

# **BRAND NEW ZEALANDERS**

## **The Commodification of Polynesian Youth Identity in *bro'Town***

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## ABSTRACT

Maori and Pacific Island youth are the ‘it kids’ of Aotearoa New Zealand television today, as the exceptional success of the television series *bro ’Town* attests. Corporate sponsors clamour to associate their brands with the hit programme, from international heavyweights including Coke and Vodafone to local players such as G-Force.

Likewise, celebrities from at home and abroad proclaim their support for *bro ’Town* in guest appearances on the show. But, what is at stake when the visibility of Polynesian youth in the media is so inextricably intertwined with the commercial imperatives of major corporations and pop-culture celebrities?

This paper attends to an absence of critical response regarding the role of commercial influences in the representation of Polynesian youth identity in *bro ’Town*. In striving to be popular, contemporary television in Aotearoa New Zealand often addresses the preconceptions of its target audience. The commodification of Polynesian youth identity in *bro ’Town*, therefore, may be interpreted as a marketing strategy to tap into a popular ideological shift towards multiculturalism in Aotearoa New Zealand without disrupting the dominant ideology of white, middle-class masculinity from which capitalism derives. Although *bro ’Town* offers specific challenges to popular stereotypes of Polynesian youth culture, the discursive construction of Maori and Pacific youth identities in the show is still circumscribed by a consumerist ethos that demands adherence to Western capitalist culture in Aotearoa New Zealand. *Bro ’Town* operates in complicity with pre-existing binaries between masculinity/femininity and heterosexual/homosexual and thus implicitly reinscribes the status quo for youth in Aotearoa New Zealand today. Moreover, *bro ’Town*’s multicultural ethic is largely contrary because the series fails to contest popular stereotypes about other ethnic minorities. In *Brand New Zealanders*, it is argued that the corporate co-option of Polynesian youth culture in *bro ’Town* ultimately does less to pry open new discursive spaces for the development of youth identity than to operate as a vehicle for the deliberate shrinking of consumer choice.



## INTRODUCTION

### ‘MORNINGSIDE FOR LIFE’

#### *Bro’Town* and the Circuit of Culture

‘Do not adjust your set: the characters in TV3’s new adult animation series are meant to be brown.

You can also heave a sigh of relief, because *bro’Town*, the year’s most hyped local comedy series, is laugh-out-loud funny’ (Corry 2004: 2).

In 2003, the first animated television series produced in Aotearoa New Zealand debuted to widespread critical acclaim and indisputable ratings success. *Bro’Town* centres on a group of five Polynesian boys who live in the suburb of Morningside. Vale, Valea, Sione, Mack, and Jeff are 14-year-old students at St Sylvester’s and they have endeared themselves to primetime audiences on the commercial broadcast station TV3. In its first six-episode series, *bro’Town* rated exceptionally, attracting up to 70 percent of the viewing audience of 15-29 year olds in its half-hour slot at 8.00 pm (Drinnan 2004). Despite its billing as an ‘adult animation series’ (Corry 2004: 2), *bro’Town* has also drawn a younger fan base. AGB Nielsen’s media research identified *bro’Town* as the most popular television series with local primary school children in 2005 (OnFilm 2006), and the second series was moved to the earlier time of 7.30 pm, which suggests a conscious effort by TV3 to lure the youth demographic. A third series of the cartoon began screening in late 2006 and the ongoing and extensive appeal of *bro’Town* is testament to its emergence as a major cultural influence in Aotearoa New Zealand today.

*Bro’Town* has reinvented Polynesian youth as the ‘it kids’ of local television. The series is written by The Naked Samoans – Oscar Kightley, Dave Fane, Shimpal Lelisi, and Mario Gaoa. The Naked Samoans are the successful writers and performers of

such plays as ‘Naked Samoans Talk About Their Knives’ and ‘Naked Samoans Go To Hollywood’, which parody their experiences of growing up as Aotearoa New Zealand-born males of Pacific Island descent. In their foray into television, the Naked Samoans again draw on their personal experiences of being Pacific Islanders and seek to promote an unprecedented visibility of ‘brown faces’ on primetime television. In the past, media commentators have variously lamented the lack of programming that features Maori or Pacific peoples or its ‘ghettoisation’ in inaccessible early morning or late night timeslots (Fox 1990; Walker 1990). Although the Government has implemented guidelines and funding initiatives designed to encourage the inclusion of Maori and other ethnic minorities in national broadcasting, some critics maintain that their presence is still token (Tainui Stephens in Norris and Farnsworth 1997: 103). *Bro ’Town*, however, marks a significant shift in the attitude of domestic media producers. There is recognition that the representation of Polynesian youth need not simply be considered a ‘public service’ obligation; instead, Polynesian youth have come to signify a particular ‘street-cred’ that can function as an asset for broadcasters in Aotearoa New Zealand today.

*Bro ’Town* has also awakened Aotearoa New Zealand audiences’ appetite for locally produced comedies and animated programming. Viewers previously cited ‘cultural cringe’ as the main reason that they turned off domestic sitcoms, including *Melody Rules* and *Willy Nilly* (Dixon 2004: B8). Yet, the Naked Samoans’ prior experience as a theatrical comedy troupe has given them the confidence to satirise The Boys’ accounts of being young and Polynesian today, and *bro ’Town*’s fondness for using irony has proven popular. *The Dominion Post* describes the series as ‘cool, irreverent, subversive, and funny’ (INL 2004: 3) and fans praise its ‘un-PC’ approach and toilet humour (‘Gameplanet’ 2004; ‘The Bar’ 2004). Suggestions that *bro ’Town*’s humour is largely juvenile and ill-developed (Dixon 2004: B8) are largely disregarded as ratings success and audience feedback cement *bro ’Town*’s self-proclaimed status as the ‘*Simpsons* of the South Pacific’ (OnFilm 2004: 6). Fans celebrate *bro ’Town*’s vibrant and chaotic animated style, which has led to spin-offs in merchandising, such as t-shirts, beanies, and the *bro ’Town* annuals that are available from *bro ’Town*’s online shop. *Bro ’Town* has thus developed a social life ‘beyond the couch’ in contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand.



The goal of this thesis is to attend to an absence of critical response regarding the role of market forces in shaping the construction of Polynesian youth identity in *bro'Town*. In the plethora of voices that praise *bro'Town* and even among those who pan it, few question the influence of commercialism in the messages that can be discerned in the series. My work is informed by a holistic vision of media critique, as inspired by the 'circuit of culture', which was developed by Paul du Gay, Stuart Hall, Linda Janes, Hugh Mackay, and Keith Negus in *Doing Cultural Studies: The Story of the Sony Walkman* (1997). In the circuit of culture, du Gay et al identify five major cultural processes 'through which any analysis of a cultural text or artefact must pass if it is to be adequately studied'; these are representation, identity, production, consumption, and regulation (1997: 3).

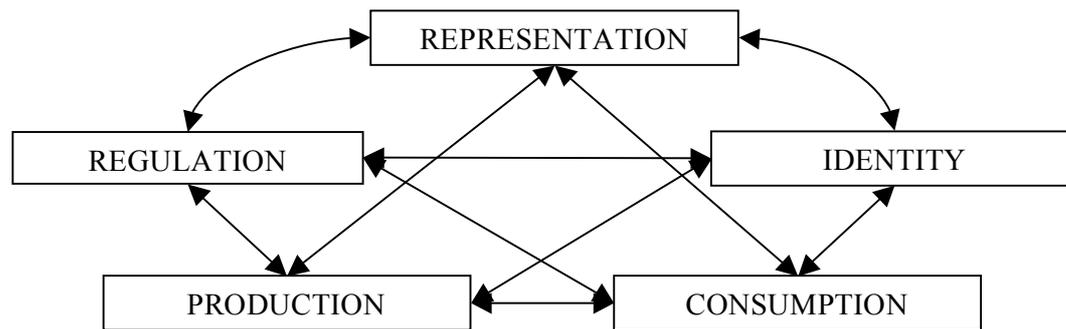


FIGURE X.X 'Circuit of Culture' (du Gay et al 1997: 3)

*Representation* refers to the construction of meaning through visual and aural signs. *Identity* broadly relates to one's sense of self and the characteristics that can be recognised by others; in modern society, a cultural artefact or text can also be said to signify the identity of its consumers. Du Gay et al ask that we consider the 'values, beliefs and patterns of working' that inform the *production* of an artefact or text (1997: 43). *Consumption* relates to the ways in which products are used and the meanings that audiences can make from them. Finally, for du Gay et al, *regulation* refers to the influence of legal and ethical requirements and institutional and

individual responses in the social life of a cultural artefact or text. These five cultural processes form an integrated network. The emphasis of du Gay et al's circuit of culture is thereby on meaning-making as an ongoing and interconnected process (1997: 5).

Television in general is a cultural artefact of modern society and, as such, is implicated in this circuit of culture. The circuit of culture encapsulates much of the popular debate about the effects of television in modern society. For example, theoretical battles have waged over whether television production influences the attitudes and behaviours of audiences or vice versa. Likewise, media commentators have debated the relationship between visual representations and the identity development of audiences; does television simply reflect the identities of its viewers, or is the construction of identity shaped by representations in the media? Du Gay et al's circuit of culture redresses the binary terms and linear flows that have characterised media theory by demonstrating that cultural studies need to acknowledge that the major cultural processes in modern society are mutually dependent. On the face of it, however, this perspective appears to make it difficult to speak meaningfully about the role of television in society today. Yet, du Gay et al do not intend their circuit of culture to represent an even flow; rather, they aim to encourage cultural theorists to evaluate the balance of power in the exchanges between several important cultural processes. In *Brand New Zealanders*, I introduce the concept of 'commodification' as both a mediating factor and a tool for critique in our understanding of the balance of power in the circuit of culture. I seek to demonstrate the ongoing significance of commodifying practices in shaping popular culture in Aotearoa New Zealand today.

*Bro'Town* represents a specific cultural text with a cult status in Aotearoa New Zealand for which the thorough analysis suggested in the circuit of culture's holistic approach is imperative. Part One and Part Two of *Brand New Zealanders* establish the theoretical foundations for this study. Part One draws on seminal literature by theorists such as Stuart Hall, Audre Lorde, and Donna Haraway to identify the enduring ideas in debate about the notion of identity. A discussion of historical relations between the white majority, indigenous Maori, and other ethnic minorities in Aotearoa New Zealand illustrates my argument that politicising the concept of

identity is pertinent in the current socio-cultural climate. In Part Two, the question of media influence is explored in detail and it is suggested that the media has an ideological effect on audiences. I interrogate the capitalist agenda of television in particular using examples from the Aotearoa New Zealand mediascape and I explain the related concept of commodification that will anchor this thesis. At this point, I also detail the methodological value of discourse analysis in deconstructing media texts. It is this model of qualitative analysis that will subsequently be used to critique the cultural processes of meaning-making in series one and series two of *bro 'Town*.

In this thesis, as in du Gay et al's 'circuit of culture', production and consumption are inherently intertwined. Part Three demonstrates that the production of *bro 'Town* is significantly coloured by economic imperatives and this curbs the series' subversive potential for viewers. Using discourse analysis of the first 13 episodes of the show, I interrogate *bro 'Town*'s proclaimed capacity to critique commercialism, refute stereotypes, promote cross-cultural tolerance, and empower audiences in the act of viewing. *Bro 'Town*'s collusion with the processes of commodification is suggested by the explicitly commercial relationships that inform the production of the series and its merchandising; examples from the show itself illustrate how the commodification of *bro 'Town* and its viewers compromises its satirical value as ironic social commentary. Although it can be shown that *bro 'Town* has altruistic intentions, commercial imperatives loom large in *bro 'Town*'s relationship with its audience and circumscribe its potential to invigorate libratory discourses about identity in Aotearoa New Zealand today.



'Morningside for life' is the catch-cry of Vale, Valea, Sione, Mack, and Jeff; this thesis will explore the socio-political implications of *bro 'Town* outside of its fictional setting. My analysis of this television series provides a case study that tells three interrelated tales of identity, television, and commodification in contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand. *Brand New Zealanders* seeks to illustrate the importance of promoting a comprehensive cultural literacy about the ideological clout of commercial values in the popular cultural imaginary of Aotearoa New Zealand today.

## PART ONE

### THE OTHERS' SIDE OF THE STORY

#### Theorising Identity in Aotearoa New Zealand Today

'I think the future of New Zealand is the likes of the Nesian Mystik kids who are both Maori and Samoan, they're Samoan and Chinese, you know, they're hybrid kids... They don't see themselves as 'I'm a Maori and that's all I am'. It's 'I'm Maori and I'm Samoan – *so what?*''  
[emphasis added]

(Annie Murray. Television New Zealand's Commissioner for Special Interest and Youth Programming: 28 July 2004).

'This chapter is an argument for *pleasure* in the confusion of boundaries and for *responsibility* in their construction' (Haraway 1991: 150).

Difference matters. In a world that is increasingly described as globalised, hybrid and multicultural, it is suggested that the social and cultural boundaries between peoples have collapsed. Questions of identity persist, however, and the self is always defined in comparison with what it is not. Consider Annie Murray's remarks on the ethnic make-up of hip-hop group Nesian Mystik, for example. Her use of 'Maori' and 'Samoan' as simply descriptive markers of identity belies the implicit relationships between these two ethnic groups and their associations with the dominant European population in Aotearoa New Zealand. The issue, then, is not the dissolution of difference in real or imagined terms. Rather, we need to ask how difference and identity can be understood as part of an inclusive, humanitarian culture.

The current historical moment promises unique opportunities for encouraging human tolerance and freedom from restrictive social stereotypes. International structures for communication, trading, and travel facilitate and maintain contact between diverse populations across the globe. It follows that in this environment of biological and

cultural diversity people should feel free to develop their sense of self in a multiplicity of ways. Nonetheless, the current period also presents new challenges because, as earlier cultural studies have noted, ‘we have no patterns for relating across our human differences as equals’ (Lorde 1990: 281). Colonialism, religious conflicts, gender discrimination, and class struggles - past and present – are indicative of the tapestry of historical inequalities between peoples against which any contemporary understanding of identity and difference must be stitched.



In this chapter, I introduce the notion of identity and outline the debates that have bestowed it with a theoretical fuzziness that is simultaneously honest and mystifying. Reference to identity is commonplace and in everyday language, it is often used with the misleading confidence that ‘who we are’ is immutable, obvious, and largely independent of external influences. Yet, marxist, feminist, and postcolonial theorists, along with postmodernism and subcultural studies, have provided compelling counter-arguments to this approach. Their contributions are summarised here and despite marked differences in their objects of study and concerns, they convincingly illustrate that identity is not a given.

The range of theoretical perspectives on identity, however, leads to the question, ‘where to from here?’ I detail a number of aspects about identity that have achieved ongoing salience in its various considerations. These include an awareness of identity as both a personal and a collective experience, attention to the cultural and historical particularities of identity formation, and an understanding of the role that ideology plays in the development and articulation of identity. This approach is subsequently used to clarify how popular conceptions of identity in Aotearoa New Zealand have been influenced by the discursive construction of ethnicity over time. Ultimately, it is against this complex theoretical backdrop that the parameters for a study of the representation of Polynesian youth identity in *bro’Town* must be set. The work of Paul Spoonley, Cluny Macpherson, and Tracey McIntosh will foreground my conclusion that whilst the meanings of ‘Polynesian’ and ‘youth’ are always contextual, positioned, and subjective, it is important to consider the symbolic labour that ‘Polynesian youth’ identity performs in the popular cultural imaginary of

contemporary New Zealanders.

### **1.1 IDEOLOGY, DISCOURSE, AND THE ‘MYTHICAL NORM’**

The popular notion of a single, stable ‘identity’ belies the intricate process of identity development and its public expression. To begin with, every individual relates to a diverse combination of identifying characteristics and some of these, such as age, will change over time. Communities that cohere around a unifying feature of identity undoubtedly have a range of experiences within their ranks. Particular identifying traits may be privileged in specific circumstances, but this does not renounce the inevitable ‘layering’ of identity. The countless arrangements of class, gender, ethnicity, age, and other axes of identity ‘make the singular notion of identity a misnomer’ (Butler 1990: 4).

Identity is also a relative term; to identify with a particular class or ethnicity, for example, involves aligning the self with a particular set of qualities that are commonly associated with that social category and used to distinguish it from others. The binaries between identifying characteristics - such as black and white, rich and poor, male and female – typify much human communication, whether they are spoken or unspoken. Yet, the comparative value of identity is not innocent. ‘Identity is a fundamental organising principle in the enactment of power, in the mobilisation for and the allocation of resources and as a critical marker of inclusion and exclusion in social organisations’ (Liu et al 2005: 15). Ideas about ‘the self’, therefore, are inevitably embroiled in broader political projects.

‘Ideology’ is a useful concept in explaining the social politics of identity. The term ‘ideology’ is commonly used to reference and disparage the supposed indoctrination of ideas that are explicitly political, such as the fascist ideology of the German Nazi regime (Abel 1997: 18). ‘In critical theory, ‘ideology’ is used in an almost diametrically opposed manner to describe something that is unconscious and unrecognised’ (Abel 1997: 18). British intellectual, Stuart Hall, has been instrumental in developing critical thinking about ideology in recent years. He theorises that the circulation of power in society is ubiquitous and incessant.

‘The argument is that everyone – the powerful and the powerless – is caught up, *though not on equal terms*, in power’s circulation. No one – neither its apparent victims nor its agents – can stand wholly outside its field of operation’ (Hall 1997b: 261).

Ideology, in this account, concerns the mobilisation of particular ideas as part of the exercise of power in society (Hall 1996b: 27). The dominant ideologies are those that exercise the greatest socio-political pressure at a given historical moment and they attribute power to particular peoples, although the exercise of this power commonly goes unnoticed.

Hall also observes that different belief systems compete for ascendancy and the goal in this ideological struggle is ‘hegemony’ (1996b: 43). ‘Hegemony requires that ideological assertions become self-evident cultural assumptions’ (Lull 2003: 62-63). Yet, hegemony is never completely assured and dominant ideas require reinforcement and modifications in order to maintain their cultural and political currency. Identities bear ideological prescriptions (Liu et al 2005: 15) and they can be effectively mobilised in support of hegemony because identity is so often presumed to be natural and unquestionable. Identity, however, can also be used to challenge the status quo in society and notable political movements have developed in defiance of oppressive dominant assumptions about class, gender and ethnicity in particular. As Tracey McIntosh explains, ‘The formulation of identity is of real significance because it can be understood as power-positioned articulation’ (2005: 44).

A further concept that is important in critical thinking about identity is ‘discourse’. Discourse generally refers to communication or conversation; however, the philosophising of Michel Foucault has given the term greater political consequence. Foucault explored how society was regulated by the limits of ‘normality’ that were implied in popular ideas about madness, sexual deviance, and felony (Smart 1985). According to Foucault, language and practices associated with institutions such as psychiatric asylums and prisons were involved in the discursive construction of the ‘normal’ and the ‘abnormal’ (Smart 1985: 19-26). Discourse, therefore, involves the use of speech and behaviours that both define and limit what is commonly ‘known’ about something (Sturken and Cartwright 2001: 94).

There is an apparent link between the work of Foucault and Hall if we consider that the communication of particular normative ideals through discourse is part of the ideological struggle for hegemony at specific historical and cultural moments. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam explain, 'As a social battleground, language forms the site where political struggles are engaged both collectively and intimately. People do not enter simply into language as a master code; they participate in it as socially constituted subjects whose linguistic exchange is shaped by power relations' (1994: 193). The comparative value of identity means that the self is developed with regard to current 'norms' of being and articulated through pre-existing discursive structures of language and behaviours. These discursive norms may be disrupted or reaffirmed as part of the ongoing ideological quest for hegemony. Discourse and ideology are thus invaluable tools in deconstructing identity.

## **1.2 MARXIST, FEMINIST, AND POSTCOLONIAL IDENTITIES**

Attention to the relationship between identity and the dominant ideologies that structure society is not new; since the 1960s, the notion of identity as an ontologically stable category has been repeatedly contested by 'identity politics'. Identity politics refers to the 'use of personal experiences as the basis for one's politics' (Rajan and Mohanram 1995: 6) and it has historically involved individuals coming together as a collective to challenge a specific oppressive experience of identity. Often their discontent stems from the common tendency to generalise any negative behaviour by a member of a minority group as typical (Shohat and Stam 1994: 183); '[r]epresentations of dominant groups, on the other hand, are seen as 'naturally' diverse, rather than allegorical (Shohat and Stam 1994: 183). Identity politics sought to facilitate 'a discourse in which diverse political views, sexual orientations, races, ethnicities, and cultural differences are taken up in the struggle to construct counternarratives and create new critical spaces and social practices' (Giroux 1994b: 31). The appeal of identity politics at this time was that it arose from a radical awareness of the systematic prioritisation of particular social groups in their relations with others (Giroux 1994b: 32). In this context, identity politics articulated a political commitment to particular group identities that had been marginalised by the explicit and implicit authority of white, middle-class masculinity.

Identity politics centred on class have contested the ideological dominance of the wealthy in society. Class has been an enduring theme in the theorisation of group identity development. Karl Marx and Fredrich Engels issued prolific critiques of economic inequalities between peoples during the late 19<sup>th</sup> century. Marx prophesised an uprising of the proletariat, or working classes, against the bourgeoisie and the establishment of a communist society wherein the means of production were communally owned (McLennan 1979: 1). He considered that the material oppression suffered by the proletariat would be a uniting factor in the quest for revolution (McLennan 1979: 1). In its original form, marxist theory differs significantly from the class-based identity politics that emerged post-1960. The revival of marxism in the 1960s and 1970s occurred in the absence of the traditional feudal relations that Marx and Engels contested. Instead, marxist theory acted as a vehicle for the politicisation of a group of people who felt marginalised by contemporary economic relations; these included unionists lobbying for the greater autonomy of workers amidst industrialisation and students campaigning against the economic supremacy held by the First World nations. Marxist principles were adapted to challenge the domination of the lower classes by those who were identified as having economic influence in contemporary society.

In a similar way, an ideological commitment to a common female identity formed the basis for critique and a call to action for the feminist movement during the 1960s and 1970s. The historical predominance of men in roles of social influence had largely effaced the voice of women in the cultural imaginary. Feminism contested the ubiquity of ‘images and discourses which represent[ed] women as passive, fetishised objects, and men as active, controlling agents’ (Segal 1993: 18) by suggesting that these stereotypes were developed in a masculinist culture and served to perpetuate gender inequalities. Feminist theory suggested that the dominance of men had skewed the social record; ‘history’, it was said, systematically omitted ‘herstory’ (Miller and Swift 1976). For example, historical descriptions of war often overlooked the experiences and importance of the contribution that women made at home and abroad. In feminist identity politics, the identity of women was crystallised by the feminist ‘we’ in order to refute the ideas and practices of patriarchy.

