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'ASIAN' IN NEW ZEALAND PARLANCE: A FALSE ESSENTIALISM

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The empiricist philosopher John Locke argued in his *Essay Concerning Human Understanding* that one's personal identity consists in 'the sameness of a rational being: and as far as this consciousness can be extended backwards…so far [as it] reaches the identity of that person' (Locke, 1689, *Essay* II, xxvii, 9). In this particular treatise, Locke was concerned with providing a naturalistic explanation of how we acquire knowledge about our human existence. Equally important, however, he contributed a timeless account of the individual's personal identity as sovereign, static and unified which was well-accepted during his heyday.

I shall begin on a personal note. I read Locke's *Essay* as an undergraduate philosophy student at university in England before pursuing a doctoral degree in sociology. Reading this account of identity was also instrumental in my choice to research issues of ethnic and cultural identity in New Zealand society. I mention this aspect of my biography because I argue throughout this paper that we need to depart from such static notions of cultural identities within social inquiry in New Zealand. While I appreciated Locke's philosophical temperament and purpose, I argue that Lock's account of identity grounded in the origins of a person's existence provides a timeless, *synchronic* account of our personal identities *over* or *across* time; bearing the hallmarks of the Enlightenment approach. The socio-economic and cultural transformations associated with the advent of late-modernity have, *fait accompli*, de-stabilised our material and social conditions for existence and the predictive capacity of identifiable behavioural patterns found in synchronic categories of identity. Our identities in these 'New Times', according to Stuart Hall (1996: 226), are best understood as fragmented, incomplete and composed of multiple 'selves' or identities in relation to the social worlds we inhabit. The question of what establishes fragmentary identities *at* a particular point in time – a diachronic *temporal* account – is of greater relevance when in New Zealand, debates on the pertinence of race, ethnicity, multiculturalism and immigration are evidence that the social and material conditions for life have changed since the late 1980's. This paper represents, in part, an attempt to highlight the difficulties of representing distinct ethnic groups in a late-modern era, when traditional categories like ethnicity and culture are beginning to implode.

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As Asians are now the largest-growing and most diverse ethnic group in New Zealand, it is argued that the concept 'Asian' itself, and the personal, ethnic and cultural identities that the label is assumed to represent, need to be problematised and interrogated. This is necessary if we want to better understand the interrelationship between existing issues of race, ethnicity and the changing socio-economic, political and cultural conditions in New Zealand society. In this paper, I first examine the concept of 'Asian' in New Zealand parlance. In essence, it will be maintained that the term creates a false essentialism that homogeneously conflates the complex identities and histories of Asian New Zealanders along distorted lines of culture, language and ethnicity. Subsequently, I present qualitative data which suggests that this problem creates a more psychologically distressing problem, which is the proliferation of a split between one's self-determined identity and the ascribed pan-racial label 'Asian'. I then conclude with a brief discussion of the solution which suggests that we must reject simplistic assumptions that particular behavioural patterns are definitive of people from a particular cultural group. Without stereotyped notions of culture, similarities between the host and minority groups will no longer remain concealed.

Research Design

The origins of my interest in this particular aspect of New Zealand sociality emerged from a questioning of my own personal and cultural identity when I was an international student in a Christchurch high school during the late 1990's. I decided to ascertain if Asian New Zealanders experienced similar feelings of ambivalence and change where their own ethnic-identities were concerned. Due to my mixed English and Asian ancestry, I was often nonplussed whenever people would ask me where I learnt English. In this sense, it should be acknowledged that my diagnoses and research interests have always been tainted by certain subjective values and prejudices. In other words, this inquiry cannot claim to be value-neutral. The crux of this problem is incisively summarised by Diesing (1991: 178-9):

> Scientists always locate themselves somewhere in society, and use their direct or vicarious experience in that location to guide their research. The experience, idealized as vision, suggests the social concerns, the phenomena and problems that should be studied, and the goals appropriate to those phenomena.

To address this problem, I endeavour to be self-reflexive and detach myself from the idealised 'visions' that motivated this study. Nothing here is beyond critical reflection or reconsideration.

