MULTICULTURAL HISTORIES AND PATERNAL GENEALOGIES:
BABES AND BASTARDS AT THE GLOBAL CULTURAL DIVERSITY CONFERENCE

Suvendrini Perera and Joseph Pugliese

As an institutional, legal and cultural construct the family unit functions to demarcate limits: to legitimate, include, authorise and enfold, even as it outlaws, excludes, prohibits, disowns and disallows. Representations of the nation as a multicultural family, as a diverse-but-united collectivity in pursuit of corporate aims, enact identical manoeuvres of inclusion and exclusion; simultaneously they endorse the hierarchies and the asymmetrical and coercive power relations by which the family is ongoingly constituted. To interrogate the complacent narrative of the happy multicultural family is to begin to construct alternative models and representations for understanding the heterogeneous, troublesome and unfinished stories of Australian multiculturalism.

Few such models were in evidence at the mega-conference on Global Cultural Diversity held at Sydney's Darling Harbour Convention Centre in April. As a celebration of "cultural" difference at the approach of the millennium and in the International Year of Tolerance, the skillful marketing of the conference sidestepped representations of difference, such as those marked by the terms race or ethnicity. As protesters concerned with the official suppression of Macedonian-Australians or the war in East Timor were relegated to the outside, the attractions on offer inside — at a price of $500+ per head — included Aboriginal welcome ceremonies, multicultural feasts and dances, the Sydney Gay and Lesbian Choir and a display of Australian advances in interactive information technology at a dinner hosted by the Prime Minister: all under the ultimate sanction of the presence of the UN Secretary-General Boutros Boutros-Ghali and a number of other

distinguished international guests.

In this essay we read the Global Cultural Diversity Conference's complex positioning of Australian multiculturalism as an event to be celebrated for its legacies to the good life of the national family even as that multiculturalism was simultaneously dispatched to the status of history. Within its structuring millennial rhetoric, the conference signalled a key moment in which Australian multiculturalism was seen to have been officially transcended by "diversity": multiculturalism, as one speaker put it, had now reached its "use-by date." In consequence, the conference also necessarily became the site for the construction and consolidation of an official genealogy of Australian multiculturalism.

We focus specifically on the construction of these genealogies at one session of the conference titled "Multiculturalism: The Australian Version, 1968-1995." The significance of the session as the blockbuster event of the conference was confirmed by its Chair, the Hon. Mick Young (Chairman of the National Multicultural Advisory Council), who later described it as having been "bigger than *The Phantom of the Opera* ." The panel, entirely made up of Anglo- and other Euro-Australian speakers, included the Hon. Bob Carr (the NSW Premier), Sir James Gobbo (Chairman, Australian Multicultural Foundation, Australia), Senator Jim Short (Shadow Minister for Immigration and Ethnic Affairs), Demetri Dollis (Deputy Leader of the Opposition, Victoria) and Emeritus Professor Jerzy Zubrzycki, universally acknowledged as "the father of Australian Multiculturalism." Throughout the session, the various speakers proceeded to bestow upon us ethnics in the audience a company of fellow fathers in addition to Zubrzycki, a pantheon of politicians, bureaucrats and academics including Malcolm Fraser, Petro Georgiou, James Jupp, Sir Peter Haydon and — somewhat begrudgingly — Al Grassby. Even as we write, the pantheon of multiculturalism's official founding fathers is proliferating in alarming, not to say monstrous, proportions. In a column in *The Australian*, Jerzy Zubrzycki, "the father of Australian multiculturalism," nominates another figure as an "Unacknowledged Father of Australian Multiculturalism." This turns out to be none other than Arthur Calwell — of "two Wongs don't make a White" fame — who is now rewritten as "a visionary" "when it came to immigration."[1]

The middle speaker, and sole woman on the panel, Professor Mary Kalantzis began her speech by distinguishing her fellow panelists as "the suits" with whom she was sharing the stage, and promising to offer a rather different genealogy for multiculturalism. Kalantzis briefly raised our hopes of a less patrilineal version of multiculturalism when she committed herself to addressing some of the exclusions among the founding figures already named: it turned out, however, that she simply wanted to give us one more

(Anglo) father by adding Gough Whitlam to the pantheon. Simultaneously, Kalantzis acknowledged that "the suits" were also legitimate fathers of multiculturalism, personalising the relationship by declaring herself their "daughter," even as she offered an amendment of their views. In the forgiving embrace of the family such disagreements could only be matters of local and modest importance: "Just call me dad," one of the panelists paternally reassured Kalantzis when she couldn't recall his name.

