In the twilight of empire, through the course of a world war and in the midst of rapid industrial and social restructuring, in the Fiji Islands between 1936 and 1947, some crucial decisions were made. They were made by British imperial officials, Australian capitalists, Fiji sugar cane growers, indigenous Fijian chiefs and commoners, and Fiji Indians of many religions, occupations and aspirations. Initiatives were taken that renewed race and racial difference as Fiji’s single most salient principle of political order. This essay in historical ethnography will focus on obscure episodes in a chain of dramatic and extraordinarily complex events, episodes often passed over or briefly noted even in detailed histories of Fiji, in an effort to highlight moments of specific political will in action, their connections and their consequences. Why did the corporation that dominated Fiji’s economy, its monopsony sugar miller, the Australia-based Colonial Sugar Refining Company (CSR), choose to lobby London to keep the price it was paid for sugar low throughout the war years? Why did Fiji’s Central Indian War Committee vote, in 1942, to disband rather than coordinate Fiji Indian service to the imperial war effort? And why did Ratu Sukuna, preeminent ethnic Fijian leader, seek and then repudiate an agreement to accept the 1943 sugar crop as a gift to Fiji from the sugar growers?

This essay will also be oriented towards a specific issue in social theory, namely, how to study community. In 1997 scholars gathered in Edinburgh to discuss migration, communalism and conflict, invited by the organizers to give special attention to the complexity of
situations and the agency of migrants. In this essay as elsewhere in my work, agency is treated irreducibly, and I seek out not only resistance on the part of colonized people, but also their initiatives. But here I want to thematize, in relation to community, not only agency but also complexity. I want to consider a scholarly interest in complexity, like the search for agency, not only a response to fact but a theme of method. In 1934 Gaston Bachelard announced a ‘new epistemological relationship between simple and composite ideas’ (p. 147). I will try to keep with Bachelard’s advice – not to seek out the simple, but to make complexity intelligible – regarding both agency and complexity. Regarding agency I hope to be irreductive, to trace for you the interconnections of cause, concomitance and consequence linking the three episodes I trace of decision and action without in any way undermining the freedom of will each expressed. And regarding complexity, I think much is at stake. I hope, in fact, to open for your consideration some grave doubts about apparently clear, simple concepts, or to put it more positively, to convince you of the need for a new approach to the social scientific understanding of some of our key concepts: community, communalism, and also identity itself. To introduce my own approach very generally, this chapter will study decisions affecting the fates of ‘represented communities’ of empire – ‘imagined communities’ in a sense very different from Benedict Anderson’s – and more specifically key moments in their relatively extreme racialization in Fiji, in order thereby to reconsider the problems they pose for new nation states as empires collapsed in the twentieth century.

Back to Fiji, and its empirical complexities, especially from 1936 to 1947. A world war impinged: after Japan attacked Singapore, Hawaii and the Philippines, it was young male Americans who came swarming into Fiji, undercutting British mana with a much less formal style of swagger. And meanwhile, another globally significant struggle impinged: the British Raj in India was collapsing. Long before 1936, Fiji government officials rewrote their sedition laws concerning journalism, originally limited to false reports, in order to be able to outlaw accounts of actual events and public speeches in India, when they were deemed likely to foment strife in Fiji. While Gandhi and the Indian National Congress were generally and, in a sense, correctly represented in Fiji’s English language media as threats to the very fabric of empire (let alone the fulminations when Subhas Chandra Bose began to build his nationalist army allied with Japan), Fiji’s Hindi language presses were mostly shut down during the war, for publishing news that threatened peace and good order, and Fiji Indians got their news about South Asia by mail and