Of great love and immense hate: The ambivalence of the other in a local/global school- 1988 - 1998

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Abstract

In recent times, and in times of insurgent globalisation, modern notions of identity and with them, conceptions of essential and primordially defined difference seem to have fallen apart. Identity is understood as post-modern, a ‘moveable feast’ of ever-in-process, negotiated differences. The examination of the material and conceptual terms and conditions that position these logics otherwise suggests that these arguments remain tied within conceptions of ourselves made through the ambivalent conceptions of others. In this paper, I trace these paradoxical relations as they are represented in a particular local Melbourne school at each end of a decade and at a time of increasing demographic change and global transformation. Teachers and parents understood and defined their identities and the identities of others in ways that were increasingly fragmented, changing and complex. Beneath these changing patterns, they continued to define others as different and as not us in ways that were ambivalent and extreme. These negotiations took place differently in recent years as the definitions of essential notions of identity changed and became more complex to define. Nevertheless, they continued as ambivalent stories of otherness that transversed the tortuous spectrum between orientalism and nativism speculated upon in post-colonial writings.
As the first-born-successfully-white-man-in-the-family-line I woke to a terrible pressure, particularly upon my nose and forehead, and thought I was blind. In fact, the truth was there was nothing to see, except – right in front of my eyes – a whiteness which was surface only, with no depth, and very little variation. (Kim Scott, *Benang: From the heart*, 1999, p.11)

In his autobiography, *Benang*, Kim Scott examines his position as the ‘first-born-successfully-white-man-in-the-family-line’. It is a deeply disturbing book in which Scott documents day-to-day decisions made by Australian governments and public officials and places them in relation to his particular experience as an Aboriginal Australian person. Scott’s ‘whiteness’ becomes a metaphor, which he interprets from three levels. In the first, the mirrored image of his almost-white-face shows nothing of the horrible pressure of the life lived behind it. In the second, his white persona shows nothing of his identity as an Indigenous person. In the third this ‘whiteness’ is surface only, has no depth, leaves nothing to see, but as he goes on to explain in the book, comes to mean everything.

This paper describes the pastiche of tropes that make up the convoluted, decentred yet disturbingly material notion of the stereotype. It examines the terms and conditions of social conduct, rules and judgements that define the boundaries of the threatening and disturbing from the acceptable and legitimate. Recent literatures of cultural studies, post-colonialism and whiteness writings suggest that in contemporary Western societies an omnipresent and unmarked us locates and knows its own identity against the always-out-of-reach and not-quite-known-other who we-are-not. Ghasson Hage’s (1998) writing, particularly, explores how others and selves are made visible and located within Australian national spaces. These debated logics and their material consequences took place within times of immense change. More recently these logics have taken place within a social context undergoing great demographic and global change. Altered flows of markets, people, communications, technologies and risks mean that the borders and integrity of nations seems changed and disrupted. More over, the most taken-for-grant notions – time and space – but also conceptions of identity particularly raced and enculturated identity, seem fluid and to fall apart. Hall’s (1996) notion is that conceptions of identity, as it is understood in its modern form as essentially differentiated and primordially constituted has been increasingly understood as post-modern, changing, fragmented and contingent – a moveable feast. His argument is that these changing and conditional debates are nevertheless reliant on normalised notions that, no matter how temporarily, position identities within and without of communities.

In other of my writings, I take seriously Patti Lather’s (1991) suggestion that these normalised ways of understanding and behaving must be spelt out: the structures of its argument made clear; the conditions of

1 See Chapter Two.
its terms defined; and the conceptual organisation of its representation located and problematised. I take note of these strictures and attempt out spell out the terms and conditions that underpin these discussions as they make up the normalised ways people talk about what it is to be one-of-us or one-of-them within an Australian context. My project was to ask teachers and parents at one particular Melbourne state secondary school to speak about race and ethnic relations in 1988 and in 1998, and as that school was considerably changed by population change and insurgent globalisation. I began by examining way that teachers and parents spoke about their own identities in each of these years. In fact, and as predicted in the literature, few of my respondents or myself found this an easy task. Instead I found that our conversations quickly drifted to the logic and conditions of being an-other. Of great love and immense hate’, explores the condition of being within an-other ethnic group. In 1988 members of ethnic groups are defined in terms that are extreme and contradictory. ‘They’ are one thing or another, wonderful or dreadful, brilliant or problematic with ‘no-in-between’. In 1998, teachers and parents continue to define ethnic groups in extreme and contradictory terms even as the essential and concrete categories that define these groups fall apart. The paper has four sections. In the first section, ‘Speaking of self’ I describe conversations with teachers and parents as they tried to describe ways they understood normalised versions of self-identity. I argue that these conversations quickly came to define selfness but otherness. The second section, ‘Other narrations’ I describe recent literatures of whiteness and post-colonialism and their notion that these ambivalent stories constitute disrupted notions of selfness through otherness. The third section, ‘Of great love and immense hate’ describes the terms and conditions of these stories as they were discussed by teachers and parents in one particular Melbourne secondary school in 1988 and 1998 and the final and forth section examines the importance of these observations for the ways that conversations about race and ethnic relations might be understood in a local and increasingly globalised school context.

**Speaking of self**

In 1988, I do not find material that discusses what it means to be one-of-us. It does not occur to me to ask the question. Nor do teachers and parents think to discuss their self-identity. Instead, I have collected large amounts of material where teachers and parents describe other ethnic and raced groups. These stories are disrupted by only a very few stories where teachers and parents tell me that they are not properly included within the school community.

In 1998, I too stumble as I ask Bill Kelly to describe his identity:

> I was wondering, whether you could tell me a bit about your own … How you see your own sense of identity?

