Problematic futures: Speaking of race and ethnicity in globalised times

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Problematic futures: Speaking of race and ethnicity in globalised times.

Over the last decades Australian society has been transformed by changed immigration patterns and globalising trends. Schools in large cities such as Melbourne, Australia have been irretrievably altered by changed demographic patterns as well as changed communication and information technologies and administrative and marketing practices. The examination of conversations with teachers and parents in one particular Melbourne school showed that teachers and parents frame discussions about these events as multiculturalism; discussions about racism are seldom, and reluctantly, broached. In this paper, I take seriously Patti Lather's (1991) suggestion that such conversations must be made clear, understood otherwise and disrupted. I argue that beneath the ironic relation between difference and sameness that underpins multicultural debate are different understandings that determine ways some belong and some do not belong within the school community. This paradoxical relation remains, even as modern and essential notions of identity become increasingly redefined as fluid, changing and post-modern. I conclude that the analyses of Australian ethnic and race relations cannot remain as discussions about multiculturalism and racism. In addition, these studies must negotiate the relation between the contingent and changing notions that define identity as post-modern rather than modern; and the taken-for-granted conditions that continue to position identities within communities.

I could spin you out even further, in terms of, we were the first Australian school to go to the Cook Islands at Easter Time. We've come back, from there, having set up a few things and now we're, actually, organising to be ... We're going to host a 'virtual domain' for the Cook Island School Aaurua College, so that we'll, actually, have all their files and stuff on our file server. Their access that, they will be able to upload, what they want, on to their part of it and then ... so ... we'll walk over to the 'Virtual Domain' and they'll want it and so they don't have to have all the expensive file server and stuff over there it's all here (Miller 1998 p.3).

For Danny Miller, senior teacher at Southgate Secondary College, information technology is a new and exciting 'virtual domain, something that will spin me out'. A web page has been set up for his school and audio conferencing put in place with a number of sister schools outside of Australia. Teachers have Internet and email access and students move between programs on the intranet. These are not just changes in technologies. They are experiments with whole 'other dimensions', the 'cutting edge of technology'. 'The boundaries of the school are being redesigned', Miller explains. The 'fence that surrounds the school' 'has shifted' and no longer defines when 'you are out of bounds'.

The excitement of globalisation is not only virtual but also material. The 'tyranny of distance', which haunted the Australian psyche since the time of European colonisation seems breached. Students, as well as parents and teachers visit a variety of countries as part of their in-school experiences. The year before a group of students and their parents visited their home in the Cook Islands, taking several of their teachers with them. The school has sister schools in Shanghai, Paris, Osaka and the Pacific Islands. Most recently these two
types of travel, the virtual and the real, came together as the school provides access and expertise for communities in the Cook Islands to use the internet.

Most particularly, Miller is excited at the new ways multicultural policies and practices are implemented within the school. Students and their teachers not only read about other cultures but also visit them both materially and virtually. 'They can have it', Miller gushes, we can have it over there'. It is a new way of carrying out the 'ethos of the school' of 'trying to give to communities', 'of trying to gather them together' to bring about 'our multiculturalism'. In this Melbourne school, poised at the end of the 20th century, multiculturalism seems both a fact and a utopic possibility. At the school nobody gets called names' because 'everyone is different' teachers and parents tell me endlessly. For Miller, the dimensions of this notion is showcased on the virtual world of the net. The images of difference - the Vietnamese, Cambodians, Anglos and Europeans - are portrayed as part of them and one of us with the simple click of the mouse. In this new and increasingly globalised world, Miller can pass on to others, technological, but also social expertise. The materiality, as well as the conception of multiculturalism, is something that he can give to them.