In this article, identities – whether racial, social or ethnic – are assumed to be socially constructed by individuals and the individuals they interact with. The social constructionist ontology assumed here contends that social identities are relative to the intentionality of observers and social actors (Searle 1995: 9). Thus, the only symmetrical and appropriate epistemology for this ontological view is the interpretive approach that aims to understand the *subjective* meanings that actors ascribe to social phenomena.

This epistemology, according to Marsh and Furlong (2002: 19), embodies a dialectic known as the double-hermeneutic which assumes that:

> …the world is interpreted by the actors (one hermeneutic level) and their interpretation is interpreted by the observer (a second hermeneutic level).

The chosen qualitative method must then establish an ongoing *dialectic* between the researcher and the interviewees' interpretations of the phenomena. The researcher is required to correctly interpret the respondent's subjective interpretation of social reality. For this reason, the semi-structured oral interview complements the social constructionist ontology and epistemology most ideally. Through a process of *clarification* and *elaboration* on responses given (May 1993: 93), the researcher can rigorously examine each (re)interpretation.

The qualitative data used in this article were selected from a sample of thirty interviews I carried out in New Zealand between June and July 2007. The selection of respondents was based entirely on the condition that they were either New Zealand permanent residents or citizens. All interviewees were of either East or South Asian descent. The sample included a married couple of Indian ancestry born and raised in Durban, South Africa who identified as Asians, as well as a few New Zealand born Asians. International students without permanent residency status were excluded from the study. During the interview process, respondents were assured of full anonymity with special care taken to ensure that no individual would be identifiable. Interviews were tape-recorded with the permission and informed consent of each respondent. Ethical approval to collect primary data was granted by the Department of Sociology, University of Birmingham, England.

A False Essentialism and Superficial Concept

It is important to state clearly at the outset the definitions of the terms which are used in this article. The concepts of 'race' and 'ethnicity' are distinctive and cannot be used interchangeably. Existing categories of 'race', according to Miles (1989: 71), perpetuate false beliefs that people can be divided according to their innate genetic essences on the basis of phenotype. Despite overwhelming scientific refutations of any biological basis for 'race', the concept continues to survive without its original root meaning. 'Ethnicity', on the other hand is a more subjective term that members of a certain group use to identify their shared characteristics, these typically include culture, language and nationhood (Jenkins 1994). In essence, racial identities usually originate in assignment by others whilst ethnic identities are self-determined (Cornell and Hartman 1988: 35). Notwithstanding the absence of a genetic basis for different human 'races', the category of 'race' continues to wield huge power in society today. What remains unexplored is how and why meanings embedded in the concept of 'Asian' in New Zealand parlance often shift from *descriptions* of people usually distinguished by their straight black hair and yellow skins, in the case of East Asians, or brown skins, where South Asians are concerned, to that of a hierarchically organised category in various social contexts.

In view of the paucity of detailed insights into the ascribed meanings of 'Asian' in New Zealand parlance, Bennett (1998: 14) argued that the monolithic notion of 'Asian' to most New Zealanders was a pejorative one. In a more recent quantitative survey of attitudes towards immigrants, Ward and Masgoret (2008: 235) established that the attitudes of New Zealanders towards immigrants and immigration policy are, on the whole very positive with more than eighty per cent endorsing multiculturalism and agreeing with the statement that "it is important to accept a wide variety of cultures in New Zealand". Thus, the mainstream's attitudes towards Asians today would, in relative terms, be more positive than that of Bennett's observation a decade ago.

The Asia-New Zealand Foundation's *Perceptions of Asia* survey reported that New Zealanders admired the hard-working and industrious character-traits exemplified by Asians with a further seventy-five per cent affirming the importance of Asia in New Zealand's future (Robertson and Newton 2007). Interestingly, it was also reported that New Zealanders expressed more warmth towards Asians from Thailand, Singapore and India in contrast to those from China. In this regard, Ward's and Masgoret's findings are broadly contiguous to, and also corroborate Robertson's and Newton's analysis. The former reported that New Zealanders continue to desire Anglophone migrants from Australia, Britain and South Africa over those from India and China, due to obvious cultural and linguistic reasons. What is illuminating here is the tension between an avowed acceptance of cultural variety and, on the other hand, a preference for similar cultural backgrounds. I argue that it would be productive for researchers to hold onto this tension. Doing so would allow for socio-historical continuities and discontinuities to surface when researching issues relating to national identity and cultural belonging in the near-distant future.