Kelly’s response is typical.

> I have no trouble, at all. I don’t … I’m more than happy with Asian kids coming in.

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1 See for instance Dwyer (1997)
Asian people or Asian background, coming into Australia. I enjoy the … As a group, they seem to be wanting to fit in. I live in an area where, none of my neighbours are Asian background, but High Glen has an Asian population in it. There’s a … I can not see how people can have a problem with Asian people, to be ho … but I deal with Asian kids and that’s different, perhaps and then. I don’t have any threat from them. I don’t feel any threat from them … They’re Australian kids, they’ve … a lot of them have a lot values, that I’ve had. You don’t look at them as kids. You, just, look at them as students to teach, them you enjoy teaching. (Kelly, 1998, ll. 537 – 549)

Kelly begins to answer my question but cannot finish the sentence. The focus of his discussion however, is not his self-identity, but his relation with ‘them’. He understands himself as the perpetrator of these relations. ‘I am more than happy’, ‘I enjoy’, ‘I live’, he tells me. His first sentence ‘I have no trouble’ at first refers to his ability to speak about himself. At the same time, it refers to the nature of his relationship with other ethnic groups. He does not ‘have any threat from them’. The object of his conversation remains those ‘Asian kids’ whom he is happy to allow in, who ‘fit in’, who are no problem, and who are not threatening. They ‘have a lot of values, that I’ve had’. The description of the ‘I’ who has these values, or even what these values are, remains undefined.

Parents Gail Dreske and Julie Pink give a more direct response. When I ask:

I wonder if you ever think about that? What it means, how you would see yourself as Australian, compared to. I know that’s a really hard one. I didn’t ask that one ten years ago.

They reply:

But we are very different to the rest, our beliefs, our way of life. It’s so different. We are … I think we are more loving and we give more for nothing and we don’t expect anything back, like, we give our time. Time, I think, is very important, in that school, because … I’m not racist …

No.

It’s just that I think the others, don’t think they shouldn’t have to do anything for the school. They think it should be the government … Sometimes, I get angry, even Kay, “Well, you’re a parent too. Why can’t you do it?” Any time, I would think, come across. (Dreske, Pink, 1998, ll. 656 – 664)

Once again, I can hardly ask the question. I apologise, explain myself, start my question again. Unlike Bill Kelly, Dreske and Pink do begin to try to define who they are but like my question their description is made in comparison with other ethnic groups. ‘We are very different to the rest’, they explain, ‘our beliefs, our way of life’. ‘It’s so different’. In the second part of the extract, Dreske and Pink are even more direct. They ‘don’t think they shouldn’t have to do anything for the school’. They think it should be the Government’. By inference, Dreske and Pink’s community are not like that. They work hard to help themselves and the school. They are angry (resentful) at the way ‘the others’ do not help.³ Why can’t they ‘do it’? Dreske asks in exasperation. ‘It’ refers to the relation being defined here. ‘It’ is what Dreske and

³ The discussion of the way these kinds of resentment have become crucial part of Australian discourse has been the focus of several recent texts. See particularly Brett (1997).
Pink do and which ‘the others’ do not do. ‘It’ is what is so different and can’t be overcome. It is a relation that is not only difficult to talk about but in some way illicit and should not be spoken about. ‘I’m not racist’, they tell me, ‘It is just that …’.

Other narrations

When I ask parents and teachers to tell me about their identity as Australian, I find it difficult to ask the question, and they find it difficult to answer. Teachers and parents like Bill Kelly, Gail Dreske and Julie Pink do not define their self-identity. Instead their discussion immediately turns to the relation that exists between themselves and other ethnic groups. The observation that those who are ‘white’ and understand themselves to be part-of-us find it difficult to talk about their own identity is well documented in the literature. Suzuki, asking a similar question from an American student, elicited the response:

I wish I had something to contribute, but I don’t know much about my background. In fact, I don’t even have a culture. (Suzuki, 1991 in Giroux, 1994)

The observation that teachers and parents describe their own identity through their discussions about others is crucial to the argument I am making here. It begins to explain the nature of the ‘it’ relation which teachers allude to but which remains undescribed. It examines how teachers and parents speak of this relation in conversations about multiculturalism rather than racism. Finally, it begins to explain how some people remain uncomfortable and not properly included within the community. It is this dualistic relation between those who belong as one-of-us and those who are one-of-them needs to be looked at more carefully.

In her novel, *Playing in the dark* Morrison (1992) argues that at the base of Western identities is not a sense of whiteness but the encoding and embodiment of blackness suggesting that:

Just as the formation of the nation necessitated coded language and purposeful restriction to deal with the racial disingenuousness and moral frailty at its heart, so too did the literature, whose founding characteristics extend into the twentieth century, reproduce the necessity for codes and restriction. Through significant and underscored omissions, startling contradictions, heavily nuanced conflicts, through the way writers peopled their work with the signs and bodies of this presence – one can see that a real or fabricated Africanist presence was crucial to their sense of Americaness. And it shows. (Toni Morrison, *Playing in the dark*, 1992)

Morrison’s position is that an African presence is overwhelmingly encoded and embodied within the day-to-day of contemporary American society. The other, in this case the African American person, becomes seen only in relation to the norm that defines a white American sense of self. As such he or she becomes neither defined as no more nor less than the stereotype that comes to represent his or her otherness. Her crucial insight is that it is not others but selves that are defined by this relation. The final part to this argument is that these conditions are made silent, spoken about in ‘coded language’; with ‘racial
disingenuousness’ and with a ‘frailty of heart’. White people do not speak of themselves. Nor do they examine their relation to the African presence, which in a very real way defines them. They remain as hooks (1995) argues, ‘unaware’, even as these representations spell out the extent of their privileged relation to black people.