In establishing herself as the phallic daughter to a collective of fathers, Kalantzis enacted a series of moves that bears further elaboration. An Oedipal model of the family scripts conflict as both inevitable and infinitely recuperable; moreover, within the cyclical structure of successive generations, the possibilities for dissent and opposition are contained by being naturalised as predictable forms of intergenerational competition. By its intergenerational nature such conflict can be seen as reenacting rather than disrupting existing structures, a model that ensures smooth transitions between the generations. Differences are rewritten within a humanist framework that overrides gender, class, sexualities and ethnicity: reassuringly and good humouredly, such matters remain, at the end of the day, all in the family.

The unthreatening version of multiculturalism effortlessly articulated by Kalantzis is one that colludes with rather than challenges familiar discourses of Australian national identity. The parent-child relationship she so hopefully advocated as a model for the new century is in fact immediately reminiscent of the paternalistic colonial discourses by which Aboriginal subjects were seen as able to be tutored or guided into white ways by genocidal practices of assimilation. This return to colonial constructs as a means of managing racial and ethnic difference in contemporary Australia was also supported by a number of other speakers: Sir James Gobbo, for example, suggested that "the pioneer" might operate as a symbol that happily united (Anglo) settler-invaders and (non-Anglo) migrants: "the outback illustrates the common values of innovativeness, of pioneering and adjustment to change, of family solidarity and of persistence and endeavour. All these are values that are at the heart of the immigrant ethos."[2]

Our paper is an attempt, in the first instance, to instigate a break with this "family solidarity" which, in its invocation of a colonialist pioneer mythology, reinscribes and revalorizes a history predicated on the violent dispossession of this country's indigenous inhabitants. Furthermore, we would argue that if these colonial values are indeed at the "heart of the immigrant ethos", radical surgery is immediately called for. The reduction of the heterogeneity of immigrant values to such a colonialist metaphor operates here in the service of those same powers who still refuse to recognize indigenous struggles over land rights in a so-called post-Mabo era.

Indigenous Australians, though piously invoked by Kalantzis as "brothers and sisters" with whom the rest of us might join hands, remained substantively invisible in the panel's imaginings of future community throughout the afternoon. The most objectionable instance of this for us was in Kalantzis's staggering statement that one of Australia's "five principal virtues" preparing it for success in the coming century was its "weak sense of traditional nationalism". Kalantzis's absolute denial of the systematic violence of the colonizing process, the racism of the White Australia policy and the continuing brutalities of assimilation — for both Aboriginal and other non-Anglo Australians — was borne out by her assertion that in Australia:

> Neither the imaginings of the British Empire in its most distant outpost nor the frontier legends have ever worked convincingly as a narrative as many other world nationalisms have done. Our sense of community without xenophobic nationalism is an asset in this world-historic moment.[3]

Exemplified in this statement is the overweening hunger to grasp the "world-historic moment" that characterised the entire conference. In the service of this hunger, over 200 years of Australian colonisation and internal and external racism are conveniently erased.

Indeed, what are we to make of this extraordinarily unhistorical assertion by Kalantzis?: "Australia, as the most diverse country in the world, has avoided the holocaust that engulfs so much of the rest of the world, the conflict over competing identities" (p. 5). What remains unthinkable in this celebratory assertion is the colonial holocaust visited upon the indigenous peoples of this country and their struggles to retain both their land *and* their cultural identities. From Kalantzis's explicitly eurocentric position, conflict and holocaust are conveniently relegated outside the borders of the nation. This whitewashing of Australia's "conflicts over competing identities" ensures that her millenarian picture of this model nation — she informs us that "managing diversity is an Australian success story" (p. 5) — is not tainted by the ongoing history of racialised contestation over both the cultural and economic capital of the nation. Placed in this context, Kalantzis's fourth point in her inventory of "Australia's five principal virtues" — that Australia now needs to "negotiate unfinished business with indigenous peoples"(p. 5) — reads as mockery. For whom is the "managing of diversity" an "Australian success story"? For the "managers", who can't see conflict or struggle but rather windows of opportunity and "unfinished business" concerned with "productive diversity" as the way to go, we are told, in order to shore up "Australia's vulnerability as an exporting economy"? (p. 5).