An identity politics centred on the experiences of ethnic minorities also developed in

and around theories of postcolonialism during this period. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) was a fundamental resource in the development of postcolonial theory. Said asserted that racial stereotypes have effectively limited a popular understanding of ethnic diversity within western society (1978). Ethnic minorities are widely represented as a source of fear or desire, but rarely as equals to their western counterparts (Said 1978). The West's presumed knowledge of 'race' has thus functioned historically to justify widespread assumptions of white superiority and rationalise colonial exploitation, including abhorrent instances of slavery and genocide. An embedded conviction in Western Europe's ultimate superiority, or Eurocentrism, was identified in disciplines as varied as anthropology, literary studies, and biology. Postcolonial theory also critiqued the validity of national identity; it argued that nationalism implicitly undermined precolonial histories and the convergences between colonised peoples in favour of an identity centred on the State. Postcolonial theory paved the way for a particular identity politics that emphasised the cultural connections between ethnic minorities worldwide and mobilised them in defiance of racial prejudice.

### **1.3 REDUCTION AND REACTION IN IDENTITY POLITICS**

Nonetheless, 'struggle does not make us immune to the errors of ignoring and misnaming difference' (Lorde 1990: 284) and the political impetus of marxist, feminist, and postcolonial identity politics was much diminished by the essentialising and reductionist tendencies implicit in their various arguments. They shared an anti-establishment approach that provided a platform from which to dispute the dominant ideologies of white, middle-class masculinity that have historically exercised power in society. As Shohat and Stam observe, 'That something vital is at stake in these debates becomes obvious in those instances when entire communities passionately protest the representations that are made of them in the name of their own experiential sense of truth' (1994: 181). Yet, as Audre Lorde notes, 'Those of us who stand outside that power often identify one way in which we are different, and we assume that to be the primary cause of all oppression, forgetting other distortions around difference, some of which we ourselves may be practicing' (1990: 282). There was a need for unity in challenging the hegemonic impulses in modern society, which

required representing the experiences of a specific group in such a way that it was meaningful to a broader audience. It proved difficult, however, to negotiate the need for political unity without implying an 'oppressive cultural authenticity' (Sissons 2005: 52) or a homogeneity in the experiences of the individuals involved (Lorde 1990: 284).

The anti-industrial, ecological basis of marxist identity politics in the 1960s was widely challenged as reactionary and romantic (McLellan 1979: 318). An increasingly consumerist ethos had emerged after World War II and marxist identity politics offered a valuable critique of how the increasing prioritisation of spending power could marginalise the less wealthy in society. It was argued, however, that the new marxism was reactionary because it attacked circumstances of capitalism in contemporary society without wholly considering the implications of instigating an economic and political revolution, as apparent in the repressive communist histories of Russia, China, and Korea. Moreover, marxist identity politics continued to emphasise the role of capitalist production as an oppressive mechanism of power whilst assuming that the moments of consumption could not be used as a site of resistance (Hall 1996b: 35). Studies have identified that consumer behaviour can be used to express derision for the status quo in society (Anderson and Miles 1999: 109) - albeit overstating the political influence of consumption at points - and this information has even given rise to not-for-profit organisations such as Trade Aid that work to improve the economic conditions of the lower classes. Marxist identity politics also tended to universalise the experiences of the contemporary proletariat. In its vision of the class struggle as unifying oppressed peoples worldwide, the marxist revival did engage with feminist and postcolonial theory to an extent. Yet, there was a lack of critical attention to how class, gender and ethnicity, as markers of identity, might subsume or discriminate against one another; for this reason, marxist identity politics was charged with an inherent romanticism in its approach to identity and human difference.

Feminist identity politics was contested for its uncritical appropriation of 'women' as a social category. Black cultural critics such as bell hooks (1997) and Lorde (1990) have challenged the feminist movement's emphasis on gender as the primary characteristic determining identity formation because it universalises the experiences

of women regardless of race, class, or sexual identity. Donna Haraway also writes, 'There was no structural room for race (or for much else) in theory claiming to reveal the construction of the category woman and social group women as a unified or totalisable whole' (1991: 160). Feminism claimed to represent the 'authentic' female voice in a modern society dominated by masculine assumptions. It sought to displace traditional gender stereotypes, but often continued to typecast female identity, although in new and increasingly positive ways. In its complicity with discourses of authenticity, feminism ironically precluded men from wholly engaging with feminist principles because they could not proclaim to understand the experiences of being female. Feminist identity politics had its founding focus on the shared experiences of women; this provided the ideological drive for intervening in the social dominance of men, but critics have dispelled the notion of an authentic female voice as a misleading and exclusionary tactic.

Postcolonial identity politics also fell prey to a paradoxical essentialism in its moves to mobilise marginalised peoples around the social category of 'race'. According to Gayatri Spivak, postcolonial theorists maintain that 'the holders of hegemonic discourse should de-hegemonise their position and themselves learn how to occupy the subject position of the other' (in hooks 1997: 178). Nonetheless, the 'other' in postcolonial theory tends to denote a transcendental racial subject and critics have questioned its tendency to totalise the experiences between and within ethnic minorities. As Arif Dirlik suggests, the 'hybridity that postcolonial criticism refers to is uniformly a hybridity between the *postcolonial* and the First World – never, to my knowledge, between one *postcolonial* intellectual and another' (1997: 512). There turned out to be a predisposition towards universalising 'the ethnic experience' within identity politics that centred on ethnicity as a defining characteristic and the basis of a shared cultural knowledge. Like marxist and feminist identity politics, postcolonialism ultimately required a greater self-reflexivity. Instead, minority groups held themselves and were held responsible for narrating the Others' side of the story based on the totalising gestures of a reactionary identity politics and this ironically preserves the dominant relations in society by positioning marginalised peoples as perpetually courting understanding.

## 1.4 THE POSTMODERN TURN IN IDENTITY POLITICS

When postmodernism emerged as a theoretical framework in the 1980s, it continued the critique of metanarratives of identity that was instigated by marxist, feminist, and postcolonial identity politics, but it also disputed the homogenising tendencies of these models. Like its predecessors, postmodern theory resolutely challenged the ideological ascendancy of white, middle-class masculinity as historically and socially constructed. However, postmodernism also comments on the emergence of ‘Marxism’, ‘Feminism’, and ‘Postcolonialism’, with the initial capital letters indicating that these critical movements have become increasingly entrenched as ‘grand theories’ in popular and academic discourses (Nayak 2003: 31).

Postmodernism contests the way that these views circumscribe what can be reasonably said about being a particular class, gender, or ethnicity. This is indicative of one of the key principles underpinning postmodern thought, which is the hybridity of personal identity. The postmodern self is a pastiche of various characteristics and the outcome cannot be easily anticipated. Indeed, ‘identity’ becomes ‘identities’ in the postmodern lexicon to emphasise the inherent layering of identifiable traits in any one person. This shift away from ‘cultural authenticity’ is celebrated as a departure from traditional expectations that shared characteristics necessarily constitute common experiences and the sense of a collective identity.

A further tenet of postmodern thought is the temporal mobility of the self. Identity, according to postmodernism, is contextual and variable; it shifts in relation to time and space. Who we are, therefore, has much to do with the circumstances in which we find ourselves. At a basic level, individuals might present themselves differently at work than at home. They might take an interest in a hobby that colours their persona for a time only to dissipate as their interest and involvement fades. This is not to say that the postmodern identity is infinitely flexible; the development and expression of various identities ‘inevitably involve[s] an estimation of the interests of other individuals and groups as to whom we can safely and advantageously align ourselves with’ (Liu et al 2005: 19). Postmodernism, however, does allow for a greater plasticity in the deployment of identifying characteristics in specific contexts. Within postmodernism, identity is the product of an inevitable multiplicity of interpersonal relationships and material conditions. The ethos of pastiche that is at the heart of

postmodern theory is attractive in its honesty; cultures of class, gender, and ethnicity are not hermetically sealed, monolithic entities as past theories have suggested.

Yet, postmodernism is ‘one of the least understood and most maligned theoretical frameworks. One of the reasons for its theoretical and conceptual fuzziness is that postmodernism is not a fixed or logocentric theory, but instead comprises an eclectic cluster of philosophic and artistic ideas and approaches’ (Nayak 2003: 30).

Postmodernism has been used to denote a free style that is apparent in architecture, literature, and fashion, a period that is distinct from and preceded by modernism, and a ‘critical practice’ through which the social sciences and humanities have sought greater reflexivity (Nayak 2003: 30-31). It is the latter that is important to this study. Within academia, however, the hybridity and temporal mobility of identities that is championed by postmodernism has generated varied responses. By its very nature, postmodernism resists absolute definition and this is at once its strength and its fatal flaw. A number of so-called postmodernists have uncritically embraced the theory as confirmation that people are able to simply be who they want to be in contemporary society (Anderson and Miles 1999). In this way, postmodernism remains susceptible to an ‘unpolitics’ of identity; its well-intentioned appreciation of a liberal mish-mash of human differences can be used in a manner that often overlooks the ways that pre-existing social, cultural and political structures can work to contain diversity. Critics such as Henry Giroux (1994a), Robert McChesney (2003), Jeffrey Sissons (2005), and Stuart Hall (1996c) have noted that postmodernism has been co-opted by institutions as far ranging as marketing bodies, the arts, and the hospitality industry to serve the cultural dominant. Postmodernism is predisposed to becoming ‘so sliding a signifier that it can be taken to mean virtually anything you like’ (Hall 1996c: 466) and this has compromised its critical potential.

In many respects, it seems that the radical insights of postmodernism remain on theoretical terrain; as a programme for political action, postmodernism has been found wanting. Postmodern theory can be understood as presupposing an egalitarian access to the cultural resources that are necessary for autonomous identity development. In doing so, it effaces the structural limitations that can constrain the wholly conscious negotiation of identity, such as education, class, and cultural circumstances. The plasticity of identity presented by postmodernism can also efface any obstacles to

choosing one's identity in a human culture where 'the public display of bodies and their materiality... are profoundly important in structuring identity categories and notions of subjectivity' (Desmond 1999: xii). For instance, the indelible inscription of race on the body is likely to be more difficult to refute than the traditional connotations that are associated with the phenotypes of class. Moreover, 'the ways in which the hybrid self can have negative unintended consequences' on others is largely overlooked (Marotta 2000: 178). The public face of postmodernism is its promotion and celebration of diversity. Symbolic manifestations of diversity, however, are not a guarantee of political power (Fusco 2001: xv) and there is a need to make qualifications based on this point in the use of postmodern theory about identity. David Buckingham confirms, 'Against the surfeit of postmodern enthusiasm, we need to insist on relatively traditional questions about who has the right to speak, whose voices are heard and who has control over the means of production' (1999: 132).

## **1.5 IDENTITY AND SUBCULTURAL STUDIES**

Subcultural studies bring the ongoing debate about how to contemplate the complex intersection of class, gender, and ethnicity that occurs in the development of identity into sharp relief. Furthermore, as subcultural analysis is characterised by an overarching focus on youth, it introduces age as another axis of identity in the deliberation. The academic genre of subcultural studies was initiated in the 1920s. Since then, it has undergone a series of modifications that derive from contemporary ideological struggles over identity and it still has a degree of currency in the current intellectual environment. Subcultural studies emerged from the acknowledgement that much work on adolescent identity was part of the developmental tradition in psychology, which tended to conceptualise identity formation as 'a linear process, detached from historical or political contexts' (Maira and Soep 2004: 250). This perception followed on and fed back into the popular paradigm of the 'at risk' or impressionable youth that persists in various guises today; much of subcultural analysis has been focused on deconstructing these stereotypes. For example, the Department of Sociology and Anthropology at the University of Chicago pioneered subcultural studies in its presentation of juvenile delinquency as a product of the working-class neighbourhoods from which such young 'delinquents' originated. As a

rule, subcultural studies recognise that ‘youth’ is a socially and historically constructed category of identity, rather than part of a broader narrative of biological determinism; in this respect, it is similar to the models of identity politics earlier discussed.

Subcultural studies are epitomised by the work of British scholars from the University of Birmingham’s Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS) that was produced during the 1970s and 1980s. They extended the focus on the historic and cultural specificity of juvenile delinquency that was initiated by the Chicago School’s urban studies and expanded it with a reworked model of the classical marxist understanding of ideology. Hall was instrumental in the CCCS and his work on ideology is again paramount. By utilising the notion of hegemony and seeing it as the objective of ongoing ideological struggle, ‘the CCCS were able to conceptualise popular culture in a more complex form as a shifting terrain in a ‘war of manoeuvre’ that was marked not only by coercion but also by consent’ (Nayak 2003: 16). Subcultural analyses took heart in the displacement of a top-down model of power relations that was entailed in this understanding of ideology and celebrated the ‘rebellious’ quality of youth as a site of potential social resistance. ‘Working class subcultures of ‘resistance’ – teds, mods, rockers, skins, punks and so on – were read *politically* as symbolic challenges to the dominant culture, not as signs of social pathology’ (McGuigan 1992: 90). A lot of prominent subcultural research presents the practices of particular youth communities as ‘resistance’ to the unequal distribution of wealth in contemporary society and this positions identity as shaped by age and class.

Anoop Nayak observes that two major criticisms were levelled at this work on subcultures (2003). Critics disputed the marginalisation of females and ethnic minorities in subcultural analyses, which is in line with the broader critiques of feminist and postcolonial identity politics. The CCCS typically focused on the distinctive cultures of young, working-class, white men as a product of and a response to their economic circumstances. Yet, whilst the social category of class received critical attention, scholars largely ignored the socio-political implications of gendered and racialised experiences for young people. Angela McRobbie (1991) and Simon Jones (1988) in particular have sought to redress these gender and ethnic imbalances respectively. Secondly, the postmodern turn in identity politics was reflected in a

postmodern critique of the totalising gestures made by subcultural studies. Scholars argued against an impression of subcultures as ‘bounded typologies whose values are consistent and without contradiction’ (Nayak 2003: 20). Instead, postmodern theorists suggested that subcultural studies should account for the hybridity and temporal mobility of identities by viewing subcultures as forming ‘a transitional and nebulous *moment of being*’ (Nayak 2003: 19). Contemporary subcultural theorists have thus ‘drawn upon the postmodernist language of ‘hybridity’, ‘tribes’, ‘neo-tribes’, ‘lifestyles’, ‘club cultures’, ‘taste cultures’ and ‘pseudo-communities’ (Nayak 2003: 19) to explain the construction of identity based on class, age, and other traits.

A further limitation of subcultural studies, however, may be likened to the charge of ‘unpolitics’ that has been levelled at postmodernism itself. It stems from the suggestion that this work affords opportunities for researchers to overstate the political power of discrete instances of so-called resistance. Certainly, to some extent, the ‘resistance through rituals’ proposition of subcultural studies appears to be a theoretical match with the postmodern appreciation of symbolic diversity; both celebrate the potential for the ‘underdog’ to assert political authority through language and behaviours. Critics such as Jim McGuigan argue that ‘this committedly oppositional account of subcultural creativity ‘from below’ is populist and romantic (1992: 90). From the outset, however, subcultural scholars have attended to the political impetus of groups formed around subcultural activities, as opposed to postmodernism’s focus on the variability of individual identities. It remains important that subcultural studies do not lose sight of their conceptualisation of popular cultures as a site for ideological struggle between the dominant and Other groups in contemporary society. This involves thinking about how the dominant discourses can contain and control apparent acts of resistance to the status quo, such as those enacted by subcultures. Former CCCS scholars have sought to extend the work on ideology that was used in early subcultural studies (see Morley and Chen 1996) and their insights into the struggle for hegemony need to be taken into account in any future work on identity and difference.

## 1.6 ENDURING IDEAS IN THE THEORISATION OF IDENTITY

‘How to balance and re-theorise the question of articulating social classes, race and ethnicity, gender and sexuality, nation and global capital together, into a forceful explanatory framework, able to confront the ‘New Times’ we face politically, does seem to be an urgent issue’ (Morley and Chen 1996: 4).

Such push-and-pull between theoretical frameworks should not be taken to mean that there is no longer any way to speak meaningfully about identity. Our thinking ‘cannot be allowed to decay into the radiant emanations of cynicism’ (Haraway 1991: 184) because identity continues to figure in popular culture and thus retains an ongoing relevance to the way we think about ourselves and others. It is most helpful to approach the jumble of theoretical perspectives on identity by looking ‘for the best, the most useful part – which can be taken from another (often opposed) intellectual position and worked with (and on) positively’ (Morley and Chen 1996: 19). There are a number of ideas about identity that resonate in marxist, feminist, postcolonial, and postmodern critiques, and in the work of subcultural studies; these can provide a valuable foundation for conceptualising identity today.

Identity is consistently refuted as an ontologically stable category. The very notion of identity has shifting relevance in particular circumstances. For example, during times of war, various governments have stressed the significance of national identity. State administrations have avidly constructed the nation as inextricably tied to one’s sense of self in order to mobilise people in the war effort. In a modern capitalist society, identity is established as important because consumers are encouraged to communicate their ‘image’ and standing in society through their purchase of goods and services. Axes of identity such as class, gender, ethnicity, and age also carry varying connotations at different historical and cultural moments, which shapes our perception of who we are and how we relate to others. For example, Western expectations of gender are inverted in the matrilineal societies of Minangkabau and the Trobriand Islands. Identity is not wholly preordained and any discussion of identity should recognise its cultural and historical specificity.

Secondly, it has emerged that ideology has a crucial and changeable role in the development and articulation of identity. Identities carry ideological prescriptions and the implications of this must be thoroughly interrogated. By introducing increasingly positive discourses around the axes of identity – as attempted by feminism, postcolonialism, and subcultural studies, in particular – ideologies that may prove liberating for previously oppressed peoples can be mobilised. However, those that seek to benefit from these alternative discourses must remain alert as to how they will implicate others, as critiques of the totalising gestures of these models have suggested. It is also important to note that the power of alternative discourses to destabilise the dominant ideologies in society is not guaranteed. The concept of hegemony has been shown as important in this regard. Hegemonic discourses can incorporate seemingly resistant ideas to serve the status quo in society and such appropriation is made easier by their pre-existing ideological authority. As it transpires that identities are both shaped by and, in turn, shape ideological structures, then the notion of identity can be viewed ‘as neither fatally determined nor fully artificial and arbitrary’ (Butler 1990: 147) in contemporary research.

The tensions and connections between identity as a collective issue and the complexities of individual identity development also require attention in any contemporary debate. We need to remember that characteristics such as class, gender, ethnicity, and age have significance both as social and cultural categories that can circumscribe identity development, and as personal, lived experience, which is contradictory and uncertain in its infinite configurations. The micro-politics of the self must be acknowledged – that is, we cannot assume to ‘know’ individuals based on their easily discernible features and, as highlighted by postmodernism, the identities of each person are hybrid, fluid, and inevitably diverse. Yet, discussion should also be geared towards recognition of the macro-politics of collective identities because no individual develops their sense of self without recourse to pre-existing discourses and their relationship to the structures of power in society. Postmodernist theory and, to an extent, subcultural studies have been challenged by the realisation that isolated, discrete instances of rebellion against the status quo do not necessarily constitute success as a political force. The sense of *communitas* provided by a group identity remains important in thinking about how people can both effectively challenge the hegemonic discourses in society and work within them to humanistic ends.

In theory and in practice, identity is multi-faceted and definitive statements about it should be treated with caution. An awareness of the intricacies of identity described here – its historic and cultural specificity, its relationship to ideology, and its implications at both an individual and a collective level – facilitates critical thinking in this area. In the 1960s, identity politics instigated ideological challenges to the conventional wisdom about human differences; I suggest that it is important to continue to politicise identity through widespread recognition that popular understandings of the self and its relation to others are neither fixed nor benign in society today.

### **1.7 WHITE SETTLER IDENTITY IN AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND**

The dominant discourses of ethnicity in contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand illustrate the enduring relevance of politicising identity in this way; in this context, the discursive construction of identity draws on the ideals of a white majority population and popular notions of difference are measured against this ‘mythical norm’ (Lorde 1990: 282). The hegemonic status of whiteness derives from the nation’s colonial history. Aotearoa New Zealand was initially settled during the 13<sup>th</sup> century by Polynesian people who travelled by waka from the eastern Pacific Islands (King 2003: 48-49). From the 1800s, however, there was sustained immigration to the country by European settlers. Most of the arrivals were British nationals and the British government instigated the Treaty of Waitangi to formalise its colonial authority in Aotearoa New Zealand. The document arose from Britain’s growing fear that France would annex the country, its concern for the post-contact welfare of the indigenous Polynesian population, and a desire to control early land purchases (Treaty of Waitangi Information Programme 2004). According to the te reo Maori version of the Treaty, it facilitated government over Aotearoa New Zealand by the British sovereign, protected the exercise of Maori chieftainship, and gave the Crown the right to buy Maori land should tribes choose to sell it (Treaty of Waitangi Information Programme 2006). The Treaty was ultimately signed by over 500 Polynesian chiefs and representatives of the Crown in 1840 (Treaty of Waitangi Information Programme 2004: 5).

Buoyed by the apparent legitimisation of its presence in New Zealand, the British government extolled the new colony as an 'egalitarian' state to potential settlers, but this premise of democracy and equality belied widespread intolerance in early contact between the first European settlers and the indigenous Maori. White settlers and the Government purchased overwhelming tracts of Maori land, which marks an early prioritisation of contemporary Western attitudes towards private ownership and commerce over pre-existing Maori tribal values. The British administration constructed the Maori people as 'noble savages' during the early colonial period; the primitive status of Maori earmarked them as subordinate to the white settlers, but their 'nobility' established them as suitable candidates for assimilation. These concurrent tropes of Maori nobility and savagery pervaded both the popular cultural imaginary of the white settler population and institutional practice at this time. For example, Aotearoa New Zealand was 'the first neo-European country in the world to give the vote to its indigenous population' with suffrage rights going to Maori in 1867 (King 2003: 257), but the national parliament instituted only four Maori seats. If the Maori seats in parliament had been allocated on the basis of population, they would have numbered fourteen or fifteen (King 2003: 257). This striking inequity suggests that although the political concessions that were made to Maori compare favourably with the treatment of indigenous populations in other colonies, they were nonetheless based on the assumption that Maori would assimilate with the dominant Pakeha population.