Despite these positive and encouraging statistical reports, a qualitative reading would find that 'Asian' in New Zealand remains *par excellence,* the name of a 'race' that is functionally equivalent to its anachronistic appellation of classifying individuals into a racial taxonomy. In the more recent current affairs reportage, political speeches, academic writings and so on, a false essentialism has always been pervasive. This false essentialism, namely: that Asian people share a common set of social, economic, linguistic and cultural characteristics – except for how they are identified and excluded by the mainstream – is problematic because it obscures the various class, cultural, religious and ethnic identities that Asian New Zealanders of various nationalities embody. The upshot of this is the *reification* of simplified and over-emphasised similarities which will suffice if anyone were to look hard enough. Once these characteristics are used to stereotype and define Asians, the term solidifies extant differences in Asian *cultures.*

Where public policy debates are concerned, the homogenisation of 'Asian' inadvertently restricts the focus of racism to skin colour. This occurs when racism is simplistically understood as discrimination on the grounds of colour difference. Thus, if this synchronic feature of racism is over-emphasised, it would be more difficult for one to discern the more temporal dimensions of the social-cultural processes inter-twined with racism *at* a historically specific timeframe. While there is well-documented evidence of direct face-to-face discrimination against Asians, most putatively in the context of employment (see Henderson 2003; Ongley 2004), it would be more

innovative for researchers to de-emphasise the timelessness of racism as colour (or cultural) discrimination between 'Us' and 'Them' and to instead focus on how racism resonates with the nation state's historically specific position in modernity. Superficial accounts of employers reacting negatively to Asian accents and names overlook the extant economic, cultural, class, religious and gender differences that are most likely to disadvantage *certain* groups of Asian immigrants. This superficial emphasis on colour-discrimination also obviates pertinent class, culture and gender analyses which have the potential to identify the 'winners' and 'losers' of Asian New Zealanders located in the existing hierarchy. In turn, a more holistic account that mapped-out the convergence of 'Asian-ness' with class, gender and culture would help policy analysts to understand how these other factors disadvantage and provide a basis of discrimination towards different groups of Asian New Zealanders.

If my criticisms are correct, unwelcoming locals and populists often disparage Asian communities with the implicit premise that their 'Asian culture' renders them different from New Zealanders. What is at stake here is a more disturbing issue than that of crude stereotypes: when host societies castigate newcomers for failing to adhere to their localised norms treated like universal rules, cultural difference is often loaded with moral significance, as Phillips (2007: 64) argues:

> …in many cases, the individual from the minority or non-Western culture disappears as a moral agent, so that being different comes to be viewed as a reflection of a morally distasteful culture, rather than anything to do with individual judgment and choice.

Phillips' claim is illustrative of the processes precipitating typical complaints that Asians are extremely rich, buy mansions, drive flash cars, drive dangerously, wear expensive watches etc. This equation of immorality with a particular culture has been invoked by the media and politicians to conveniently denigrate Asian immigrants. Bearing testimony to this is the infamous Pat Booth article of 1993 entitled *The Asian Inv-Asian* (pp. 8-9) that callously posed the question:

> What lies behind the image of crowds of Asian children coming out of the best schools, the buy-up of expensive homes, slow erratic drivers in big new Mercedes and migration figures suggesting that Auckland is becoming the Taipeu [sic]/Hong Kong/Seoul of the South Pacific?

