

Address at the Launch of *Bearing Witness: Essays in Honour of Brij V. Lal, Canberra 1 August 2017*

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I discovered the world of the *festschrift* as an undergraduate when I happened upon *The Critical Spirit: Essays in Honour of Herbert Marcuse*, edited by Kurt Wolff and Barrington Moore. At the time, it seemed a boon to a lazy and ambitious undergraduate, who was working on an essay reviewing *One Dimensional Man*. Within days I realised how dangerous these things are, as the hours passed and I grew ever more engrossed in the essays in *The Critical Spirit*. When I should have been writing my essay I found myself in the library, exploring and following Marcuse's other works and those that influenced him, as introduced to me by *The Critical Spirit*. It was not only Marcuse's work that entranced me but his life and times – more hours in the library and not sitting at my typewriter. In the end, I got the essay in on time, after pulling one of my trademark all-nighters. And yes, it was full of pretentious intellectual and culture references culled from those many hours prowling the shelves of the UQ library. In the end I got a pretty good mark – but it had been a close-run thing.

Ever since, reading *festschriften* has been for me a sort of guilty pleasure; a fast-track introduction to a great scholar's life and work. The really good *festschrift* is the true friend of the intellectual poseur – the person who believes he (and yes I use the gendered pronoun deliberately here) can speak with authority about an author whose primary works he's never read. I just escape this charge, because I have read Brij's work and benefited greatly from having done so for 30 years now.

In fact I first came across Brij's clear prose and unfaltering judgments as an undergraduate while studying the first Fiji coup in 1987. I remember, in those pre-internet days, dog-eared copies of Brij's articles being shared around an undergraduate study group preparing essays on the coup. Inevitably, as the subsequent coups happened, (thankfully in the

internet age) I would google Brij's name to access his dependably lucid and searching analyses of what had happened

Ladies and gents, *Bearing Witness* is a really, really good *festschrift*, and for reasons that go beyond what I've just said.

It is a dangerous *festschrift*, as *The Critical Spirit* was. It is the sort of book that once you pick it up, it drags you in and fascinates you to the end, and then sends you off to the internet and the library chasing down intriguing further reading.

But most importantly, it is dangerous because of its subject matter.

Bearing Witness is simultaneously the story of a remarkable man, a remarkable life journey, and a varied, rich and transformative set of intellectual, moral and cultural contributions to the world.

Brij the man comes across in *Bearing Witness* in so many senses.

The first thing that strikes you is the enormous affection felt for him by his colleagues, as evidenced by the poems written by Tessa Morris-Suzuki and Robert Cribb.

There is also his service to this institution, both in a formal and an informal sense.

Brij, who co-edited a book of essays on ANU's very own singular Coombs building, was so much a part of the deep culture of RSPAS and CAP. He recounts in his interviews reproduced in *Bearing Witness* the culture of sharing ideas and working together on common issues. What he's too modest to mention is how much he himself was a major part of this culture: interested, engaging, highly collaborative, dazzlingly well-read. And perhaps only such a person could have had the sort of life journey recounted in BW.

Born in rural Labasa to illiterate parents, Brij's is a story of a restless intellect, great passion, dollops of good luck, and a ferocious appetite for grinding hard work

Of course there was the magic of the written word: literatures and manifestoes from. His reflections of his early studies at USP, at UBC, and then his arrival at ANU give us fascinating snapshots of those institutions at those times.

And of course the story of Brij's ongoing entanglement with the politics of his place of birth, as it succumbed to the agonies of successive coups and growing inter-ethnic and communal antagonisms. What stands out from these pages are his moral clarity, his courage, but also his deep pain at being cut off from his homeland.

And through this remarkable life journey was a scholar, an intellectual, an aesthete whose writings were truly profound and transformative

Brij's intellectual contributions can be clustered around at least three

themes, and his contributions in any one of these three themes would be sufficient to mark him as a major scholar – let alone all three.

At the outset, Brij was a quantitative historian, whose painstaking statistical mining of colonial immigration data became the basis of his PhD thesis, first book, and an enduring masterwork called *Girmitiyas: Origins of the Fiji Indians*. Of course, that book and the papers and articles that followed were so much more than dry statistics; the statistics establish a rock solid foundation for the rich communal histories that were the lived lives of Indian migrants communities in Fiji

Another theme of course was Brij's deep analyses of Fijian politics, and his enduring analyses of the causes of Fiji's political instability. These are works of political science, history, constitutional analysis and anthropology – if I can sum them up in one term, it'd probably be political ethnography. Glancing back through them one can't help but be struck by their freshness and immediacy but also by their enduring importance.

Finally there's Brij's fiction – wonderful evocative fiction such as *Mr Tusli's Store* that Tessa writes of so beautifully in the volume. Surely Brij has demonstrated to us that there are many ways of telling important stories; and perhaps it will be through his fiction that his enduring contributions will live on most vitally

I congratulate the Editors Doug Monro and Jack Corbett for a truly great festschrift for a truly great scholar and figure in the ANU community.

Brij, for those of us who inherit your legacy, you leave us with a gigantic challenge – how can we continue to build Asian and Pacific history to be of a stature befitting the giants who went before?

Speaker:

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