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# Reflective engagement in cultural history: A Lacanian perspective on Pasifika teachers in Aotearoa New Zealand

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**ABSTRACT** How do we understand our own cultural histories and how do these understandings impact on our senses of self? This paper addresses the case of Pacific-islander migration into New Zealand. It is based on a study fuelled by a group of Pacific island teachers exploring their own experiences of becoming teachers in New Zealand schools. The paper raises some theoretical issues relating to cultural identity as understood in relation to educational practices at the interfaces of cultures. By examining how notions of Pacific cultural identity for individuals are held in place by particular self-images the paper asks how such identities might be seen as reaching out to possible futures. The paper concludes with some tentative thoughts on how an individual might work towards strengthening an historical sense of self and a more productive reflective/reflexive conception of engagement in a situation of cultural minority.

## Introduction

My brown eyes are encircled by a brown face, crowned by thick curly hair. My reflection is a story of the richness of my ancestors while my journey is an aspiration of opportunity and progress. Progress is a progression of shades of brown. I am tempered by the preconceptions and judgments of what best-fit I can accommodate. My cultural capital is of value when the brown connection is needed otherwise the lighter shade of brown dominates the conventional papa'a setting.

During a visit to an art galley in Venice Tony's seven-year old daughter Imogen was rather taken by Tintoretto's painting entitled 'Creation of the animals'. But she was alarmed by an apparent omission: 'Where are the dinosaurs?' Her awareness of cultural history could detect the limits of Tintoretto's worldview that had been shaped by assumptions that have been revised in more recent years. Her brother Elliot, meanwhile, chipped in with a comment that he had not realised that God was a man. Tony speculated on the many ways in which cultural histories have been revised since the painting was created in the sixteenth century and thus on how individuals understand themselves fitting in to the world we inhabit. He sought to relate this to a project that he had been involved in where as a short term resident of New Zealand he found himself working with a group of Pacific island teachers on issues of cultural identity and histories. The project was set against a more general backdrop of Pacific islanders seeking to retain senses of their own cultural identities in a situation of ethnic minority within New Zealand. Although the Pacific island population of New Zealand is growing rapidly this group is heterogeneous spanning many islands, languages and stages of absorption into New Zealand society. There are also differential relationships to be negotiated with other cultural groups such as the white majority, the indigenous Maori population, as well as

other new immigrant groups mainly from Asian countries. The specific theme to be addressed here concerns the way in which prospective or new teachers of Pacific descent, but from many different islands, might rework their cultural identities in relation to their teaching practice in New Zealand schools. The main focus, however, is theoretical with particular attention being paid to Lacan whose Freudian psychoanalysis will provide a framework for addressing how cultural identifications might be accounted for as they evolve.

We commence with a brief outline of how Pacific communities have been shaped in relation physical and human geographical parameters. This is followed by an indication of how such themes have been addressed in the research literature. We then offer a theoretical perspective derived from Cole on how cultural history might be understood but introduce the difficulty of migration into this model. We question how individuals make sense of themselves and the world they inhabit but suggest that such sense making is always partial. In the following section we outline the structural situation in which beginning Pacific teachers find themselves. We contrast this with more Pacific oriented understandings of how individuals fit in to their communities. In the subsequent section we offer some data that exemplifies such understandings. We conclude with a discussion of how alternative practices might come together and how Pacific self-perceptions might be historicised in this process.

### **Constructions of cultural histories**

This paper began with a quote from one of our team members who was exploring her own Pacific descent and personal history in relation to the professional and cultural demands she faces presently. Her physical appearance marked her out as someone from a particular cultural heritage yet responses to this appearance were different through time and space and according to the circumstances of her professional and wider social relationships. These relationships, however, are unlikely to settle, formed as they are through shifting associations within a variety of evolving cross-cultural settings. In his *History of New Zealand* Michael King (2004, p. 37) suggests that Polynesians have over the last millennium or so become 'the most widely dispersed people on the planet'. Yet in the fourteenth and fifteenth centuries, after many hundreds of years of widespread voyaging, this migration began to slow down for unrecorded reasons and the former travellers began to settle where they were. The Polynesians set up home on a huge number of islands, widely scattered over the earth's least populous hemisphere, including, eventually, the previously un-peopled land of what became known as Aotearoa New Zealand. This more settled lifestyle resulted in each island evolving specific ways of life and modes of culture, more or less distinct from other island settlements. Because of its relative size Aotearoa found itself home to many diverse communities, often having arrived from different islands, living largely separate lives in different parts of the land mass. In relatively recent times, however, new sorts of diverse communities arrived. The majority of these new arrivals were collectively known as 'European', or 'Pakeha', as they came to be known by the people they encountered. This new immigration, however, was much larger in scale than previous immigrations and the by then relatively disparate