In this cultural climate, white settler identity achieved ideological ascendancy as the mythical norm against which difference was measured and judged. In the early colonial period, white immigrants to the country were discursively constructed as having a rugged masculinity and a 'can do' self-sufficiency (Phillips 1987). The dominant New Zealand identity of this period grew in part from the country's geographical isolation, which necessitated independence, and it served to justify the trying circumstances that the British immigrants found in Aotearoa New Zealand. It also effaced the value of divergent identities in this environment. Western attitudes and behaviours were ideologically prescribed as beneficial to the Maori indigene. Even so, the imperial authority of the British settlers drastically diminished the wealth, health, and cultural liberties of the Maori people. The non-Maori population in Aotearoa New Zealand increased from approximately 2,000 in 1840 to over 470,000

by 1881 (King 2003: 169; 231). By contrast, the Maori population fell from 110,000 before European contact to 46,000 in 1881 and would be further eroded by disease, low fertility, and cultural exploitation over the following two decades (King 2003: 150; 231). People from Britain and other European states comprised the greater part of Aotearoa New Zealand's immigrant population throughout the 19<sup>th</sup> century (King 2003: 175), and historical documents point to the widespread discrimination against immigrants from other ethnic backgrounds, such as the Chinese gold prospectors who arrived in the late 19<sup>th</sup> and early 20<sup>th</sup> centuries. This evidence, in tandem with assimilationist attitudes towards Maori, is indicative of the 'desirability' of whiteness in the cultural and political circumstances of that time.

Despite the relative instability of white identity in Aotearoa New Zealand today, white ethnicity still consistently exercises ideological authority in the spheres of culture, commerce, and politics. Recent debate about the wording of the ethnicity question in the 2006 census illustrates the ongoing volatility of white ethnic identity in Aotearoa New Zealand. 'European New Zealander' was the preferred description over the Maori word 'Pakeha'. In newspaper letters to the editor and on talkback radio, however, debate raged about the implications of being 'Pakeha' and the validity of white New Zealanders' engagement with te ao Maori. The term Pakeha will be used in this study to denote the cultural experiences and practices of the dominant white population in Aotearoa New Zealand. Pakeha represents a historically and culturally specific understanding of white identity in this country. It has shifted from being simply a Maori word for the early white settlers to connoting a sense of 'belonging' for the white population born in Aotearoa New Zealand today whose ties to this country are markedly more profound than those to their foreign ancestral 'homelands' (King 1999: 235). It offers a discursive reminder that identity is ideological; it explicitly signifies white identity at a time when the numerical dominance of whiteness can render it seemingly invisible and therefore the 'norm'. The label Pakeha has implications for the white New Zealander's sense of self and their relationship to other individuals; it references the broader group identity of white New Zealanders and their relationship to the Maori indigene, as well as distinguishing the white settler population from other immigrant peoples to this country and white people living elsewhere. In this context, the term Pakeha reminds us that identity is not a given and it serves to politicise white identity in Aotearoa New Zealand today.

## **1.8 THE INDIGENOUS IDENTITY OF AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND MAORI**

By contrast, Maori have explicitly politicised ethnicity since the 1960s based on mounting confidence in a distinctly Maori cultural identity (Spoonley 1990: 29). They have recognised inequities in their relationships with the Pakeha majority at both an individual and a group level and they have fought for the ideological acceptance of the particular attitudes and behaviours of te ao Maori that diverge from Pakeha 'norms'. The touchstone for the revitalisation of Maori identity has been the Treaty of Waitangi (Spoonley 1990: 29). Paul Spoonley notes, 'In a society that values legal agreements and the order imposed by legal structures, the Treaty is an important weapon in arguing for equity for Maori. The Treaty, and its dismissal for more than a hundred years, is used to remind the dominant Pakeha group of its obligations' (1990: 29). As early as 1918, the Ratana movement called for ratification of the Treaty and since the 1960s, Maori protest groups such as Nga Tamatoa have invoked the Treaty to challenge the historical imbalances between Maori and Pakeha. Biculturalism has been increasingly acknowledged as a legitimate political regime from the 1970s onwards and the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi were incorporated into government policy at this time. One example is the establishment of the Waitangi Tribunal in 1975 'as a formal ongoing commission of inquiry to hear grievances against the Crown' for historical violations of the Treaty's principles (Treaty of Waitangi Information Programme 2004: 20). Other successes include the return of confiscated land to some tribes and the Fisheries Claims Settlement Act, which awarded 50 percent of New Zealand's commercial fisheries to Maori in 1992 (Waitangi Tribunal 2006). Place-names and the titles of government agencies are often offered in both English and te reo Maori and the increasing prominence of Maoritanga in public representations of the nation has also acquired wider approval (Pearson 2005: 33).

Yet, the institutional changes required by Maori under the Treaty of Waitangi have often met with strong resistance from the dominant Pakeha population and the validity of contemporary Maori identity has been challenged. David Pearson observes that 'there is only limited tolerance for Maori to demand additional rights and resources, especially on 'racial' grounds' (2005: 33). Debate continues around the 'true'

interpretation of the Treaty and the extent to which it remains relevant (see Orange 1992; Slack 2004; Consedine and Consedine 2005). Both the incumbent Labour government and the National party, as the primary opposition, advocated definite cut-off dates for Treaty settlements in the 2005 national election, which ideologically positions the Treaty as a historical document with limited relevance in society today. The legitimacy of a distinctly Maori identity has been contested by a popular shift towards multiculturalism in the national cultural imaginary. The major political parties have crystallised this attitude by co-opting the postmodern rhetoric of ‘hybridity’ to suggest that Maori ethnicity is redundant in a ‘multicultural’ society of inter-racial marriages and integrated cultural institutions. Maori have had to prove that their ‘Maoriness’ persists in the current cultural milieu in order to secure state resources. Jeffrey Sissons notes that shares in the nation’s fishing assets have been limited to tribal Maori, who are a largely rural populace, and this is evidence that the urbanisation of Maori and their shift away from tribal organisation is seen as negating their political legitimacy (2005: 52). Hybridity is a valuable concept in understanding contemporary identity, but its use in this instance belies both the cultural specificity of what it means to be Maori and the implicit role of dominant Pakeha values in mediating the balance of power in Aotearoa New Zealand.

There is also a degree of discontent within Maoridom itself about the nature of Maori identity today. Maori identity politics have typically drawn on traditional indigenous cultural values that do not resonate for all contemporary Maori and can even work to exclude some. Tracey McIntosh has explored popular thinking about Maori identity in Aotearoa New Zealand today (2005). She writes of a ‘traditional’ Maori identity that exists in contemporary society in which ‘[w]hakatapa, matauranga Maori, proficiency in te reo and tikanga are all seen as important’ (McIntosh 2005: 42). This traditional Maori identity uses its divergence from Pakeha cultural norms as a site of resistance; the conscious articulation of ethnic difference offers a real alternative to Pakeha ideals and, in doing so, reveals their very constructedness. However, ‘[w]hile this identity has been successful in its current form in voicing both the concerns and aspirations of Maori as well as progressing many political issues, it can exclude some Maori by having relatively unyielding criteria in place to prove one’s ‘Maoriness’ (McIntosh 2005: 45). There is no overstating the value of Maori identity politics in contesting the ideological dominance of Pakeha in Aotearoa New Zealand, but both

Maori and non-indigenes must be wary of essentialising te ao Maori and its people.

In this study, 'Maori' is used with an awareness of the theoretical and lived complexities of ethnic identity in Aotearoa New Zealand today. The word Maori evolved to signify the indigenous population from the burgeoning number of white settlers in the early period of colonisation; this is indicative of how Maori identity is historically and culturally constructed. Maori identity is thus not inherently fixed and modern trends such as urbanisation do not contradict what it means to be Maori, but are instead indicative of the necessary flux and hybridity of identity itself. Maori identity has been explicitly involved in the ideological struggle for power in Aotearoa New Zealand and has invaluable potential to disrupt the 'mythical norm' of whiteness. Yet, it is also an ideological construction itself and there is a need to be alert to the motivations behind the articulation of Maori identity by paying attention to the context of its use. Maori identity has clearly been a collective concern in the historical pursuit of economic and cultural resources required by Maori to meet their potential in Aotearoa New Zealand today and it plays a political role in personal relationships in modern society.

### **1.9 PACIFIC IDENTITY IN AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND TODAY**

Along with Maori, Pacific people are one of the most visible minority groups in Aotearoa New Zealand today (Teaiwa and Mallon 2005: 207) and the concept of a particular Pacific identity has become increasingly important. A significant number of peoples from the Pacific Islands have immigrated to Aotearoa New Zealand. This is in part a consequence of the historical relations between nations in the Pacific rim. As part of the Commonwealth, Aotearoa New Zealand has variously been responsible for the governance of Western Samoa, the Cook Islands, Niue, and the Tokelau Islands. 'Western Samoa gained independence from New Zealand in 1962, and the Cook Islands became self-governing in free association with New Zealand in 1965' (King 2003: 468). Niue and the Tokelau Islands remain under Aotearoa New Zealand's jurisdiction. From the late 1950s and 1960s, there was an influx of immigrants to the country from these Pacific nations and from Tonga. This was brought about by the need for more unskilled labour to meet New Zealand's economic

growth as an agricultural producer for Britain (Liu et al 2005: 13). Auckland is now both home to one-third of Aotearoa New Zealand's population and is the largest Polynesian city in the world.

Yet, Pacific peoples have faced ethnic discrimination, most tellingly during the political campaigns against 'illegal overstayers' in the 1970s. The government's decision to encourage a migrant population from the Pacific Island nations was chiefly economic rather than humanitarian; ethnic discrimination came to be viewed as 'an irrational check on market forces' at a time when the country required further unskilled labour (Pearson 2005: 29). However, when an economic downturn caused an increase in unemployment in Aotearoa New Zealand, the government chose to address the situation by targeting the country's immigrant population in an attempt to reduce overstayers. Polynesian immigrants were the focus of campaigns during 1974 and 1976; this was presumably because their physical appearances marked them as different and therefore not 'belonging' in the predominantly white nation. Jores de Bres and Rob Campell point out that 'the majority of the quarter of a million visitors who came to New Zealand in 1973 could not possibly [sic] have been Polynesian. And yet there has been no record of Europeans being constantly raided in the manner that Pacific Islanders, innocent or otherwise, have been' (1976: 21).

Pacific peoples in Aotearoa New Zealand have historically united around the notion of a Pacific identity and they continue to do so today. Pacific Islanders politicised their identity based on their common experiences of feeling marginalised in their status as ethnic minority peoples during these 'dawn raids' of the 1970s. The campaigns against illegal immigrants certainly had the potential to act as a source of divisiveness between the people of the various Pacific Islands. In particular, there was some disgruntlement among the Pacific community that the broader Island population was being unfairly targeted because of their relative closeness in physical appearance to the Tongan people. 'Tongans were key targets during the period of the 'dawn raids' against illegal overstayers. They did not hold any of the citizenship privileges other Pacific Islanders could claim' and were therefore more likely to be working on a non-working permit or overstaying a short-term license (Teaiwa and Mallon 2005: 209). However, the 'dawn raid' experience also solidified relations between Pacific peoples. Simativa Perese captures the sense of collective identity that emerged at this time,

albeit in negative circumstances:

‘Our new found opportunity and prosperity was met with dawn raids and police dogs. The stigma of overstaying tested our resolve and sense of community with New Zealand. The dawn raids attacked our collective psyche, touched the core of each Pacific person, and questioned our place in New Zealand. The images and experience of dawn raids changed our perception of New Zealand and New Zealanders perceptions of us. It was a wake up call that we were a politically weak group and easily targeted’ (2006).

Pacific peoples continue to forge connections based on a shared sense of self. Melani Anae has observed that, for Pacific youth, Pacific cultural, sports, and religious groups offer ‘familiarity in the alien milieu of schooling in New Zealand, which was and is dominated by Papalagi children and teachers, and the Papalagi-orientated curriculum’ (2001: 109). Pacific peoples often come together under the umbrella term ‘Pasifika’ to advance the interests of people from all Pacific Islands in Aotearoa New Zealand today.

Reference to Pacific identity in this study - denoted by the terms ‘Pacific peoples’ and ‘Pacific Islanders’ – recognises that such a notion is complex and can variously serve as socially restrictive and enabling and even act as both at once. Its construction is coloured by the relatively recent ‘dawn raid’ campaigns when ‘Pacific Islander’ had a pejorative value in the national cultural imaginary. Its meaning continues to shift as new generations of Pacific peoples are born in Aotearoa New Zealand and their relationships to this country and the Islands changes. Pacific identity, too, is ideological. Terms such as ‘Pacific peoples’ or ‘Pacific Islanders’ can efface the diverse cultural identities that make up the Pacific diaspora (Bedford and Didham 2001: 28) and homogenise the ethnic identities of Samoans, Tongans, Cook Islanders, Niueans, and people from the Tokelau Islands. Spoonley suggests, however, that Pacific identity can also prise open new discursive spaces for Pacific peoples in a country dominated by Pakeha values and cultural institutions (2001). He writes, ‘Maori identity politics disrupted the colonially’ inspired constructions of the New Zealand nation and state from a base of indigeneity. Pacific peoples now pose a new challenge to these constructions, from identities and networks of the Pacific diaspora’ (Spoonley 2001: 96). In this thesis, Pacific identity is a means of exploring the

relationships between Pacific peoples and other ethnic groups in Aotearoa New Zealand, whilst acknowledging the diversity of cultures from the Pacific diaspora. Like the ethnic identities of Pakeha and Maori, Pacific identity is both social and personal, enacted in relation to specific cultural and historical contexts, and its ideological charge fluctuates according to the context in which it is mobilised. Failure to politicise the notion of identity in this way effaces the complex historical developments that colour ideas about ethnic identities in Aotearoa New Zealand today.

### **1.10 POLYNESIAN YOUTH IDENTITY**

*Brand New Zealanders* analyses the representation of Polynesian youth identity in *bro'Town* and the theoretical terrain already mapped in this chapter can be used to clarify the interrogative value of 'Polynesian youth' as a specific social category. I use the term 'Polynesian' to reference the interface between Maori and Pacific peoples. This label has been widely critiqued as a discursive tool for 'lumping together' Maori and Pacific Islanders as a single ethnic and cultural group (Misa 1995: 16). For example, it can efface the historical tensions between these two ethnic groups. There was some resentment within Maoridom towards the arrival of Pacific immigrants in Aotearoa New Zealand as they were seen as causing 'incursions on finite local and national resources' (Teaiwa and Mallon 2005: 211). Sefita Hao'uli also explains that 'Pacific Island people did not come here to hongī with Maori' and many Pacific Islanders have viewed the political demands of Maori under the Treaty of Waitangi as the claims of an indulged people (1996: 38). However, the socially and politically empowering potential of identifying as either Maori or Pacific Islander in Aotearoa New Zealand has already been discussed, and the same is true of identification as Polynesian. 'Being Polynesian' can function as an ideological challenge to the hegemony of Pakeha beliefs and institutions and it may even exercise greater political weight because of the numerical advantage of uniting Maori and Pacific peoples. Polynesian identity has varying meanings and political potential in contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand and, with this awareness, the representation of Polynesian identity in the cartoon series *bro'Town* will be examined.

‘Youth identity’ is also a contentious concept that nonetheless has analytical significance. As illustrated earlier in this chapter, subcultural studies challenged the paradigm of the ‘at risk’ or deviant youth by focusing on the positive resistance to the status quo in society that youth can articulate through their distinctive cultural behaviours. Popular conceptions of what it means to be young have continued to oscillate between prior notions of moral vulnerability and delinquency and the ideas of youth rebellion and independence proffered by subcultural research. It is the context in which particular manifestations of youth identity are articulated and interpreted that is important and I will use this awareness in analysing the discourses of youth identity that are represented in *bro’Town*. The parameters of youth in this study are people aged between 12 and 24 years. This age range has been appropriated from the Ministry of Youth Development, which develops policies, programmes, and services for youth in Aotearoa New Zealand today (Ministry of Youth Development 2006). Within the context of this paper, ‘Polynesian youth’ therefore refers to New Zealanders of Maori or Pacific Island descent ranging in age between 12 and 24 years. Whilst a generic label masks the cultural diversity within this population, the term ‘Polynesian youth’ connects with the discursive construction of this demographic in the national cultural imaginary and facilitates a critique of its representation.



Identity may appear to be a familiar concept, but it requires critical attention. Notable theoretical challenges to the notion of identity as an ontologically stable category have come from marxist, feminist, and postcolonial identity politics, postmodernism, and subcultural studies. Some enduring ideas have emerged in these critiques. In understanding identity as historically and culturally constructed, both personal and social, and inherently ideological, we can speak meaningfully about identity today. These ideas resonate with the historical configuration of Pakeha, Maori, and Pacific identities in Aotearoa New Zealand and illustrate the ongoing importance of politicising identity in this way. Still, identity has proven impossible to pin down entirely. Therefore, my discussion of identity in the forthcoming chapters should not be read as an all-encompassing account of how the self is made meaningful in popular culture today. Rather, it contextualises the representation of identity in the popular television series *bro’Town* in the current historical moment and offers a series of

insights into how this may affect the programme's production and consumption. The goal is to provide a contemporary example of why critical theories of identity are important and how these theories can be applied so that individuals can imagine how visual representations of difference might impact upon others at a personal and a political level and make informed choices about how they interpret and use such cultural texts.

## PART TWO

### IMAG(IN)ING IDENTITY

#### Theorising the Representation of Identity in Aotearoa New Zealand Television

‘The central and overriding aspect of our times is the dominance of the market, capitalist social relations, and the primacy of profit’  
(McChesney 2004: 45).

‘[C]ommodities come to serve as representations of identities’ (Ram  
2004: 27).

In the current historical moment, identity has a dollar value. In the contemporary market economy of Western societies, corporate entities can contribute to an ideological project that positions consumption as a marker of who we are and our relationship to other individuals and social groups. The construction of Polynesian youth identity in the television series *bro’Town* represents a case study of the extent to which commercial values mediate a popular understanding of identity in Aotearoa New Zealand today. First, however, the role of television in influencing public opinion must be examined. Television does not exist in a cultural vacuum and is inevitably embroiled in broader economic and political circumstances. The significance of capitalist culture and consumer values in the Aotearoa New Zealand mediascape is indicative of the context in which *bro’Town’s* construction of Polynesian youth identity can be understood.



This chapter examines the debate around media influence in order to develop an appropriate approach to theorising television’s role in constructing identity for Aotearoa New Zealand audiences today. Within critical media studies, the conclusions of audience research have oscillated between the idea of the media as an all-powerful institution that manipulates its consumers, and the active audience thesis,

which favours the autonomy of audiences to negotiate their own meanings from media texts. I return to the work of Michel Foucault in suggesting that it is more accurate to consider that the media has long-term ideological effects for audiences. From this perspective, it is important to analyse the predominance of certain discourses in Aotearoa New Zealand television and to reflect on how this can normalise particular belief systems and ideas about identity.

The television system in Aotearoa New Zealand is characterised by the continual push-and-pull between public service objectives and commercial imperatives. At present, commercial imperatives appear to have gained ascendance, as illustrated by the practices of the major free-to-air broadcasters, Television New Zealand (TVNZ) and CanWest. *Bro 'Town* is screened on TV3, which is administered by the private media company CanWest. I suggest that the concept of commodification is pertinent to understanding television's construction of Polynesian youth identity in the current cultural and historical moment because of the apparent centrality of commercial values in the contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand mediascape. Commodification is a means of considering how human qualities and social relations are increasingly conceptualised as commodities and thus implicated in the pursuit of profit (McChesney and Foster 2003). As discussed in Part One, there is a popular tendency for identifying categories such as ethnicity and age to be ideologically positioned as 'saying something' about the self; marketing personnel have seized upon this trend and readily reducing identity in one way or another to commodities that are provided by the capitalist economy.

The representation of Polynesian youth identity in contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand television can be critiqued using discourse analysis. The inherent value of this methodology will be demonstrated through a summary of the semiotic work of Roland Barthes and the Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS). I explain the potential of discourse analysis to encourage critical thinking about the way that television is produced from particular historical and cultural locations, and how this shapes the production of identity on screen and its reception by audiences. I suggest that if the media is both capable of normalising particular ideas about identity and susceptible to the processes of commodification then television frames our sense of self and our relationship to others in accordance with a

consumerist sensibility. The conclusions of this chapter will set the foundations for the discursive study of series one and two of *bro'Town* and its role in circumscribing identity for audiences in Aotearoa New Zealand today, which follows in Part Three.

## 2.1 TELEVISION AND DIRECT EFFECTS RESEARCH

The notion that the media has considerable power to directly influence the behaviour of its audiences has long commanded the attention of mass communication research and public opinion. Moving image media, such as television, have drawn particular critical attention because of their purportedly realist qualities. Albert Bandura's series of 'Bobo doll' experiments in 1963 represent a seminal example of research that identifies a direct relationship between viewing moving image media and subsequent audience behaviour. Bandura observed how children interacted with a life-size doll after watching violent videos (Kearsley 2006). He concluded that children had fewer inhibitions about behaving aggressively after witnessing mediated violence (Kearsley 2006). James Weaver's 1992 study on the behavioural effects of viewing sexually explicit material offered similar insights. He concluded that exposure to pornographic material encourages sexually aggressive behaviour in men (Jensen 1995: 298). Such findings have fuelled public indignation towards the content and proliferation of modern media.

The development of television in Aotearoa New Zealand and abroad has been tempered by the conclusions of direct effects research. 'In the early days of television broadcasting there was much concern about the new medium's power which led to very strict regulations on access to broadcast via television' (Siune and Hultén 1998: 24). As recently as thirty years ago, television transmission in Europe was limited to a small number of channels mandated by the national governments to provide 'public service' programming (Kleinstauber 1998: 60). The Aotearoa New Zealand government administered a one-channel national system and its content reflected the 'codified, hierarchical' tone of the State's management practice at that time (Farnsworth 2001: 190-193). The introduction of a second channel in the mid-1970s – TV2 – offered programming geared more towards a youth audience, yet both channels remained under the Government controlled TVNZ network. The assumption was that

the so-called hypodermic needle effect of television viewing should be monopolised by the State in the interests of the greater public good.

Nonetheless, the era of the all-powerful media declined as the research used to support the direct effects approach was extensively contested. The focus of media analysts on experimental research with quantifiable outcomes was a product of the modernist positivism of the early 20th century when scientific rationalism was the lynchpin of most research practices. In the latter half of last century, this scientific positivism was broadly critiqued and its emphasis on laboratory experiments, measurable outcomes, and presumed objectivity were challenged. As a result, the experimental research that was used as evidence of television's direct effects on audience behaviour has been discredited. This research was conducted under the artificial circumstances of a laboratory environment and thus does not translate reliably to the complex circumstances of actual viewing (Gauntlett 1998). Direct effects research also operated on the erroneous assumption that its subjects would not alter their ideas and behaviour in response to observation or inquiry by the researcher (Dutton et al 1994: 152). Greater reflexivity has been demanded of media researchers than that evidenced in experimental media research, which paradoxically presumed that the researcher was exempt from media influences in studies that supported its direct effects (Gauntlett 1998). The direct effects approach to media influence offers a seductive argument that frequently resurfaces in the public sphere, but the evidence for this position has proven unreliable.