Here, the journalist equates the purchase of expensive homes and cars as something immoral because it is an aberration to the unspoken *status quo.* Exceptional individuals or 'tall poppies' from the host society who transgress local rules of conduct by 'flaunting' their wealth in a similar vein will most likely be castigated as greedy, materialistic or arrogant. When Asian individuals offend, their 'Asian culture' takes the blame. In 1994, much tension and anti-Asian sentiments were aroused when Mannu Paul, founder of a new Maori political party opposed to immigration publicly equated Asian culture with greed when he said that "Asian people come in and their culture is to take everything" (Schuer 1994: 3, cit. Ip 2003: 246). Despite the warnings by the Race

Relations Conciliator that his utterances pandered to prejudice and endangered racial harmony, the politician refused to apologise (Ip 2003: 246).

More recently, the popular media was also addressing the question of whether Asians have a culture that is 'immoral'. An article in the December 2006 issue of *North and South* sensationally entitled "Asian angst: is it time to send some back?" garnered a great deal of controversy. On the first page of the article set against the background of a 'sea' of Asian people were the words of Deborah Coddington, the author:

> Welcome to New Zealand, the new home of Asian drug runners, illegal suburban brothels, health cheats, student P pushers, business crooks and paua smugglers. (Coddington 2006: 39)

Coddington cited high-profile cases of murders, extortions and kidnaps committed by mostly *Chinese* immigrants and students to bolster her argument that *Asians* are a potential menace and threat to New Zealand. Coddington's homogenisation of Asian differences along nationality and ethnicity employ the term 'Asian' as an ascribed 'race' through a process of negative politicisation. Despite the press council upholding public complaints that the article was hostile and unbalanced (Eleven and Bennetts 2007), Coddington did not apologise until September 2008 (see Coddington 2008). In these instances, the association of 'Asian culture' with the immoral contributes to greater ethnic divisions when the host society is encouraged to view Asians and their cultures in a systematically distorted way. This homogenisation of Asian differences along nationality, language and ethnicity suggests that 'Asian' functions as a racial identity that is ascribed rather than self-determined. It is argued that this imposition of a racial identity generates some unsettling psychological effects on Asian New Zealanders which are quite difficult to identify. The following section uses the qualitative data to examine evidence of this issue as a prelude to a discussion of the need to take prophylactic measures against undesirable mental health problems.

'Unsettled' Asian Identities

I begin this section with an important caveat. In response to the occasional instances of informants making reference to terms like 'non-Caucasian', 'kiwi', 'white' or 'European', I do acknowledge that the respondents' use of these terms are essentialist and equally problematic as 'Asian'. For the purposes of clarity, I should state that it was necessary to analyse 'Asian' in the context of 'whiteness' as the naturalised (historically constructed) norm by which all other groups are differentiated from. In a seminal article on the construction of 'whiteness' as an invisible racial category in New Zealand society, Dyson (1996: 55) postulated the similar notion of an 'indigenised whiteness' positioned alongside essentialised versions of 'Maoriness'. To this end, the responses in this section can reveal, to varying extents, how the informants view themselves as culturally distinct from the ascendant, invisible 'white' group.

In the course of carrying out qualitative research, it emerged that most respondents experienced being placed in the spot-light of stereotypical gazes that objectified and

exoticised their Asian-ness. Most ostensibly, they found themselves in assigned roles of patronising expectations they considered repugnant and pejorative. The following young Malaysian woman narrates how she only *became* an 'Asian' after migrating to Wellington with her family in 1994 as a teenager. She arrived completely unprepared to accept this essentialised racial label that homogenised her unique personal and ethnic identity:

> I think it's really really crap, because they always say ooh, 'bloody Asians',
>
> > But hello, I'm an Asian but I didn't do that…like you know what I mean. You get clumped in one basket. It's like saying that everyone who looks White is European when things are more complicated than that.
>
> …I wanted to integrate with kiwis but it was quite difficult so I thought I'll join the Christian group in school but I don't know whether it was just me being a Malaysian… but it was very hard to form friendships and I had a couple of instances of younger students making fun of me…like I remember going up the stairs and these two kiwi boys making mock Chinese accents…you know the way Chinese speak English so I turned around and just said "can't you speak English?"… I can't stand it when people come up to me and say "whheerrree aaarrrreeee yyyooouuu frrrooommm" thinking that I cannot speak English.