Polynesian groups within Aotearoa found themselves being forced into associations of common interest and became collectively known as 'Maori', a Polynesian term for 'normal people'. Over the last one hundred and fifty years the fortunes of 'Maori' have been turbulent where issues of identity and status have been a function of negotiations with Pakeha now firmly in the majority. Maori people have developed their own distinctive claims as an indigenous culture as immigration continues with increasingly diverse groups assuming residency. Yet as Aotearoa New Zealand progresses into the future there are competing assertions of rights from newly immigrated Asian groups, who will surely provide the source of much future immigration, but also from newly arriving Pacific groups. This latter group is the subject of this paper that is written by a group whose membership includes five people of recent Pacific descent. This diverse cultural minority originates from many islands each with its own distinctive culture and language. Now increasingly seen in New Zealand as a category for administrative purposes this new 'Pasifika' community finds itself building a collective identity out of these diverse origins so that the people of this new community might find a place alongside other ethnic groups, within New Zealand and beyond.

Such cultural movements and reformations echo many other situations around the world; Africans, becoming Caribbean islanders, becoming British subjects, is but one example where the literature is more developed. The works of Fanon (1961), Gilroy (1988), Anthias (1990), Anthias & Yuval-Davis (1992), Bhabha (1990, 1994), Laclau, 1994; Hall (e.g. 1997) and many others have charted how ethnicities have evolved through times and spaces, showing how ethnic/cultural identities, boundaries and commonalities are socially constructed and politically enforced. Meanwhile, diasporic identities have been shown as constructions of commonality in relation to perceptions and projections by the dominant values of the host society (e.g. Brah, 2001). Such themes have been touched on in the literature relating to educational situations. Black women's experiences of schools and academia have been explored by hooks (1994) and Mirza (1997). Issues of working with new teachers to address diversity have been recently considered by Milner (2005) and Achinstein & Athanases (2005). Meanwhile, England and Brown (2001), Selby (2004), Middleton (2005) and Brown, Atkinson and England (in press) have provided accounts of teachers and researchers confronting their own ethnicity within their professional work.

The existing literature on Pasifika education is not large, but it is growing. Most of the literature is concerned with issues of provision, student welfare and education (e.g. Mara, 1995, 1998; Meade, Puhipuhi & Foster-Cohen, 2003). There are anecdotal accounts of the experiences of Pasifika students (e.g. Foliaki, 1991) and general research on the transition of Pasifika students from secondary school to tertiary education (Turoa, 2002). Specific research in Pasifika education (e.g. Hart, 1998; Coxon, 2002; Nahkid, 2004) concentrates on the positions and issues of the students and does not draw attention to the positioning of Pasifika teachers in the schools of New Zealand. Works with a multicultural theme from the 1970s on tend to assume that the need is for Palagi (white) teachers to understand their Pasifika students (e.g. Bray & Hill, 1974; Metge & Kinloch, 1984; Begg, Bakalevu, Edwards, Koloto & Sharma, 1996; Hart, 2003; Nahkid 2004). The assumption is that the *students* have a problem, often located in the inadequacies of

Palagi teachers. The existence of a substantial number of Pasifika teachers is seldom envisaged. Strachan's (1999) account of a Pasifika woman teacher's experiences addresses the gap representing the experiences of Pasifika teachers. The research project to be described here draws on theoretical apparatus derived from critical perspectives addressing cultural issues in a New Zealand and Pasifika context (e.g. Thaman, 1988; Tamasese, Peteru & Waldegrave, 1998; Smith, 1999; Manu'atu, 2000; Vaioleti, 2004; McKinley 2005; Moeke-Maxwell, 2005).