Recent literatures of whiteness emphasise that it is not the representation of blackness but the conditions of its narration that form the centre of the analytic task. Contemporary Western conversation remains focused on ambivalent discussions about others (and in Australia as in America this is often to contemplate the unsettling presence of blackness). The significance of this dialogue is to trace out the limitations of the unexamined norm, which conceptualises non-blackness-whiteness. In an Australian context I am not talking predominantly about white and black but about a certain kind of white against otherness. A central focus for my project was to examine whether and how the logics of this kind of ‘whiteness’ condition the ways that ethnic and race relations are embodied and enunciated within Melbourne schools. There are several stages to my development of this concept. The first concerns Morrison’s argument that in contemporary western societies concepts of selves are made through the conception of what we are not. This has been a crucial point within whiteness writings. As Rey Chow puts it:

To the extent that it is our own limit that we encounter when we encounter another, all these intellectuals can do is not more than render the other as the negative of what they are and what they do. (Chow, 1993, p.34)

Chow’s argument is that the gaze of the white self is in some way pornographic. The study of the other is both its obsession but also that which it can’t quite look at. Robert Young (1990; 1995), in commenting on this suggestion, explains that: In racial stereotyping the colonial power produces the colonised as a fixed reality, which is at once an ‘other’ and yet entirely visible and knowable’. To define the other – to know the other – is not only to tell their story, it is to make the other as it is to be represented. It is to locate the other so that it can be appropriated and controlled. These claims ‘to know’ as I noted in the last section, are ones made within the ambivalent protocols of fantasy and desire, as the coloniser unable to find the other, represents him or her in a fluctuation between its consideration as one thing and its opposite. It is an impulse to control, which is disrupted, slipping, and incomplete. Nevertheless, it is in the first instance mapped out as part of the orientalist project to locate and to know others. As Said puts it:

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5 Most recently there have been a number of studies that trace the nature of whiteness as a phenomenon of contemporary western society. The conception of otherness, as it is understood in contemporary societies (and discussions by intellectuals are often no exception) are understood through the conception of what we are not and what we do not do. The definition of white in Australia has changed markedly as Italians, Jews, and other peoples from Middle-Eastern and southern Mediterranean countries have variously been classed as Black, as Asian and as not-white. The concept of Asian, and therefore of not-white has been a particularly changing one, including those peoples who come from the Middle East, India, South-East Asia, China and what was eastern USSR.

6 From now on I will use the term ‘whiteness’ without inverted commas.
Orientalism is not a mere political subject matter or field which is reflected passively by culture, scholarship or institution ... but also a whole series of ‘interests’ which by such means as scholarly discovery, philological reconstruction, psychological analysis, landscape and sociological description, it not only creates but also maintains; it is, rather than expresses, a certain will or intention to understand, in some cases to control, manipulate, even to incorporate, what is a manifestly different (or alternative or novel) world; it is above all, a discourse … [that] is produced and exists in an uneven exchange with various kinds of power … Indeed, my real argument is that orientalism is and does not simply represent a considerable dimension of modern political-intellectual culture and as such has less to do with the Orient than it does with ‘our’ world. (Said, 1991, p.12)

Said’s argument is that miscellaneous and unequally empowered individual and institutional practices and interests create and maintain what it is to be in ‘our’ world. The other, the orient, becomes the creation that exists as a way of formulating what is in essence our world made in comparison to their world. Said’s second point is that the condition ‘white’ is in the first place unaware and invisible. It is within the power of those speaking from a position of whiteness to define the dimensions of the map that underpins the ways that day-to-day worlds in contemporary Western societies are understood. Within this mapping process whiteness takes on the appearance of normalcy. It comes to represent the universal condition of being and working within the world. ‘Whiteness’ comes to be seen as ‘that what is’. That which ‘it is not’ becomes that which is not white. The privileges conferred by these mappings are equally taken for granted and therefore in some way invisible. Whiteness becomes understood as ‘having no culture’, about being accessible to everyone and as the condition of the normal. The ‘taken-for-grantedness’ of this whiteness condition leaves it in a sense undefined. Thus whiteness seems to be nothing, even as it is in a sense everything. These metaphoric plays are not just conceptual but are in the first place corporeal as they are firmly embodied and enunciated in the conception of white. In Richard Dwyer’s (1997) analysis narratives of white set out the normative conditions of what white people are, how white bodies are to be maintained, reproduce and interbreed. They define the ways that relationships can take place between white people and others. In a world that is material and not merely symbolic they define the nature of the physical places and spaces, which can be inhabited, how and by whom. They shape the spaces we can and can’t inhabit, our physical landscapes, the schools we go to, the neighbourhoods in which we live, the friends we make, and the occupations we do.

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8 Dwyer (1997) in particular, traces the ways that white has to take on particular meaning in contemporary worlds. White has become a conception, which has come to mean cleanliness, lightness, and translucence and is placed in relational opposition to blackness, darkness, opaqueness and dirtiness. Christian doctrine and motifs of being European interweave with these tropes that reconceptualize white as commensurate to Godliness, spirituality, purity, asexuality, rationality. They place it in absolute contrast to the demonic and primordial and to that which is overly abundant, emotional, and sensual.

