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Aloha e Brij

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Other contributors to this volume will no doubt comment on the undeniable quality and absolutely stunning volume of Brij Lal's scholarship. In this short essay dealing with Brij's time in Hawai'i, however, I would like to focus on other attributes that help explain his rise as one of the most prominent and certainly the most prolific Pacific historian of his generation. I have always been struck by Brij's persistence, courage, graciousness and upbeat ways. Those attributes certainly showed themselves in Hawai'i, but first there is the story of our simultaneous hire by the Department of History back in 1983. The position in Pacific history had been deemed an important one given the University of Hawai'i's geographical location. Gavan Daws had served with distinction as the department's Pacific historian. Tim Macnaught ably replaced him but decided, after securing promotion and tenure, to return to Australia. The search for Tim's successor proved difficult and frustrating. Invitations to apply were sent to established historians in the field but most declined. Ian Campbell taught for a term in 1981 but he declined the offer of a tenured position. There was a hopeful breakthrough when Stewart Firth agreed to accept the departmental search committee's offer of a regular, tenure track position. Stewart arrived in August of 1982 but by October of that year, had decided that the cost of living in Honolulu was just too prohibitive (Lal 1987: 3–4).

Division along generational, ethnic and political lines characterised the Department of History in the early 1980s. Political differences, coupled with professional rivalries that became personal, added to the tense environment. When it came time to choose Stewart's successor, those divisions showed themselves quite clearly. Brij and I were the finalists for the position; department members split their votes evenly between us. The tie vote was recorded on a blackboard in the department's library and was left up for several days for any and all to see. The stalemate was broken when someone observed that the department actually had a second position in Pacific history that had gone unfilled for a number of years. The decision, then, was to hire the both of us. At the risk of deluding myself, I'd like to think that things ultimately worked out well for all parties concerned, here and in the broader region.

I wanted to establish a strong personal as well as professional relationship with my new colleague, and decided to introduce Brij and his family to the island of O'ahu. Shortly after they arrived in late July 1983, I took Brij, Padma and young Yogi on a ride around the island; Niraj would arrive on the scene later. When we got to the cane fields above Haleiwa on the North Shore, an auspicious place to stop given Brij's family history, I spied a pickup truck selling sweet Kahuku watermelons by the side of the road. I thought at the time that watermelon would be an appropriate welcoming gift. I pulled over, got out of the car, and began to purchase a whole melon when I realised I didn't have enough money with me. Brij graciously stepped forward, paid for the watermelon himself, and gave it to me as a gift! I still cringe every time I recall that trip around the island with Brij and his family.

The size, formality and hierarchy of the department surprised Brij. It took some getting used to. Life in Hawai'i also took some adjustment and was never easy for Brij and his family, as attested to by the chapter 'A Sojourn in Hawai'i' in his autobiographical collection of stories entitled *Mr Tulsi's Store* (Lal 2001: 111–26). The cost of living was the highest in the United States. This was particularly true for housing where the lack of quality added insult to the high rents being charged. Brij and his family started out in faculty housing, and later moved to a small cottage behind a large house on Keala'olu Street in the Kahala area of East Honolulu before purchasing a townhouse in Hawai'i Kai, one of the island's newest suburban developments at the time. A little more than a year after his arrival, the US Immigration and Naturalization Service ruled that Brij could only be granted a temporary visa because he was occupying

a position for which there existed qualified American scholars. Reports of the ruling reached the newspapers. Already overburdened by the demands of teaching, research and advising students, Brij found his days crowded with meetings to attend, forms to fill out and telephone calls to return, all of this related to his visa status. Had that determination not been reversed by his persistence and the efforts of colleagues, university administrators, and Hawai'i's congressional delegation, Brij's sojourn in Hawai'i would have been short.

The 1980s was a tumultuous time on campus and in the broader state. Native Hawaiians were demanding sovereignty, and the redress of injustices and wrongs that followed the overthrow of the monarchy in 1893. There was a natural affinity and alliance between Hawaiian and Pacific studies in this period, and Brij was very much a facilitator and supporter of that alliance. He got along well with Haunani-Kay Trask, the head of the Center for Hawaiian Studies and the campus's most outspoken advocate on behalf of Native Hawaiian rights. Brij encouraged those Native Hawaiian students who sought to do a doctorate in Pacific history because there existed no real equivalent degree option in Hawaiian history. Being supportive of Native Hawaiian causes did not mean for Brij the abandonment of scholarly standards, however; he let it be known that politics could not substitute for a rigorous engagement with the archives.