This paper is concerned with the ways in teachers and parents at one particular Melbourne secondary school speak about race and ethnicity as those schools are made increasingly diverse and are transformed by globalising trends and technological change. The examination of material collected from one Melbourne state secondary school in 1988 and 1998 suggests that teachers and parents discussed these notions as concerns about multiculturalism. Conversations about racism seldom took place and became increasingly difficult to broach. Post-colonial, cultural studies and whiteness writings suggest that deeply held notions, which identify those who belong as one-of-us through conceptions of those who are not-one-of-us, frame discussions about race and ethnicity. These ways of knowing about and being in the world constitute and transform identities in ways that are negotiated and changing, but nevertheless taken-for-granted, as they are played across patterned fields of power. The endpoint of these negotiations is two kinds of noises and silences. The first is the silence of the person who is textualised as not-one-of-us and therefore other in this way. Such people are left with no position from which to speak. The second is the person, who understands himself through others in this way and have no need to speak of themselves.

In this paper, I consider the slightly different suggestions by Toni Morrison and by Patty Lather that the spotlight needs be turned on those who speak and not just on their conversations about others, and that these silences need be disrupted. I develop my argument in three sections. The first section, Virtually global examines out recent literatures of globalisation and postcolonialism and the ways these change ways conversations about ethnic and race relations can be understood. The second section, Speaking of multiculturalism notes the changed ways multiculturalism was spoken about within a school over a decade. The third section, Other dealing, considers the logic which underpins these conversations. I suggest that beneath the ironic relation between difference and sameness that underpins multicultural debate are different understandings that determine ways some belong and some do not belong within the school community. This paradoxical relation remains despite increasingly post-modern definitions of identity that underpin the field of this debate. In this way, discussions about race and ethnic relations in Australia cannot simply remain as studies of multiculturalism and racism. They must also examine the taken-for-granted notions that underpin the ways identities are understood to be and to belong within communities.
Virtually global

Recent literatures of globalisation, transformation and hybridity examine the transformations, which emerge as communications, technologies, capital labour markets and trade, the productions of goods and services and the mass movement of people and services change everyday practice. Here the ability of national states to structure the materialities of the day-to-day is broached. The contemporary transcendence of relations between individuals, the nation state and the international world has put pressure on the traditional ways these entities are understood. These literatures are contradictory as they theorise the nature and possibilities of the global process as normal and even utopian and decry even as they celebrate the possibilities unleashed during its process. Of particular importance here are writings that point to hybridity, multiple identities and indeterminacy as a consequent but often tortured condition of living in the late modern age. Stuart Hall argues that in an increasingly globalised and post-modern world, conceptions of identity have changed. His categorisation has three tiers. The 'enlightenment' subject described the human person as essentially formed, fully centred, unified and reasonable. The 'sociological' subject was considered as autonomous and self-sufficient and at the same time mediated in his or her actions by the cultures and structures of the world that he/she inhabited. Most recently, Hall suggests, identity has become 'post-modern', a 'moveable feast' in process, contingent and at odds with itself.

Hall's point is that strangers haunt us even as in a recent and increasingly globalised world the most basic categories of human existence - time and space - change in the ways they are understood across different lived formations. Divisions between those who belong and do not belong remain as local communities respond to global operations. In a recent book Bauman encapsulates this paradoxical relation between globalisation and conceptions of identity and difference pointing out that these:

Public debates about the ways and the means to alleviate the sorry state of local affairs focus on the 'foreigners in our midst' on the best method of spotting them, rounding them up and deporting them to 'where they've come from' while coming nowhere near the true source of the trouble (Bauman, 1999, p.193)

Bauman notes the paradoxical relation which has developed within an increasingly globalised world as local communities, increasingly worried by changes which seem imposed from outside, turn instead on those groups of people who are understood not to properly belong within the community. He goes on to explain that multiculturalism, so often seen as a panacea in this divisive debate, is also problematic. At its most definitive, concepts of multi-cultural define cultural communities in totalising terms, which delineate them as essentially different, mutually exclusive and tightly bordered. Even the notion of a multicultural society as one that tolerates cultural difference, the free flow of cultural propositions and freedom of cultural choices assumes the attribution of cultural identity as a discrete entity, separate from that of citizenship and community.

