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## Images in the 'Looking Glass': self, ethnicity and multiculturalism in contemporary Australia

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# Images in the *Looking Glass*

**Self, Ethnicity and Multiculturalism  
in Contemporary Australia**

A thesis submitted in fulfilment of the  
requirements for the award of the degree

DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY  
from  
UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

by

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CENTRE FOR MULTICULTURAL STUDIES  
(1998)

# UNIVERSITY OF WOLLONGONG

## CANDIDATE'S STATEMENT

I certify that the thesis entitled Images in the 'Looking Glass': Self, Ethnicity and Multiculturalism in Contemporary Australia and submitted for the degree of Doctor of Philosophy is the result of my own research, except where otherwise acknowledged, and that this thesis (or any part of the same) has not been submitted for a higher degree to any other university or institution.

Signed.....

Date.....

Leslie John A. Terry  
1<sup>st</sup> March, 1999

*For those who travelled with me.*

Unable as yet to walk, or even to stand up, and held tightly as he [she] is by some support, human or artificial (what in France, we call a 'trotte-bébé'), he [she] nevertheless overcomes, in a flutter of jubilant activity, the obstructions of his support and, fixing his [her] attitude in a slightly leaning-forward position, in order to hold it in his [her] gaze, brings back an instantaneous aspect of the image . . . I am led, therefore, to regard the function of the mirror-stage as a particular case of the function of the imago, which is to establish a relation between the organism and its reality—or, as they say, between the *Innenwelt* and the *Umwelt*. (Jacques Lacan 1977b: 44)

It wasn't a joke when I said that I migrated in order to get away from my family. I did. The problem, one discovers, is that since one's family is already 'in here', there is no way in which you can actually leave them. Of course soon or later, they recede in memory, or even in life. But these are not the burials that really matter. I wish they were still around, so that I didn't have to carry them around in my head, from which there is no migration. So from the first, in relation to them, and then to all symbolic 'others', I certainly was always aware of the self as only constituted in that kind of absent-present contestation with something else, with some other 'real me', which is and isn't there.' (Stuart Hall 1987: 44 - 45)

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# Abstract

During the past two decades the notion of ethnic identity has been discussed vigorously from a range of perspectives in much of the literature in the social sciences. This thesis continues this discussion by examining the ways in which the stories of ethnicity have been and are being told at both the theoretical and everyday levels. Making connections between the life narratives of people from a number of generations in six 'ethnic minority' families in Australia, theoretical insights on ethnicity, and the researcher's own engagement with issues of identity, the thesis highlights (following Butler 1991 on gender identity) the 'performative' nature of ethnic identities or identifications. It argues that while the different ethnicities examined in the study have specific individual and social genealogies, it is in the telling of the life stories that these ethnicities come into being in ways that cannot be reduced to what Bottomley (1997) critically refers to as 'celebratory pluralisms'. Engaging with contemporary writings in the area, the study contributes to a 'non-foundationalist' reading of the ethnic self.

Moreover, the thesis suggests that such a reconfigured notion of ethnicity raises important issues for theorists working around concepts such as 'multicultural citizenship' or 'post-multiculturalism'. Consequently, in the final stage of the study some proposals are made about the possible futures for multiculturalism in Australia, including the need to support the further development of past initiatives in the areas of languages,

education and employment. As well as this, it is suggested that 'post-multiculturalisms' will involve, among other things, a continuing response to racism at all levels of society, a connecting up of different social and cultural histories with key social institutions and a recognition of the way in which the new technologies are impacting on established social identities, as well as an engagement with some critical strands in contemporary social theory.

In looking back across the entire text the author of the thesis finds that the idea of the 'looking glass phase' or the 'mirror-stage' as proposed by Jacques Lacan (1977b) comes to mind. This is because, it is suggested, that in narrating the self or the stories of others, whether it be around ethnicities or some other identifications, we are in some ways returning to that original moment when we as infants, in an attempt 'to find a way around certain inescapable factors of lack, absence and incompleteness' (Sarup 1992: 65), tried to touch the specular image in the 'looking glass'. However, in contrast to the one-dimensional mirror which Lacan formulated, the writer of this thesis concludes by suggesting that in engaging with other ethnicities, he is looking into a three-dimensional mirror in which the image of himself is unpinned by the reflections of his significant others, while images of other people who do not share his ethnicity, such as those whose stories are retold in this text, provide another merging layer in the 'looking glass'. It is subsequently argued that any exploration of the self or the 'Autobiographical I' in the Australian context cannot escape acknowledging that difference has 'entered inalterably' (see Hall in Terry 1995a) into our lives and that such a recognition provides us with a starting point for developing forms of post-multiculturalism which above all are open and reflective.

# Preface

When I was a child I lived in the inner suburbs of Melbourne where many immigrants would first settle on their way to 'a better life' in other parts of this city. In these early years, I was always interested in these people's stories, as well as those told by members of my own family, about what life was like somewhere else and how we had come to be in Australia. It was only when I reached the end of writing this text that I came to see, in an uncanny sort of way, that I had never let go of the wish to locate myself and others in a more imaginary space, beyond the experiences of the everyday. This text, then, is a continuation of a journey which I began long ago, and, while it is written in my role as an academic, I have tried to draw on the early lessons I received from the story-tellers in my childhood, as well as those whom I met through this present work.

A task of this size cannot be completed alone. I therefore would like to thank all the individuals and families who shared their stories with me. I hope I have done justice to their 'memories' in the retelling. Clearly, the work could not have been carried out without their generosity, support and friendship.

I would particularly like to thank my supervisor, Professor Stephen Castles, in the Department of Sociology at the University of Wollongong who played an exemplary role as a 'critical friend', always posing the right questions, showing trust and waiting

patiently, aware of the complexity and size of such a project. I would also like to acknowledge the financial assistance provided to me in the fieldwork phase of the project by the University of Wollongong.

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with some insights into how we might move beyond superficial understandings of the self. I must also acknowledge the invaluable assistance of Yuping Li and Teresa Chu, who facilitated and translated a number of the interviews that I carried out with the Chinese families.

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Les Terry