Brij and I worked well together on behalf of Pacific history, while effectively bridging the divide that separated our respective supporters. We sometimes gave private, not-very-flattering nicknames to one or two of our more pompous senior colleagues, and had a good laugh when using those names. Things turned around quickly for Pacific history. We revised the curriculum, and added new courses. Under Brij's leadership, enrolment in our undergraduate Pacific history courses doubled, and there were soon more than a dozen students doing advanced degree programs in the field. Students from other fields of study found their way to our courses and seminars as well. Brij offered a graduate seminar on the Southwest Pacific during the fall 1985 semester that enrolled more than 20 students, an unheard of number for a seminar then and now. Brij's presence also helped attract a number of leading scholars in Pacific history to Mānoa: Ahmed Ali, Greg Dening, Francis X. Hezel, S.J., Kerry Howe, Barrie Macdonald, and Caroline Ralston all addressed formal gatherings sponsored by the Department of History or other units on campus.

During his time in Hawai‘i, Brij kept a keen eye on political developments in his native Fiji. The coups of 1987 brought great pain and sorrow that were exacerbated by the distance that separated him from his extended family and homeland. At the same time, he was energised to speak out, and in ways that required great courage. There were those in Hawai‘i who also hailed from Fiji but who held decidedly different views on the causes and cures of political unrest there. Brij was threatened on more than one occasion with bodily harm, but these efforts at intimidation did not deter him from speaking out or privately confronting his harassers. Later, his ceaseless advocacy for true democracy in Fiji would earn him official banishment and exile from his homeland. The courage to advocate, protest, criticise and speak out was honed in part in Hawai‘i, I think.

Among our assignments as young assistant professors was the teaching of History 151 and 152, or World Civilization as it was known then. It was an impossible two-course sequence taught in a lecture format to audiences of between 300 and 400 students in large auditoriums. The avowed purpose of the course was to provide students with a sense of the sweep of the human past. Undaunted, Brij came to relish the assignment and carried it out with energy, enthusiasm and considerable success. He has written and spoken about the skills that he developed teaching that course, skills that served him well in his later academic and public career. Less well known are the binders of meticulously researched, handwritten lectures that he developed for the course and that he keeps in his office to this day. I remember an occasion a number of years ago when Brij was on campus during one of his frequent visits to Hawai‘i. He stopped by the Department of History to say hello to former colleagues. While in the department offices speaking to the staff, Brij was introduced to a young assistant professor and recent hire who knew Brij by reputation. In the course of casual conversation, the young academic mentioned that he was giving a lecture that day on indentured labour. Without hesitation, notes or time to prepare, Brij offered to deliver the lecture himself, and proceeded to do so. To this day, that young academic, now a tenured associate professor with an impressive list of scholarly publications, speaks with an awe and amazement about Brij’s feat.

It is not necessary to list here all of Brij’s many books. Bob Kiste, the former director of the Center for Pacific Islands Studies at Mānoa, and I used to have a running joke when Brij’s name came up in conversation in the years after his departure from Hawai‘i. ‘Another year, another book by Lal,’ we’d say, ‘how does he do it?’ Like everyone else, we were stunned

by his prodigious output. Brij was not just an incredibly productive scholar, he was a generous one as well who sought to give voice and make space for others. He brought many of us along on his own intellectual journeys, as evidenced in the numerous volumes he edited by himself or with colleagues, and that followed conferences in Canberra or elsewhere in the region that were characterised by their substance, hospitality and intellectual camaraderie.

I have always been impressed by the diversity of mediums through which Brij communicates. He is committed to the peoples about whom he writes and through histories that don't always use footnotes. He is a public intellectual who believes in accessible prose and good stories. Since leaving Hawai'i, Brij has become an advocate of what he calls 'faction', or the use of creative writing to impart the human stories that are often left out of academic histories. I and other contributors to this volume may risk embarrassing Brij with our words of praise on the occasion of his retirement from The Australian National University, but the truth is that he has embarrassed us with his incredible productivity, unflappable collegiality and his deep caring for the peoples of the Pacific about whom he writes with true commitment.

Hawai'i did not make Brij, but it certainly nourished and encouraged him. The energy, talent and drive that would make Brij such a force in Pacific history from the 1990s on was already on display in this corner of the region. His arrival here coincided with the publication of his first book, *Girmitiyas: The Origins of the Fiji Indians* (1983). There soon followed an edited collection of essays on Fiji politics published by Allen & Unwin, and a series of articles appearing in scholarly journals including the *Journal of Pacific History*, the *Indian Economic and Social Review*, and *Pacific Studies*. Brij later co-edited with Bob Kiste and Kerry Howe a much-needed volume on twentieth-century Pacific history put out by the University of Hawai'i Press.