The Australian debate has so often been defined as an expression of a dualistic and paradoxical relation that exists between notions of difference and those of sameness. Gillian Bottomly remarks on this in her introduction to a recent anthology The future of Australian multiculturalism. She points out that recent documents continue to 'conclude with a statement that social cohesion is ... [about] unity in diversity'. Bottomly's point is that such cultural diversity continues within conditions of relentless national-centrism. Gunew's analysis is that these arguments take place alongside wider notions of belonging and not belonging within a community. Her argument is that multiculturalism provides the language to mark out the boundaries which separate nation from that which is not nation. More than
that however, Gunew argues, multiculturalism provides the limit, which distinguishes between that which is intrinsic and that which is extrinsic to us. The violence of framing sets the conditions of these possibilities:

The rationale for this procedure is precisely the underlying logic of classic deconstruction, which posits that the elements excluded in the analytical process are the considerations of possibilities. Thus the exclusions or marginalisations of certain writings in fact frame the conditions of those other writings, which are included or endorsed by the analytical process. 'Framings always sustains and contains that which, by itself collapses forthwith. , p.28)

In providing the frame, Gunew argues, multicultural conception and practice reconceptualizes the borders between usness and themness, margin and centre, with the Australian imagination. In this case Australian writings define the conditions of others and in doing so defines the self. However, it is a formulation of self that is paradoxical and in process. They reflect the power of the 'coloniser' but also the disruption of his or her power so that 'it collapses forthwith'. In his much-quoted chapter 'Cultures inbetween' argues that an example of the irony contained within this relation is the conflation between diversity (areas of experience and practice marked and separated as different) and difference (practices of signification which are both reflective and constitutive of prevailing economic and political relations and mark out people as different). In Australia it is a slight of hand where national identity is envisaged as constituted by universal, atomistic, self-possessed, equally empowered individuals differing only within privately made choices to maintain experiences and practices marked as different. At the same time, groups are positioned, both conceptually and practically, as being primordially, essentially and inalienably different.

Speaking of multiculturalism

Australian multiculturalism is described in a recent book by Jon Stratton as part of a top-down political strategy, a centrepiece of official government policy, implemented by those in power precisely to advance the inclusion of ethnic minorities within Australian culture. As such, Stratton argues, Australian multiculturalism is a crucial concept through which the national imagination is made manifest. In fact, an increasingly vocal ambivalence, underpins debates about Australian multiculturalism since 1988. The National Agenda of multicultural Australia promulgated with so much fan fare in 1988 by then Prime Minister, Robert Hawke, considered an utopian vision whose achievement was the absorption of 'large a large number of people from a wide range of countries' in ways which provide for the 'preservation' of cultural identity', the 'imperative' of social justice and the 'development and utilisation of the skills and talents' of all Australians. By 1998, multiculturalism is a more contentious vision. Multiculturalism is now understood as potentially divisive and as supported by intellectuals but not necessarily by ordinary Australians. Far from being an important factor for maintaining social cohesion it is now understood as a potentially destabilising force. Quintessentially Australian notions of cohesion, harmony and fair-go are understood as existent despite rather through multiculturalism. Multiculturalism itself is something threatening, something to 'be uneasy about'.

In my research of one Melbourne school, in 1988 and 1998, teachers and parents argue that Government policies are irrelevant. In 1988, multiculturalism was something 'accepted by the Government but nothing much is done about it', something Sandra has once written a university paper about but which 'wouldn't mean much to us, because they wouldn't be able to tell us much about that sort of thing'. In 1998, Southgate Secondary College has developed its own official statement of multicultural policy and practice but parents and
teachers are not necessarily concerned by these documents. "I know that it was updated last year but I didn't see it until it went to council, Gillian explains 'I think it's basically in the filing cabinet'. The policies and practices put in place at Southgate Secondary College in both 1988 and 1998 are different to those suggested by governments. Nevertheless, this school is rightfully considered as an exemplar of good multicultural practice. The programs put in place deal with the changed demographics within the school is somewhat similar to those suggested by Governments. They include programs for: Language other than English (LOTE), English as a Second Language (ESL), Access and Equity, and multicultural perspectives across the curriculum. I will describe just one of these programs, that of multicultural weeks and days, as a way to illustrate the direction of these conversations.