On this occasion we shall also be guided by Michael Cole's account of cultural psychology that takes a cultural historical approach inspired by Leont'ev, Luria and Vygotsky (Cole, 1996). This is shaped around three key concepts. Firstly, shared artefacts, tools and words mediate human interactions. Secondly, these artefacts are inherited through successive generations. Thirdly, psychology is seen as a function of everyday human activity. Taken together this ensures that cultural psychology is directed at a practical social organisation that evolves around human objects and language that supplement and redefine the objects found in nature. Such objects reflect and define the human's sense of self and his or her relation to the world. But, we may ask, how self-evident are these relations to the individual human? Also, is there a cost attached to a conception of psychology that processes and understands the human through such objects? Might it be that this shaping through artefacts, tools or words can begin to misrepresent the human's sense of self and thus demand or suppose compliance with a false caricature? Whilst the tools of language clearly intervene in shaping conceptions of culture, these tools can function quite differently in new environmental conditions resulting from migration and thus fracture the operation of traditional cultural parameters.

The psychoanalytic theory of Jacques Lacan offers us some particular assistance here. This addresses issues of how humans are implicated in and by symbolic universes. Lacan examines how human subjects might be understood as being effects of discursive activity, yet insists that there is always a failure of fit between the psyche and the discursive depiction. That is, there is a gap. And for Lacan (e.g. 1977) the gap locates desire, but a desire that often mistakes its object. We may well have a fantasy of who we are and a fantasy of the world that we occupy but, for Lacan, there is always something beyond these fantasises and this supplement interferes with the operation of our fantasies. Let us begin by asking some questions to set the scene for how these fantasies come into being.

How aware can we each be of our own culture and its history? How do such awarenesses define our practical relations to the world? How can we work on our awarenesses? How does one's awareness of one's own culture shape this culture? But in asking these questions we need also to reflect on our own reflective capabilities and on the results they produce. Lacan suggests that we each have a fantasy of self as reflected in a mirror. But if I look in the mirror and say 'that's me', am I right? And if so what do I mean? How visible am 'I' to myself? So often in reflection practice we see just what we want to see. For Lacan the mirror misses quite a lot and those *unconscious* aspects come up to haunt our vision and chip away at our portrayals of self.

Further, our stories about ourselves are also a function of what we hear others saying about us. Lacan is attentive to the ways in which individuals function in relation to

these stories. We are named and shaped by others and this crafts the situation in which we find ourselves expected to fit in. Tools *mediate* but don't fix this naming and shaping. Freud (2002) had earlier pointed out how the boundary between the ego and the external world can be uncertain, where the baby's emerging understanding of where the borderlines are drawn is not fully resolved by adulthood. That is, the space we perceive ourselves to be working in is a function of real and imagined restrictions. To some extent we become our own policeman guided by supposed rules and regulations that have been internalised but then forgotten except at an unconscious level. How then might an individual understand her own cultural identity in relation to her own sense of self, her sense of the world she inhabits and her sense of the people she shares this with?

Althusser's account of the individual emphasises how identity might be best understood as a play of identifications and mis-identifications with cultural discourses. In the variety of life that surrounds the individual she can detect styles of life that echo her own preferences whilst other styles seem less attractive or comprehensible. Althusser (1971) focuses on how the individual understands herself through ideological filters. That is, the individual recognises herself in some discourses (that's me) but not others. But, as in Lacanian analysis, there is always a gap in this identification, a distance between the person and the story in which she sees herself. Again, this gap stays there. Althusser is not persuaded by consensual aspirations where difficulties are ironed out. Time does not necessarily make alternatives more attractive or comprehensible. He sees the supposition that you could get to a consensual ideal beyond conflicting ideologies as the biggest ideology of all (see Žižek, 1989; Brown & England, 2004). What are the stakes then for an individual or group of individuals importing a cultural history to new environmental conditions and in that new environment encountering alternative cultural histories and ways of being? Old stories are being asked to work in new situations yet the old stories are important nonetheless in securing collective strengths from family and community ties. They mark out the cultural territory in the absence of some of the geographical parameters that preceded them. As an example of how such collective strength might be understood, one of our women team members of Samoan descent put it thus:

We need each other. We need each other's love, support, acceptance and value. We are 'not needy' however. We seek to 'give' first, and by natural and spiritual laws, we 'received' more than we might have even anticipated or wanted or needed.