9 See, for instance, Cohen (1997), Dwyer (1997), Ellsworth (1997), Fine (1998), Frankenberg (1997), Roman (1997), Weis and Fine (1993) and in Australia see, for example, McLean (1998) and Hage (1998). There have also been a number of studies that focus on schools particularly. See, for instance, Sleeter and McLaren(1995).
These are the relational spaces that Bhabha describes as ones of hybridity. They describe the construction of cultural authority within conditions of political antagonism or inequity whereby there:

Opens up a space for translation: a place of hybridity, figuratively speaking, where the construction of a political object that is new, neither the one nor the other, properly alienates our political expectations and changes, as it must, the very forms of our recognition of the moment of politics. (Bhabha, 1994, p.25)

Bhabha is not proposing hybridity to mean the simple blending of cultures suggested by contemporary theories of integration and multiculturalism. Rather, he argues that attempts by colonial discourses to totally appropriate the other are always slipping, ceaselessly displaced and incomplete. Bhabha’s argument is that the places of in-between are ones of ambivalence and instabilities of power. Hybrid strategies are strategies of resistance that open new spaces of negotiation. Ambivalences work within discourses of the coloniser, so that authority is undermined even as it is asserted. The ‘mimic man’ becomes a person like the coloniser but not quite. The native remains only a partial creation of the coloniser and the coloniser, seemingly unequivocal in his power, finds the native still there, fraught with menace. The coloniser’s discourses, seemingly authoritative, reverse the very process of domination which they seek to replicate so that both coloniser and colonised remain locked into movements of destabilisation neither of them can contain. The outcome of this ambivalent relation is that the other becomes both the focus of the coloniser’s obsession but also the locus of its disavowal, in an attempt at mastery which is always asserted but at the same time slipping and never complete so that:

The demand of identification – that is, to be for an Other – entails the representation of the subject in the differentiating order of otherness. Identification, as we inferred from the preceding illustrations, is always the return of an image of identity that bears the mark of splitting in the Other place from which it comes. (Bhabha, 1994, p.45)

To discuss others, Bhabha argues, is to build a stereotypical fantasy of the other as a relation to self. It is to build an identity of difference, which is always in excess, is more than or less than, leaves ‘no in-between’. The production of the stereotype as a representation of the other contains within its logic, its own demise. Its attempt at mastery is always slipping, displaced and incomplete as the other remains never quite known.

In a recent book, by Stereotyping Michael Pickering both admires and critiques Bhabha’s notion arguing that in providing a counterbalance to Said’s totalising analysis overlooks the effective nature of these stereotypical positioning. He asks whether the other, though unsettling to that which is white, can indeed provide a strategic reversal to that process of domination. He points out the concrete terribleness of these discourses where by

The definition offered at the outset was made in he light of this critical difference between ‘self’ and other’ in the stereotyping process, for stereotypes operate as distancing strategies for placing other in such a manner that will serve to point up and perpetuate certain normative boundaries of social conduct, tales and judgements separating what is seen as threatening and disturbing from what is regarded as acceptable and legitimate (Pickering, 2001, p.174).
Pickering’s definition contemplates the harsh materiality of Bhabha’s notion, ‘hybridity’, whereby the self, no how tentatively and how settling and incomplete its comprehension, understands itself though ambivalent notions of what it is not. It is in the alienating and disturbing notion of the stereotype that the terribleness of this dialectic can be understood.

Of great love and immense hate

To exemplify my argument, I describe two pastiches of tropes described by parents and teachers – that of ‘The Asian’ and that of ‘The Moslem’ student – as they were articulated in one particular Melbourne state secondary school in 1988 and again in 1998.

The ambivalence of the other – 1988

Stories of others as pathological and as unable to know, as we do, how to treat their women, look after their families and bring up their children, are repeated again and again. In Helen Brown’s story the field of narration is that of Greek, Turkish, and Middle-Eastern girls:

Yes, if they wear provocative clothing and get into trouble, nobody is going to protect them. A lot of Greek and Turkish, Middle Eastern girls, behave with a great deal more, sexually, provocative actions, because they believe that nobody is going to, particularly if they have older brothers, no one is going to rape them, or molest them. And they look at life, as all sugar and almonds and white brides and they write in a Mills and Boonish type way. (Brown, 1988, ll. 285 – 303)

They will be better communicators, the boys will be, particularly certain types of ethnic boys who believe that males can do as they please and the females … those boys will leave those classes with more respect for women's rights and the girls will have more understanding of why their brothers and fathers and uncles, sometimes, appear to be playing the heavy-handed personae, because they think that it is their right. (Brown, 1988, ll. 230 – 258)

Helen Brown complains about the ways that Turkish, Greek and Middle-Eastern woman and men behave. Girls ‘wear provocative clothing’ and are sexually provocative in their actions. Their place as temptress is both purposeful, they know ‘they have older brothers’ to protect them and naïve as ‘they look at life, as all sugar and almonds’. They suffer the advances of their ‘heavy-handed’ brothers, fathers and uncles without really understanding what happens to them. Brothers, fathers and uncles are ‘heavy handed personae’ who are not only disrespectful of women’s rights but abusive of them. Their right to do so is enshrined in points of view, which allow ethnic boys to believe that ‘males can do as they please’ with ‘females’. The ethnic woman is also contemptible; the repressed victim of male violence; bashed and violated. Daughters strut around irresponsible, sexually provocative, repressed and yet quite inconsiderate that their task is to protect themselves.

The notion of ethnic groups as dysfunctional is particularly persistent in discussions about the Moslem woman. Once again the narration begins with a description of the pathological condition of the ethnic home. Bill Kelly tells me that:
I have noticed in some of the other groups who are coming out now. I must say that some of the Moslem boys that we are getting, the Afghans and so on are different in terms of, I think again it is probably the society that they come from. In terms of their attitudes in terms of … and they have to be dealt with in a special way and that’s fine.