## **2.2 THE ACTIVE AUDIENCE THEORY OF TELEVISION VIEWING**

Active audience theory emerged as a popular alternative to the idea that the media affected audiences directly. This approach focused on the variety of responses that the media can elicit in audiences and attributed greater power to individuals in discerning media messages. It suggested that the diverse socio-cultural experiences of individual audience members and the specific conditions of viewing impact upon the meanings that people make from their media use. John Fiske sums up the active audience thesis in the term 'audiencing', which is defined as 'the process in which audiences selectively produce meanings and pleasures from texts' (1996: 297). His ethnographic

study of homeless men watching the film *Die Hard* on video is frequently cited as an example of how viewers can take surprising meanings and pleasures from specific media texts. Fiske identifies the homeless men's 'ability to read antisocial meanings against a prosocial text' (1996: 306). For example, the men favoured scenes in the film in which a terrorist group committed violent acts against innocent citizens and repelled police intervention (Fiske 1996: 305) and 'they switched off the tape before law and order were restored' (Fiske 1996: 301). Fiske sees the homeless men as reading against the grain of *Die Hard* in their apparent allegiance with the antagonists. His work is characteristic of the active audience approach in which a focus on viewer productivity and the polysemic nature of any media text was advocated as a counter to the conclusions of direct effects research.

This paradigm shift away from direct effects research towards the active audience theory resonates with the significant changes to the television sector in Aotearoa New Zealand that occurred in the late 1980s and early 1990s. Following the 1984 election of the Labour Government, television broadcasting was swiftly deregulated in accordance with public pressure. Critics argued that television programming in Aotearoa New Zealand remained too conservative for contemporary audiences (Fox 1990) and TVNZ was thereby reconfigured as a State Owned Enterprise. Publicly, the Government advanced the rationale that the free market could best meet the modern audience's needs, yet the move also had the benefits of enabling the State to withdraw from the 'messy' and contested activity of cultural management (Atkinson 2001: 125; Farnsworth 2001: 195) whilst simultaneously providing an additional source of State revenue. Throughout the late 1980s and early 1990s, Aotearoa New Zealand audiences were ostensibly empowered by the deregulation of national television broadcasting. In 1991, the incumbent National Government further decentralised television services by removing all restrictions on foreign ownership of Aotearoa New Zealand media. This enabled Canadian corporation CanWest Global Communications to purchase the local station television station TV3 (Horrocks 2004: 30-31) and by 2003, CanWest had launched a second channel, C4. As popular opinion about the direct effects of media waned and the active audience approach achieved ascendance, Aotearoa New Zealand governments deregulated national television services with the professed goal of facilitating audience autonomy in their viewing choices.

Yet, there are significant limitations to the active audience theory as a definitive account of media influence. Proponents of the active audience approach used qualitative methods to assess viewer response, but the quality of their research remains questionable. For instance, major ethical and methodological issues plague Fiske's *Die Hard* study. His observations were made against the men's wish, which consolidated the relative socio-political power of Fiske as an academic over the homeless men and rendered them as objects of the study, rather than participants in it (Bordo 1993: 281). Fiske also made unqualified assumptions about the meanings that the men took from *Die Hard*. He presumed that the men's reactions reflected a symbolic rebuke of the status quo in society under which they had been systematically disempowered (Fiske 1996: 305) without considering that their responses could also be a mark of the men's appreciation of the quality of violence in the film. Ultimately, active audience theory exhibits the same limitations as postmodernism in its populist form; it defines power as primarily the property of individuals, which undermines the influence of cultural 'norms' in tempering the audiences' potential to make subversive meanings from media texts (Bordo 1993: 261). Fiske's study of homeless men watching *Die Hard* is indicative of active audience theory's tendency to overstate the political implications of discrete instances of resistant media viewing. Likewise, audience 'autonomy' in the deregulated Aotearoa New Zealand television environment meant choosing from a schedule of television programming that lacked diversity as stations engaged in 'an unabashed pursuit of ratings through populist and tabloid content' (Thompson 2005). The active audience thesis is valuable because it highlights that the audience, as a single term, is a misleading label for a complex reality; nonetheless, it has largely inflated the power of viewers to make active choices in their consumption of media texts.

### **2.3 THE IDEOLOGICAL INFLUENCE OF THE MEDIA**

Within mass communication research, there is no longer a predominant conviction that television exerts direct effects upon audience behaviour and active audience theory has also proven largely inadequate. Understanding the media as a cultural institution with long-term ideological effects on audiences, however, is a viable alternative to the polarising dichotomies implied in the direct effects approach and the

active audience thesis. This theorisation derives, in part, from the work of Michel Foucault. Foucault traced the development of surveillance techniques and concluded that visibility facilitates knowledge of the observed, which is then circulated as discourse to produce widespread ideas about acceptable 'norms' and social 'deviance' (1995). He referred to this process as panopticism and wrote, 'The panoptic society functions through a productive power, rather than a repressive one' (1995: 208). By this, Foucault meant that the normative values communicated in dominant discourses are internalised, which enables individuals to survey themselves and regulate their attitudes and behaviours in accordance with the governing ideas in society.

Foucault's definition of discourse proved useful in understanding identity (see Part One) and it is a valuable tool in conceptualising the influence of television. Some media theorists have used Foucault's ideas to suggest that a panoptic gaze is structured into media texts and their discussion has focused on modes of audio-visual communication such as television. The argument is that media texts make particular aspects of society visible to audiences and the dominant discourses that emerge in this process can then function to demarcate the realms of normality and abnormality. Susan Bordo is a leading proponent of the long-term ideological effects of popular media. In 'Material Girl', for example, Bordo asserts that the media has idealised a particular image of the female body so consistently that it has become the expected norm in modern society. She cites the example of longstanding pop star Madonna, who transformed her curvaceous figure of the early 1980s to align with the 1990s ideal of the svelte female form (Bordo 1993: 168-170). Madonna's body transformation was celebrated in popular media such as music television whereby reinforcing the desirability of the contemporary norm and effacing the inequalities of privilege, money, and time involved in transforming one's figure, as well as the associated emotional trauma (Bordo 1993: 227-228). Bordo's work is reminiscent of a number of studies by other researchers who demonstrate that media such as television are cultural institutions with a considerable role in discursively producing social knowledge.

The media's pervasiveness in contemporary Western society means that it has significant power to affect the ideological struggle for hegemony. The media comes in a multitude of forms; the advent of digital communication technologies such as the

internet, mobile phone services, and satellite television is coupled with the continuation of traditional media, including radio, newspapers, and magazines. Conventional expectations of where media use will take place have also expanded as the media increasingly colonises new public spaces such as bus shelters, eateries, and shopping centres. Television has a specific capacity to inhabit both domestic spaces and communal areas. Consequently, the discourses communicated by television have an extensive reach and this proves telling when paired with Foucault's understanding of discourse and power. Foucault argued that power must be discursively constructed because it is discourse that circumscribes the relationship between individuals and groups in society (1995: 202). He writes that in the panoptic relationship between visibility and discourse, '[a] real subjection is born mechanically from a fictitious relation' (Foucault 1995: 202) and certain groups of people are made powerful within specific discursive spaces. Foucault therefore understood that particular discourses carry ideological weight in society and mediate the flow of power, which would otherwise be a dynamic of non-centralised forces. Television is extremely pervasive and this means that the dominant discourses that it constructs inevitably carry ideological clout in society today. In this thesis, I refer to the 'popular cultural imaginary' as a way to speak meaningfully about television's influence that capitalises on the work of Foucault. This phrase indicates an awareness that the audience's response to specific media messages is not preordained, but that the dominant discourses circulated by television play an important role in colouring the public's imagination and making collective meaning in society. As a result, contemporary audiences must become increasingly culturally savvy in order to take ownership of the ideological effects of their media consumption.

#### **2.4 THE DISCOURSE OF THE DOLLAR IN AOTEAROA NEW ZEALAND TELEVISION**

This understanding of media influence is more nuanced than both the direct effects approach and active audience theory and thus more difficult to articulate in public pronouncements on television broadcasting in Aotearoa New Zealand. Yet, amidst the shift from the highly regulated environment of early television broadcasting to the deregulated market of the late 1980s to the 1990s, there has been evidence of a

Foucauldian philosophy - an underlying sense that the media occupies a position of power in modern society, although the exercise of this power can never be wholly guaranteed. In particular, the Aotearoa New Zealand Labour Party has demonstrated ongoing concern that the profit imperative of commercial television positions audiences as consumers first, which potentially negates the public service potential of television. For example, public service directives were actively protected during the commercialisation of Aotearoa New Zealand television in the 1980s. The Labour Government established NZ on Air in 1989; this funding body dispensed government revenue from a broadcasting fee with the purpose of facilitating local content that might otherwise be commercially unfeasible (Thompson 2005). Although its success has been questionable (see Fox 1990; Walker 1990), the formation of NZ on Air points to historical conjecture that the free market would be ill-equipped to administer balanced television programming to New Zealanders.

Moreover, Labour-led governments since the late 1990s have also sought to reverse the commercial trends of the deregulated television sector (Thompson 2005). In 2003, the TVNZ Charter was introduced with this objective. Amongst its principles is a commitment to ‘feature programming that serves the varied interests and informational needs and age groups within New Zealand society, including tastes and interests not generally catered for by other national television broadcasters’. It also seeks to ‘maintain a balance between programmes of general appeal and programmes of interest to smaller audiences’ (TVNZ 2003). Media commentators have observed that in commercial television services there is an insistent pull towards a standard formula of television programming to attract maximum audience numbers. This is due, in part, to the appeal that high rating television programmes hold for advertisers. For example, United States’ research suggests that broadcasters can charge up to six times more for a 30-second advertising position in a top-rated series than in a relative low-rating spot (Baran 1999: 225). The Labour Government has promised subsidies to offset the costs of implementing public service principles in Aotearoa New Zealand television, beginning with \$12 million in 2003 and rising to \$17 million by 2006-2007 (Thompson 2005). The goal of this funding is to offset competition for audience numbers, or market share, with an increased focus on the quality of national free-to-air programming.

Under this model, Polynesian youth identity is positioned to attain greater visibility in national free-to-air television. The Charter specifies that TVNZ will ‘promote understanding of the diversity of cultures making up the New Zealand population’ (TVNZ 2003). In particular, TVNZ is obliged to ‘feature programmes that serve the interests and informational needs of Maori audiences, including programmes promoting the Maori language and programmes addressing Maori history, cultures and current issues’ (TVNZ 2003). Media commentator Juliana Venning observes that ‘there is a strong commitment to Te Tiriti o Waitangi’ in the locally-produced drama series *Shortland Street*, which receives funding as a TVNZ Charter programme (publicaddress 2006). Venning continues, ‘This is not chance people, this is a collaboration with senior Maori advisers’ (publicaddress 2006). In recent years, Maori youth have featured in central roles on *Shortland Street*, such as those of Tama Hudson, Shannon Te Ngaru, and Eti Kawaka, and core Pacific Island characters have included young Samoan nurse Vinnie Kruse. *Shortland Street* predates the implementation of the TVNZ Charter, but State funding helps ensure that the long-running soap, with its palpable commitment to diversity, can sustain the prime-time slot of weekdays at 7.00 pm amidst competition from other stations. This is an example of the potential of public service broadcasting initiatives to encourage cross-cultural diversity in national television programming.

In this historical moment, however, national governments must frequently function as corporate entities and the condition of the domestic economy is viewed as the primary indicator of a government’s accomplishments by the majority of the voting public. Television broadcasting is viewed as an expensive drain on public coffers so many state-sponsored television services have adopted a dual system with revenue coming from both the government and advertising (Siune and Hultén 1998: 27). Certainly, the aftertaste of the commercial television model of the 1990s persists in Aotearoa New Zealand as TVNZ must remain committed to achieving unfettered commercial profits for the Government based on its contemporary status as a Crown-Owned Company (Thompson 2005). TVNZ CEO Ian Fraser surmises, ‘We have a dual remit. Our job is to deliver the Charter while maintaining our commercial performance... It’s the challenge of rendering unto God and unto Caesar at the same time’ (Thompson 2005). Advertising still comprises 90 percent of TVNZ’s annual income and this suggests that special interest programming will continue to warrant limited resources

(Horrocks 2004: 37). A commercial ethos persists in Aotearoa New Zealand television despite the Government's Charter prescriptions for TVNZ. This effectively compromises its ability to open new discursive spaces in Aotearoa New Zealand because it requires that television content be geared towards generating large audiences and investment by advertisers.

TVNZ's obligation to meet considerable financial objectives set by the Government negates its ability to deliver Charter programming consistently and during accessible time-slots. Peter Thompson observes that '[d]espite some investment in local content, including new documentaries and discussion programmes, the content on TV One and TV2 remain[s] similar to the pre-charter schedules, with a continuing high proportion of light entertainment and reality-TV shows' (2005). There is evidence that programmes that focus on Polynesian youth culture have been 'ghettoised' in early morning and late night slots. For example, the 2006 series *The Market*, which focuses on a romance between a young Maori man and a Samoan girl, screened at 10.30 pm. Likewise, *Tagata Pasifika* is scheduled for Thursday evenings at 11.20 pm. The TVNZ Charter risks becoming mere rhetoric because the increasing commercial demands that face the State-sponsored network impede TVNZ's public service initiatives.

Surprisingly, then, it is commercial broadcaster TV3 that has advanced Polynesian youth culture on screen. *Bro'Town* is the most notable example and the first two series have screened during prime-time. In 2005, TV3 also launched *Pacific Beat Street*, which is 'the first mainstream magazine series to be fronted entirely by Polynesian presenters' (XtraMSN 2006). *Pacific Beat Street* airs on Saturdays at 11.30 am. It is reasonable to surmise that Polynesian youth identity is commercially profitable for the privately-owned TV3 in Aotearoa New Zealand today. In recent years, the CanWest broadcasters have certainly demonstrated an intuitive understanding of contemporary youth audiences. CanWest has fashioned a channel that has ultimately proven more hip to the interests of the demographic of 18 to 49 year olds than TVNZ. TVNZ has enjoyed the benefits of familiarity in the national mediascape, but in 2005 TV3 commanded up to 28 percent of the national audience for this desirable demographic (Hickey 2005: 2). TV3 appears progressive in embracing cross-cultural influences in its programming schedule. Further study of TV3's featured programmes is required,

however, to assess the extent to which they can open new discursive spaces for understanding Polynesian youth identity in Aotearoa New Zealand today. This will be initiated in the following chapter regarding TV3's *bro 'Town* because as commercial imperatives undoubtedly colour the production ethos of the CanWest media corporation, there is pressure to reproduce the familiar in the station's programming in order to secure mass audience appeal.

## **2.5 THE VALUE OF COMMODIFICATION IN CONTEMPORARY TELEVISION**

Although the dominant discourses in Aotearoa New Zealand television are shaped by a range of cultural, political, and economic factors, it is clear that capitalist values permeate national television services today. Television producers and viewers alike require critical tools to discern the implications of this trend. I suggest that 'commodification' has significant probative value in understanding television in Aotearoa New Zealand today. Commodification is the submission of social relations to the principles of capitalism, or commercial exchange (Wikipedia 2006b). It was initially described by Karl Marx in the *Communist Manifesto* (1848) to account for the reduction of personal labour by workers to simply an abstract cost in the production process (Wikipedia 2006b). It may be extended, however, to theorise how market forces inform media discourse in general and the ideological labour of television specifically. As mentioned above, television networks in Aotearoa New Zealand generate most of their income from advertising. A network's audience is thus a commodity to be sold to advertisers who are motivated by the potential to promote their product or service to a large demographic or niche market.

Like audiences, television programmes also function as cultural commodities to be sold to audiences in order to generate significant viewer numbers of a particular 'identity' that will prove desirable to advertisers. This might not seem problematic – television shows are objects and media producers and advertisers alike view them as a means of securing audiences. Yet, as television has long-term ideological effects on audiences, programmes can function as a means by which to commodify public space and popular values in ways that serve the commercial interests of television networks

and naturalise the market economy in general. Consumption emerges as a predominant cultural currency with the fandom of particular programmes and the purchase of advertised goods and services frequently promoted as uniting like-minded individuals, articulating one's identity, and positioning the consumer in a desirable relation to the constructed norms in contemporary society.

If television programmes are viewed as commodities, an implicit bias can emerge in the programmes that are produced and broadcast (McChesney and Foster 2003). The potential synergies between a programme and the promotion of particular products of services during its advertising breaks may make specific shows more desirable for media buyers and advertisers. Specific genres have been shown to be favoured because of their capacity to incorporate advertising within the programme itself. In recent years, advertising has been shrewdly integrated into television programming via product placement and the corporate sponsorship of media events and celebrities. Television producer Mark Burnett confirms that he considered his show *Survivor* to be 'as much a marketing vehicle as a television show' (McChesney and Foster 2003). The potential rewards for companies engaging in product placement and corporate sponsorship are wide-ranging; the brand accrues symbolic capital by being associated with the plot-lines and characters of certain television programmes, which can bolster the profile and sales of the advertised product. The financial spoils for media producers are also astounding. In *Survivor*, '[a]dvertisers' products were made part of the story line – for \$12 million each in the 2001 season' (McChesney and Foster 2003). It is probable that such financial windfalls will further encourage synergies between advertising and television programmes; commercial messages will achieve greater prevalence in contemporary television hence a popular literacy around commodifying practices becomes ever important.

Commodification is an especially valuable concept in critiquing the representation of Polynesian youth identity in Aotearoa New Zealand television. On the back of *bro'Town's* phenomenal popularity, Polynesian youth have become 'it kids' in Aotearoa New Zealand television; notably, their unprecedented visibility on free-to-air television has occurred in the context of increasingly commercialised national television services. Polynesian youth represent an increasingly lucrative market for media producers and advertisers alike. As discussed in Part One, there has been a

quantitative rise in Maori and Pacific peoples in Aotearoa New Zealand in recent years, which means that Polynesian peoples have a burgeoning appeal as a target market for advertisers. Polynesian youth culture has also achieved a widespread acceptance amongst Pakeha in Aotearoa New Zealand today. Thirty years after Maori protests at Pakeha monoculturalism peaked and the dawn raids vilified Pacific peoples, Aotearoa New Zealand's Polynesian flavour is increasingly embraced as a sign of the country's distinct culture and growing numbers of Maori and Pacific sports stars and music artists are achieving national and global celebrity. This development has largely been celebrated as indicative of Aotearoa New Zealand's progressive multicultural politics; yet the concept of commodification offers a timely reminder that the impetus behind the increased visibility of Polynesian youth identity warrants further critique. Commodification raises important questions in relation to the discourses of Polynesian youth identity on free-to-air television in Aotearoa New Zealand today. As a theoretical tool in understanding Aotearoa New Zealand television, commodification demands critical attention to the role of commercial influences in both media production and consumption. For example, to what extent does TV3 privilege advancing the profitability of the station's services in its apparent commitment to advancing the interests of Polynesian youth? Or, how can *bro'Town* subvert hegemonic ideas about identity when audience ratings and an appeal to advertisers loom large in its production? In Part Three, the representation of Polynesian youth identity in *bro'Town* will be discussed with attention to the broader socio-political issues that are brought to mind by the term commodification.

## **2.6 DISCOURSE ANALYSIS AND THE DECONSTRUCTION OF TELEVISION**

This chapter has illustrated that Aotearoa New Zealand television is inclined towards performing ideological labour in support of the existing capitalist system and those who rule under it. Discourse analysis is an appropriate methodology through which to uncover commercial messages in specific television programmes and assess their potential socio-political implications. I conclude this chapter with an extended discussion of discourse analysis because I consider it to be an accessible theoretical tool to enable anyone who is involved with the media to understand the broader

implications of media production and spectatorship. Indeed, my discussion of the representation of Polynesian youth identity in *bro 'Town* is intended as an example of how discourse analysis can be applied in a meaningful critique of popular media texts.

Discourse analysis is the study of how speech and behaviours are used in specific circumstances to both define and limit common 'knowledge'. Roland Barthes' work in the field of semiotics was central to the development of discourse analysis. Barthes argued that the presumed meaning of any image is inherently constructed. According to Barthes, an image denotes a sign that is made up of a 'signifier' – a word or picture – and the 'signified' – the concept evoked by the word or picture (1977). The sign also acquires broader ideological meaning that appears self-evident to the viewer. Barthes called this process 'connotation' and he referred to the naturalisation of such socially constructed meanings as the production of 'myth' (1977: 22-23). He points to the context in which a photograph is published and circulated and the relationship between an image and its accompanying copy as indicative of the meanings that producers intend audiences to make from it (Barthes 1977). Using semiotics, Barthes thus disputed the presumed objectivity of media images.

The Birmingham Centre for Contemporary Cultural Studies (CCCS), under the direction of Stuart Hall, extended semiotics and developed critical discourse analysis. Like Barthes' work, their encoding-decoding model examines the production of meaning with a view to deconstructing the dominant messages that are encoded into a media text. It also incorporates an understanding that audience reception is influenced by the personal histories of individual viewers, which can potentially lead them to make oppositional meanings (Bobo 1988: 95-97). 'The researchers at the Centre felt that media analysts should not look simply at the meaning of a text but should also investigate the social and cultural framework in which communication takes place' (Bobo 1988: 95). They were interested in television and their study of the British current affairs programme *Panorama* is an early example of their approach to critical discourse analysis (McRobbie 2005: 12). The encoding-decoding model is valuable because it rescues discourse analysis from simply becoming an insular critique of the ethics of particular television producers by attending to the broader cultural economy of the media industry and the local environment in which television communicates to its audiences. As Jacqueline Bobo explains, 'When [producers of mainstream media]

construct a work they draw on their own background, experience, and social and cultural milieu. They are therefore under 'ideological pressure' to reproduce the familiar' (1988: 96). In a similar way, viewers are predisposed to recognising and accepting the familiar in media texts. Like du Gay et al's circuit of culture that I explained in the introduction to this thesis, the CCCS' framework of discursive analysis positions meaning-making as an ongoing and interconnected process in which context is all-important. The work of the CCCS thus represents a model of discourse analysis that encourages media commentators, producers, and audiences alike to consider how the media defines and limits social knowledge (Sturken and Cartwright 2001: 93-94) and to evaluate the implications of their media activities.

