

Notes Towards an Autobiography¹

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*For Bruce Bennett,
dear friend and fellow traveller*

I'm grateful to the NLA, so full of wonders and treasures, for generously awarding me this fellowship. For the last three months, I've been able to read and research, write and reflect, and meet a variety of scholars, staff and friends; with the feeling that how one's life intersects with so many other lives: that, I think, is one's real autobiography. Happy Valley, Patrick White's first published novel in 1939, has that as a theme and its epigraph is from Mahatma Gandhi. But more on these men later.

In March 2012 Jyoti and I returned from Fiji after six eventful years. We'd gone there in February 2006, from the ANU and the University of Canberra, to help establish the first University of Fiji. Of course, there was USP, established in 1968, which I joined as one of the first local lecturers in 1969 and resigned to take up a ministry in the Bavadra cabinet in 1987: I resigned on Monday; the Colonel staged his coup on Thursday. To lose two jobs in two days is sheer carelessness.

We'd gone back to Fiji after 18 years in this lovely, open city of transplanted trees, lakes and gardens. On the eve of my departure from Fiji on March 11, my name was announced as one of the three Commissioners to the Fiji Constitutional Commission. I'll be there at the end of the month to begin the work of the Commission. That should form a chapter in my autobiography.

Before I left Fiji, three months ago, I'd completed the draft of a book *Nadi: Memories of a River*, a childhood remembered. I've written this specifically for students in Fiji: We now have three universities includ-

¹ A Harold White Fellow Presentation at the National Library of Australia on Tuesday 19 June 2012.

ing the new Fiji National University. Nadi, in Hindi, my mother tongue, means a river. But more importantly, for me, Nadi is a small town next to the Nadi International Airport. The town gets submerged in virtually every flood: but it is the only town I knew before I flew to New Delhi in my teens, on a Government of India scholarship valued at \$8—quite a fortune for someone who had acquired his first pair of shoes at the age of 18, when he completed the Senior Cambridge examination. And going to India, the *mulk* of my grandparents, was for me a revelation. I'd not understood what migration or exile must have meant to them for they had arrived in Fiji in their teens—I'd always seen them as old men and women—girmityas we called them without any sense of historical irony hidden in that distorted English word 'Agreement'. They had sealed it with their indelible Left Thumb mark. I was born in the village of Maiganyah, about six miles from Nadi town – three miles from Nadi airport. It is only recently that I discovered that Maiganyah is not the native name of the place of my birth. In fact, I was told, the name was given to the place by an Australian overseer who looked after the sugar plantations owned by the CSR Company of Sydney.

My grandparents, both maternal and paternal, worked for the CSR Company of Australia: indenture, as you know, was a new system of slavery with an expiry date. After 10 years, they were given 10-acre farms – one in Maigania, the other in Lega Lega, next to the airport across the Nadi river adjacent to the shores of the Pacific Ocean.

So while my grandparents spent their childhood on the foothills of the Himalayas - doubtless many of their shipmates walked on the banks of the Ganges - I played on the shores of the Pacific.

Indentured Indians were transported to Fiji from 1879, soon after Fiji was ceded to Great Britain in 1874. The first secondary school for the children of farmers and grandchildren of indentured labourers was established in 1949 on the banks of the Nadi River, next to a temple and a *koro*. I studied in that school for the ubiquitous Senior Cambridge examination. The Colonel, with his sense of history divinely inspired, he claimed, destroyed the Parliament of Fiji in 14 May 1987, exactly 108 years after the arrival of the so-called coolies. For some reason the Hindus consider 108 a lucky number: what luck you may well ask! I was, on that fateful day, a cabinet minister and have the last legitimate words recorded in Fiji *Hansard*.

So the narrative I'm contemplating to create is a complex one – at least, to me. By sheer chance the other day I came across Ben Yagoda's account of autobiographies and memoirs entitled *Memoir: a History* (2009) in the Book Grocer in Kingston. It is engrossing to read the sto-

ries of others, some genuine, some fraudulent. My attempt is a much more modest one but I hope, an important one: hardly anyone in Fiji has written an autobiography: there are a few examples of memoirs and fragments of life writing but they seem to have been done by editors. Certainly no one has written about his or her Fijian-Australian-Indian experience, particularly through literature and politics.

