's successor Jai Ram Reddy. From the lives of these two men I became aware of the ceaseless, uphill struggle for a different future for Fiji.¹⁶ Had their vision for social justice, equality and human dignity succeeded, Fiji might well have been spared its present fate. What is past is past. A large part of my life has been devoted to ensuring that the voices of the vanquished are not extinguished from public memory or the written record. 'Words,' Winston Churchill once said, 'are the only things that last forever.'¹⁷

And it is from Coombs 4240 that I have spoken out, and continue to speak out, against the coups in Fiji. I accept fully the fundamental truth of Arthur Schlesinger Jr's view that 'a society in which the citizens cannot criticise the policy of the state is a society without the means of correcting its course.'¹⁸ Dissent in a democracy should never be construed as disloyalty. It should be the responsibility of every citizen, every civilized human being, to speak out against tyranny and oppression, against the subversion of democratic values and the rule of law. Scholarship should, as a matter of moral duty, speak truth to power; silence can never be an option. Violence as a tool of public policy is always counterproductive. There are certain values humanity has embraced as its own which transcend national and political boundaries, and which are worth defending. This much I have said from Coombs 4240, and more. And I have paid the price, the price of banishment from the country of my birth, cheated of my birthright. What is it about Fiji that I miss the most, I have often been asked. Not being able to say the final farewell to friends and family is the simple answer. But there is no regret: I could not have done anything else. I am at peace with myself.

Coombs 4240 is my private retreat and my site of resistance. Within its walls I have laughed and cried, talked and listened, taught and learned. It has enabled me to engage with the world on my own terms, not on someone else's. It is here that I have met people who have inspired me and enriched my life. It is here that I have glimpsed possibilities I never imagined. It is here that I have become what I am. It is here that I daily struggle to rescue memory from the shallow graveyards of forgetfulness and defend it against those who seek its extinction in the interests of the privileged and the powerful. To whatever quirk of fate that brought me to Coombs 4240, I am immeasurably grateful. The words of William Shakespeare are apposite: 'Within this wall of flesh/ There is soul that counts thee her creditor.'