A third-generation New Zealand born Chinese man in his mid-twenties shared his unique experiences at school:

> It's more the stereotypes you get like FOB 'fresh-off the boat' where you get those stereotypically 'Asian' things like speaking loudly among themselves in their language and bad driving…sometimes I just laugh about stereotypes and that sort of stuff. I went to high school and had a game, there was about a third of the class that was Chinese or Asian and we used to play this game called 'Asian Invasion'…you know on our hallway we had the Asians and fresh-off the boats on one side and kiwis on the other side and we Asians would race to the front to win the invasion.

I found this account evocative because of the respondent's sense of humour. But more tellingly, it reflects the ambivalence a New Zealand born Asian identifying with New Zealand values would exemplify when affirming a subordinate racial identity. In this case, the reproduction of the 'Asian Invasion' stereotype is acted out in a sensational way that is both liveable and containable for the mainstream. Acting upon this abasing role reinforces an exotic sense of difference, which encourages the subject to 'know his place' in society because he is not a White New Zealander.

More revealingly, the following narrative illustrates how attempts to circumvent and defy racialised expectations usually result in further attempts to subordinate Asian subjects within their stereotypical roles. A female professional narrated her experiences at work with great insight:

> Sometimes I feel uncertain about my own identity and it's really hard for me to claim my own ethnicity in New Zealand. When there's a function at my learning institution and I choose to wear a costume that typifies my ethnicity, even though I don't relate so closely to my ethnicity, it's just one of the ways that I do or can still kind of relate to it but when I do wear it, for one, my kiwi colleagues well most of them will always say oh that's a beautiful dress blah blah blah, but there're definitely some who would say oh you should wear that everyday and I wonder why. I really enjoy wearing other clothes so why should I be stuck in this? I feel it exoticises me and that's why I wouldn't wear it on a normal day

> …the strange thing is I have a German colleague who belongs to the Hare Krishna sect here in Christchurch. She'd go early in the morning sometimes to do an offering to the gods and that involved cooking something and offering it and having breakfast there. She'd bring some of that to work in a sari that's very very badly dressed it's always terrible. Anyhow, she's allowed to eat her curries and whatever with her fingers in the staffroom, smelly food really, wearing a sari and everyone is respecting of her, doesn't ask her anything but if I have a sandwich with curry in it, everyone goes, "oh what's that smell?"…It's really strange, if you're White and choose to go to a strange religion or an Asian thing, they're really accepting. Hinduism and Buddhism are terribly fashionable these days and White people want to know a lot about those philosophies and yet people [Asians] who come with those philosophies and have them in their background and live according to them are not acceptable "because oh they haven't learnt how to live"…it's a tremendous paradox. A terrible paradox!

In refusing to wear her traditional costume, this respondent clearly did not wish to be exoticised as an Asian. The stifling effects of covert racism are echoed in her self-avowed inability to 'claim her own ethnicity' whenever her colleagues want her to live-out their perceived images of herself as an 'Asian' she finds abasing. Here, the process of exoticisation restricted this respondent from negotiating her personal life beyond the 'Othered' version of self ascribed to her. In contrast to the acceptability of her German colleague's idiosyncrasies, she is positioned somewhat voyeuristically and sadistically so that her 'Asianness' can be objectified as an aberration to whiteness, the unspoken norm. Whilst her colleagues are used to seeing her German colleague occupy a 'modern lifestyle', they clearly do not consider her worthy because of her Asian origins, despite her willingness to integrate into the wider society.

In these three narratives, I should add a rider that those individuals responsible for assigning these pejorative identities on their Asian counterparts are unlikely to be conscious of their actions and should not be incriminated. Nevertheless, it is evident that the negative connotations of 'Asian' position Asian New Zealanders with false versions of their identities they find pejorative and reject. This is a way in which 'Asian' can often be used as a hierarchical racial category to dominate and dehumanise. The

root of this problem is well-encapsulated by one of my 'Asian' respondents who has lived in New Zealand for thirty-one years:

> …I think Kiwis don't really know who Asians are for a start but they label Asians those who look, I suppose those who have non-Caucasian features shall we say and who have a particular skin colour perhaps, and they can't tell the difference between Malaysian, Singaporean, Japanese, Chinese, Koreans and so on, they can't so they just label them all Asians…I feel ambivalent as to whether or not I'm Asian. Sometimes people say things about Asians in my presence, some negative things and I'm sort of thinking, are you including me in that or are you including me as one of you so you can say what you're saying, so I think New Zealanders have an interesting concept of the Asians.