There are inevitably limitations to this discursive model of media analysis. The primary critique of discourse analysis is that it cannot account for the actual responses of audience members. Discourse analysis *does* make generalisations about the decoding process, but it is naïve to assume that there can be an entirely objective approach to studying media influence. Critical discourse analysis is concerned with media production and consumption as they operate in specific cultural and historical circumstances; its assumptions are significant because they are based on certain 'tendential alignments' between the meanings that are constructed in popular media texts and the ideological weight that they carry for viewers based on the current socio-political milieu (Hall 1996b: 42). '[T]here is nothing inevitable, necessary or fixed forever' about tendential alignments (Hall 1996b: 42). Discourse analysis has its roots in the Foucauldian understanding of power as continuously negotiated, which has already been outlined. It does not presuppose a uniform interpretation or acceptance of media messages nor an insistence that all media texts conform to the governing ideologies at a given time. Power, nonetheless, is not entirely free-floating in Foucault's view and this is a good theoretical match with Hall's idea of tendential alignments wherein the contemporary hegemonic values in society have significant power to contain resistance. In short, discourse analysis recognises that the media, as a cultural institution, is not innocent; it is produced, circulated, and consumed from specific historical and cultural locations and media texts actively seek to circumscribe audience response. Critical discourse analysis cannot account for the actual responses of individuals, but it is an effective methodology in anticipating the outcome of meaning-making processes on a broader scale and highlighting the exercise of power

at a given moment.

A further criticism is that discourse analysis predominantly produces a negative impression of the media's role in society. This perspective, however, is largely superficial. Discourse analysis considers the relationships between media messages and pre-existing ideologies in society. This necessarily involves considering how media texts can reinforce dominant discourses of social oppression, consciously or otherwise. Media theorists have used discourse analysis to suggest how alternative discourses might secure visibility and cultural capital and thus destabilise the hegemonic stronghold of the status quo in society. Attention to prejudicial ideologies remains paramount, however, because discourse analysis does not assume that new ideological spaces will result from 'the end of one discourse and the emergence of another, but rather the refolded surfaces that join the two' (Stoler 1995: 72). For example, Allan Sutherland considers that physical disability is often made to stand for notions of dependency and vulnerability that are feared by the able-bodied (1997: 19). He does not, however, see this as wholly negative and he writes, 'The very fact that previous representations of disability have been narrow, confused and unimaginative leaves the way open for disabled writers and film-makers. What we can produce can blow the past away' (Sutherland 1997: 20). Like any methodology, discourse analysis is not infallible, but I believe that it offers unprecedented opportunities for media producers and audiences to engage judiciously with popular media culture. Critical discourse analysis, as inspired by Barthes and the CCCS, works towards a visual literacy that enables everyone who engages with the media to assess the junction between discipline and pleasure in its representations in order to understand their role in the configurations of power at any given moment.

## **2.7 TELEVISION, IDEOLOGY, AND DISCOURSE ANALYSIS**

Television constructs discourses and exercises ideological influence in specific ways that can be discerned through critical discourse analysis. Television is a ubiquitous cultural institution in modern society; adults in the United States alone watch, on average, thirty hours of live television each week (Louisson 2001). Media scholars and practitioners agree that television has a significant role in affecting the popular

cultural imaginary. Scholar Claudia Bell writes, 'Television creates a culture-in-common, and provides viewers with experiences in common' (2001: 21). Media company CanWest concurs, 'The audiovisual power of television makes a lasting impact. It is the only medium frequently enjoyed by people together and is often our window to the world' (CanWest MediaWorks NZ 2006). Anne Friedberg's theory of the mobilised and virtual gaze offers some insight into television's distinctive qualities. Friedberg traced the historical evolution of the panorama and the diorama and concluded that 'as the 'mobility' of the gaze became more 'virtual'... the observer became more immobile, passive, ready to receive the constructions of a virtual reality placed in front of his or her unmoving body' (Friedberg 1998: 261). Her work suggests that, with technological development, moving image media have become increasingly compelling and realist in appearance and effect, which can work to efface their ideological labour in the popular cultural imaginary. As a medium, television represents an extension of the panorama and the diorama and, as such, it has become an increasingly vivid and persuasive 'window to the world'.

The characteristics of television as a moving image medium are pivotal to the way that it articulates specific discourses. Discourse analysis, with its roots in semiotics, is capable of discerning the signification practices used in television. In the context of this thesis, discourse analysis will herein refer to the study of television's language specifically, which incorporates visual imagery as well as audio cues, including music and sound effects. Susan Sontag writes that motion pictures 'light up walls, flicker and go out' (1977: 3); television too must seek to produce a particular affect in the viewer within a limited time. Producers of moving image media have honed particular visual communication strategies to maximise impact. Television producers use techniques such as lighting, colour, and camera angle to explicitly communicate messages and suggest points of identification for the viewer. Television images can operate in conjunction with dialogue, music, written text, and sound effects to connote meaning, as opposed to still images that generally interact with written text alone. Barthes reasons that the syntax of images can also connote meaning for the viewer (1977: 24). Moving image media exert a greater degree of influence over the length of time that audiences view specific images and the order in which they are seen than still media. Like film, television is based on 'disjunctive atomising principles of juxtaposition and montage' (Geiger 1998: 4) that establish a context through which to

view television content and make the ‘correct’ interpretation. As inferred from Friedberg’s work, television’s ideological labour can be masked by the aesthetic appeal of its moving images. Discourse analysis engages with the features of moving image media directly to suggest how producers have developed media texts and used them to influence public consciousness.

Television programming also has the distinctive capacity to tell a particular story over an extended period of time and this can be interrogated using discourse analysis. In the forthcoming chapter, I analyse two series of *bro ’Town*. The television series has the potential to introduce a coherence in ideological influence that is unprecedented in contemporary media. Print media and radio serials lack the dynamism of combining image and sound in a moving text. Film has this advantage, but a particular film captures the audience for a limited time and is largely a once-off event. This argument omits repeat viewings and sequels, but these are also characteristic of watching television. Television spectatorship can require a considerable investment of time over an extensive period, which potentially creates a greater level of identification with characters and plot lines. As a result, audiences may be more open to receiving the dominant discourses constructed in particular television programmes. For example, across thirteen episodes, *bro ’Town* seeks to develop a particular rapport with its viewers and, as a result, the show’s dominant discourses may become increasingly valued and accepted. Television is a moving image medium that is pervasive and compelling; its distinct potential to have long-term ideological effects on viewers renders it a worthy object of study and discourse analysis is an appropriate methodology to address the ideological labour performed within this medium.



Popular ideas about the self are inevitably embroiled in broader cultural debates and political projects. In contemporary Western societies, this means that the identities of individuals and social groups are often implicated in consumer culture and the politics of capitalism. Television is capable of having long-term ideological effects on viewers so it is significant to note that the national free-to-air television services in Aotearoa New Zealand are evidently susceptible to commercial imperatives. This research into the commodification of Polynesian youth identity in *bro ’Town* was prompted by an

awareness that in the context of contemporary television, the articulation of identity and the relations between diverse peoples are discursively constructed as dependent upon an ethos of consumerism and widespread consumption practices. The forthcoming chapter will deconstruct the dominant discourses in *bro'Town* in order to assess the broader implications of commodifying practices. The methodological value of discourse analysis in deconstructing *bro'Town* is that it has a holistic regard for the meaning-making processes involved in television and the importance of context in assessing the implications of mass communication practices. In line with the initiatives of the CCCS, this discursive analysis of *bro'town* incorporates a historical contextualisation of the contemporary socio-political climate in Aotearoa New Zealand as a means of producing an understanding of how capitalist ideology influences ideas about identity within the popular mediascape today.

## **PART THREE**

### **BRAND OF BROTHERS**

#### **The Commodification of Polynesian Youth Identity in *bro'Town***

‘It’s cool, irreverent, subversive and funny and it has never been done before in New Zealand – New Zealand’s first prime-time adult animated series is the suburban, un-PC satire *bro'Town*’ (INL 2004: 3).

‘But actually, despite TV3, the writers and producers talking it up, there is nothing particularly subversive going on here’ (Dixon 2004: B8).

Being subversive means adopting radical attitudes and behaviours that disrupt the status quo in society. Identity politics since the 1960s have demonstrated an unprecedented awareness of the systematic prioritisation of particular social groups over others and, as a result, the popular meaning of the word ‘subversive’ is no longer simply pejorative. The power relations that govern society at any given historical and cultural moment are ideologically constructed and subversion can involve undermining hegemonic impulses in order to open new discursive spaces with increasingly positive, humanitarian intent. The subversive value of the television series *bro'Town* is framed in this way.

As ascertained in the previous chapter, an overarching belief in the capitalist system predominates in contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand; the capitalist economy is based on Pakeha values and variously favours the white majority, men, and the middle-class. Obviously, these social groups are heterogeneous (Abel 1997: 20), but from the perspective of ideological analysis, they have benefited collectively from the structural inequalities in Aotearoa New Zealand society that have been caused, in part, by the capitalist system. Television emerged amid the rapid ascendance of the market economy and consumer culture. This socio-political context is therefore pertinent in

interrogating the ideological value of any television series that claims to be subversive in Aotearoa New Zealand today.



*Bro 'Town*'s producers laud the series as '*The Simpsons* of the South Pacific' (OnFilm 2004: 6), which implies that *bro 'Town* exhibits similar satirical qualities to this long-standing American cartoon. The subversive labour of *bro 'Town* is largely represented by the attitudes and behaviours of its five young Polynesian protagonists; by extension, the construction of Polynesian youth identity in *bro 'Town* is presumed to create new discursive spaces for understanding ethnicity, age, and gender in Aotearoa New Zealand today. This chapter addresses the unprecedented visibility of Polynesian youth in Aotearoa New Zealand television as advanced by the first two series of *bro 'Town*. The show's producers and local media commentators maintain that the characters of *bro 'Town* and their adventures in Morningside are challenging the status quo in contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand. There is some evidence to support this assertion, including specific instances when the show contests the dominant value of the market economy, Pakeha ethnocentrism, and stereotypes in the popular cultural imaginary of contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand.

Yet despite *bro 'Town*'s altruistic public image, I suggest that the series remains complicit with the pre-existing politics of representation that are circumscribed by Aotearoa New Zealand's capitalist economy. *Bro 'Town*'s creators, TV3, and various private companies and celebrities are stakeholders in the commercial success of the series so it is important to assess the extent to which *bro 'Town* resists the ideological pressure to court popular appeal, which is done by simply reproducing the 'familiar'. At issue is the seemingly unproblematic pairing of two goals in the production of *bro 'Town* – the empowerment of Polynesian youth identity via a heightened mainstream visibility and the extension of the market appeal of *bro 'Town*'s corporate stakeholders. The relative power of the profit imperative in this ostensibly symbiotic relationship requires interrogation.

Although *bro 'Town* appears to critique hyper-commercialism and promote cross-cultural understanding, its commercial objectives and market success curb the

subversive potential of the series for viewers and have made *bro'Town* into 'exactly the type of brand that the show... derides' (Gray 2006: 9). *Bro'Town* propagates an ethos of consumption that is consistent with capitalist ideals; extensive product placement in the series exploits Polynesian youth as a signifier in aid of this pedagogical project. Moreover, the commodification of Polynesian youth identity in *bro'Town* may be interpreted as a marketing strategy to tap into a popular ideological shift towards multiculturalism in Aotearoa New Zealand without disrupting the dominant ideology of white, heterosexual, middle-class masculinity and from which advertising's capitalist roots derive. It is argued that the co-option of Polynesian youth culture in *bro'Town* by corporate entities ultimately does less to pry open new discursive spaces for the development of youth identity than to operate as a vehicle for the deliberate shrinking of consumer choice.

### 3.1 TELEVISION, IDENTITY, AND COMMERCIAL CULTURE

'...we have fewer and fewer places where we can relate to each other as non-consumers, as citizens' (Klein 2003).

There is an inherent link between television, identity, and commercial culture. The previous chapter established that television has ideological influence in the popular cultural imaginary and, as such, it can work to normalise certain belief systems. Moreover, television is a product of the modern capitalist society and 'the fact that television is driven by hyper-commercialism should, by this point in television studies' history, be a commonplace observation' (Gray 2006: 70). Part One ascertained that identity is an ideological construct; in television content, the self is often represented as achieving meaning through practices of consumption and participation in the market economy because of this medium's commercialist bent. As Stuart Ewen explains, 'Our own experiences are of little consequence, unless, they are substantiated and validated by the world of style' (in Jhally 2003: 256). Advertising provides the most explicit example of the enculturation of consumerist principles as a predominant means of articulating one's identity. Television in Aotearoa New Zealand relies heavily on advertising revenue so the representation of identity in national broadcasting is particularly vulnerable to processes of commodification. In

recent years, Maori and Pacific Island youth have emerged as the ‘it kids’ in the endorsement of brand identity on Aotearoa New Zealand television, which prompts the question ‘what is at stake when the visibility of Polynesian youth in the media is so inextricably intertwined with the commercial imperatives of major corporations?’

The corporate co-option of Polynesian youth identity in television advertising provides a meta-narrative of wider discussion about the perceived ‘commercialisation’ of public culture and its impact upon the values that subsequently achieve ascendancy in contemporary society. As recently as fifteen years ago, Maori and Pacific Island youth held little interest for advertisers and media producers. In the 1990 paper ‘Whitewash: the Acceptable Image in Television Advertising’, Mark Scott quotes advertising executive Bob Harvey:

‘In a country that likes to think it’s multicultural, there are more dogs shown on commercials than there are Maoris [sic] and Polynesians. It is deliberate... the view is they have no image appeal - except in association with fast food. There is a whole class of clients who would be horrified if you showed a Maori or a Polynesian in their showroom’ (84).

In contrast, an obvious association with major marketing campaigns characterises the visibility of Maori and Pacific Island youth in mainstream television today. In television commercials screened during the past two years, corporate uber-brands such as Coca-Cola, Nike, and McDonalds have forged links with Polynesian youth culture to indigenise their international reputations for an Aotearoa New Zealand audience. Local products such as Kiwi Blue bottled water and G-Force energy drinks also tap into the symbolic value of young Maori and Pacific Islanders in the popular cultural imaginary. There is, however, an absence of critical response to advertising’s role in the heightened visibility of Maori and Pacific Island youth identity in mainstream television.

Advertising is an ‘*active* strategy of selling and marketing’ (Falk 1997: 5). It explicitly seeks to galvanise the popular appeal of a specific product, service, or cause in the cultural imaginary of a mass audience. Modern advertisers have delighted in the promotional possibilities that the audiovisual register of television affords.

Advertising seeks to produce a particular affect in the viewer within a limited time or space; the medium of television enables advertisers to intensify their potential

influence by inferring meaning via sound and moving image simultaneously. This model of mobilised, virtual communication (Friedberg 1998: 258) is well-equipped to access the rich discourses of music and fashion, which characterise contemporary youth culture. It is through the audiovisual paradigm of television that advertisers have sought to advance the experiential aspect of consumption. By relating the tangible act of accumulating material possessions to a feeling of social belonging for the consumer, television advertising has been instrumental in nurturing a pervasive cultural logic wherein ‘having’ and ‘being’ co-exist (Jhally 2003: 252). Television advertising constructs a mobilised, virtual reality wherein individual happiness and social belonging hinge on personal material consumption and this has self-evident implications for the core values that structure contemporary society (McChesney and Foster 2003).

In recent years, this pedagogy of consumption has found fresh legs beyond the direct sell of paid commercials. As Part Two indicated, advertising has been shrewdly incorporated into television programming via product placement and the corporate sponsorship of media events and celebrities. By seeking ‘codes that efface [their] own production’ (Lacey 1998: 190), advertising texts potentially broaden audience complacency towards messages of consumption; as Robert McChesney and John Bellamy Foster caution, ‘it is about the marriage of editorial/entertainment and commercialism to such an extent that they are becoming indistinguishable’ (2003). *Bro ’Town* is characterised by fervent product placement for companies, including Vodafone, Frucor Beverages, Puma, Holden, and Mars Incorporated. The potential rewards for companies engaging in product placement and corporate sponsorship are wide-ranging; the brand accrues symbolic capital by being implicated in the social relationships of television’s mobilised, virtual reality whilst preventing audiences from ‘smelling the sell’ in the traditional sense. *Bro ’Town*’s young consumers are ideal targets of increasingly aggressive marketing techniques as advertising executives seek to enculturate brand awareness at an increasingly young age (McChesney and Foster 2003). Sut Jhally elaborates: ‘Because we live inside the consumer culture, and most of us have done for most of our lives, it is sometimes difficult to locate the origins of our most cherished values and assumptions’ (2003: 249). The incidence of product placement in *bro ’Town* raises the issue of its possible function as a form of

‘soft’ censorship based on the prioritisation of discourses of identity that are commercially viable.

The widespread popularity of *bro ’Town* for viewers and advertisers alike thus poses the question, ‘what do young Maori and Pacific Islanders stand for at this particular moment in the history of television in Aotearoa New Zealand?’ It is widely understood that the representation of Maori and Pacific Island youth in national television relies on corporate investment. The cost of producing *bro ’Town* is relatively high at \$400,000 for one half-hour episode (Drinnan 2004). NZ on Air provides up to 60 percent of the series’ budget, but funding from private backers and product placement covers the remaining costs (Drinnan 2004). It may be argued that the willingness of corporations to sponsor *bro ’Town* is a positive indication of the newfound ‘street-cred’ that young Maori and Pacific Islanders have in the popular cultural imaginary. Advertising’s drive to secure mass audience appeal, however, potentially compromises any opportunities to articulate the intricacies of Polynesian youth identity. In striving to be popular, advertising addresses the preconceptions of its target audience; it inevitably operates within the constraints of what is appropriate to speak to ‘the inner coolness’ (Quart 2003: xv) of its ideal consumers. In this way, the representation of Maori and Pacific Island youth in *bro ’Town* connects with literature that positions the communication of identity and difference in particular circumstances as implicitly reinforcing the status quo in society (see Part One). Henry Giroux explains that ‘mass-market advertisers have seized upon the cultural logic of postmodernism to integrate politics and difference with the stylized world of aesthetics and consumption’ (1994a). The political significance of this trend is that ‘[s]ocial consciousness and activism in this worldview are [now] about purchasing merchandise, not changing oppressive relations of power’ (Giroux 1994a). It is therefore important to note where the co-option of Polynesian youth by media producers and advertisers stops constituting new discursive spaces for the construction of Maori and Pacific Island youth culture and ends up replicating pre-existing discourses of power in society.

### 3.2 BRO'TOWN'S CRITIQUE OF COMMERCIALISM

Despite *bro'Town's* reliance on corporate funding for production, the series ironically pokes fun at the proliferation of consumer culture in contemporary society and the shortcomings of the market economy. *Bro'Town's* culture of production is decidedly commercial and, for its private stakeholders, the success of the series requires that it generate audience numbers and cultural capital that can be translated into dollar values. There is a risk, therefore, that a distinct consumerist ethos needs to be encoded into *bro'Town* and this can compromise its subversive value in the popular cultural imaginary of Aotearoa New Zealand today. Jonathan Gray, however, writes that animated television series are often 'refreshingly anti-consumerist' (2006: 68) and *bro'Town* does offer a marked critique of television's hyper-commercialism in 'The Weakest Link' (2004). In this episode, Valea is struck by a bus and he becomes extraordinarily intelligent as the result of the resulting head injury ('The Weakest Link' 2004). Valea leads the St Sylvester's team of Vale, Sione, Mack, and Jeff to unprecedented success in the annual High School Quiz Challenge ('The Weakest Link' 2004). TV3 news anchor, John Campbell, interviews Valea's father about the implications of his son's newfound genius ('The Weakest Link' 2004). Pepelo Pepelo explains, 'Ah, now we can buy things we've always needed, but could never afford... Like this Abflex that allows me not to exert any effort at all, but still get all the benefits of a tough abdominal workout. Or this knife that can cut through tin can and show. Yeah. Top of the world, man!' ('The Weakest Link' 2004). This scene mocks the outlandish, yet seductive, promises that typify television infomercials as an example of how the media can encourage the undue prioritisation of materialism and consumption.

Pepelo Pepelo's response to Valea's success resonates with Adorno and Horkheimer's theorisation of the media as a culture industry that promotes material 'needs' as the key to happiness at the expense of democratic values. Robert McChesney and John Bellamy Foster elaborate in writing that 'all our most treasured values – democracy, freedom, individuality, security, cultural diversity, equality, education, community, love, health, human development – are reduced in one way or another to commodities provided by the market' (2003). *Bro'Town* thus ridicules the consumerist notion that conspicuous consumption is a marker of personal success and the accumulation of

material goods leads to satisfaction in life. This scene in 'The Weakest Link' also points to the ironic appeal of infomercials to low socio-economic groups. Such advertisements largely screen between 10.00 am and midday when advertising rates are relatively cheap. Their ideal viewer, therefore, is likely to be someone who is unemployed or works nights or weekends. These jobs often involve so-called unskilled labour and pay less. In Aotearoa New Zealand, a disproportionate number of Polynesian people work in these roles or remain unemployed, like the character of Pepelo. Advertisements that equate the purchase of particular goods to personal and social empowerment are designed to appeal to those who feel disenfranchised by the political economy of the contemporary labour market. In this instance, *bro'Town* can be read as debunking the capitalist myth that links 'having' with 'being' and its distinct appeal to marginalised peoples.

*Bro'Town* also highlights the failings of the market economy to facilitate upward social mobility for the lower classes. For example, in 'Half-Caste Away' (2005), The Boys rescue an abandoned baby from the local sewerage pond. They name her Loo-Can and look after her until they can find her a permanent home ('Half-Caste Away' 2005). Vale protests when Valea buys Loo-Can fast-food: 'Ah Valea, since when are burgers better than proper food for Loo-Can?' ('Half-Caste Away' 2005). Valea replies, 'Since burgers are cheaper than proper food!' ('Half-Caste Away' 2005). It is a central paradox of the modern consumer society that the market economy positions healthy foods as a relative luxury. Paradoxically, foods that are less refined, such as wholefoods and organic produce, are more expensive than mass produced goods, which are often significantly lower in nutritional value. Health experts partly attribute the rising rates of obesity in the developed world to this discrepancy (Massey University 2006). 'The global surge in overweight people is concentrated among lower-income city-dwellers' (New Zealand Herald 2006) and, in Aotearoa New Zealand, obesity is more prevalent in Maori and Pacific peoples. The 2002/2003 Health Survey found that 21 percent of the general population were obese; by comparison, 27 percent of Maori men and women, 36 percent of Pacific men, and 47 percent of Pacific men were markedly overweight (Ministry of Health 2006). Obesity amongst youth is also a major concern. In 2006 the New Zealand government announced plans to spend '\$67 million over four years on improving nutrition and fitness among under-25-year-olds as research reveals more than 30 per cent of

children are obese or overweight' (Hann 2006: 1). The effects are systemic with experts agreeing that poor nutrition adversely influences school behaviour and academic performance (Hann 2006: 1), which can limit future job opportunities. *Bro 'Town* briefly alludes to these social and political implications in 'Half-Caste Away' and, in doing so, implicitly undermines the pre-existing authority of the capitalist economy as a democratic structure.