I did attempt a piece in 1990-91: it came out as *Requiem for a Rainbow* and was launched in 2001 at the 13th ACLALS conference in Canberra by Bob McMullen. But my new work, while taking account of my life until I left Fiji on Xmas eve 1987, revisits Fiji, Delhi, Canberra: places in my heart, not so much through the prism of a single life, but through the lives I've admired, the many books I have read, studied and in places I've loved and lived. For instance, most studies of autobiographies scarcely mention that of Gandhi or Nehru or Nirad Chaudhuri or Dom Moraes - four outstanding autobiographers. Nehru's *An Autobiography* helped change British opinion towards India; Gandhi's autobiography, *My Experiments with Truth*, of course, is possibly the world's best-selling life-writing of all time. The last three I have met as a student. But, alas, not Gandhi. In any book on writing, Vidia Naipaul, whose grandparents were indentured Indian labourers taken to Trinidad; hardly any mention is ever made of this most accomplished writer of the English sentence. *Finding the Centre* (1989) has a piece entitled 'Prologue to an autobiography'. It is some of these writers and their journeys into themselves and into other worlds that I wish to introduce to Australasian readers. In that sense my work will be a literary-political journey into myself, my distinctive subjectivity, shaped by an archipelago, an island-continent and a subcontinent, and subterraneously by Literatures in English.

And there's no better place to do this than Canberra: the man who designed this city is buried in Lucknow. My grandparents migrated to Fiji from a little village not far from that antique city, with mutinous echoes. It is, of course, my intention to write about this connection. More than 60,000 Indentured Indians were taken to Fiji; we lost 60,000 Diggers at Gallipoli; many Indian soldiers died there too, but there's always a blank page at every commemoration. One of the ways of exploring this experience can be imaginative literature. I was hoping to do precisely this after writing my personal story for in the process I'd have done a lot of research and reading on the history of Fiji, on the history of Indenture, on the new freedom of India and my own affections and connections to Australia through the works of my favourite novelist: Patrick White. It's my good fortune that I got this fellowship in the

year when we are celebrating the centenary of his birth. Next year is the centenary of our city itself. Both White and Canberra mean a lot to me, almost like the Indian and Pacific oceans touching Australia, so to speak.

But there's another sense in which White is important to me: Patrick White is often portrayed as a great spiritual writer. I recall asking David Marr once whether he thought White was an equally important political writer. His reply was: No, he was a spiritual artist. But I think he was a profoundly political writer in a colonial-postcolonial island continent. I know he didn't quite like Bob Hawke's cockatoo hairstyle but the level of his response to political issues remains inspiring and resonant in today's world. Literature as resistance is a force. White understood it intuitively and creatively. If I hadn't read Vidia Naipaul in Leeds, White in London, I don't think I'd have ventured into politics. I went into politics through literature; I came back to writing through politics. And this interconnection forms part of my autobiography. It has certainly deepened my life and relationships. And made me feel that Fiji is just another four-letter word for hope, and yet unexamined, unimagined through words.

It was while baby-sitting in London that I first came across two remaindered novels of Patrick White in a special bin at Foyles. The two novels I read in 1971 were *The Tree of Man* and *Voss*. The 1970s were the Paki-bashing season in London. I stayed in a hostel owned by a Pakistani and he warned me not to go out at night: You look like a Pakistani, he said, with fearful pride. I followed his advice: he was, in fact, a Pathan, I was a Fiji Indian. I sat and read and fed myself on KFC—another Colonel's chickens, or parts thereof. My children relished Colonel Sanders' finger-lickin pieces.

The book that moved me most deeply was not *Voss* but *The Tree of Man*. Stan and Amy Parker reminded me of my own grandparents. It was in London that I decided that if ever I were given a scholarship to do a PhD, I'd come to Australia and work on White. In 1974, I got that opportunity: the rest is not history but my roller-coaster life. What gives me immense joy is that three of us – Jyoti, Kavita and I - did our PhD in Literature almost in the same room in the AD Hope building. I read everything White had written from *Happy Valley* (1939) to *The Eye of the Storm* (1973). And Australia became dear to me because of a writer.