As mainstream New Zealanders do not really know who Asians are and do not distinguish between Asians, an Asian identity is only adopted when one comes to realise that he or she is an 'Asian' on the basis of a shared oppression. This often occurs, according to Iris Marion Young (1990: 46), when groups are constructed by outsiders without those identified having any prior consciousness of themselves as a group. Clearly then, Thais, Chinese, Japanese, Koreans, Malaysians and Filipinos etc only 'discover' that they are 'Asians' when they arrive in New Zealand and begin to identify with those from other Asian countries on the basis of how the *mainstream* treats them; despite whatever extant language and cultural differences. Thus, 'Asian' in New Zealand parlance exists as an essentialised racial category created for immigrants as opposed to a self-assigned ethnic identity.

In any social context, the imposition of stereotyped 'Asian' identities makes it psychologically uncomfortable and difficult for any self-respecting Asian New Zealander to be certain of their unique ethnic identities and history. It also makes their lives and identities fragmented and incoherent, both socially and psychologically. There is in effect, a *split* between one's self-determined ethnicity and the racialised version of self ascribed to the subject. In metaphorical terms, this split between the actual and ascribed identity of any racialised individual exemplifies an *unsettling* effect on the person's original identity. This pathology is exemplified, on the one hand, by a stereotypical version of 'self' one is *expected* to rise up to that is considered abasing and inaccurate; and on the other, by being *humiliated* or *dismayed* at expectations to live out a false racial identity.

Asians and non-White immigrants New Zealand would be more likely to suffer from mental health problems due to constant problems of racial abuse, marginalisation and discrimination in the labour market, as O'Hare (2004: 19) stated in the *New Zealand Listener*:

> Marginalisation has been shown to be associated with the poorest mental health, and migrants and refugees with poor English have been among the most marginalised here for decades.

There is insufficient space to discuss problems of mental illness affecting Asian New Zealanders in greater depth but it is still plausible to suggest that anyone adapting to a new culture and a life in a new country would be more vulnerable to a variety of mental health problems. Language problems, unemployment, separation, and traumatic experiences prior to migration are, according to Ho (2004 *passim*), factors associated with minor mental disorders like depression and anxiety. Thus, matters would also be exacerbated for Asians if they are imbued with a sense of worthlessness and uncertainty through expectations to live-up to the negative and inferior qualities embedded in the concept 'Asian'. The more congenial aspects of a person's self-determined personal and ethnic identities are inhibited and devalued by the mainstream; the upshot of this is an unsettled and fragmented sense of self-worth.

In the absence of a stable psychological edifice for Asians to confidently express and affirm the more congenial dimensions of their original cultures in New Zealand, it is not difficult to understand why they are often accused of not contributing and participating actively in New Zealand society. As Asians are now the largest and fastest growing minority group, they need to be accepted and treated with respect. The continued failure to harness their untapped skills is likely to presage greater socio-economic and mental health problems on the long term. Thus, the question we are now confronted with is what will happen if Asians and other minority groups continue to be marginalised and segregated. The fears expressed by this interviewee illuminate the likelihood of marginalisation precipitating mental illnesses and turns to various types of fundamentalisms:

> I do fear that if New Zealanders continue to stay separate and only relate to other cultures on a very superficial level without actually accepting how they really do things and only accepting them if they do things correctly like how they want them to do it then I think you're going to have very very segregated communities. And Kiwis always say "oh the Chinese only like to stick within their own community and I'm thinking "do you not see why that is?" you know. They don't see it as a two-way thing; it's always blamed on the other people. And sooner or later, you're going to have very alienated and disenfranchised people who just don't relate and young people who are struggling to find their identity not able to live as a separate person because they identify so much with being a kiwi kid and yet not accepted as a kiwi kid at school or whatever and then they're going to do things like pull out their guns and shoot all their classmates which is awful! Just absolutely awful and then that points the finger again to the ethnic minority person who was mad you know mentally unhealthy etc and the society doesn't accept any responsibility for that at all. They don't see that their kids not accepting and teasing the Asian kids and not including them is what's causing all this.