Simultaneously, the authorised version of Australian multiculturalism produced by the Global Cultural Diversity Conference was one that denied both the histories of struggle by women and men outside of official and institutional sites, as well as the complexities of contemporary multiculturalism in Australia. The inadequacies of "the family" as a model for conceptualising multiculturalism were touched on by the final panelist, Dimetri Dollis, who remarked on the anomalies of being claimed by a "daughter" some decades older than himself: in this gesture Dollis began to call attention to the multiplicity of positions within contemporary Australian multiculturalism, positions that cannot be encompassed by a parent-child or master-disciple relationship. Indeed, we understood Dollis's remark as signifying the possibility for a productive rupture with the patrilineal genealogies and the familial ideologies that dominated the session. Inscribed in Dollis's remark is the demand that we cease, on the one hand, to infantalise and patronise those migrants from non-English-speaking backgrounds who were instrumental in agitating for socio-political change during the late 1960s and early '70s, and who mobilised across a wide range of social sites in order to contest the institutional apparatuses that were insisting that they assimilate, i.e., that they negate and erase their cultural-linguistic background, whilst simultaneously denying them equity and access to the range of jobs and services available to the Anglo-Celtic members of the community. On the other hand, the bourgeois Oedipal model that structured the session also functioned, in highlighting the individualist role of a few privileged "founding fathers", to efface the collective nature of NESB migrants to achieve such change.

Kalantzis's paper, "Coming to Grips with the Implications of Multiculturalism," was driven by a breathless trajectory which, in its desire to justify her "Australian success story," systematically neglected and obliterated entire historical processes which were, and are, constitutive of the coercive "management of diversity" in this country. When policies like assimilation or integration were broached in these triumphal accounts of multiculturalism, they were only briefly mentioned as relics. Kalantzis's argument was that they had been overcome by the wonders of multiculturalism: "The Australian streetscape has become an ethnic kaleidoscope" (p. 6). We would suggest that this ethnic kaleidoscope, and its necessarily scopic and voyeuristic regimes, elides, again, the question: Who is "managing" the kaleidoscope and its aestheticised arrangement of ethnic differences? Furthermore, we would argue that both assimilation and integration are still playing constitutive roles in the "management of Australia's diversity." (We examine these continuities in detail elsewhere in our work.)

Our critique of the conference is part of a larger project in which we

knowingly divorce ourselves from the legitimate family of official multiculturalism in order to assert other intercultural affiliations and genealogies. As against the top-down, patriarchal model of the authorised version, we understand multiculturalism as also produced by women and men who were never merely the passive recipients of official policy. Rather, we see their agency and resistance acting to *produce* the official policies designed to manage and contain ethnic and cultural difference in an Australia always imagined as monoethnic and monocultural. Orphaning ourselves of our official fathers, we seek in this project to disrupt the neat generational patterns by which racial and ethnic difference are seen as progressively assimilable by a benevolent national family. Multiculturalism, we would argue, is very much an unfinished story in Australia; whereas some of its recent theorists have sought to close the books either by quietly placing the prefix "post" around the term or by celebrating the "ethnic kaleidoscopes" or the cosmopolitan eateries in their particular inner-city neck of the woods, multiculturalism remains for us a continuing, fraught and violent process, extending the psychic and material damage of assimilation even as it works to deny or to recoup the effects of ethnic and racial difference.

NOTES

[1] Jerzy Zubrzycki, "Unacknowledged Father of Australian Multiculturalism," *The Australian* 2 August, 1995.

[2] Sir James Gobbo, "Criticisms of Multiculturalism," contribution to "Multiculturalism — the Australian Version." Global Cultural
Diversity Conference, 26 April, 1995. Official Conference handout, p. 8.

[3] Mary Kalantzis, "Coming to Grips with the Implications of Multiculturalism", contribution to "Multiculturalism — the Australian Version." Global Cultural Diversity Conference, 26 April, 1995. Official Conference handout, p.5. Further references to the speech are from this text.