This statement is an example of our team's attempts to pinpoint stories that encapsulated our collective account of Pasifika culture that might be held in distinction to more Westernised accounts of human interaction. But Badiou (2001), who has pursued Lacan's work in his discussion of ethics, cautions us. His basic premise is that most conceptions of ethics and the human rights associated with them are predicated on a Western conception of what it is to be a human. Similarly, for Pasifika people entering the teaching profession in New Zealand most barriers are seemingly invisible, a sly functioning of Western *modus operandi*. We saw part of our own research task as being about better understanding how Pacific people anchored their cultural senses of self. And in doing that we were aware of the risks entailed of conflating differentiation within the category "Pacific".

## **Pacific teachers working in New Zealand**

The project on which we draw sought to be attentive to structural issues relating to the educational contexts in which Pacific island teachers were being included or otherwise. It also attended to the issues as experienced by the individual teachers.

Structurally, the Pasifika school population is one of New Zealand's fastest growing groups. The New Zealand Ministry of Education suggest that in 30 years the present 8% of the total school population will have increased to 11% (ERO, 2003). Yet teachers of Pasifika ancestry are few, both in absolute terms and relative to the population they represent, at about 2% of the teaching workforce. Pasifika graduates are not coming into teaching in great numbers. This scenario has a number of adverse implications: Pasifika interests are under-represented in schools, curriculum development, in broader social definitions of teaching practices and in more specific concerns with Pasifika students, one of which is that, contrary to research findings about optimal intellectual development, Pasifika learners are not able to learn at school in their first languages (May & Hill, 2003). Meanwhile, teacher induction, teacher education and school management of teachers show little sign of significant change in order to adapt to this change in the New Zealand demographic. Indeed, more specifically, schools do not 'have a clear focus on reducing disparities in achievement between Pacific and non-Pacific students' (ERO, 2002; ERO, 2003, p. 2). Inclusive education may be high on the agenda of educational ambitions in New Zealand, yet the dimensions of this inclusiveness are constantly under pressure from other priorities that tend to work to the disadvantage of Pasifika principles and ways of relating. The research project aimed to redress those priorities by bringing Pasifika needs and concepts to the fore, to 'recognise the different needs and priorities of Pacific people' (ERO, 2003, p. 58), to address the task of bringing more Pasifika teachers in to the profession and to improve the retention of these teachers. The research initiative sought to make visible and ask questions about the experiences of Pasifika teachers as they moved into the profession, or alternatively, failed to find jobs.

Individually, new Pacific teachers are confronted with personal issues of integration into a mainstream culture where they are perceived to be different by themselves and by others. These compound difficulties common to all new teachers of being initiated into a demanding professional role. Yet the new teachers' understandings of what it was to be a Pacific islander permeated their understandings of the personal issues they needed to confront in becoming a New Zealand teacher. A key point repeated many times in response to our enquiries related to how Pacific island people see themselves fitting into their communities. A view commonly expressed was that if you ask a Western person who they are it is quite common to get a response in terms of what she does, e.g. 'I am a teacher'. And the notion 'teacher' is held in place by a complex social infrastructure comprising the artefacts of teaching, curriculum documents, school practices, social expectations etc. Pacific people, however, are more likely to respond by establishing their genealogical roots. Family connections, homeland, blood ties and community links would figure more prominently in their accounts of self. And it was these characteristics that shaped the modes of interaction seen within the Pacific community as being appropriate to the craft of teaching. For example, Maori and Pacific social practices generally are very attentive to welcoming rituals, establishing social status, issues of inclusion and

community structure, which are more peripheral in a Western perspective. And the body, as a set of organs, and its blood ties, are privileged above the social apparatus that defines a Western teacher.