Despite her personal difficulties, this interviewee's judicious insight explains why isolation within one's own ethnic group is inevitable whenever attempts to integrate and participate are met with disapproval and disdain. Furthermore, Asians will be prone to identifying their 'Asian' cultures and original ways of life as aberrational and inferior

to local New Zealand norms. According to Greenslade (1992: 213), this 'internalised opposition' is pervasive in Irish colonial subjects desiring acceptance and approval from their British colonisers:

> The native's consciousness and need for identity need to find their validation in the Other, while at the same time being tinged by an historical sense of inferiority resulting from the need to do so. The native has to recognize his or her inferiority in order to achieve self-validation but, at the same time, a secure identity eludes him or her because total identification with the Other is impossible; the colonized can never become the colonist, at best s/he can only replace him or her.

We need to recognise that such feelings of inadequacy would be common in immigrants, indigenous peoples and ethnic minorities in every country. Factors inducing the self-isolation of Asians could eventual boil down to despair and a lost of one's sense of being with choice and language problems playing an insignificant role. The main antidote for potential cases of mental illness affecting Asians and other ethnic minorities in New Zealand does not lie entirely in them divesting themselves of their perceived inferiority or in their 'hosts' tolerating their differences. If the latter could levitate towards affirming the similarities they share with the former in their human experience, both parties can eventually *exploit* rather than tolerate their differences. This would provide the ideal conditions for a more harmonious future that will challenge the exoticisation of other cultures.

I end this qualitative discussion by situating some responses of the Asian interviewees in terms of New Zealand's unique bicultural environment, and hope to conclude on a much more encouraging note. When asked about the inter-ethnic *challenges* or *difficulties* they foresaw in the future, all informants provided optimistic responses and believed that ethnic relations between Maori, Pakeha and all other ethnic groups would be more harmonious and peaceful. It would be worth noting that the most notable challenge they foresaw was that of Pakeha New Zealanders resolving their disputes with Maori. The respondents were generally positive and supported the need for to address the Crown's historical grievances with Maori before other cultures can be accepted. This informant's incisive and candid response is indeed encouraging:

> Well, I think biculturalism and the movement towards getting the Maori a decent place in New Zealand society, an equal place, was and is, very very important, it is a good thing, it's a very good thing. For a while back then, I actually struggled with it. I kept saying "hey bicultural, but what about all those other cultures, what about multiculturalism, we're all here too?" But I think they are right in that, in one sense, the Maori culture ha[s] to be established alongside the Pakeha culture first before the other cultures can be integrated. I believe that, but from there, I don't believe that biculturalism has to stay dominant. I think once the Pakeha have accepted the Maori culture as valid and contributing and umh I think the Pakeha have kind of given a bit of lip service and superficially said, okay, just as long as it doesn't involve

> you know us, going beyond our comfort zones, like learning a lot of Maori, umh as long as it doesn't become a compulsory subject at school then that's okay. They'll say all right, we can use it for official ceremonies, we'll have a haka and powhiri and whatever but, and yes, okay, let's give Maori some scholarships so they can also get jobs but the time has come and it's also long, long due to go beyond all this lip service.

Contrary to crude generalisations and complaints that Asian migrants are ignorant about the Treaty and do not acknowledge the *tangata-whenua* status of Maori (see Ip 2003; Ip 2008), this respondent positively affirms the need for Pakeha to reconcile themselves with Maori first, in order to facilitate the integration of other cultures. This vision of biculturalism as a non-mutually exclusive ideology from multiculturalism resonates with the position espoused by New Zealand scholars like Ward and Lin (2006: 169) and Ip (2008: 18) who argue that biculturalism can be used as a framework for multiculturalism to be realised in the near future.