Q. Can you extend on that?

A. Sure – Just – It is not entirely – It’s more specific – We haven’t got enough of them. There’s about – the few that we have got out here – I can give you one example with a guy and his sister and I have been to India and Kashmir where I have seen Muslim society where the females are pushed terribly into the background and everything is kind of the male side of the family and he has just got his freedom and it was just noticeable and the female was in the background and the male was extremely pushy and demanding.

Q. And you can see that happening here?

A. This is this case here and I won't generalise from the case where this was taken, but it would be nice if it isn't going to be the case. Because as I said, I don't think that is the way that Australian society is to go – that sort of importance of people and so on but we will wait and see what happens as more of these people come out. (Kelly, 1988, ll. 411 – 433)

The ethnic woman, this time the Muslim woman, now the woman from India, Pakistan and Afghanistan is pushed to the background, by the pushy, demanding ethnic, this time the Muslim man. These ‘other groups’ are arrogant in their difference. They ‘have to be dealt with in a special way’. The females ‘are pushed terribly into the background’. The male has ‘got his freedom’ and he is ‘extremely pushy and demanding’. The terms ‘female’ and ‘male’, ‘these people’ further separates them from the civilisation and humanity of the Australian society that should not go this way. The relation of their behavior to the way in which we would behave is reflected in the last part of my conversation with Kelly. ‘You can see that happening here’, I ask. ‘We will wait and see what happens as more of these people come out’. Kelly replies.

The contradictory nature of these descriptions becomes most noticeable when I speak with my respondents about what it means to be ‘Asian’. Tracy Cunningham describes to me the dysfunctional nature of the Asian home:

We have one Year 11 student, Tam. She is here with her father. Her three younger sisters have moved out of the area, but stay with the school, because they know friends and teachers – security – travel a long way to school which is actually out of character, because the Indo-Chinese do not like travelling to work or school, they like to live nearby.

Tam went through, the school, getting straight As, but is also Mother to her sisters, housewife to Father etc. Father had been in the army and imprisoned, by Communists, and beaten and when he got out of the army he tried, at least, half a dozen times to escape. Lost everything in bribes of gold, bargain not fulfilled. Finally could only get half the family out. Mother and older sister still there. I have helped write letters, re Sponsorship.

The motivation is just remarkable. You could eat your dinner off the floor in their house. The house and the garden are lovely. The Father had a job and lost it. He helps, but there are traditional things that men wouldn't do. We, actually, took Tam, with the family, sailing – don’t usually take students, but Tam is special. You have to be very careful about taking students. (Cunningham, 1988, ll. 150 – 171)
Tam is ‘out of character’. Her story is made in opposition to the ways most Indo-Chinese behave, to the ways ‘they like to live’. Cunningham finds her taken-for-granted notions of a proper home turned upside down. Tam is the perfect ‘housewife’: ‘you could eat your dinner off the floor’, and ‘the house and the garden are lovely’. However, her mother is absent, and her father ineffectual: he does not have a job; and he doesn’t help properly in the house. His ineptitude is a product of his traumatic past and because ‘there are traditional things that men wouldn’t do’. Despite her problematic home-life ‘Tam is special’. She is ‘getting straight A’s’ and her ‘motivation is just remarkable’. Tracy’s narration shifts from the specific story of Tam, to notions about these students generally who are usually not like that. ‘You have to be very careful about taking students’ she tells me.

Carl Davies describes the dangers he knows about in relation to a second trop, that of the ‘Asian gang’.

I had a boy in the other day who was saying he had a few problems and one of them was that he was being hassled by a gang of Vietnamese kids and he was saying ... He was Greek ... and he was saying that a lot of the kids don’t – I was going to say don’t like – but I should say are a bit wary of Indo-Chinese kids because they feel that if you cross one of them they will gang up on you. Now I don't know if that is true but that certainly was what he believed and he knew that there was a group of Indo-Chinese kids led by one kid who was from a different school who was after him and he knew that one day they would catch up with him and bash him. He wasn't particularly worried about it. Yeah they certainly do have their – what those other cultures are capable of doing and how they are going to react to contact. (Davies, 1988, ll. 370 – 393)

Davies doesn’t quite know if there are Asian gangs but he has his information from one of his students. ‘Indo-Chinese kids’ were often ‘after him’. ‘One day they would catch up with him and bash him’. The narration shifts from the story he has heard from ‘a boy in the other day’ to his own perceptions ‘of what I should say’. His final remarks shift his story, to the general ‘they certainly do have’ their gangs. Gang-members themselves become superhuman. ‘The gang of Vietnamese kids’ becomes the ‘Indo-Chinese kids’ you have to be ‘wary of’. By the end of the paragraph they are ‘those other cultures’ generally who are extraordinarily dangerous as one never knows what they ‘are capable of doing and how they are going to react’.