*Bro 'Town* also uses intertextuality to engage the viewer in a critique of the hyper-commercialism of contemporary television. 'Intertextuality has been used by various writers to describe how any particular text implies or calls forth other texts' (Marshall 2002: 70). Stuart Hall explains that images 'gain in meaning when they are read in context, against or in connection with one another' (1997b: 232). One way that media producers can use intertextuality is to call into focus and subvert the cultural value of other dominant media texts. One episode of *bro 'Town* titled 'Survival of the Fattest' (2005) delivers an extended critique of the genre of reality television. In 'Survival of the Fattest', the boys become lost on a school trip to the Morningside ranges. Sione becomes frenzied in the unfamiliar surroundings and, at his suggestion, Vale, Valea, and Jeff join him in voting to sacrifice Mack for food ('Survival of the Fattest' 2005). The voting process mimics the tribal councils in which *Survivor* contestants vote their fellow participants off the show. Reality television shows such as *Survivor* and *Big Brother* are widely derided as creating sensationalist television content by subjecting participants to artificial situations and undue pressures (Wikipedia 2006d). These shows have relatively limited production costs and thus are criticised as unabashed attempts to secure high audience ratings and advertising dollars without ethical regard for their contestants or their viewers. Certainly, *Survivor* was consciously constructed as a malleable vehicle for extensive product placement and the details of this were discussed in Part Two. *Bro 'Town's* 'Survival of the Fattest' reflects a disdain for unethical television production that is dictated by commercial imperatives. This suggests that, at times, *bro 'Town* itself will actively undermine commercial objectives.

### 3.3 BRO'TOWN AS HYPER-COMMODITY

Commercialism occupies a central position in television studies demonology and *bro'Town* has demonstrated a desire to disrupt the hegemonic value of advertising and consumer culture in Aotearoa New Zealand. Nonetheless, the series is also markedly complicit in normalising and even extending the ideological reach of commercialism in the popular cultural imaginary. Gray explains that the cartoon characters of *The Simpsons* have a uniformity of appearance that offers 'little room for product placement or the marketing of style, body image, clothes, or appliances' (2006: 68). *Bro'Town*, however, embraces product placement and corporate sponsorship; this includes in-show advertising for G-Force and L&P soft drinks, the confectionary brands of M&Ms, Snickers, and Starbursts, clothing label Puma, cell-phone company Vodafone, and Holden cars. The series utilises the creative license that animation affords to incorporate brand merchandise into the plotlines and the setting of Morningside to an extent that is noteworthy in the history of Aotearoa New Zealand television. *Bro'Town's* economic and cultural complicity with the commercial imperatives of its sponsors potentially undermines instances in which it critiques consumer culture.

Product placement is rife in the third episode of *bro'Town*, for example, and it establishes brand consumption as a categorical aspect of being a young Polynesian in Aotearoa New Zealand today. In *bro'Town's* typically slapstick style, the episode confronts the low socio-economic status of many Polynesian communities in Aotearoa New Zealand. When Vale is mistakenly kidnapped, his Samoan family cannot meet the ransom demands; indeed, Vale explains to his kidnappers, 'Our phone's cut off. Dad spends all his money on horses' ('The Wong One' 2004). The proliferation of product placement in *bro'Town*, however, undermines the structural limitations to material consumption by extolling active participation in a consumer society. The boys pointedly use a Vodafone Live cell-phone to access their horoscopes, play games, send text messages and play popular song tunes ('The Wong One' 2004). Jeff is chastised by the other boys when he cannot interpret a text message from Vale that is written in the distinctively abbreviated 'text language'. The Vodafone cell-phone is also vital to the ultimate rescue of Vale from his kidnappers ('The Wong One' 2004). *Bro'Town* enables Vodafone to present cell-phones as an

essential aspect of the contemporary youthscape in Aotearoa New Zealand irregardless of the cost of the product in general and the \$899 price-tag for the featured Vodafone Live model specifically (Vodafone 2004). In particular, this product placement effaces the unbalanced relationship between ethnicity and income in Aotearoa New Zealand; in 2001, families with at least one Maori or Pacific adult were almost twice as likely to be classified as 'low income' than families with any European adult (Ministry of Social Development 2004b). As *bro'Town* demonstrates, product placement and corporate sponsorship in Aotearoa New Zealand television encourages the representation of Polynesian youth as advocates for the conspicuous consumption of brand-name merchandise. This trope may efface any cogent discussion about the structural disparities that continue to influence the identity formation of Maori and Pacific Island youth.

In a further example, *bro'Town* incorporates product placement for L&P throughout its second series, which effectively negates the critique of the market economy that it proffered in 'Half-Caste Away'. Although television shows are rarely self-coherent, this incongruence is significant because the producers of *bro'Town* position the series as unequivocally subversive. The visibility of L&P in *bro'Town* is consistent. For example, L&P advertises on the back of the St Sylvester's school bus ('Survival of the Fattest' 2005), L&P is served at a party attended by the boys ('A Chicken Roll at my Table' 2005), and a bottle of L&P sits on Vale and Valea's desk when they cast their school play ('Morningside Story' 2005). As mentioned above, Polynesian peoples have disproportionate rates of obesity and related diseases in Aotearoa New Zealand today and such cheap, sugar-laden drinks are widely identified as contributing to this negative trend. The cost of soft-drinks provided by L&P's parent company, Coca-Cola, is less than a bottle of milk or water at most supermarkets in Aotearoa New Zealand. Moreover, the product has greater image appeal than these healthier alternatives and Coca-Cola often supports youth-oriented projects in order to advance its symbolic value in the popular cultural imaginary. At a seminar in 2005, the creators of *bro'Town* denied that the level of corporate sponsorship required to produce the series would influence the stories that it could tell about being a Polynesian youth in Aotearoa New Zealand today (The Naked Samoans 2005). Yet, the advertising space that the second series of *bro'Town* affords to Vodafone and soft-drink brand L&P suggests otherwise. *Bro'Town* makes some admirable attempts to

challenge the hegemonic value of the market economy and commercial culture. Yet, consumerist values resurface in *bro 'Town* because of its explicit relationship to corporate sponsors; moreover, they do so in ways that potentially have negative implications for a popular understanding of Polynesian youth identities.

### 3.4 BRO'TOWN AS INTERTEXTUAL COMMODITY

*Bro 'Town* is also complicit in employing intertextuality as a means to advance the commercial interests of its broadcaster TV3, its corporate sponsors, and its celebrity guest stars. Production company Firehorse Films has also launched a range of *bro 'Town* merchandise on the coat tails of the series' market success and the production team thus has further impetus to commodify the show and its relationship to viewers. P David Marshall writes, 'The audience 'learns' about a product through its associations in other cultural forms' (2002: 69). The various brands and personalities that feature in *bro 'Town* achieve familiarity and cultural capital by being referenced in the show. Likewise, the *bro 'Town* television programme creates brand visibility and generates potential consumers for the show's spin-off merchandise and vice versa. Marshall believes that 'the industrial strategy of massaging the [media] text into something larger' is now new, but '[w]hat has altered is the intensification and elaboration of the intertextual matrix' (2002: 69). He writes, 'The culture industries are providing a circumscribed agency for the new audience by providing complex patterns of engagement and exploratory architectures' (Marshall 2002: 80). Certainly, there are instances when *bro 'Town* exhibits divided loyalties in its stated goal of challenging the status quo in society and its underlying need to advance the commercial interests of its producers and private backers.

Much has been written about the 'risk' that TV3 took in purchasing the broadcasting rights to *bro 'Town*, but the commercial benefits of CanWest's so-called gamble were largely guaranteed. Chief operating officer for CanWest's TVWorks, Rick Friesen, states, 'We believed [*bro 'Town*] was quality stuff and would do well, but it's had a very strong reaction, which is great because it was a risky show for us to produce' (Perrott 2004: A4). TV reviewer Trevor Agnew agrees, 'TV3 deserves praise for its courage in taking the risk of creating this series' (2004: F1). Nonetheless, *bro 'Town*'s

scope as an intertextual commodity tempered this supposed risk. The aforementioned corporate sponsorship of the series ensures the purchase of advertising during episodes of *bro 'Town* by the companies concerned. For example, advertisements for G-Force soft-drinks regularly screen during the show's commercial breaks as Frucor Beverages seeks to capitalise on G-Force's incorporation in the show itself. Moreover, these companies pay peak rates to advertise in *bro 'Town* because it screens during primetime. TV3 is also able to exploit clear synergies between *bro 'Town* and existing programmes on its schedule as well as those that screen on CanWest's C4. In particular, TV3 was able to promote the launch of *bro 'Town* during *The Simpsons*. *The Simpsons* has maintained consistently high ratings over an extended period and audiences of this long-running cartoon were likely to welcome New Zealand's first adult animated television series. Promotional trailers for *The Simpsons* now screen during *bro 'Town* as well.

TV3 also promotes itself via the regular appearances of the network's news anchors, John Campbell and Carol Hirschfeld, on the show. The TV3 news team frequently report on the events in Morningside. An example from 'The Weakest Link' episode is typical of the tongue-in-cheek role that Campbell and Hirschfeld play in the series. John Campbell intones, 'Mr Blair's office has angrily denied that he swallows. Mr Bush refuses to comment'. Carol Hirschfeld continues, 'In local news, a young man giving hope to a struggling school where previously there were only dumb-ass P-heads and no-hopers' (2004). In this instance, it could be argued that *bro 'Town* critiques the informational value of television news by parodying the 'sexualisation' and sensationalisation of current affairs programming. However, *bro 'Town* is complicit in TV3's attempts to advance its popularity with the youth demographic and this undermines the satirical value of Campbell and Hirschfeld's guest appearances. This is explicitly demonstrated during 'Sionerella' (2004). When Sione exclaims, 'Bloody John Campbell. Stuff him!' Vale retorts, 'Don't blame John and Carol. They're only doing their job' ('Sionerella' 2004). In sending up themselves on *bro 'Town*, John Campbell and Carol Hirschfeld thus signal their street-cred to a youth audience and connote the hip appeal of the CanWest network. TV3's involvement in *bro 'Town* was commercially calculated and CanWest's investment appears to have paid off. The screening of the first series of *bro 'Town* coincided with the rise in trading profits for CanWest's TVWorks by more than a fifth in 2004; in the three

months to November, CanWest's profit was up from \$20.9 million to \$26.4 million (Inder and Griffin 2004: C3). Audiences can feel culturally savvy in recognising the intertextual references to TV3 and other corporate sponsors in *bro'Town*; however, these are patterned interconnections that are part of the industry's attempt to commodify and capture an audience.

The prioritisation of commercial imperatives is also apparent in relation to the appearance of celebrity guests in 'Zeelander' (2005), the first episode of series two. The title of the episode implies a localised critique of the fashion industry, as attempted in the 2001 movie *Zoolander*, albeit with dubious success. Katya Mandoki notes that fashion has been discursively constructed as conveying 'information about our personality, profession, hierarchy, lifestyle, gender, age, even political, ideologically, and sexual preferences' (2003: 610). Clothes and accessories have a built-in obsolescence and the fashion industry encourages people to purchase new items in order to infer that they are trendy and contemporary. Yet, 'Zeelander' significantly marginalises these issues, which are characteristic of the contemporary commodity culture. In 'Zeelander', fashion designer Hans Wulfman seduces Jeff da Maori with promises of fame and fortune in order to co-opt Jeff's 'street urchin' style in pursuit of his own success in the fashion industry (2005). At the height of his fame, Jeff becomes addicted to drugs and neglects his friends ('Zeelander' 2005). Wulfman is the antagonist in this episode; he is German and this is likely to be an explicit attempt to symbolically distance his unethical treatment of Jeff from the Aotearoa New Zealand fashion industry. Local fashion designers Francis Hooper, Kate Sylvester, Karen Walker, and Denise L'Estrange Corbet make guest appearances in 'Zeelander'; it could be disadvantageous to the interests of these guest stars if *bro'Town* were to critique the fashion industry itself and its predisposition towards commodifying identity. The role of guest appearances by famous people in *bro'Town*, therefore, can intercede in the series' representation of identity in ways that serve the commercial interests of the starring celebrities and undermine the series' capacity to challenge the status quo in society.

Product spin-offs from the *bro'Town* television series are rife and this potentially broadens the series' complacency towards the promotion of a consumerist ethos. The official website at [www.brotown.co.nz](http://www.brotown.co.nz) was launched in April 2005 (Firehorse Films

2005). Visitors to the site can access a fan club and chat forums, yet it was created primarily to facilitate an online shop to sell *bro 'Town* merchandise. 'The initial brief [to designers Cucumber Software] was to launch an online shop supported by a secure, multi-lingual content management and document management system' (Firehorse Films 2005). *Bro 'Town* merchandise that is available online includes books, calendars, DVDs, and an extensive clothing range. The predominant images on the available t-shirts include Jeff da Maori and Valea, which illustrates *bro 'Town*'s role in advancing the mainstream visibility of Polynesian youth today. Images of the *bro 'Town* characters also feature on stationery and sports gear that is sold in general stores, and Nice 'n' Natural produces *bro 'Town* snack bars. *Bro 'Town* effectively blends 'content and promotion' (Marshall 2002: 70) as fandom of the television programme is increasingly associated with the conspicuous consumption of related merchandise. This works to increase the visibility of *bro 'Town* as a brand and enables it to accrue cultural value and commercial profit beyond the show's half-hour weekly slot. Moreover, as its popular appeal increases, *bro 'Town* becomes more valuable to its corporate and celebrity supporters. *Bro 'Town*'s use of Polynesian youth identity as a promotional form demonstrates an elaborate model of intertextuality that is designed, in part, to pattern the consumption practices of *bro 'Town* viewers (Marshall 2002: 73). This is a disquieting trend because it reflects the media industry's desire to address audiences as consumers, rather than citizens. As Henry Giroux surmises,

'This is not to invoke a vulgar critique of the real pleasures of buying, or to underestimate the diverse ways in which people negotiate the terrain of the market or reappropriate goods through resisting and oppositional practices. Rather these practices require recognition of the political and pedagogical limits of consumerism, its often active involvement in creating new identities, and its ongoing assault on the notion of insurgent differences in a multicultural and multiracial democracy' (1994a).

### **3.5 TELEVISION, IDENTITY, AND MULTICULTURALISM**

As Giroux suggests, the commercialisation of Polynesian youth identity in *bro 'Town* is part of a broader multicultural ethic in contemporary capitalist culture; this 'brand' of multiculturalism ironically relies on an imagined hierarchy of human difference to

make meaning. As a discursive construct, multiculturalism developed to counter ‘the existing canons of white, male, Eurocentric privilege’ (Kellner 2003: 11) with an ideological commitment to the flux and hybridity of personal identity. Difference is necessary, however, in the production of meaning because the ‘self’ is imagined to have particular qualities that define it only through comparison with what it is not. This is particularly true in the pedagogy of a capitalist culture; consumption is promoted as the key to achieving mobility within imagined social hierarchies. Contemporary television may feign acceptance of ethnic diversity, for instance, but only at a symbolic level; the rationalisation of social relationships remains bound to Western capitalist ideals (Ram 2004: 24). Where commercial television encourages diverse symbolic manifestations of ethnicity, it often implicitly relies on hierarchical ideals pertaining to class and gender to make meaning and encourage consumption. As Audre Lorde surmises, ‘Institutionalised rejection of difference is an absolute necessity in a profit economy that needs outsiders as surplus people’ (1991: 281).

This multicultural ethic is particularly popular in the broadcasting environment of Aotearoa New Zealand. It functions as an agreeable, catch-all marketing solution for a nation which seems fatigued by the on-going political tensions between Maori and Pakeha. Since the 1970s, the Government has advocated a bicultural stance towards race relations in Aotearoa New Zealand, which derives from the principles of the Treaty of Waitangi. In the recent history of identity politics, however, biculturalism seems to be a dirty word. Whilst many Maori feel aggrieved that the dominant values of life in New Zealand remain rooted in the culture of the Pakeha majority, popular opinion refutes their claims for particular cultural consideration based on the ongoing relevance of the Treaty of Waitangi. The strength of this attitude was illustrated in public response to the 2004 Orewa address by National Party leader and head of the Opposition, Dr Don Brash. Dr Brash lamented ‘the dangerous drift towards racial separatism in New Zealand, and the development of the now entrenched Treaty grievance industry’ (Brash 2004). He condemned the Maori minority’s ‘birthright to the upper hand’ and promised policies based on ‘one rule for all’ (Brash 2004). Subsequently, the National Party experienced an unparalleled 17-point rise in the polls; in the week following Dr Brash’s Orewa speech, 45 percent of voter’s pledged support for the National Party compared with just 38 per cent in favour of the incumbent Labour Government (Tunnah 2004: A3). Widespread dissatisfaction with

the perceived ‘special treatment’ (Brash 2004) of Maori characterises contemporary ideas about biculturalism and encourages a multicultural sensibility in the popular imaginary of Aotearoa New Zealand.

Sustained immigration to New Zealand, moreover, means that biculturalism is increasingly perceived as redundant in a contemporary population that is effectively broad-based. Livia Käthe Wittman’s research into the cultural identity of Jewish women in New Zealand, for example, concludes that an official policy of biculturalism may result in the ‘discursive denial of other cultures in Aotearoa New Zealand’ (1998: 58). As one of her informants remarks, ‘I think biculturalism is the gravest error that any country can fall into, because we aren’t bicultural. You could only be bicultural if you have [only] English and Maori. You can’t because we don’t’ (Wittman 1998: 63). Within the current political environment of Aotearoa New Zealand, multiculturalism is favoured because it is not explicitly tied to Maori ethnicity in the manner that biculturalism has been interpreted. The Treaty of Waitangi established a bicultural model for power sharing in Aotearoa New Zealand between the Maori as tangata whenua, or ‘first people of the land’, and the Crown, which represented the settler peoples. Arguments that a multiculturalist politics effaces the unique indigenous status of Maori in contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand, however, are repeatedly countered by persuasive claims for the hybridity of personal identity and the ‘democratic’ necessity of treating all people as equals. Multiculturalism finds favour over a bicultural politics in Aotearoa New Zealand because it is commonly perceived as a more accurate reflection of the nation’s current ethnic composition.

Multiculturalism, nonetheless, is inadequate as a programme for political action in Aotearoa New Zealand because it remains embedded in the preservation of white, middle-class masculinity as the dominant social discourse. A multicultural ideology may be desirable because the social and cultural boundaries between the discursive communities of Aotearoa New Zealand have always been ambivalent in practice. At this particular moment, however, the ascendance of multiculturalism in Aotearoa New Zealand hinges on a defensive conservatism against the appeals of Maori for historical redress under the Treaty of Waitangi. As ongoing tensions between Maori and Pakeha attest, ‘we have no patterns for relating across our human differences as equals’

(Lorde 1991: 281). The discursive production of multiculturalism in Aotearoa New Zealand appears to privilege the ethnic Other that assimilates to Western norms over the racialised Other that challenges the dominant cultural values. The proliferation of differences that is implicit in the multicultural ethic of capitalist culture offers little support for the positive development of ethnic relations in Aotearoa New Zealand because it continues to reinscribe social hierarchies in order to make meaning. Through a particular brand of multiculturalism that appeals to a predominant conservatism in Aotearoa New Zealand, contemporary television appears to embrace ethnic diversity whilst implicitly cementing the foundations of a white, middle-class, hetero-sexist, urban society, 'where rights are defined by consumer styles and political demands are rendered invisible' (Mayer 2003: 88). *Bro'Town's* relationship to this multicultural ethic of commercialist culture warrants analysis.

### **3.6 BRO'TOWN'S PROMOTION OF CROSS-CULTURAL TOLERANCE**

Multiculturalism is 'disputed terrain rather than empirical reality' (Kothari et al 2005: 137) and *bro'Town* is instrumental in advocating a multicultural discourse that *does* challenge conventional expectations of cross-cultural relations in Aotearoa New Zealand. *Bro'Town* vehemently critiques Eurocentrism, which was described in Part One as an ideology that asserts the inherent superiority of the West's people and cultural practices and thus marginalises ethnic minorities. For example, 'The Weakest Link' contests the 'Old Boys' network' in Aotearoa New Zealand through its representation of the organisers of the High School Quiz Challenge. The Old Boys' network refers to a long-standing system of social networking based largely on ethnicity and class; it implies the preservation of existing social authority based on the exclusion of those who do not meet deep-rooted expectations of socio-economic 'success'. In 'The Weakest Link', a group of upper class, white Old Boys attempt to rig the High School Quiz Challenge so that St Sylvester's cannot win (2004). When Valea leads St Sylvester's to the final round, one Old Boy complains, 'This team of cheeky darkies is making a mockery of this once great competition. What' ('The Weakest Link' 2004). Spozzo agrees, 'We only let them in because they've lost every time, confirming our theory that dark people have only one degree of separation from apes' ('The Weakest Link' 2004). A third Old Boy says, 'Damn right, Spozzo.

Smithy, you fix this competition so those taro-eaters lose' ('The Weakest Link' 2004). The comments of the Old Boys are indisputably Eurocentric because they discriminate against those who are not white on the assumption that they are biologically and physically inferior to their European counterparts. Spozzo's words, in particular, resonate with the characteristically Eurocentric belief that European peoples are the most evolved ethnic group and thus Western culture is the location from which difference should be evaluated.

'The Weakest Link' clearly mocks the Old Boys for their narrow-minded approach to cross-cultural relations in Aotearoa New Zealand today. The Old Boys are seen engaging in an intricate handshake that finishes with them pulling each other's pants down ('The Weakest Link' 2004). This distinctly juvenile performance is accompanied by a simple melody akin to the music that is played on children's programmes, which reinforces the Old Boys' general foolishness ('The Weakest Link' 2004). *Bro'Town's* burlesque of the Old Boys is relatively 'safe' because the social authority of this system of networking is widely recognised and critiqued hence it already has diminished power in contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand. Nonetheless, it provides the show's producers with the opportunity to discursively construct the St Sylvester's team as an egalitarian alternative to historical structures of power. Despite Valea losing his newfound gift for super-intelligence before the final round of the quiz, the St Sylvester's team ultimately win the High School Quiz Challenge ('The Weakest Link' 2004). Vale, Valea, Sione, Mack, and Jeff tap into the cultural capital provided by their largely under-privileged childhoods to answer the final questions correctly ('The Weakest Link' 2004), which illustrates that knowledge is not the exclusive property of the upper classes and European cultures. The accumulative effect of 'The Weakest Link' is to undermine the historic authority of Eurocentrism in the national imaginary because it is inherently ill-informed and facilitates racist attitudes and behaviours. Eurocentrism has stifled the voices of minority peoples, *bro'Town* suggests, yet there is indisputable value in being young and Polynesian in Aotearoa New Zealand today.

