

*Conversations: Occasional Writing from the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies* 2:1, June 2001, edited by Brij V Lal. Canberra: The Australian National University Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies. ISSN 1444-0849; 122 pages, figures. A\$16.37 including postage.

A welcome concept informs the biannual journal *Conversations*, which, in the words of editor Brij V Lal, was “established to provide scholars in the Research School of Pacific and Asian Studies at The Australian National University an opportunity to publish non-academic material—fiction, poetry, autobiography, visual material—that intersected with the School’s thematic concerns focused on the Asia-Pacific region” (4). Were this all that the journal accomplished, it would be exemplary; academia would certainly be a healthier place were there more outlets (and incentives) for scholars to express themselves and address each other outside of their disciplinary modes and circles. But *Conversations* has, so to speak, opened its pages wider, extending its ambitions for conversation beyond the original sense of a local, community-oriented forum, and soliciting writers in the region, broadly conceived, to contribute in building “a premier literary journal with catholic content and diverse readership” (4).

Judging from the third issue, *Conversations* is well on its way toward accomplishing its aims (though its contributors as yet remain Australia-based). It is a distinctive small journal, handsomely produced, elegantly

illustrated, and varied in its offerings, which are divided into five sections: poetry (Brij V Lal, Ruth Saovana-Spriggs, Roland Leach); a collaborative “artist’s book” (Jan Brown and Ian Templeman, with an introduction by Dianne Fogwell); an appreciative essay on the Donald Friend diaries as self-consciously literary (Paul Hetherington), which includes facsimiles of line and ink drawings from the diaries; fiction (Jan Borrie); and autobiography (Roderic Lacey, Marsali Mackinnon, John Thompson, and Brij V Lal). What joins these works, if any generalization can hold, is a sense of measured emotional engagement of issues of location and dislocation, most notably in the settler’s relation to place and history.

The poetry section suggests the liberal scope, or catholicity, with which the region is being conversed about in the journal, bringing together Lal’s “Fare Well” to the Fiji of his youth (a dual assertion of love of birthplace and culture and commitment to Fiji’s faring well, expressed through memories at parting); Saovana-Spriggs’s heartfelt complaint about cultural “ambush” by greedy and repressive governmental policies toward the poor in Bougainville; and Leach’s evocation of the displacements of violent history in Peru and the uncanny, durable ruggedness of the Galapagos Islands. The “fiction” and artist’s book are likewise explorations of moments of disconnection—if inward ones—from community, the natural world, or both. Jan Borrie’s prose-poem-like “Skin” expresses the “skin hunger” that comes of aloneness, sharpened by the recognition

that “We have always lived in tribes, how can we now live this way?” (69). The artist’s book is a two-handed composition, with eerie prints of ravens accompanied by “Raven,” a poem by Ian Templeman, which explores the interchange between the artists and “a particular raven” that has impressed itself on artistic consciousness, provoking a desire for interspecies conversation. In a reversal, the raven, who gazes—by turns quizzically, indifferently, or sternly—at the reader through the pictorial and verbal texts, conveys the strangeness of humans to birds; the poem in particular, in its ravening attempts to know birdness, presses up against the sense that bird logic resists human logic, including the perhaps impudent dream of imagining a way out of the enclosures of humanoid consciousness.

The final section brings together four quite different forms of creative nonfiction: Lacey’s recollection of the absence created within a sensitive young boy, Alex, by the death of his elderly father during World War II; Mackinnon’s account of an oral history project in Fiji to gather the stories of an aging generation of “Part-Europeans,” who experienced a double estrangement from white settlers and Fijians; Thompson’s reflections on “Memory, Place, and People” in a remembrance of the legacy of the historian Geoffrey Serle (written in a seminar with Greg Denning on “Performing Cross-Culturally”); and Brij V Lal’s account of his education at Labasa Secondary.

This last essay gives an intimate

portrait of the socio-intellectual climate of the school and its villager-students in pre-independence Fiji, as well as crisp, partial profiles of Vijay Mishra and Subramani as young teachers. Lal is particularly deft in allowing us to see the early dedication, styles, and innovativeness of these figures, who have become important literary scholars: “Vijay was intellectually agile, cool and instinctive whereas Subra seemed more scholarly, brooding, and withdrawn” (114). Their hunger to teach meets the drive of the boys to learn, and Lal renders with humor and fine detail the aspirations and working conditions of the select handful of boys who left home to receive a rigorous education as “the hope of a generation emerging out of the shadows of indenture” (97). If the rigorously colonial education they received—political consciousness and a sense of the value of local sociopoetics would come later—opened the world to them, it gradually made them feel more like strangers at home. What Lal emphasizes with sharp tenderness, however, is the girmitiya-descended generation’s overriding feelings of possibility for social mobility and determination to succeed as embodied in young students. That *Conversations* is edited by one of those pupils adds testimony to the far-reaching effects a remarkable institution produced.

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