A couple of years ago, my daughter, Kavita from Canberra, sent me a book titled *Literary Activists: Writer-Intellectuals and Australian Public Life*. It is written by Brigid Rooney and published by UQP. Seven Australian writers are discussed. There's no Asian-Pacific-Australian

writer on the list. Kavita's inscription in part reads: 'someone who made that bridge between literature and politics a long time ago!' The Australia-Fiji tangled relationships have existed for almost two centuries. This year, on 15 May, we commemorated the 133rd anniversary of the arrival of the first Indentured migrants in Fiji from India via Calcutta to serve primarily British, Australian and chiefly interests. It is a unique fragment of history of both exile and freedom. To appreciate the uniqueness, you'll have to read my book.

Fiji, through the mischief of many, had become a crown colony by the Deed of Cession in 1874. All of Fiji by then had been evangelized.

In the past 25 years Fiji has been through a series of crises, triggered by the first Fijian coup in May 1987. One would have expected an old friend like Australia, with so many bonds and human bondages with the people of Fiji, to come to the rescue in the wreck. Early sea-farers, explorers, beachcombers, missionaries, businessmen and women, overseers, experts and consultants, the CSR Company harvesting the profits of a slave crop, indenture and blackbirding victims, tourists and teachers, preachers and profiteers became part of the Fiji archipelago. In the 1982 Fiji elections we also learnt a thing or two about Aussie toe-cutters and digital amputation through the Carroll Report, devised by not a few eminent Australians, partially revealed by ABC's 'Four Corners'. There are connections, historical and contemporary. And I've just read Mr Malcolm Fraser's Whitlam Oration, given on 6 June. It makes interesting reading – Mr Fraser exhorts Australia to become a genuinely independent and sovereign state. When Fiji is asserting its independence after the tragedies of at least three coups, there's this lack of understanding and a historical generosity of mind in our most generous neighbour. Often we fail to imagine the Other, our close neighbour.

The world is what it is.

Fiji has remained excluded without much understanding or knowledge of a small but complex, colonially-created society, perhaps more than any other in the South Pacific, paying the price of brutalities against native peoples on islands and continents, including this one. Racism in Fiji was acceptable because so much in our largest neighbour was determined by its historical policies based on racial considerations. The Indentured and their descendants were children of the lesser gods. The vast majority of these peasants resisted conversion to Christianity. And the fig leaf of Fijian-styled Democracy hid a multitude of sins. There was a worm at the heart of paradise: political racism in a communally-oriented garb of venal democracy. We didn't even have a common name. A whole community was excluded from the nation's im-

agination.

Only now, from January 1, 2012, all the citizens of Fiji are called Fijians after the name of the nation: Fiji.

How does one begin to comprehend the Fiji-Australia enigma? For many of us today, Australia is home – in the past twenty odd years more Fiji people have come to Australia than those transported from India to Fiji in 40 years from 1879-1920. Our ancestors came in 87 different boats; the journey took weeks and months; today Fijians come to Sydney in less than four hours. Distances have coalesced; dislocations have deepened; deceptions have multiplied. Our journeys have become manifold. And the return flights to paradise are now quite cheap. But there's a deep lack of insight into Fiji's problems – and that is proving very costly. The waves of significant change are lapping the Fijian shores and we, in landlocked Canberra, ought to appreciate this.

But it is a personal journey that I wish to talk about. Patrick White had travelled in the 1940s to London by the P & O liner, *Strathmore*, but had returned to Sydney at the age of 46 to write fiction. In April 1958, White published his remarkably personal and passionate essay 'The Prodigal Son'.

White had written: 'the reasons why anybody is an expatriate, or why another chooses to return home, are such personal ones that the question can only be answered in a personal way.' White had returned, with the thought of a full belly, to the scenes of his childhood, to the stimulus of time remembered. By 1958 he'd crafted, in Australia, two classic novels: *The Tree of Man* and *Voss*. In December 1987, aged around 46, with Jyoti, I was leaving Fiji for Canberra with two coups behind me, two suitcases in front, and 200 dollars in my pocket, having lost two jobs in two days! My two daughters were with me. I was coming to see Rohan, my son, at the ANU. White says he was brought up on the maxim: 'Only the British can be right'. I grew up on the dictum: Fiji was our one and only home. Then to suddenly become homeless, in your homeland.

I spent 18 years in Canberra, our often derided national capital. There was the Great Emptiness in my heart, not in the landscape which White had made me love despite the sometimes sordid and cruel experiences of White Australia written on the bark of the ghostly gum trees and between the blue waves of the Pacific.