Another important difference between white New Zealand culture and Pasifika and New Zealand Maori cultures is in how personal and family histories are represented. In Pacific culture much importance is placed on traditions in which history is passed down orally. And in such oral traditions the heart is represented as well as the head (cf. Holland, Lachicott, Skinner & Cain, 2001, p. 20). That is, rationalisations are resisted if they are thought to squeeze out more emotional and familial dimensions of history. As such, aspects of self that are privileged in narrative accounts might not fit comfortably in to the frame of words provided in mainstream teaching. One of our interviewees argued this in relation to New Zealand *Numeracy Development Project*. She felt that the depiction of ‘teaching’ was too instrumental for Pacific tastes. One of our own team members however, a Head of Mathematics (of Cook Island descent) at a school with relatively high Pasifika representation, countered this by saying that if it was managed appropriately it encouraged ‘students to discuss strategies and to create their own way of learning’. She argued that ‘the Numeracy Project potentially supports the oral tradition of the Pacific’. She offered some caution however by saying that

‘the environment has to be carefully crafted so that Pacific students feel comfortable about sharing their strategies. The ‘akama’ (shame) factor, that we as Pacific people unfortunately like to avoid at all costs, and the hierarchical nature of Pacific culture, will stop us from sharing our strategies within the classroom environment. Therefore the challenge for educators is to try and overcome the above barriers’.

The cultural structure of New Zealand educational practices has expectations and is clearly making demands of the individual Pacific teacher, drawing them into specific roles, yet these roles may jar with the individual’s capabilities, self perception and motivation. Structure and individual are identifying with partial images of each other, and ‘structures’ and ‘individuals’ are conceived differently across Pacific and Western cultures (Strathern, 1988; Holland et al., 2001).

### **Pacific self-images in relation to teaching**

In which differing ways do Pacific people understand themselves and which of these characteristics do they wish to nurture as they embrace life in a culture where Pacific people generally are in a minority and where allegiance between different Pacific groups might be strategically beneficial? In particular, how might alternative conceptions of cultural identity impact on the individuals’ conceptions of and participation in educational practices? The general features as outlined in the New Zealand Ministry of Education pamphlet *Pasifika Education Research Guidelines*, produced by a team comprising New Zealand Pacific people, were apparent throughout our own enquiries. Issues such as respect, reciprocity, communalism, humility, collective responsibility, spirituality (p. 14) were recurrent themes in our team meetings and our discussions with Pacific people in the community. As one of our team members explains:



Pacific peoples place great importance on spiritual influences and genealogy must be taken into consideration when dealing with our students. Providing safe opportunities and places for theirs to be expressed through any medium, for example, art, song, dance.

The knowledge economy of our team group discussions was based on talking things over and being prepared to negotiate, working things through and growing together rather than seeing the discussions as being about presenting alternative points of view. We were keen to keep such discussion alive rather than summing up Pacific values in essentialist ways. In this respect knowledge was understood and built relationally rather than being seen as being generated from a declared position. Yet there was also a commonly expressed aspiration that such qualities were being brought to a wider New Zealand community and that the preservation and development of these attributes should be seen as qualities that could be shared and nurtured beyond the collective Pacific community. In line with New Zealand's national embracement of a multi-cultural society the privileging of such attributes could be seen as a contribution to this multi-cultural ethos. Yet Western modes of operation were subtle and pervasive.

Pacific teachers that we interviewed sometimes felt that they were noticed by schools only insofar as they fitted the conventional image of a New Zealand teacher: 'Being a Pasifika teacher often means hiding behind a guise of being westernised as to fit into the mainstream system'. There are also some particular issues experienced by new Pacific island teachers being located in schools where Pacific island pupils are more numerous. Such schools are often in more disadvantaged urban areas with the additional pressures such schools present to new teachers. Further, in these schools the Pacific island teachers are often mistaken for Maori and thus assigned to classes of Maori children: 'doors are opened in relation to being a solution-maker for a certain type of school community (e.g. at-risk, Maori, Pasifika students)'.