*Bro'Town* also challenges the homogenisation of ethnic minorities in the popular cultural imaginary. Part One established that while Marxist, feminist, and postcolonial identity politics contested the hegemony of white, middle-class masculinity, these

models also implied a homogeneity in the identities and experiences of marginalised peoples. *Bro 'Town*, however, disputes reductionist tendencies in developing a popular understanding of ethnic diversity. For example, in 'A Maori at my Table' (2004), The Boys go on a school trip to Jeff's marae. Jeff explains, 'My cousin Cliff Curtis will be there too. Oh, he's a Maori actor in Hollywood. He's hanging with all the flash people all the time, but he talks just like a bro, bro! Oh, he's choice! And he gets to act as Latin American drug dealers and terrorists and Iraqi refugees' ('A Maori at my Table' 2004). Cliff Curtis is a high-profile Aotearoa New Zealand actor. He is Maori, yet he has starred in a number of blockbuster movies playing characters from other minority ethnic groups, including Sheikh Fadlallah in *The Insider*, Amir Abdullah in *Three Kings*, and Pablo Escobar in *Blow*. Ella Shohat and Robert Stam write, 'Dominant cinema is fond of turning 'dark' or Third World peoples into substitutable others, interchangeable units who can stand for one another' (1994: 189). This argument potentially undermines the acting ability of performers such as Curtis and their ability to transcend identity categories based on ethnicity. Nonetheless, it highlights a racist history of representational practice that essentialises ethnic minority peoples. Jeff's comments allude to this lumping together of ethnic minorities in popular cinema and highlight the relative absence of Maori characters in the media. Jeff's appreciation that his cousin still 'talks just like a bro' confirms the importance of having role models who are meaningful according to one's culture and experiences and this confirms the intrinsic value of facilitating the increased visibility of Polynesians peoples in contemporary media.

*Bro 'Town* utilises Polynesian youth identity to highlight ethnic discrimination resulting from Eurocentrism and the marginalisation of diversity in the popular cultural imaginary, but it does not sanitise cross-cultural relations between Polynesians. Indeed, in 'Go Home, Stay Home' (2004), *bro 'Town* highlights ongoing tensions between Maori and Pacific peoples. When a social worker visits the Pepelo house, Valea lies to explain who looks after him and his brother while their father is at the pub, saying 'if Sione's mum's mad at us, we stay with Jeff da Maori. Eh, Jeff?' ('Go Home, Stay Home' 2004). Jeff's response simultaneously reveals Valea's fib and indicates that white people are not the exclusive perpetrators of racism; 'Well, you could stay, but my parents hate Islanders', he says ('Go Home, Stay Home' 2004). In Part One, the historical resentment between Maori and Pacific immigrants to

Aotearoa New Zealand was explained. In this instance, Jeff uses ‘Islanders’ as a pejorative term that connotes the Pacific overstayer controversy of the 1970s. ‘Go Home, Stay Home’ thus indicates that differences exist within the Polynesian population in Aotearoa New Zealand and this draws attention to how the identifying category of ‘Polynesian’ can universalise the experiences of Maori and Pacific peoples. Overall, *bro’Town* makes use of Polynesian youth identity to challenge the hegemonic value of whiteness in the popular cultural imaginary, yet it does not reduce or romanticise what it means to be Polynesian in Aotearoa New Zealand today.

### 3.7 BRO’TOWN’S USE OF STEREOTYPES

*Bro’Town* makes ironic use of ethnic stereotypes to promote multiculturalism and to pry open new discursive spaces for the development and popular understanding of Polynesian youth identity specifically. The term ‘stereotype’ denotes a commonly held notion of a person or social group that remains relatively set in the popular cultural imaginary. As Stuart Hall elaborates, stereotyping ‘reduces, essentialises, naturalises and fixes ‘difference’’ (1997b: 258). It ‘symbolically fixes boundaries, and excludes everything which does not belong’ (Hall 1997b: 258). *Bro’Town* deploys stereotypes ironically in order to illustrate their intrinsic inability to account for the complexities of ethnic identity in contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand. For example, ‘The Weakest Link’ introduces audiences to the central cast of Morningside. Early on in the episode, The Boys are summoned to the office of St Sylvester’s principal where they try to talk their way out of an anticipated reprimand:

Mack: ‘It was everyone else except me!’

Sione: ‘I was wagging then’.

Vale: ‘Society made me do it!’

Valea: ‘It was Jeff – he’s a Maori’.

Jeff: ‘Not even, ow!’ (‘The Weakest Link’ 2004).

The Boys’ excuses resonate with the popular conservative belief that Maori and Pacific youth are over-represented in crime statistics and as welfare recipients because they do not accept accountability for their attitudes and behaviours. The colonial expectation that minority ethnic groups should assimilate to Western norms echoes in such negative tropes of Polynesian peoples as being lazy and ‘dole bludgers’ (Perese

2006). These stereotypes efface consideration of how the systematic marginalisation of the cultures of the Maori indigene and Pacific immigrants to Aotearoa New Zealand has contributed to the socio-economic inequalities between the dominant Pakeha population and Polynesian peoples (see Part One).

In 'The Weakest Link', the use of negative stereotypes of Polynesian youth identity is evidently ironic. This is apparent in The Boys' lamentation when the school principal refuses their application to participate in the annual High School Quiz Challenge because of their poor previous performances:

Vale: 'I can't believe that he ripped up our application form just like that!'

Valea: 'That took me two weeks to fill out!'

Sione: 'How are we gonna get on TV now?'

Jeff: 'We'll have to become criminals, ow!' ('The Weakest Link' 2004).

Jeff's comment alludes to the long-standing television show *Crimewatch*, which recreates actual unsolved crimes to encourage further information from the public that might help solve them. There was widespread criticism during the 1980s and 1990s that *Crimewatch* and other local media focused unduly on the presumed criminality of Polynesian youth thus casting them as a moral and physical threat to the security of Aotearoa New Zealand (see Abel 1997; Walker 1990). In 'The Weakest Link', *bro'Town* makes a tongue-in-cheek reference to *Crimewatch* as the vehicle by which Polynesian youth previously achieved the greatest visibility in wider Aotearoa New Zealand. *Bro'Town* thereby points to the narrow and imbalanced representations that generate and perpetuate negative social stereotypes.

*Bro'Town* often pokes fun at positive stereotypes of Polynesian youth as well. Dr Melani Anae criticises the series' use of stereotypes about Polynesians; she accuses the show of promoting the kinds of 'happy-go-lucky' stereotypes 'we fought against in the 70s' (Misa 2006). 'We've moved beyond the stereotype of just being entertainers', she writes (Misa 2006). Yet, in 'The Weakest Link', Valea says, 'We have to win [the High School Quiz Challenge] cos little kids only look up to sports stars and singers and we're stink at those things'. His comment is intended to satirise the discursive construction of Polynesian youth as hip participants in an egalitarian society. In this representation, popular media position Maori and Pacific Island youth

as autonomous cultural agents who inspire social unity in Aotearoa New Zealand. The high-profile success of various Polynesian music artists, top-level sportspeople and actors lends weight to this perspective; Che Fu, Jonah Lomu, and Keisha Castle-Hughes are among the cited examples. Nonetheless, this widespread trope for explaining ethnic diversity in the popular cultural imaginary of Aotearoa New Zealand does not destabilise the dominant ideology of male, middle-class Eurocentrism. Vicki Mayer's critique of the portrayal of Mexican youth in American visual media is revealing:

‘The socially included are brokers of popular culture in the United States. They push cultural boundaries, but only within the established paradigms of literature, music, and sports. They set trends so that other Americans can consume their products’ (2003: xii).

Likewise, the dominant cultural ideals of the Pakeha majority persist in the discursive production of Polynesian youth as empowered cultural agents in a multicultural society. It is a reactionary discourse in support of the ‘Pakeha imaginary of a ‘post-racist’ culture’ (Tait 1999: iii) that positions material success as the foundation for a ‘rose-tinted’ Pacific youth experience and erases any challenges to this perspective. *Bro ’Town* reflects a critical awareness of how positive stereotypes can legitimate a popular understanding of Polynesian youth against which most Polynesian youth are destined to fail.

‘Get Rucked’ (2004) extends this critique of the limits of positive stereotypes. Mack is ashamed to admit to The Boys and his physical education teacher that he cannot play rugby. A large number of Polynesian players represent Aotearoa New Zealand in international rugby, including Ma’a Nonu, Rodney So’oialo, and Rico Gear; the immediate past All Black captain was Samoan Tana Umaga. Consequently, rugby is a rare area through which Polynesian men command respect in the popular cultural imaginary and this can create implausible stereotypes against which Polynesian youth are evaluated. In a flashback to Mack’s time at Morningside Heights Prep School, Mack’s rugby coach demands, ‘I want everyone to pass the ball to the big fat brown kid. These Poly-wogs are naturals at sport’ (‘Get Rucked’ 2004). When Mack proves unable to catch the ball, the coach chastises him: ‘Call yourself a darkie? You stink!’ (‘Get Rucked’ 2004). This is a sardonic comment on the biological determinism that sees Polynesian boys expected to excel at physical sports. As Mack complains to his

parents, 'Everyone expects me to be good because I'm big, brown, and cuddly, but I'm not!' ('Get Rucked' 2004). The positive stereotype of Polynesian youth as stand-out sports performers nonetheless circumscribes Polynesian youth identity to the exclusion of many young Maori and Pacific Islanders. Hall explains, 'You can no longer conduct black politics through the strategy of a simple set of reversals, putting in place of the bad old... subject, the new essentially good black subject' (1996a: 444). Anae's criticism of *bro 'Town* is consistent with Hall's discussion of the limitations of 'positive' black imagery. Nonetheless, *bro 'Town* does appear to recognise the implausibility of negative *and* negative typecasts of Polynesian youth identity and critiques them both with a view to promoting multiculturalism in Aotearoa New Zealand today.

### **3.8 BRO'TOWN AND THE COMMODIFICATION OF ETHNICITY**

'Do these images appropriate 'difference' into a spectacle in order to sell a product? Or are they genuinely a political statement about the necessity for everyone to accept and 'live with' difference, in an increasingly diverse, culturally pluralist world?' (Hall 1997b: 273-274).

There are troubling incongruities in *bro 'Town*'s use of stereotypes to promote multiculturalism. *Bro 'Town* is widely described as 'un-PC' because it embraces the negative representations of identity that political correctness has sought to eradicate. For example, TV3's associate director of programming, Kelly Martin, describes the series as 'very, very politically incorrect' (OnFilm 2004: 6). Political correctness requires individuals and social institutions to think about how their attitudes and behaviours can discriminate against others. In Aotearoa New Zealand, political correctness is understood as an initiative of the Centre-Left Labour administration, which is currently in its third consecutive term of governance. In 2005, the National Party instituted Dr Wayne Mapp as the minister for the 'eradication of political correctness', deeming it 'a prescriptive view on how people should think and what they are permitted to discuss' (Mapp 2005). *Bro 'Town*'s explicit parody of stereotypes is discursively positioned as 'un-PC'; the series' no-holds-barred spoofs are viewed as a more honest and credible way to challenge Pakeha ethnocentrism and

promote cross-cultural tolerance than its politically correct antecedents. *Bro'Town's* 'un-PC' comments on ethnic relations in 'The Weakest Link' and 'Get Rucked', for instance, position the viewer in a 'knowing' relationship to the dominant discourses in Aotearoa New Zealand. The series consciously applies racial stereotypes to amuse a presumably culturally savvy youth audience, which recognises that typecasting can be both socially relevant and restrictive.

However, *bro'Town's* apparent stance of resistance may be undermined by the series' ties to the governing capitalist ideology via product placement and corporate sponsorship. *Bro'Town* breaches various taboos in its representation of race relations in Aotearoa New Zealand. Likewise, *bro'Town* incorporates product placement with a degree of irony. *Bro'Town* capitalises on an obvious synergy between its own cartoon status and the animated marketing campaigns for corporate sponsor *G-Force*, for instance. Driving down the motorway, the *bro'Town* boys notice a car of girls; these 'hot chicks' are characters from a string of *G-Force* commercials ('The Wong One' 2004). This 'tongue-in-cheek' intertextuality may empower the viewer because it allows a sense of sharing an 'in-joke' about the pervasiveness of advertising with *bro'Town's* producers and youth in general. Advertisers, however, retain the power to exploit this anti-authoritarian attitude for the purpose of encouraging consumption practices amongst contemporary youth. Christine Harold observes that although parody seems subversive, it "finds itself without a vocation' as a rhetoric of protest in late capitalism' (2004: 191). *G-Force*, for example, is able to engage in a form of advertising that is recognised as 'the wink'. Advertiser's employ 'the wink' to communicate to the audience that 'we know you know what we're trying to do, but because we're letting you know we know, it makes it okay – because we're so hip to your hipness. Get it?' (Nicholson 1997: 183). 'The wink' suggests that there are particular pleasures implicit in brand recognition and this notion is valuable in sustaining advertising's pedagogy of consumption. Hall acknowledges 'that the spaces 'won' for difference are few and far between, that they are very carefully policed and regulated' (1996c: 468). The ironic labour of *bro'Town* is ideologically permissible in Aotearoa New Zealand television partly because the parodic mode of address has proven commercial viability.

Furthermore, although *bro 'Town* exhibits an ideological commitment to contesting the popular representation of Polynesian youth identity, the series' subversive potential diminishes in its discursive production of other ethnic groups. In 'The Wong One', *bro 'Town* challenges the tendency of popular media to perpetuate a limited understanding of ethnic minorities. 'Gosh, those Asians are so stealth like', Mack observes while watching a kung-fu movie. Jeff replies, 'Oh, it's cos of all the rice they eat. Makes them sticky, ow!' ('The Wong One' 2004). Yet, this episode largely contains Asian youth identity within the stereotypical expectations of marked financial wealth. This stereotype stems, in part, from the high number of Asian students who pay augmented fees to receive their education in Aotearoa New Zealand, yet it effaces the incidence of poverty in Asian populations both here and abroad (Greenfield 2002). 'Wong from Hong Kong' is a new student at St Sylvester's school ('The Wong One' 2004). Wong's material possessions pique The Boys' interest in becoming his friend ('The Wong One' 2004). Initially Valea teases Wong, 'Why don't you go do some fractions?' ('The Wong One' 2004). Wong retorts, 'Wuck you! I'll be in my car listening to my stereo since you don't have one!' ('The Wong One' 2004). 'Car?' says Vale. 'Okay. We'll come with you' ('The Wong One' 2004). Later, Vale audaciously asks, 'Wong, can I use your phone to ring my pen pal in Mauritius?' ('The Wong One' 2004). This scene reflects an opportunity to market the Vodafone Live cell-phone to *bro 'Town*'s viewers. As 'The Wong One' attests, *bro 'Town* readily imagines consumption as empowering youth to transcend historically discriminatory beliefs. 'The Wong One' in particular entertains a multicultural fantasy wherein conspicuous consumption functions as the uniting factor across ethnic difference for youth in Aotearoa New Zealand.

*Bro 'Town*'s parodic use of stereotypes also falls short in subverting popular representations of Indian peoples. In *bro 'Town*, Indians Rakeesh and Satisha Maadkraklikka own the Morningside dairy. This is symbolic of the high number of these shops that Asian immigrants own in Aotearoa New Zealand, but *bro 'Town* does not interrogate the socio-economical reasons and implications for this trend. Suburban dairies in this country have suffered financially with the proliferation of national supermarket chains and thus are only viable investments for people who are prepared - or compelled - to work long hours, weekends, and public holidays with limited financial rewards. The disproportionate number of Asian immigrants who own dairies

may be a result of the widespread discrimination that they have experienced in seeking employment in Aotearoa New Zealand, as reported in a 2006 Massey University report (Thomas 2006: A3). Yet, in *bro'Town*, these broader circumstances are effaced. Rakeesh is vilified as a 'rip-off curry muncher' by The Boys, which is significant because they are the moral centre of the show ('The Wong One' 2004). The surname Maadkraklikka also carries derogatory sexual innuendo. Satisha is hypersexualised and is consistently shown with her g-string underwear riding high above her low-cut pants. Challenging these images does not involve simply replacing them with positive representations, which can also work to contain diversity and generate misguided expectations of difference in society. In this instance, however, any other Indian characters in the show are very minor and do not work to balance the negative stereotypes in any significant way.

The characters in *bro'Town* 'aren't real' (Agnew 2005: 1), but they can function as metaphors for the experiences of the minority peoples that are represented in the series and thereby have ideological implications for the normalisation of particular cultural attitudes and behaviours. *Bro'Town's* disparaging representations of Indians in Aotearoa New Zealand signify an undervaluation of Asian immigrant labour by the series' producers that resonates with discriminatory attitudes nationwide and can reinforce them in the popular cultural imaginary. Furthermore, these representations are also likely to offend the Indian animators that work on *bro'Town*. Firehorse Films contracted out some of the animation work required to produce *bro'Town* to DQ Entertainment in Hyderabad, India; a second Indian studio was employed to manage the time pressures involved in producing the forthcoming third series (Wick 2005: 4). The transnational quality of *bro'Town's* production is indicative of the contemporary industrial climate in which Western companies frequently move production offshore for economical reasons; this process can often create a 'crisis in value' (McClintock 1995: 208) wherein the cultural attitudes and behaviours of international workers are underrated and compromised. DQ director Tapaas Chakravar diplomatically notes that *bro'Town* 'has higher doses of New Zealand-centric humour' (Wicks 2005: 4), but *bro'Town's* apparent lack of cultural sensitivity towards Indians implies that the Indian studios occupy a generic role in production that can be filled by other overseas animation houses. Likewise, the discursive construction of Asian youth identity in 'The Wong One' is geared primarily towards encouraging conspicuous consumption,

*Bro 'Town's* capacity to prise open new discursive spaces for the understanding of ethnic identities obviously does not extend to destabilising restrictive ideas about Indian and Chinese peoples. *Bro 'Town* disputes the interrogative value of stereotypes, but ultimately it does not offer an alternative language of difference for contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand audiences than a reliance on comparative values and an implicit social hierarchy to make meaning. This is characteristic of the broader multicultural ethic in commercial television and its inherent service to a 'profit economy that needs outsiders as surplus people' (Lorde 1991: 281).

### **3.9 BRO'TOWN AND THE COMMODIFICATION OF GENDER**

Whilst multiculturalism largely denotes an acceptance of ethnic diversity in Aotearoa New Zealand, it also indicates tolerance across identifying categories of gender and sexuality. *Bro 'Town*, however, enables essentialising discourses about gender to endure in Aotearoa New Zealand today. Images of urban masculinity predominate in the representation of Maori and Pacific Island youth in *bro 'Town* thus reinscribing the authority of male ethnocentrism in contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand. Cultural criticism acknowledges that discursive constructions of gender are always historically and culturally specific. In Aotearoa New Zealand, conventional expectations that 'true' Kiwi masculinity equates with '[s]uperior physical toughness borne of an open-air life' (Phillips 1987: 118) do not resonate for contemporary youth; the 2001 census indicates that 86 per cent of contemporary New Zealanders live in urban settings (Ministry of Social Development 2004a). Popular ideals of masculinity have shifted to incorporate urbanisation whilst maintaining the ideological dominance of the male perspective. *Bro 'Town* treats the world of youth as essentially male, which suits its corporate sponsors because young men represent a particularly lucrative market for advertisers. In addition, the show's representation of masculinity can also communicate to a female audience, which is familiar with the proliferation of masculine assumptions as underpinning Western cultural norms. The commercial rationale of *bro 'Town* favours the representation of urban masculinity and underscores this discourse as a leading social ideology for youth in Aotearoa New Zealand today.

In the representation of Polynesian youth identity in television advertising, the ‘street cred’ of Maori and Pacific Island youth resides in their urban lifestyles, which are characterised by a popular association with the typically male pursuits of hip-hop and professional sport. *Bro ’Town’s* primary male characters are ‘from the street’ (‘The Wong One’ 2004) and demonstrate a staunch interest in hip-hop music, rugby and rugby league; hip-hop group Nesian Mystik, the All Blacks, and the Warriors rugby league team make guest appearances in the series. As such, *bro ’Town* endears itself to corporate investors as an appropriate sales vehicle for the local youth market.

*Bro ’Town’s* emphasis on urban masculinity as a predominant characteristic of Polynesian youth identity, however, privileges individual consumer interests over broader socio-political concerns. For example, it affects Polynesian youth culture as part of an urban ‘middle-class, multicultural playland’ (Mayer 2003: 88) that effaces the cultural intolerance experienced by both Maori during the process of urbanisation and Pacific Islanders immigrating to Aotearoa New Zealand (see King 2003; Toft 1990). In addition, the overwhelming focus on Polynesians as an urban people negates the unique relationship between the indigenous Maori population and the land; it implicitly undermines Maori claims for the redress of land confiscations within the popular cultural imaginary. *Bro ’Town’s* representation of Maori and Pacific youth through the prism of urban masculinity aligns with the conservative multicultural sensibility in Aotearoa New Zealand, which effaces the value of biculturalism; it supports the ‘undisruptive’ assimilation of the ethnic Other to the dominant Western cultural norms.

The pervasiveness of urban masculinity in *bro ’Town’s* production of Polynesian youth identity also has implications for a popular understanding of young females in Aotearoa New Zealand. *Bro ’Town* operates in complicity with pre-existing binaries between masculinity and femininity to make meaning. Females are generally marginalised in the series and when they do appear, it is often in accordance with traditional tropes of femininity, such as a distinct emphasis on the sexual appeal of the body. The sexualisation of Satisha Maadkraklikka is indicative of the delineation of female identity in this way. In a further example, Sione lusts after Mila Jizovich, who is one of the few recurring female characters in *bro ’Town*. Her role, however, is limited to being the focus of Sione’s affection and she is objectified by The Boys as ‘a loaded sixteen year old, A-grade fine-ass honey’ (‘Sionerella’ 2004). In ‘The Wong

One', Vale lets his kidnapper, The Grasshopper, escape because 'she was a hot Asian chick and they deserve a second chance' (2004). This is consistent with the concept of Orientalism wherein Asian women are consistently hyper-sexualised in popular discourse (Sun 2003: 657-658). As the instigator of Vale's kidnap, The Grasshopper transcends traditional expectations of female passivity. Nonetheless, her representation is consistent with a history of representation that contains Asian female identity as an object of sexual desire and indicates that male ethnocentrism persists in *bro'Town*. Although it could be argued that The Boys' attitudes towards girls are reflective of their age, *bro'Town* fails to offer an alternative language to gender stereotypes through which to imagine female identity in Aotearoa New Zealand today.