I had two extraordinary advantages: I'd spent my most formative student years in Delhi. I'd fallen in love and married my college sweetheart. Two of my children were born in New Delhi. I'd taught in two famous Public schools: the Delhi Public and Doon. Vikram Seth sur-

vived my teaching during 1963-64. A brief stint as a trainee-journalist on *The Statesman* in New Delhi gave me a life-long desire to be a scribe of sorts. And, of course, I'd been lucky enough to study for my doctoral degree Patrick White's fiction in Canberra, from May 1974-1977. *The Vivisector* remains my favourite fiction on the life of an artist and the joys of the then English Department are unforgettable.

Because of these two experiences in New Delhi and Canberra, I was able to survive the holocaust of my heart in May 1987. The fall of island politicians is rather compellingly described in V S Naipaul's *The Mimic Men*. I could have gone to New Delhi and become, as White says of London, an intellectual, that most sterile of beings, leading a parasitic and pointless existence: Or like Ralph Singh, in his forties living in a quaint hotel in a London suburb, hiding behind a pillar to look at Lady Stella. The politics of a country can only be an extension of its idea of human relationships, I'd believed, of which Naipaul had written in that splendid work of truthful fiction.

During the Blitz White experienced the first sensations of rootlessness. I was born around the time of the London Blitz. But I'd no idea of the banality of evil. The two Fijian coups in 1987 almost 50 years later were, for me, the first signs of ethnic evil. I was deeply, deeply affected by this betrayal by more than the Colonel of the Royal Fiji Military Forces of Fiji, with special connections at Duntroon. Even the Queen of Fiji didn't care for us – she was persuaded not to see the ousted Prime Minister, Dr Timoci Bavadra. And he had taken his oath of allegiance in Her Majesty's name. My friend, the *Vuniwai*-healer, died betrayed and broken. The Colonel, who had destroyed the Fiji Parliament with 10 masked gunmen, got the 21-gun salute in our Federal Parliament and a round of golf with our Gareth. Gareth also got the gong recently from Her Majesty. But I wish to write more about Bavadra buried in the village of Veiseisei by the sea.

Luckily I came to Canberra. The city gave me a new life – the life of the mind – teaching and talking, reading and writing, and hoeing my own garden. My family grew up; often I walked by Lake Burley Griffin, thinking could this be my Walden? Griffin is buried in Lucknow, the capital of UP; from the ancient vicinity of that most multicultural city, my maternal and paternal grandparents had migrated to the Fiji Islands. They had never seen a sea-wave or a ship. For generations they had not gone beyond a few miles from their habitus of mud and mythology. They had not known an island let alone a sea of islands; their bones are buried in the largest ocean.

Today my son is married to a woman from near Tamworth – her an-

cestors came in the First Fleet. Jyoti and I have three grandchildren: Hannah Maya, Arjun Sebastian, and Kallan Akash. What would their identities be? Their destinations? Their transit visas? What roots will clutch at their hearts? What fragments will they shore against their sorrows? I wish to explore these themes through the prism of my life. And see its many colours.

But the longing to return to days of adolescence persisted: the nostalgia of seascape, the brooding volcanic mountains' lengthening shadows looming over our little village within the green seas of sugarcane, the swaying palm siblings, the storm-tossed bures and lean-tos; the cows and bullocks, the fishermen fishing on horsebacks, the two rainbows over the mystic hills; and the lights of Nadi Airport where the drone of small planes is lost in the landing of a 747 from Sydney every evening around 7pm as farmers graze their cows; the smell of food, the sounds of Fijian Hindi in the streets and on the radio; the Bula smile, and the five-petalled frangipani in the left ear; the greenness of life in grass, the colourful leaves and flowers, the spirit of play in the muddy fields of rugby and soccer, and the soft rain falling across my childhood river.

There are also the mutilated remains of frogs and stray dogs on the pot-holed roads from the airport to hotels. One's fate can be mirrored in myriad images; one's history refracted in the puddles of a broken road. You'll not see it in Fiji hotels or Aussie ads for a holiday in Fiji. In fact you'd have scarcely seen any Fiji Indian faces in Air-Pacific-QANTAS magazines or ads.

But today Fiji's face is changing – and I believe for a better and fairer Fiji.