At the same time, Brij proved a model citizen within and beyond the confines of the Mānoa campus. He gave numerous talks at the East-West Center, on other campuses in the University of Hawai'i system, and to teachers' workshops and local public schools. Along with the late Professor Leonard Mason of the University of Hawai'i Anthropology Department, Brij served as a consultant for Hawai'i Public Television's series on contemporary Pacific Islands cultures. He did not shirk his service obligations to the History Department: he sat on a variety of committees

that dealt with the administrative, procedural and programmatic concerns of academic life. He was always there and with that cheerful, energetic, can-do-anything attitude of his. He was supportive of colleagues of all ranks and did not forget those who had helped him to this point in his career. Brij joined with other members of the History Department in establishing a fitting memorial tribute for the late Professor Walter Johnson, an early mentor and supporter whom Brij had encountered during his student days at the University of the South Pacific when Johnson was there as a visiting professor. Within two years of his arrival in Hawai'i, Brij successfully applied for promotion to the rank of associate professor with tenure, something that usually requires five or more years of research, teaching and service from the recently hired. The only vice I saw Brij exhibit during his time here was an obsession with cricket, a bad habit to be sure but one that was difficult to indulge in the Hawai'i of the 1980s.

Brij developed a special bond with the Center for Pacific Islands Studies at Mānoa, and its director, Bob Kiste. The Center was funded largely through a grant from the United States Department of Education, and was designated as a National Resource Center for the Pacific Islands, the only one of its kind in the United States. Based on the postwar area studies approach, the Center offered an MA degree in Pacific Islands studies and had an active community outreach program. Brij soon became one of the Center's core affiliate faculty members, and was instrumental in helping it to develop an active publishing program that soon became the envy of the entire region.

It was an exciting time for Pacific Islands studies at Mānoa. I remember vividly the numerous planning meetings leading to a well-crafted proposal that secured a funding grant from the university administration to start *The Contemporary Pacific: A Journal of Island Affairs*. We made a strong effort to recruit distinguished contributors to our inaugural issue and managed to secure submissions from scholars such as Harold Brookfield, Greg Dening, Stewart Firth, Johan Galtung, Stephen Henningham, Fran Hezel and Roger Keesing. Brij served as the journal's first editor. The meetings he chaired were models of their kind. He would come in with a set agenda that dealt primarily with decisions on whether or not to accept a manuscript for publication. Brij would describe the submissions' contents, summarise the readers' reports, and offer his recommendations. The thoroughness of his preparation was such that there was little need for comment or extended discussion. Those of us who later followed

Brij as editor of the journal had to confront the reality that we were not Brij Lal, and that our recommendations required supporting documentation and more extensive discussion from the members of the editorial board. Brij and I also served as founding members of the editorial board for the Pacific Islands Monograph Series (PIMS), a publication outlet for quality manuscripts on the Pacific Islands that might otherwise go unpublished because of sales and marketing considerations. Bob Kiste often expressed amazement that so many of the series' first volumes had to do with history; he thought it serendipitous but Brij and I knew better. Brij's concerns for the promotion of scholarship extended to students. With the support of Bob and the Center, Brij edited a collection of student writings entitled *Wansalawara* (Lal 1987) that helped establish a tradition of support and encouragement for student scholarship that is still very much alive and active today at the Center. Brij's debt to the Center led him to edit a Festschrift in honour of Bob Kiste on the occasion of his retirement. Brij also made it a point to return to Hawai'i for the launch of that book, *Pacific Places, Pacific Histories: Essays in Honor of Robert C. Kiste*. The introduction that he wrote for that volume is an eloquent testament to his deep gratitude to Bob and the Center (Lal 2004: 1–27).

As successful as he'd been at Hawai'i, Brij felt the pull to be nearer to events in his still-troubled homeland of Fiji. An appointment at The Australian National University offered him the opportunity he sought. Brij left the University of Hawai'i in 1991, though he returned on numerous occasions to give talks, participate in conferences or simply drop in to say hello while in transit to or from other destinations. In 2005, Brij served as an external examiner for the Center for Pacific Islands Studies. The review was required under the terms of the National Resource Center grant that funded the Center's programs. Brij's past history with the Center did not mean a pass. He chaired the review committee and authored, shortly after his return to Canberra, a lengthy report that combined praise and appreciation with a healthy dose of constructive criticism. That was the thing about Brij; his personal warmth and congeniality never compromised his insistence on excellence.

Let me close this all-too-brief remembrance and reflection by addressing Brij directly. It has been an honour and a privilege to count you as a friend and a colleague for more than 30 years, Brij. Thank you for all of the many ways that you supported and assisted me, and so many others here in Hawai'i. Please know that the aloha that you have shown so many of us here over the years is not forgotten and is more than reciprocated.

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