**Multicultural weeks - 1988**

It depends on what people, really want, at this stage. I think it is good, to see that we have a lot of new staff, on the Multicultural Committee, although I would like to see parents, other than the Communication Aides, who are working for the same school, on those things too. It takes time to do all that. I think there are plenty more things, to be done, but everyone has got a different approach to things. I think there are plenty, more things to be done. When there were divisions, between people and people knew very little about each other they got to know each other. Even if it was to do food, dancing, crafts. (Winters, 1988, p.17-18)

In 1988, programs of multicultural weeks and days have a central place within the multicultural programs of Southgate Secondary College. A large multicultural committee organises annual events around particular themes. Dancing groups are invited; parents and the cooking department help make food; and artists, academics and parents talk about ethnic arts and crafts and cultures. Despite their success Amanda Winters speaks about the ambivalent support given these days. These days and weeks are a large scale and well coordinated events and a source of great pride to the school. Nevertheless by 1988, teachers and parents are tired and doubtful whether they can continue to run these activities. Moreover, some teachers feel that these days are 'a bit of a sham - a bit hollow - a bit like playing lip-service'. They argue that these teachings need to be better spread out throughout the curriculum and more time spent exposing students to 'other cultures'.

Amanda is proud because multicultural days do 'what people really want' as 'we have a lot of people on the multicultural committee'. The notion of 'the people' changes throughout the passage. Parents need to be brought in to help, because everyone has a different approach to things. The concept of 'everyone' is not quite the same as the people, who are working together as a committee in the beginning of the paragraph. The people are the people in the school who are different from us, have divisions between them and who know very little about each other. The rationale for multicultural weeks, Amanda and Violeta explain, is about reducing 'divisions', 'breaking down the barriers, 'being friends with them and bringing them together'. This phrase, an oft-repeated one throughout the analysis, illustrates a second logic that needs to be unpicked. Teachers and parents are fearful that the others who have entered the school might remain divided both from each other and from the school community as a whole. Multicultural weeks are necessary to make other people more aware of each other and of the community. It also allows members of the community to view them and understand them.

**Multicultural days - 1998**

Pacific Island Concert where they organised a fundraising concert. The kids practised and Pat Leota rehearsed and did all the stuff, did all the
organisation, and we had a fantastic Pacific Island Concert where they raised lots and lots of money for the trip. And I also notice that Saturdays or Sundays or whenever they would have a community meeting, and I went along to the community meeting as well, where everybody would talk about the trip and what the arrangements were going to be and talked about the difficulties. And I just really noticed the difference in, I mean there is a cultural difference, and a language difference too because I've noticed, to a degree, too how they prefer to speak in Cook Island Maori. And the whole meeting was usually Cook Island Maori and someone would, you know, tell me what was going on (Mulhauser, 1998, ll 297-401)

By 1998, multicultural weeks have become multicultural days and their conceptualisation and implementation are fundamentally changed. Activities put on the school are now far more professional. Concerts are held at Monash University rather than at the school, attract many more people, are ‘by invitation, or you buy tickets’, and are funded by the ‘multicultural program. Food days, where ‘the different backgrounds sells their food’, are now run by the various language departments rather than by multicultural aides. A Pacific Islander concert has been organised by the Pacific Islanders with the specific purpose of fund-raising to send students on a trip to the Cook Islands.