My village home is now deserted. The leased native land we grew up on has a few years to go before it is 'reserved' – 90% of all land is communally native-owned. Many farms lie fallow; many farmers, descendants of the indentured, were evicted during the tenure of the former government. One would have thought the CSR of Australia or the British and Australian Governments would have taken a little more care of the migrants who were brought to Fiji as labourers, and who served their 'girmits' – indenture agreements to these governments – with their lives.

Only PM Bainimarama's government has now given a new sense of belongingness to all Fiji citizens without the terrible discrimination of race and religion, colour or communal creed and global greed. It is a season of hope in Fiji after several seasons of anomy.

Some years ago I was invited to the NSW Parliament to a dinner to raise funds for the brutally deposed FLP's People's Coalition Govern-

ment. That evening I did say that when this Parliament was being built, doubtless with some money from CSR company's exploitations in Fiji, the children of the farmers, labourers, small shopkeepers in Fiji didn't have a single secondary school in the sugarcane growing areas. It was only in 1949 – 70 years after the arrival of first Indian workers – that an Indian mission, run by Vedantic monks, started a secondary school named after the most famous of them all: Swami Vivekananda. I studied in that school under a tin shed, by the Nandi River, across a *koro*. We were 88 in the class and spent our days playing cards on the back benches.

Levuka, the first colonial capital of Fiji, celebrated the founding of its first Public School for privileged children in 1879, 133 years ago, built just before the arrival of the indentured. It's not only the tyranny of distance but the tyranny of difference.

Senator Bob Carr, our new Foreign Minister, is a well-read person, especially in history. His thoughtlines may help us start a new and fresh era of meaningful relationships with Fiji. I am, like many others in Australia and Fiji, quite hopeful that Bob will initiate more imaginative policies and good politics towards Fiji.

My autobiography will, I hope, give the ideas of how writing can make injustices visible and audible. It may suggest ways of creating a sense of home for a nameless and countryless people. To me that is our one immense challenge to let thinking people in Australia know the truth on the streets of Suva away from the Island hotels. We cannot be tourists: we've to remap the world with words and images in our stories, in our writings. We're a Pacific people; as are Australians and New Zealanders, among others. We cannot be defined constantly by others and bear the brutalities of the colonial experience for imperial crimes.

I wrote a few years ago that the noblest epic from India really is this unique diaspora of the twice-banished people found from the South Pacific to South Africa. It is in their diaspora that Gandhi was shaped and sharpened. The 'coolie barrister' became a Mahatma in South Africa: the revolution that he started with a turban in Durban! Much more potent and protean than imperial armies.

Patrick White's first published novel *Happy Valley* in 1939 has an epigraph from Gandhi's essay on suffering. And Gandhi was killed in New Delhi, ten years before I arrived in that most palimpsests of cities. And how deeply White must have read Gandhi in the 1930s, when Gandhi was dismantling the largest empire with his *lathi*. The astonishing thing was that an Australian of genius was reading and thinking the thoughts of this half-naked fakir.

Only now I'm beginning to understand the significance of that first epigraph, not in the portrayal of the megalomaniac in *Voss* but in the shadow and understanding of *The Tree of Man*. Stan and Amy Parker remind me of my indentured grandparents. And their Great Silence must find breath and voice in our words, in our lives, in between the lines. I wish to write about that too. For as Patrick White wrote 50 years ago: There is the possibility that one may be helping to people a barely inhabited country with a race possessed of understanding. It is this quality of understanding we seek for our island country, too.

It is through literature that I went into politics, and it is to literature I've come back from politics with some sense of wholeness. I wish to interweave the resistance of literature and its healing power in the many journeys I've made, of love, politics and life generally.

Literature can work; let me give a brief example: I met Colonel Rabuka after 21 years in my office three years ago. I gave him four books, three of mine and one by Kavita entitled *Stolen Worlds*. A few days later Mr Rabuka wrote a remarkable piece in *The Fiji Times* asking for the nation's forgiveness for his unnecessary coups and their tragic consequences. He said he was affected by three lines in a poem of mine entitled *Easter*' 88 and dedicated to Timoci Bavadra. That – a dictator's extraordinary response to an ordinary poem – alone is a compelling reason to write my story.

I know nothing straight was ever made from the crooked branches of *The Tree of Man*; but I also know that I can continue to write in that tree's shade.

Fruitfully, I hope.

Vinaka, as we say in Fiji in Fijian!