An alternative trope describes ‘Asians’ as passive. ‘Asians’, Tom Paterson explains, are a quiet shy race, grateful for small things, not very able to help themselves. It is, he reminisces,

A real shame ... feel sorry for them because they’re really genuine ... There’s others like Indians that have been very good you know taken everything in. It’s very hard but I think with the Asians. I just feel that there are, just that little bit of language barriers that keeps them from speaking. Also I think they’re very shy race. I feel it’s going to take them a long while to ever get to a stage where they can get up and really speak with authority, confidence because I think they’re still very frightened people but they’re very nice people the ones I’ve spoken to I’ve always gone up and spoken to them and try to make them feel at home. This is the whole thing to try and build their confidence. I’ve had a friend recently. He saw this car break down just down the side of the school. In a car and he stopped ... He said, ‘Are you alright?’. He said, ‘I’ve run out of petrol’. My friend said, “Look come on”. He said, “I’ll take you down and get you some”. So he took him
down to Southgate and got him petrol and brought him back. And that man was basically crying. He said, “You are the first person that’s ever spoken to me or treated me like a human”. (Paterson, 1988, ll. 24 – 35)

Paterson differentiates himself from many others who do not behave well towards Asians. He himself has ‘always gone up and spoken to them and tri[ed] to make them feel at home’. What he does is ‘try and build their confidence’. Patterson explains that he ‘feels sorry for’ Asians. He thinks that they are ‘very nice’, ‘really genuine’. However, they are generally ‘a very shy race’, ‘very frightened people’, unable to speak for themselves and silenced by their lack of language. These cultural, perhaps even biological inhibitions ‘keeps them from speaking’. Paterson’s role as saviour is exemplified by his friend’s act of kindness. ‘The man was basically crying’ as a consequence. ‘You are the first person that’s ever spoken to me’ or who has ‘treated me like a human’ his friend is told.

Juxtaposed against these images of the Asian as pathological and dangerous, timid and ineffectual is the conceptual image of the brilliant Asian student. As Barry Houston explains:

They work extremely hard. Like this Cambodian boy, at the end of last year, who had no schooling in Cambodia. After 3 years, he did HSC and got into Medicine, under special consideration. The Chinese and the Vietnamese, even more so than Cambodians – They work very hard ... Mostly Cambodians, Vietnamese, Chinese at present. Mostly work hard, old-fashionedness, politeness – teachers love them. Our past Principal was delighted, because our HSC results were out of sight. Get straight As in Math and Science, because of Vietnamese boys. Look at Dux Board. The names for the last two years are of Chinese students. (Houston, 1988, pp16-17)

A most common trope is that of the Asian student who works ‘extremely hard’, is ‘old fashioned’ and ‘polite’ and who achieves almost against the odds. They are the perfect student, quiet, hard-working, obedient, and high achieving especially in areas of maths education. These accomplishments have positive consequences for the school community generally. Houston remarks cynically that ‘teachers love them’ and ‘our past principal was delighted’. ‘Our HSC results’ are ‘out of sight’ ‘because of Vietnamese boys’. The aptitude of the Asian student is nevertheless pathological. Their achievement, and the hard work they put in to accomplish this, are not normal, not quite sensible.

Asians are more methodical, very structured. If they go away from the straight line, they get lost. Europeans tend to be more creative. All kids including Australians like to be spoon-fed but if you ask the Asians to create something, they are lost – except for the art field. Can be creative in the art field but not so much language wise, even if they speak good English. All types of artwork, some fantastic students in art ie. painting, but language wise, though wise are very structured. This is why they are very good at science. Not just a language thing being good at maths/science. Wonder when Asians become more integrated, whether they will become creative writers. (Saunders, 1988, ll. 108 – 120)

Asian students are indeed doing well, but their achievement is a narrow one, and a reflection of a lack on their part. They are ‘methodological’, ‘structured’ and even more so than Australian kids ‘like to be spoon-fed’. They can speak good English and can be good at art, but only in very specific ways. Asian students, as
Carol Saunders explains to me, are not creative, cannot think for themselves. Their hard work is to repeat and to regurgitate what they have been given in school. Their thinking lacks flexibility. There is a difference in the form that this image of Asian takes. Whereas in other portrayals of ethnic groups discussed here my conversations shift from the individual case to the general, here teachers, parents and I confidently discuss the way these students are. ‘They work extremely hard’, Houston tells me. ‘Asians are more methodical’. ‘Europeans tend to be more creative’, Saunders says.

The trope of the Asian student is contradictory: they have problematic pasts and difficult home-lives; are dangerous and timid; brilliant students but lacking in creativity. There is little in-between here, Dimitrious Kalidis explains:

I separate particularly the Asians into two groups – The very bright and the very dumb – That is how I see them. Those who are dumb – They are dumb – You can't do anything with them. Those who are bright – even if they are not – Those who are really willing to become somebody – They try they try and unbelievably how much they try. They spend hours and hours to study and to overcome their difficulties. (Kalidis, 1988, ll. 435 – 453)

In 1988, distinctions are clear. Asians come in ‘two groups’, the ‘very dumb’, or the ‘very bright’. Kalidis’ omnipresence is almost absolute: he can ‘separate’ them, can ‘see them’; and he can try but often cannot ‘do anything with them’. Those others, in this case Asian students, are clearly one thing or the other: very bright, hard working, respectful, high achieving; or very dumb, difficult and impossible to help. There does indeed seem to be no-in-between.

When I explore the descriptions of ethnic groups in 1988, respondents shift their conversations between the individual case and the general. They ‘have spoken to’, they ‘have been to’ them. Now they know ‘how I see them’. Ethnic groups are understood as being essentially different from each other and from ourselves. They are more or less than; worthy of great love or great hate. Asians are both brilliant/stupid almost beyond redemption; hardworking, successful/totally lacking in initiative, uncreative; nice, timid, dependent on our support and help/aggressive, violent, withdrawn, timid. Ethnic men are cruel and chauvinistic and women suffocating, maternal, victim, whore. There is certain definitiveness to these descriptions of the way these other people are. There seems indeed to be no-in-between.