In the above quote, Gillian Mulhauser discusses a multicultural concert, which 'they organised'; so 'they' could raise lots of money for a trip for them. Even as she is excited by the project, she is not part of the organising committee and visits it as a guest. She cannot overcome the 'language' and the 'cultural' difference at the meeting without someone telling her 'what was going on'. Sally Williams, in a similar vein, complains that the ownership she felt for multicultural programs in 1988 is no longer there. Multicultural days, she explains, used to be 'by a whole committee', by 'everybody'. Now, they were something organised by an increasingly 'gynormous' LOTE department and by 'particular cultural groups'. The principle behind multicultural days has been changed. It is no longer about breaking down the barriers between them and us. Instead they have become their days.

**Dealing with the other**

Teachers and parents spoke about race and ethnicity differently in 1988 and in 1998. In 1988, multiculturalism is considered as the way to break down the barriers between them and between us and them. Those others seem not quite known, but it seems within the power of the speaker to control ways of knowing them. In 1998, multiculturalism continues to be about ways a community can learn about those who are both part of the community and yet diverse. The possibility of learning about them seems both exciting but also more frightening as the unknown 'other' seems both more known and more out of control than before.

**Other dealing - 1988**

Susan Siddons speaks of the barriers that stand between those like herself and those others who are essentially and biologically different. She wonders whether she can work with people quite so alien. Although, she notes that students do often work together, she is doubtful that the barriers between different groups can ever really been broken down:

> Its really quite incredible - the acceptance and the co-operation - the working together and not necessarily being racist - of wanting to be with that person or that person because their eyes are different and all that sort of thing - and it
never ceases to fascinate me - I guess to my way of thinking - it should in theory produce a great deal of tolerance - but I just don't whether human beings are tolerant - I just don't know whether the barriers can ever really be broken down - I think that there is always going to be that non-acceptance and really if you're white Caucasian or southern European or something there is a chance there that coming out of a different - a very different culture and you look different - if you are Asian - but - you smell different - all of those sorts of things - whether it is going to work into a melting pot I don't know - but I believe that there will always be pockets of racism -

A. So do you think that multiculturalism will work

Maybe it will -one would hope that it would - It may be the answer to so many problems - I don't whether you can ever breakdown the barriers completely (Susan, 1988, ll 479 - 500)

Siddons considers the relationship between others and herself with credulous fascination. 'It's quite incredible', she tells me. 'It' refers to the relationship between ethnic groups. It is a relation that she cannot quite come to terms with. No amount of 'wanting to be' or tolerating or accepting can ever 'breakdown the barriers completely'. 'It' is a relation that 'never ceases to fascinate' Siddons. The source of Siddons' consternation begins from the definition of identity itself. Ethnic and raced groups are essentially and primordially alien, made almost absolutely different by biological as well as cultural conditions. 'If you are Asian you 'look different' and 'you smell different'. Barriers that 'cannot really be broken down' separate such other groups from us. Tolerance of such difference is possible, but it takes a great deal of perseverance and is probably not sensible. A multicultural society in which people, work together, co-operate and accept each other, is almost impossible.

Such notions of absolute difference contradict others, which suggest that everyone is the same. Tom Paterson argues that almost impermeable barriers separate essentially and measurably different ethnic groups from each other. At the same time these barriers are simply overcome by a smile, an interest in gardening, friendship, a bunch of roses. It is a matter of negotiating barriers between those 'sad cases', those wanting only to be friends, looked after and helped to fit in:

That's where the barriers are broken down - If there's going to be racial barriers that's where it's going to be a sort of broken down. I think it's a sad case sometimes. They want to be friends but people wont sort of accept them - when I'm out in the garden, the rose garden ... I speak to everyone that goes past and smile to them or try and make themselves and its remarkable the smile you get back - One day I saw some of them looking at my roses. I went outside and gave them a bunch of roses - They thought that was great - Its just trying to break down that barrier - I think that they're so acceptable to that - My wife was out weeding the other day and she had four or five little ones I'd say they would be about four years old or six and they helped her weed that garden - They thought that was great (Paterson, 1998, ll 106 - 124).