There was felt to be an image of an ideal teacher that Pacific teachers do not quite fit. This image was held in place by the artefacts of teaching, curriculum documents, school practices, social expectations etc. And this conflicted with Pacific peoples self-images centred on respect for authority, an aversion to self-promotion, being family and community oriented, where cultural histories are predicted on oral traditions and blood ties. One of our team members, continuing with the theme of re-negotiating Pacific identity that she raised at the outset of this paper, sought to describe this image:

Tentative is our walk in the world of teaching. It is a negotiation of our self-image to the supposed frame of the NZ ideal. The general portrait that is painted contains the singularity of the colour white, he has traveled the road of middle NZ, he aspires leadership, challenges or questions for the common good, seeks opportunity to self promote without maligning the team that surrounds him. He is an individual that blends in the house of familiarity his corner in the staff room is a haven he does not have that conscious plight of wondering where he 'can' fit. This picture is lacquered and sealed by the constructs of policy, leadership and social norms that pervade our schooling community.

She felt that the task for such teachers was to work with this supposed New Zealand image whilst finding ways of preserving aspects of their own self-image. Such images, however, are held in place by cultural parameters that are themselves being troubled as a result of shifting environmental conditions.

## Conclusion

In examining how we understand educational practice and its evolution Kemmis (2005) argues that we need to attend to both insider and outsider perspectives. He suggests that changing practices is not just a question of changing individuals but also a social, discursive, historical process – it requires changing the social, discursive and practical conditions that support and structure the practice.

For Pacific teachers in New Zealand there is a task of shaping their individual practices to function effectively in the classroom. Yet there is also a need for wider practices to adjust to accommodate diversity in the teaching force. Kemmis introduced Habermas' notion of 'public sphere' in pursuing what he called 'symposium research'. This comprised a forum to combine thinking inside the head of practitioners with thinking outside of it, to better understand how discursive conditions shape individual actions and from there move towards achieving a consensual good. To use language introduced by Althusser (1971), participants of this activity might be seen as human subjects being *interpellated* by discourses but then exploring these immersions. Yet within Althusser's analysis the individual participant would move between insider and outsider perspectives without necessarily realising it. Such an analysis troubles the boundaries between what Kemmis calls individual and extra-individual perspectives. Such a troubling, however, echoes the concerns of Lacan, who sees the gap between self and the object of identification as a key formative element in the construction of the psyche. Thus the individual's sense of cultural identity is a function of identifications built according to uncertain parameters. In particular Lacan understands the task of psychoanalysis as being about resisting processes that require individuals to fit models laid out for them by external agencies.

Multi-culturalist policies require an awareness of the ideologies that govern actions, by consent or otherwise, and it is necessary to subject them to critical review and resist them where necessary. Yet so often alternative ideologies encounter each other and the differences need to be worked through in individual and collective practices alike. Happy consensus is not always an option with one ideology pulling its weight over another. But surely ultimate agreement is not the only worthy outcome of this meeting of minds. Histories, whether past, present and future, are not set in stone, nor are they fully self-evident. Nor can we aspire to singular interpretations. And they vary between cultures both in terms of their content and in terms of the way in which stories are put together and preserved. In what sense can our own grasp of our own histories be more secure than that displayed by Tintoretto about his? Conceptions of educational practice are both time and perspective dependent. We need to attend to our emerging histories but our histories can be crafted in many different ways according to what we know of ourselves, what we know of the world but also according to what we each want from the future. As Freud (2002, p. 5) has suggested, the 'sense of self is subject to disturbances, and the limits of the self are not constant'. But so too are the features and dimensions of the relevant world. As the dimensions of our world expand inwards and outwards to the future how will our understandings and masteries of this world be revised? As Ricoeur put it, the important thing is to continue with the endless work of distancing and renewing our

historical substance. (Ricoeur, 1981: 246). These sentiments appear to be present in the words of a teacher in our team:

It is not only the embracement of the past or the stories of the past but it's telling of the stories for the future, for the betterment of who you are. For my Dad, the whole reason for migrating to New Zealand was for a better future. The better future was for him the aspiration of his children doing well. When his children do well, that is a legacy that he is leaving behind and that legacy will continue as you march into the future. I think when you are looking at the future; you are also looking behind you, behind the people who helped you take that journey, those steps and the reasons behind those steps. I think my Dad took a huge leap of faith in coming to New Zealand and leaving his family and community behind him for us and what he perceived as a better future. I think for me what I am looking for my children is to have confidence in themselves but also the worlds they are going to walk into.

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