Similarly, this informant who has forged close relations with Maori over four decades does not see biculturalism as mutually exclusive from multiculturalism. However, his views differ quite subtly from the earlier respondent:

> I've been here long enough to understand the Maori and I've had contact with Maori right throughout, from the time I was a student. So, the view I'm giving you is that this creation of multiculturalism and biculturalism, we openly raised to Maori...I've been to maraes and spoken at other Maori association meetings, the answer we get from them is, we must settle biculturalism first before we can have multiculturalism come in. That's the answer we get. I accept their view in the sense that biculturalism is already here and multiculturalism is coming in. But our people think that we shouldn't wait for biculturalism to be established before multiculturalism. That's our point of view and we do express this to the Maori okay, so we get on very well…our view is that multiculturalism and biculturalism can go hand in hand…we're not saying you go first and then we come last, we're saying we should go together… Maori are good friends of us and we can only tell them what we think, they know what we think and it's okay to disagree.

The evidence of this informant's amicable dialogue and disagreements with Maori is indeed encouraging. Whilst his views would be highly contentious to some, the suggestion that multiculturalism can be simultaneously accommodated alongside biculturalism through dialogue between Maori and Asians should be mentioned.

The Antidote: Blurring Cultural Distinctions

The mistake of rejecting the Chinese and Indians of the last century as normal citizens should not be repeated again. The more recent failures to welcome Asians have, according to Spoonley and Fleras (1999: 152), "robbed New Zealanders of

any experience of dealing with diversity as normal or beneficial, except in the most superficial manner". As New Zealand is geographically closer to Asia, the population's antipathy and aversion to anything Asian is, at any rate, unsustainable for its future. The underlying assumption that Asians are profoundly different because of their practices, values and beliefs is rooted in pervasive assumptions about culture that are central to social scientific inquiry. One such assumption is the reductionist view that people are products of their culture and are therefore driven to behave in a certain way because they are Asian, Muslim or European. The use of culture as an all-purpose explanation for differences in human behaviour, according to Tooby and Cosmides (1992: 41), is problematic because it is easier to confirm and verify cultural differences but much harder to falsify. It is therefore instructive to jettison stereotypical notions of culture that conceal the similarities which immigrant cultures share with their host societies. The actions and behaviour of Asian minorities need to be understood on the basis of their personal, individual choices rather than cultural dictates. This requires rejecting assumptions about particular behavioural patterns as being definitive of a culture (see Phillips 2007). Once individuals from ethnic minority groups are treated as autonomous agents and not representative of a reified Asian or European culture, differences on the surface like skin colour will no longer be used as stereotypes and predictors of behavioural patterns. It would then be possible to obviate the exoticisation and accentuation of perceived differences surrounding Asians, Muslims, Indians and other minority groups in New Zealand.

Conclusion

Let me briefly stress, in conclusion, three points of key importance. First, that it is necessary to emphasise that scholarly accounts of race, ethnicity and multiculturalism in New Zealand need to problematise the hegemony of 'Asian' as a hierarchically-organised category in various social settings. This will enable future academic inquiries to map out the changing perimeters of anti-Asian racism in New Zealand society and also identify the 'winners' and 'losers' amongst Asian New Zealanders. It is argued that the simplicity of common-sense guises of racism conflated with skin-colour need to also be interrogated. Second, it should be clear – from the qualitative discussions – that the essentialism of 'Asian' in New Zealand parlance results in the proliferation of more covert racisms that can produce psychologically unsettling effects on Asian New Zealanders. Finally, if Asians are to be integrated successfully into New Zealand society, it is important to ensure that their practices and complex histories are not crudely reduced to monolithic constructions known pejoratively as 'Asian culture'. This would enable Asians to pursue their new lives in New Zealand in a psychologically stable and coherent manner; and facilitate their effective participation and contribution to New Zealand society. More fruitful and innovative aspects of future research could be conducted to explore how New Zealand biculturalism influences how Asians relate to Maori, Pakeha and other New Zealanders in various social settings. In turn, this would help us to interrogate what we understand and acknowledge as 'Asian'. For instance, there is a need to recognise that Asian-ness can often be expressed, and analysed, through other categories like class, gender, sexuality etc.

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