The ambivalence of the other – 1998

In 1998, I no longer hear stories about Spanish, Greek or Slavic students. Instead teachers, parents and I speak about the Cook Islander student. Varvara Kokanakis tells me her opinion of the Cook Islanders:

With the Cook Islanders you ask them to do something, it’s much more relaxed, more understated and yet I’m sure there’s a whole lot of hierarchy going on there as well. With the Cook Islanders, mainly, respect seems to be with the older people, so that’s what I’m saying about being in tune. How people do this, every society – It needn’t be cultural. It’s different ways that they either show respect for people or they encourage people or whatever. (Kokanakis, 1998, ll. 494 – 500)
For the Cook Islander ‘it’s much more relaxed, more understated’; ‘it’s the different ways that they … show respect’; it’s ‘about being in tune’. Bernard Pieterse is similarly impressed with the Eden-like existence of the Cook Islander student:

In the Cook Island community, where the kids were walking around barefoot and singing songs, playing guitar with a flower in the ear. And why should I take the guitar from them and tell them to put the flower away because it is not part of the school uniform – impose silence bans as they are working quietly on individual projects. (Pieterse, 1998, p.5)

Cook Island students come from a place of ‘walking round barefoot’, ‘singing songs’, of ‘playing guitar’ and ‘walking around with a flower in the ear’. The description of the Cook Islander remains in dualistic relation between the exotic and the mundane, the primitive and the modern. The existence of the Cook Island student is both noble and idyllic and totally at odds with all that Kelly finds appropriate in the material, sensible world of the Australian classroom. In the modern world of the school Cook Islanders need to think otherwise, put away their guitar and work quietly on ‘individual projects’. In the real world of the Australian schoolteachers face students who need to wear ‘school uniform’, obey ‘silence bans’ and work ‘quietly on individual projects’. The quandary for Pieterse is that the consequences of these differences: the way they should be described; and what should be done about them, have become unsayable. How ‘should I take the guitar from them’? How can I ‘tell them to put the flower away’? He asks. Nevertheless, the dimensions of these differences remain within his conversation: a lacunae found between the ‘kids’ ‘walking around barefoot and singing songs’ and the kids ‘working quietly on individual projects’.

The story of the Asian student, well used to hard work, polite, respectful and achieving good results, is repeated but in a slightly different form. Asian students still ‘want[ing] to achieve’. Nevertheless the utopian classroom peopled by perfect Asian students is something of the past. Teachers and parents are concerned that other Asian students, the Refugee-Asian student and the Second-Generation-Asian student have somehow taken over. For Bill Kelly the perfect Asian student is:

One of the things that we used to have and don’t have any more is, the number of new arrivals, kids that were straight from, as in, they’d come in as refugees, as refugees and more or less into the classroom that, usually, were fairly skilled and perhaps, a little bit older. Now we seem to have a lot more kids of an Asian background. They were either, born in Australia, worked their way through the Australian system. It seems to me how that, perhaps, that ambition that those kids had had earlier on, has been diluted, somewhat, and to different extents and growing up and moving through the system, their … Whereas the other kids were refugees from an Asian country, that came into Australia and were fairly interested in education. These kids are, a lot, more like, perhaps you might think one of the … kids who have just come through the education system. They're still wanting to achieve, but it’s not an ambition … (Kelly, 1998, ll. 15 – 26)

For Kelly speaking in 1998, the kinds of Asian found within the school have changed. The Asian students who come here, still go through the motions of ‘wanting to achieve’, ‘but it’s not an ambition’. Today’s Asian student is a pale replica of the perfect student of earlier times. ‘That … has been diluted’. The Asian
of past times forms the model against which today’s students are judged; provides a proper example of hard work for the Australian student; and is an exemplar for other groups who arrive in Australia. They are ‘one of the things that we used to have’. The analysis of the concept ‘things’ is of interest. The Asian student of the past has become an object against which today’s students can be measured. The Asian student in today’s classroom is also not quite one-of-us. Their very contact with us has not been useful. Instead contact with us has rubbed away some of the nobility of their own culture, contaminated them with the worst of ourselves. In this way these hybrid students, neither one-of-them nor one-of-us, remain nevertheless as other. Our ability to speak about them is never in doubt. ‘We seem to have a lot more kids of an Asian background’, Kelly tells me. ‘They were either …’

The narrational fields that describe ethnicity as a condition take a different slant as teachers and parents discuss the Muslim student. Now stories of the pathological ethnic home merge with notions of the dangerous fundamentalism of Islam:

Oh one of the things about Multiculturalism, this is my own opinion, I think with the school. Like some certain things, where … in their culture, I don’t think, should be approved in Australia. Like, if it’s going to hurt a child, like what happens with Muslim girls in Africa or something, then I don’t think they should be approved in Australia. … if you come to Australia you should respect culture, you should also respect way of life, so it doesn’t mean you can have five wives or four wives …

Also this is private, I can’t discuss it, but you have child abuse. You have children who are beaten up, by their parents, because of their culture. They can’t report or they can’t say it. That’s not to me, Multiculturalism. It’s abuse. (Vadra, 1998, ll. 694 – 715)

Crucial within cultures of Islam are the terrible things that can hardly be said. ‘This is private’, Violeta Vadra tells me: ‘I can’t discuss it’; ‘they can’t report … it’; ‘they can’t say it’. The ‘it’, the ‘certain things’ refer to that which is going ‘to hurt a child’, the thing ‘what happens with Muslim girls’, it’s ‘child abuse’. The loathsomeness of ‘five wives or four’, or ‘children who are beaten up’, pales in significance. The real horribleness is that of female circumcision. This concept unpins our conversation, without ever quite being mentioned except as something which ‘happens’, which is ‘abuse’, which ‘hurt’. No longer simply pathological in their family lives; the Muslim family is shadowy, evil, macabre and absolutely depraved.