The notion of a school community forced to deal with groups of people who are essentially different contrasts with a second that considers that all people share a common humanity. The barriers between groups can be broken down by the simplest of means: by talking to each other, by eating each others food, by taking part in each others projects. Paterson believes himself to be an agent of change in this regard. ' I think it is a sad case' he tells me.
'I went out', 'I speak to everyone', I think they're so acceptable to that'. Throughout Paterson's conversation, those on the other side of racial barriers remain as 'they'. They 'want to be friends', 'look at his roses', 'thought it would be great to help his wife'. 'The four or five little ones' shyly cross barriers as 'they' help weed the garden. The relation between others and self remains. Paterson declares all men are the same, indulgently smiles at them, gives them roses and considers how difficult it is for them to be accepted into our community. At the same time, Paterson continues to understand members of ethnic groups as essentially different and as desperately in need of his help. 'That's where the barriers are broken down', he tells me, 'It's just trying to break down the barriers'. The 'that' and the 'it' of this unspoken relation stand at the juncture where everyone could be the same, even as ethnicity remains a marker of almost absolute difference.

In 1988, the task of multicultural policy and practice is to 'break down the barriers'. For some, such as Susan Siddons, essential cultural and biological difference make this task almost impossible. Those on the other side of those barriers are absolutely different: have different smells; different colour; different cultures. Others, such as Paterson believe that these barriers can be removed by the simplest of means. For him, the parameters of cultural identity continue to define some as other and as essentially different. Multiculturalism appears as paradoxical as cultural identities are understood as essentially different and as separated by almost impermeable barriers. At the same time, these barriers seem irrelevant and transparent as people share a common humanity. This paradoxical relation can be examined from what I have defined as a 'third level of analysis'. This other direction of examining the data, suggests that these debates about definition of identity; are in tension with other and normalised notions about the way that identities are positioned and can belong within communities.

**Other dealings 1998**

In 1988, Sally Williams argues that members of ethnic groups are essentially different and need particular help if they are to work well within the school. Williams tells me about Cook Islander students:

> Well, to begin with, they were constantly out of uniform. It came from that. They don't wear shoes in the Cook Islands, so they went out and bought a whole lot of second hand shoes from Clarke's and things. Just ways that we could, best help by having class sets suited to a particular year level. So that we could train them. It's sounds, really, demeaning, but train them, that equipment is important and that, they could borrow the equipment from us. So that with them coming to school unprepared, we would still say, "Well, here's a pen, here's a paper. Get stuck in and here's a book that you may use now ... to minimise that, sort of, disruption in their lives and we'll, probably, add strategies that we ask teachers to do this or take this in with them, or ... (Williams, 1998, ll 957 - 967)"

In 1998, Cook Islander student are problematic. Their integration into the school demands carefully formulated 'strategies for teachers'. Williams’ conversation lists the things we need to do for them; 'we could train them', 'we ask teachers to do this for them'. What has changed in 1998 is the confidence she feels that she now knows what to do. They need strategies to change their behaviour: they leave their work at home, shift from house to house; need shoes. 'We'll probably add strategies' Sally Williams tells me, which will 'minimise that sort of disruption in their lives'.

For Bernard Pieterse identity appears as fluid and changing. Difference is something that everyone has. At the same time difference is hard to pin down because:
It is very hard to pin ethnic tags on people - it is a lot harder to say you are Khmer, ethnic or the like. If I told you I was born in Australia and I was born in Shepparton on a dairy farm - I mean you would probably put me in a classification - but if I was to say to you - I can speak Dutch and I didn't start speaking English until I was 6 years old - ... Got you because it will flexible my ethnic background - ... It is very difficult to place those ethnic labels on people - to say - you are Italian - you are Greek - it is a little bit more healthy say to pick on the language - because often that defines the ethnic boundaries - but they open enough to realise - even Scotland - Gaelic Wales - Welsh have different backgrounds and cultures to draw upon (Pierterse, 1998, p.5).

Ethnic tags become unworkable as people move from place to place, mix in different ways and relate and do not relate to people differently. People have many identities, as Australian, Dutch, Greek, Italian. Pierterse 'can speak Dutch' and didn't speak English until he was six'. He can 'flexible his ethnic background'. The terms are slippery but nevertheless Pierterse immediately defines ethnic groups as different ('You are Italian - You are Greek') as being defined by cultural norms ('It is a little bit healthy to pick on the language') and as having fixed borders ('Because that defines the ethnic boundaries'). 'Even the ... Welsh have different backgrounds and cultures to draw upon', He tells me. The conceptual shuffle required in order to not speak of others, even as this is exactly what one needs to do, is made clear in Pierterse next comment:

Why should I impose my Western culture and stereotype them - It is real dog eat dog competition - You have got to learn to survive about yourself here - Don't look at the person next to you - Your racial background may tell you that you operate and talk and make a bit of socialising with a friend and then work on the problem and here I am imposing my ideas on them (Pierterse, 1998, p.5)

Pierterse is worried that he should 'impose his Western culture on them'; that he might impose his ideas on them. At the same time, he does not want to stereotype them, does not want to 'impose his culture on them'. A dualistic relation is set up between 'them' and his western self, even as he seeks to demolish it. Piterterse definition of ethnic identities is confused. Ethnicity is understood as a matter of race and presumably biology. At the same time, it is a matter of something added on and cultural; a matter of how you 'co-operate and talk', socialise with a friend, work on the problem. Pierterse argues that these added on differences are things ethnic groups keep that he chooses not to change. That he believes that he can change them reaffirms the differently empowered relations, which stand between himself and other ethnic groups.

In this 'moveable feast' of the 'post-modern' identity, the categories, which seemed so easily attributed in 1988, fall apart as teachers and parents enter the increasingly globalised world of 1998. Within the world of hypertext, email and user pays, people seem no more that images, their difference no more than different names, faces and colours. Diversity becomes little more than the variety of the text, the colourful picture. Difference becomes no more than the imaginary and therefore seems irrelevant. Ethnic groups exhibit differences that spin out into almost never ending variations. More and more languages, more and more dialects of Maori, more and different places where students who seemed to be the same can come so that:

The publicity is, merely just, to handle... trying to promote, let people understand that we... that we, really, are quite diverse, and we're not all Cambodian, we're not all Vietnamese. People say, "Southgate, that's next to Southgate South, they're all Vietnamese aren't they." No, no.
Trying to find a balance in the... the images, so that there are African, there are Vietnamese, there are Cambodian, ... there are Anglos, Europeans, because we have a lot of... the ex... (the Yugoslavians) here as well. We're just trying to say, "Well, look at us, because we're diverse." The shots are, that's what I was doing this morning, with that photographer, for a promotion of our 35 years (Miller, 1998, p.4)

The contradictory, paradoxical mixing of ideas which underpins ways teachers and parents understand these shifting images interweaves ever more complexly as multicultural notions of alterity and universalism mix with cultures and globalising technologies. Danny Miller markets the diversity of his students and sells conceptions of multiculturalism virtually to people anywhere. Images of Southgate say 'look at us because we are diverse', 'the publicity lets people understand that we are really quite diverse'. Even as the borders between identities seem to have disappeared, and conceptions of self and other made irrelevant, the other remains enigmatically there. Far from negating difference, these conversations about selling multiculturalism begin with the conceptualisation of some groups as different and as other. 'There are Africans, there are Vietnamese, there are Cambodians, there are Anglos, Europeans'. Miller takes his digitalised images, negotiates their fragmentedness, and makes all of them, whatever their difference, part of a shared difference. He celebrates their difference. It's about the way they share the difference of being other than us. They are 'those kids' who 'do well in sport'; 'who could excel'; and who are 'the Cook Island kids and they're just great'. Conceptions of difference become nothing more than the image itself. It is an image of all-of-us as different. At the same time, they remain as a reminder of all that is different and other than ourselves.