My conversation with Gillian Mulhauser exhibits similar and paradoxical shuffling between the unspeakable practices of others and our understanding that the very labelling of some as other is wrong:

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Yes, and there’s also … got students who have corpor … it’s more than corporal punishment it’s violence and the main part, the cultural and the role of women in some of these cultures.

Q. So what do you do in those kind of situations?

A. Well, because it’s … sometimes it relates to individuals who can’t be … who can’t be expected to … just have to work around it. But I think people need to know about it in general terms. It’s not something that you get up …. You don’t want to do it in a negative way, you don’t want to get …. to do with people, there’s a lot of domestic violence or whatever or they treat their women badly.

Q. Because then, of course, you’re doing something quite else and when you’re trying to …

A. Yes, and you don’t want it to be negative and you don’t want people to get more
negative feelings than they, may, have about it.
Q. And then on the other hand you want them to understand that if the girl comes and she’s … upset.
A. You’ve also got to look at … well you know maybe there are things that the kids don’t want everybody to know so you’ve got to talk about in … general terms, I sometimes don’t think that general terms actually…
Q. Expresses enough to do with anything.
A. Yes.
Q. It’s a thin line isn’t it between trying to help people understand and all … typing people, or invading people’s privacy and such.
A. Yes, because you don’t want to say, “Well alright some of the African girls have had female circumcision.” You don’t want to get up there and say that because it might…
Q. Then they’ll say that all of them have and that they’re primitive and…
A. Or else they might say something in class that is totally inappropriate and I think the other thing people have to learn about, myself included too, …
Q. I mean I know all that … and that’s the worst of all of this because you sit and you talk and you think God I’m stupid sometimes.
A. Yes, about what’s appropriate and what’s inappropriate and it takes a lot of learning.
(Mulhauser, 1998, ll. 861 – 888)

From the beginning Gillian Mulhauser is barely able to say what she is speaking about. Her sentences remain unfinished. They speak of an almost unsayable ‘it’, which is ‘more than corporal punishment, its violence’. ‘It’ looms enormous as something you ‘just have to work around’. Nevertheless both of us (Mulhauser and myself) are absolutely certain about what we are speaking about. Nor is the truth of our assumptions about what it is ever in doubt. There is no need to say more, we both know exactly what we mean. The loathsome story of the Muslim woman literally becomes the unspeakable. Behind coded stories of the African women, her home life, her threatened sexual castration, are coded knowingnesses. Yet and at the same time we are ashamed. Both Mulhauser and I are aware that in noting these behaviours we are ‘typing people’ and we are concerned about the implications of doing this. The focus of our frustration is the nature of the relation in-between. We know to be careful not to ‘type people’, to put them into categories. Yet we have already learnt about them, we already know who they are. We have already made them horribly, despicably and frighteningly other.

In 1998, I trace fields of stories about ethnic groups, which understand and define these entities in ways that are fragmented, changing and complex. Nevertheless, beneath these changing patterns I map out ambivalent stories about others which transverse the tortuous spectrum between orientalism and nativism speculated upon in post-colonial writings. The Asian, now also the fee-paying student, the new arrival, the ESL student, is the bright, not bright, good student and problematic. The Asian who has been in Australia for some time, remains in a space between usness and themness, a new kind of themness, neither them, nor us, and who nevertheless remains certainly not a member of us. The Moslem, the African, the Southern Asian, are represented within complex stories of the unspeakable. The very silence underpinning these tales encode something already known which seems even more horrendous, in its lack of telling. The

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10 See for instance Chow (1993).
Moslem man, no longer man but male, is not only chauvinistic and rough, but breaks the most hallowed of
Australian values and institutions. The Moslem female, no longer merely complicit in her subservience
performs her own circumcision. The slippery fantastic silent awfulness of these stories is the materiality of
their difference, even as the identities they describe now seem disjunctive, slippery and changing.

Conclusion

At the beginning of this paper, I asked teachers and parents at a school to describe how they understood
their identity. I found this task difficult. In 1988, I did not think to ask the question. In 1998, parents and
teachers acknowledged the question, but continued to speak to me about the conception and location of
those other people whom they were not. I found that these dualist relations, self and other, were contested,
changing and confused. In 1988, parents and teachers considered ways they were essentially one ethnic
group and another. In 1998, teachers continued to negotiate the ways they might become one ethnic group
and another, even as the definition of these identities were contested, conflated, and fell apart. My point
was that despite these changed ways of negotiating the conceptual and material domain, which defined
ethnic identities, these negotiations continued to be framed by taken-for-granted notions which make
people – at various times – one-of-us or an-other. In 1988, this condition described some people as
members of particular ethnic groups who are quite different from us. In 1998, and even as definitions of
identity became changed, conflated, fragmented, diffuse and fell apart, teachers and parents continued to
define others in ambivalent and paradoxical relation to their own unmarked and ill-defined selves.

In recent times, and in times of insurgent globalisation, modern notions of identity and with them,
conceptions of essential and primordially defined difference seem to have fallen apart. Identity is
understood as post-modern, a ‘moveable feast’ of ever-in-process, negotiated differences. In this paper, I
examined the material and conceptual terms and conditions as they are represented in a particular local
Melbourne school at each end of a decade and at a time of increasing demographic change and global
transformation. Teachers and parents understood and defined their identities and the identities of others in
ways that were increasingly fragmented, changing and complex. Beneath these changing patterns, they
continued to define others as different and as not us in ways that were ambivalent and extreme. These
negotiations took place differently in recent years as the definitions of essential notions of identity changed
and became more complex to define. Nevertheless, they continued as ambivalent stories of otherness that
transversed the tortuous spectrum between orientalism and nativism speculated upon in post-colonial
writings.

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