In 1998, teachers and parents continue to describe ethnic identities as being quite different from each other and yet as sharing a common humanity. This paradoxical relation becomes more complex as notions of identity change. The essential categories used to name ethnic entities in 1988 continue to be used in 1998 but now these definitions seem far more slippery affairs. Danny Miller understands ethnic identity as absolutely flexible. The impact of new technologies and ways of communication mean that the most basic ways of understanding these concepts seem lost. The materiality of Cook Islanderness becomes conflated as photos of generic, exotic difference are sent everywhere and nowhere on the net. Nevertheless he reasserts the same dualistic relation between others and ourselves. The Cook Islanders on the net remain Cook Islanders, new migrants as new migrants and the Africans, Cambodians, Vietnamese, Dutch, Italians and Greeks as people who are different from us.

The language of race and multiculturalism

I have been exploring the ways that teachers and parents in one particular Melbourne school speak about race and ethnicity at a time when these conversations have been increasingly impacted upon by globalising trends and changing demographic patterns. In particular, I have been researching the observation that these conversations have taken place as dialogues about programs and policies of multiculturalism. My analysis has three tiers. A first tier spoke about the different experiences teachers and parents reported when they spoke about race and ethnicity. In 1988, most teachers remarked on their involvement with policies and practices of multiculturalism. Despite the hard work this commitment evoked, they remained confident that these policies would help 'break down the barriers' between different ethnic groups within the school. In 1998, these programs had a more professional mien and teachers and parents were increasingly sure that they knew the right strategies to use with
students. Now however, many teachers and parents felt they no longer had control over the implementation of those programs.

The second tier of analysis looked more carefully at what teachers and parents meant by the concept 'breaking down barriers'. I suggest that in 1988, teachers and parents considered that on the other side of barriers were a variety of ethnic groups who were essentially different from themselves by virtue of biological or cultural difference. These notions were negotiated with other understandings, which suggested that all people were the same. In 1998, definitions of ethnic identity seemed more complex. 'Ethnic tags', became something increasingly difficult to pin down as people 'flexible their ethnic background' and shift from being one ethnic group. Ethnic difference suggested absolute diversity and flexibility as photos of difference could be altered with the click of a mouse.

A third tier of analysis suggested that even as ethnic identity became understood as increasingly flexible and changing, conversations about multiculturalism continued to define who belonged and who did not belong within the school community. In 1988, teachers particularly were concerned about ways that ethnic others could to mix with each other and with themselves. More particularly they were interested to know how they understood other groups and how they should behave towards them. In 1998, differences between belonging and not belonging continued to be understood and made despite the increasingly fluid ways that identity was understood. Now teachers and parents felt increasingly in control over the way these programs could be understood and put in place.

Conversations about multiculturalism in a Melbourne school were concerned about definitions of sameness and difference and about the ways in which ethnic groups in Australia could be diverse and yet the same within a unified national structure. This question seemed more easily considered in 1988, when definitions of ethnic difference seemed easy to make. I am arguing that these negotiations about what ethnic identity is and how one can be the same and different took place in relation to other conceptions which defined ways that one might belong and not belong within Australian community. Narratives of multiculturalism continued to map out ways that people belonged and did not belong differently within a school community, reflected through a myriad of understandings come together to map out who we are and who we are not. As Joanne Pemberton, p.181) argues in a recent book *Global metaphors*, such notions made up a discursive realm in which intense controversies and negotiations take place over definitions of the rights and obligations of states. This is a realm in which semantic anarchy ... is possible and ambiguity is necessitated in the course of navigating among a myriad of understandings and nuances.

Pemberton argues that this observation reflects the way modernist understandings continue to underpin conversations, which take place within conceptions of the post-modern. I am arguing further that beneath conversations about multiculturalism, as they take place in a globalised world, are quite different and ontological notions, which define the ways that others and selves are able to understand and to be within the world. It is through these deep seated and ontological notions - as well as the vibrant discussion of individual experience and fiercely discussed fields of debate about sameness and difference - that narratives of race and ethnicity as they are spoken of in contemporary and increasingly globalised times, are to be properly understood.