### **3.10 BRO'TOWN AND THE COMMODIFICATION OF SEXUALITY**

*Bro'Town* is also complicit with stereotypes of homosexuality. 'Ideology, as cultural studies theorists have persuasively argued, constructs viewing positions and identities. Sexuality, at least in modern times, is one component of that ideology, a component whose regulation occurs both formally and informally' (Raymond 2003: 103). Brian McNair observes that, after decades of exclusion in popular media, representations of homosexuality are now 'more visible than ever before' and this can have positive implications for the acceptance of gay peoples in society today (2002: 147). In *bro'Town*, Mack is presumably gay; for example, he is shown cavorting with two male models backstage at the Morningside Fashion Show in 'Zeelander' (2005). Mack's implied homosexuality is significant because as a core character in the series, his presence has the potential to subvert heterosexual norms and encourage a better understanding of homosexuality. Some critics, however, express concern that the incorporation of homosexuality in mainstream media represents the development of 'just another niche market, another product line' (Ruby Rich in McNair 2002: 146). Vito Russo explains that popular media has historically incorporated homosexuality as something to laugh at, to pity, or to fear (2001). In *bro'Town*, the character of Mack often functions as a comedic tool and, at the expense of promoting cross-cultural tolerance, this representation favours the notion that being gay is a cause to ridicule.

Mack epitomises the popular trope of the homosexual ‘sissy’, which television has historically employed in ways that do not subvert the status quo in society. The sissy represents a manifestation of homosexuality that was permitted to thrive within popular media because sissies were not perceived as threatening to the hegemonic value of heterosexuality (Russo 2001). The attitudes and behaviour of the sissy are described as ‘camp’, which refers to an exaggerated femininity enacted by men. Mack’s sexual identity is communicated by his camp style. Mack speaks with a feminine lilt and his inflated enthusiasm for the Morningside Fashion Week mystifies the other boys in ‘Zeelander’ (2005), which connotes his unconventional interest in typically feminine pursuits. Likewise, when former All Black Frank Bunce tries to teach Mack to tackle using a tyre in ‘Get Rucked’, Mack’s emotional response is at odds with engrained expectations of masculinity. Bunce cheers, ‘Look, the tyre hates you and deserves a smash. Tackle it!’ (‘Get Rucked’ 2004). Mack replies, ‘Then Mr Tyre needs to look within and see what’s really wrong’ (‘Get Rucked’ 2004). Nonetheless, Mack seeks to hide his homosexuality from his male friends throughout the series and his sexual identity remains ‘harmless’ (Russo 2001) as long as he is effectively ‘in the closet’. As a consumer, Mack’s attitudes and behaviours are notably conformist. He proves to be the biggest fan of the top-level rugby and rugby league stars who play the St Sylvester’s team in a rugby match (‘Get Rucked’ 2004), he is the most prolific user of the Vodafone Live cell-phone in ‘The Wong One’ (2004), and ‘Get Rucked’ explicitly describes him as loving M&Ms and Starbursts. The idea that conspicuous consumption facilitates social belonging thus structures the discursive production of homosexuality in *bro’Town* and places pedagogical limits on the acceptance of gay peoples in Aotearoa New Zealand.

On the surface, the character of Mack appears to be an attempt by *bro’Town* to prise open new discursive spaces for the development of homosexual identity and the acceptance of gay peoples. *Bro’Town*’s appropriation of the camp style of the sissy, however, bends traditional stereotypes of gender and sexuality, but it does not transcend them; it can be argued that being camp acquires meaning through its novelty and thus ‘lives parasitically on the strength of the dominant culture’ and is dependent on its preservation (Wikipedia 2006a). In addition, incongruities in *bro’Town*’s representation of homosexuality efface Mack’s subversive potential as a central gay character. In the High School Quiz Challenge, for instance, The Boys first

compete against a team from Frances of Assisi Grammar; the school's name is a reference to homosexuality as indicated by the ambiguous gender of the name Frances coupled with the phonetic reference to sissies in Assisi and the acronym FAG ('The Weakest Link' 2004). The insinuation of homosexuality is clearly intended as an affront to the team from Frances of Assisi Grammar, who are a potential block to the success of the St Sylvester's team with which audiences are expected to identify. The media has 'taught straight people what to think about gay people, and gay people what to think about themselves' (Russo 2001). The representation of homosexuality in *bro'Town* does little to disrupt the hegemonic value of heterosexuality in Aotearoa New Zealand because it discursively supports the need for gay peoples to court understanding and outwardly assimilate to heterosexual norms.



This case study of *bro'Town* illustrates that 'the appearance of *difference* per se is not necessarily subversive' (Raymond 2003: 105). Indeed, the commodification of difference in the first two series of *bro'Town* is largely complicit with the ideological dominance of white, heterosexual, middle-class, masculinity and it 'merely contains activism within the confines of the market place' (Nicholson 1997: 193). In specific instances, *bro'Town* mounts challenges to the predominance of capitalist values in contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand and the inability of the market economy to facilitate upward mobility for minority peoples. Moreover, *bro'Town* effectively challenges popular stereotypes of Polynesian youth identity, which largely derive from the proliferation of Western capitalist culture in Aotearoa New Zealand. Yet *bro'Town's* culture of production is decidedly commercial and the series discursively supports a distinct consumerist ethos that compromises its subversive value for viewers. *Bro'Town's* multicultural ethic is contrary because the series fails to contest popular stereotypes about other ethnic minorities. Moreover, *bro'Town* operates in complicit collusion with pre-existing discourses that define masculinity and femininity, urban and rural, and heterosexuality and homosexuality in opposition to each other and this potentially reinscribes the social authority of male ethnocentrism in Aotearoa New Zealand. *Bro'Town* illustrates how notions of identity and difference can be conscripted in the service of an upbeat consumerist that does not alter the pre-existing oppressive relations of power.

## FINAL THOUGHTS

### ‘NOT EVEN, OW’

#### **Missed Opportunities in the Representation of Identity in *bro’Town* and an Incentive for Future Research**

‘The lesson to be learned from the market’s approach to multiculturalism is that differences among youth matter politically and pedagogically, but not simply as a way of generating new markets or registering difference as a fashion index’ (Giroux 1996: 47)

In *Brand New Zealanders*, it has been my intention to utilise *bro’Town* as a pedagogical tool to facilitate a cultural literacy that will enable media producers and consumers alike ‘to see their position and subjectivity (a subordinate relationship with various forms of power) within the greater ‘framework’ of contemporary capitalism’ (Nicholson 1997: 176). The representation of identity and difference in both series one and series two of *bro’Town* reflects the intrinsic inability of the consumerist paradigm to account for the wax and wane of contemporary cultural life in Aotearoa New Zealand. *Bro’Town* is largely complicit with commercial imperatives and incorporates product placement with uncritical ease. Yet, advertising is a motivated discourse that is geared towards disseminating a seductive regime of social ‘truths’ in order to encourage consumption. The representation of Polynesian youth identity in *bro’Town* functions to align the series and its affiliated brands with the ascendancy of a multicultural sensibility in Aotearoa New Zealand. Under the pretence of multiculturalism, however, *bro’Town* commodifies popular notions of identity and difference in collusion with dominant cultural ideals of white, middle-class masculinity and invites the viewer to occupy a subject position that accepts the assumptions and practices prescribed by a consumerist sensibility.

The limitations of *bro’Town* as a subversive cultural text in Aotearoa New Zealand are indicative of contemporary society’s weak commitment to disputing the politics of

representing difference in a capitalist economy. Further qualitative research is required to ascertain the influence of television's commercialist ethos for individual viewers and the development of broader society. Preliminary discourse analysis of viewer response to *bro'Town* in online chat forums suggests that audiences have a limited repertoire to account for the complexities of identity and critique its representation. The representation of difference in *bro'Town* generates polarised responses; viewers interpret the series as either discriminatory or libtatory and this is based on its construction of ethnicity. There appears to be little room for a more nuanced discussion of *bro'Town's* probative value in the representation of identity. The individual viewer's sense of humour is often cited as the rationale behind their response to the show and, in this way, *bro'Town's* politics of representation can be largely written off as a matter of taste. This case study of thirteen episodes of *bro'Town* thus also highlights a need for a critical awareness of the corporate co-option of comedy in general and the ironic mode of address specifically. Contemporary television comedies embrace ambiguity and polysemy, which can make them intimidating objects to critique. Yet, as *bro'Town* illustrates, comedies are cultural texts in an increasingly commodified culture and there is a need to approach this genre in ways that do not let comedy off the hook.

#### **4.1 AUDIENCE RESPONSE TO BRO'TOWN**

Additional qualitative work is required to ascertain the correlation between the multicultural sensibility produced in *bro'Town* and a popular understanding of identity among local youth. Preliminary discourse analysis of audience response to *bro'Town* supports the assertion that the show has limited success in facilitating new spaces for the understanding of identity and the improvement of cross-cultural relations in Aotearoa New Zealand. Theorists acknowledge that the quantitative studies and laboratory experiments that formed the foundations of early audience research have limited probative value for understanding the actual influence of television viewing for audiences (see Part Two). There is much excitement, however, about the potential insights into audience activity that can be acquired through qualitative research, including discourse analysis of online communications. There are ethical and methodological difficulties in conducting audience research online

(Wolcott 1995); nonetheless, as this preliminary fieldwork with viewers of *bro 'Town* attests, such qualitative research has the capacity to tap into the relatively unmediated responses of television audiences. Their comments can be analysed with a view to interpreting the culture of media consumption in general and their response to *bro 'Town* specifically.

As Part Two established, television audiences are not cultural dupes who passively receive and accept media messages; their understanding of the corporate culture of media production can temper their response to particular texts. For example, comments on the commercial strategies deployed in *bro 'Town* to enhance its market appeal surfaced in an extended discussion about the show on the 'Gameplanet' chat forum. 'They tried to cram as many celebrity guest spots as possible into 23 minutes to blind us with star power', observes blink ('Gameplanet' 24 September 2004). The show also generated some debate in a 'Gameplanet' thread about the role of product placement in contemporary television:

'The G-Force product placements are getting annoying' (garet jax 7 October 2004).

'Though necessary as that is where they are getting their funding from. Becuase [sic] they outsource the animation to India, and they arent [sic] able to spend their NZ on Air funding O\ S thus they need to get the rest themselves' (Greedy 7 October 2004).

[...]

'for real? outsource animators? sheesh why outsource when you have freelance animators in auckland... ' (code\name 12 October 2004).

'Its [sic] sad, but it is cheaper for them to go O\ S than to use local talent. Which is why they need to have blatant [sic] product placement, as well as investment from a private investor and TV3, because they can use the NZ on Air funding overseas' (Greedy 12 October 2004).

It is encouraging to note that product placement is not so entrenched in popular culture that its occurrence goes unnoticed. Yet, while the rationale behind the corporate sponsorship of *bro 'Town* is addressed by Greedy, the cultural implications of product placement are reduced to being simply a nuisance for viewers in this thread. This raises the question, 'to what extent are Aotearoa New Zealand audiences aware of advertising's potential to reflect and reinscribe a consumerist ethos in

contemporary society?’ In particular, ‘are viewers alert to the potential for product placement in *bro’Town* to undermine the series’ subversive intent?’ Discourse analysis of the ‘Gameplanet’ chat forums suggests that these issues are largely effaced in the popular cultural imaginary. When code\name writes, ‘lets [sic] hope the 2nd series has more funding and less ad names injected into the toons’ (‘Gameplanet’ 15 October 2004), it is more likely to signal a desire to enhance the pleasures of personal viewing rather than to reduce *bro’Town*’s implicit support for conspicuous consumption and the perpetuation of social hierarchies.

*Bro’Town* has attracted some criticism from individuals for its use of stereotypes, but other viewers largely dismiss these comments as a matter of taste. Boreas exclaims, ‘I’m all for the removal of this damn PC culture, but why the hell can people make a blatantly racist cartoon with public money, just because the creators are ‘ethnic’?’ (‘Gameplanet’ 27 September 2004). Boreas could be eluding to the way that *bro’Town* challenges stereotypes of Polynesian youth identity yet proffers an imbalanced representation of other minority groups on the show. Although this is not possible to confirm from the chat room thread, Boreas’ comments are indicative of the potential for Aotearoa New Zealand audiences to submit the discursive construction of difference in popular television to critical analysis. Infallible’s [sic] remarks on *bro’Town* also appear judicious; Infallible [sic] observes that ‘the concept was good, picking on local stereotypes, but it falls short of it’s potential by relying on tired clichés’ (‘Gameplanet’ 25 September 2004). Nonetheless, dissatisfaction with *bro’Town*’s discursive construction of difference is largely countered by claims that its critics do not appreciate the show’s ironic humour. For instance, when scottg26 expresses his disdain for *bro’Town*, JoeSkie suggests, ‘Maybe its [sic] because you don’t ‘get’ the humour?’ (‘Gameplanet’ 10 September 2004). Greedy wonders ‘how many complaints are going to be recieved [sic] about it. No doubt a lot because no one has a sense of humour anymore’ (‘Gameplanet’ 23 September 2004). Discourse analysis of *bro’Town* has shown that marked incongruities in its representation of difference mean that its ironic address is ill-equipped to disrupt discriminatory attitudes and promote cross-cultural tolerance in Aotearoa New Zealand today. This pilot research suggests, however, that critics of *bro’Town* are largely undermined as ‘spoil-sports’ in discussion of the series amongst viewers and this warrants further investigation in subsequent studies.

Initial research into the responses of viewers to *bro'Town* suggests that many people celebrate the series as subverting the status quo in contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand. Audiences generally appear complicit with the show's approach to multiculturalism, despite its illustrated inability to encourage an unequivocal acceptance of difference and address the complexities of identity because it is overly influenced by commercialism. Certainly, as Cheeky girl points out, 'its [sic] good to see them put some different races, other than pakeha on tv!!' ('The Bar' 27 October 2004). However, most viewers are complicit with the typecasting of ethnic, gendered, and sexual identity in *bro'Town*. DeadEye, for example, supports the representation of 'rich Asians':

'I thought it was hilarious, as are the ads for this weeks episode.....especially loved this one bit - where the Dad wants to go to the casino: 'Hurry up boy, gotta win some money at the casino b4 the asians [sic] get it all ('Gameplanet' 27 September 2004).

This stereotype of the wealthy Asian has the potential to ideologically position Asian peoples as a source of both fear and desire in contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand. This is a contemporary manifestation of Orientalism, which Edward Said described as ideologically segregating Asian peoples from their Western counterparts (see Part One). *Bro'Town* uses this Orientalist trope when it discursively constructs material possessions as the bridge between Wong and The Boys in 'The Wong One' and it is disquieting to see it so readily accepted by audiences.

Furthermore, the marginalisation of females in *bro'Town* is reflected in limited discussion of their role in the show in online chat rooms. In one of the few references to *bro'Town's* female characters, one chat room participant supports the hyper-sexualisation of Asian females in the series. SIR\_MIGHTY\_DORK recounts 'The Wong One':

'She just about killed you and you let her go...  
yea but shes [sic] a hot asain [sic] and they deserve a second chance...'  
( 'Gameplanet' 7 October 2004).

'[Y]ea true PUEW PUEW PUEW PUEW PUEW PUEW', he agrees ('Gameplanet' 7 October 2004). Likewise, a significant number of viewers endorse the use of homosexual stereotypes as a comedic tool without consideration of how such representations might infer negative ideas about being gay in Aotearoa New Zealand

today. Bacon writes, ‘Little things like the acronym for one of the schools F.A.G.S and the white headmaster wearing pink frilly undies - nice and low brow, just the way I like it’ (‘Gameplanet’ 23 September 2004). In another post, yoke writes that ‘*Bro town* is the meanest show Ive [sic] ever watched, if your [sic] not in auckland you wouldn’t understand some of it cos they were making fun of Kings college calling it queens lol’ (‘Gameplanet’ 25 September 2004). Yoke appears to take pleasure in the political labour done by *bro ’Town* to contest the distribution of power in Aotearoa New Zealand by satirising the expensive private school King’s College. Yet, homosexuals are often called ‘queens’ and in using this term to mock the King’s College, *bro ’Town* is simultaneously denigrating gay peoples. In accordance with the online comments noted in this early research, *bro ’Town* appears to do little to disrupt the ideological dominance of masculinity and heterosexuality in the popular cultural imaginary.

The balance of power between commercial television and the development of youth identity is always contextual, positioned and subjective. Yet, this preliminary discursive analysis of audience response to *bro ’Town* suggests that the show ‘perpetuates a commitment to rhetorical binaries – the hierarchical form it supposedly wants to upset’ (Harold 2004: 191). As explained in earlier chapters, television is the product of a commercial culture that relies on an imagined hierarchy of human difference to make meaning; *bro ’Town* has some subversive potential, but its commercialist bent is part of the reason that the show’s multicultural vision is largely half-hearted. Sustained research and debate is clearly necessary to interrogate how the representation of identity and difference in *bro ’Town* works to both enable and limit the participation of individuals as ethnic, gendered and cultural citizens in Aotearoa New Zealand today.

## **4.2 THE CORPORATE CO-OPTION OF COMIC IRONY**

The online comments of *bro ’Town*’s viewers in the ‘Gameplanet’ chat forum and chat room ‘The Bar’ suggest that people primarily view the show’s representational practices as a matter of comedic taste. *Bro ’Town* invites this appraisal because, as a comedy, it relies heavily on the use of irony and its counterparts of ambiguity and

multiple meanings. H M Fowler writes, 'Irony is a form of utterance that postulates a double audience' (in Wikipedia 2006c). Fowler explains that there is one part of the audience that consumes irony, but does not understand its implicit meaning; the other part, he writes, is aware of the 'more' that is implied in the use of irony as well as the 'outsider's incomprehension' (Wikipedia 2006c). Comic irony is therefore very open to the defence that some people 'don't 'get' the humour' (JoeSkie in 'Gameplanet' 10 September 2004). *Bro 'Town* uses irony to highlight the absurdity of Eurocentric thinking, as detailed in Part Three; viewers 'know' that ethnic discrimination is ill-informed and are invited to mock monoculturalism and its perpetrators in Aotearoa New Zealand today. Yet, Part Three continued by illustrating that the subversive labour of *bro 'Town* is compromised because the series deploys the same ironic sensibility to commodify its audiences in the interests of its corporate sponsors. In this context, the 'knowing' gaze of the viewer itself is subverted in the service of the cultural dominant; it is as if the audience is 'let in' on the symbolic power of consumption and the specific cultural value of the advertised brand and those that do not subscribe to this consumerist ethos are framed as 'outsiders'. Consequently, there is a risk that *bro 'Town's* ironic sensibility can be invoked as an irrefutable defence of the series whereby effacing a more nuanced discussion of its representational politics and its relationship to the dominant culture of capitalism.

To some extent, irony is limited to working with the cultural capital of existing ideas and this jeopardises its capacity to open edgy new discursive spaces for understanding identity in contemporary society. Through 'a kind of nudge-and-wink knowingness' (Harold 2004: 191), comic irony generally suggests the opposite of what is literally depicted. Comic irony thus largely 'derides the *content* of what it sees as oppressive rhetoric, but fails to attend to its *patterns*' (Harold 2004: 191). This is problematic when 'we have no patterns for relating across our human differences as equals' (Audre Lorde 1990: 281), as Part One first established. Moreover, comic irony is circumscribed by ideas that are recognisable – albeit not necessarily accepted – in the popular cultural imaginary. Media producers use irony to evoke a particular response in the imagined viewer so relatively new or obscure ideas are less likely to be the intended meaning of ironic representations. It is unsurprising, therefore, that *bro 'Town* presents a deracinated discourse of multiculturalism, which already has cultural currency in the national cultural imaginary. This case study of the

representation of identity in *bro 'Town* has demonstrated the series' limited capacity to transcend dualistic discourses of identity and difference. *Brand New Zealanders* thus suggests the need to further develop a popular media literacy that recognises the general reliance of comic irony on the inversion of popular ideas for effect, which can curb its subversive potential in the popular cultural imaginary.

The preamble to this thesis introduced *bro 'Town* as a cultural text in the circuit of culture; the following chapters crystallised the notion that television comedies, including *bro 'Town*, are cultural texts in an increasingly commodified culture. *Bro 'Town* utilises comic irony in ways that serve the status quo in society and thus it illustrates the need for media producers and audiences alike to increasingly subject television comedies to critical discourses about commercialism. For example, Part Three demonstrated how *bro 'Town's* intertextuality could be co-opted to pattern audience behaviour in accordance with the commercial objectives of the show's producers and corporate backers. Likewise, Firehorse Films commodifies the ironic labour of *bro 'Town* in ways that support polarised opinions of the show and negate a more discerning critique of its subversive value. On the cover of the *bro 'Town Series One DVD*, Firehorse Films quotes rave reviews of the series:

'Soon to be a national treasure... Phil Bostwick – Bostwick's Box;  
Funny and smart... what an achievement... Jane Bowron – Dominion;  
A ground-breaking TV cartoon that has changed the face of NZ  
comedy... Margaret Henley – Sunday Star' (2004).

The final citation is from Greg Dixon of *The New Zealand Herald*; he writes, 'There's nothing particularly original going on here' (Firehorse Films 2004). The juxtaposition of Dixon's criticism against the praise of numerous other reviewers is characteristic of the corporate co-option of comic irony. It reflects irony's predisposition towards discursive binaries and illustrates its possibilities as a tool of commercial enterprise. Firehorse Films commodifies Dixon's criticism in the service of marketing the show by using an ironic tone to imply that he does not 'get' the show's humour and is therefore an 'outsider' to its 'hip' appeal (Firehorse Films 2005). Furthermore, the DVD cover discursively positions viewers of *bro 'Town* as either fans or critics, with a distinct bias towards fandom of the series; in this way, it negates a 'middle-ground' appreciation of the show based on the nature and extent of *bro 'Town's* achievements as well as its shortcomings. The corporate co-option of comic irony raises questions

about the implications of this commercial practice that subsequent research could best address.



*Bro 'Town* misses opportunities to break open new discursive spaces for the understanding of identity and difference in contemporary Aotearoa New Zealand. Part One of this thesis contested the popular view that identity is fixed and immutable thus illustrating the value in politicising the notion of identity in the popular cultural imaginary. Part Two highlighted the ideological labour of television; it positioned Aotearoa New Zealand television as an historical product of contemporary capitalism and discussed its predisposition towards commodifying practices. This thesis has thus established the fundamental importance of critiquing the commodification of identity and difference in Aotearoa New Zealand television today. In Part Three, discourse analysis of series one and series two of *bro 'Town* supported this assertion.

*Bro 'Town's* producers and financial backers discursively construct the series as subversive in its multicultural vision, which is presumably evidenced by the conspicuous visibility of Polynesian youth in the programme. Yet, the marked incongruities in the representation of other ethnicities, gender, and sexuality in the show suggest that the multicultural sensibility of *bro 'Town* is largely conservative and does little to disrupt the status quo in Aotearoa New Zealand today. As Part Three detailed, *bro 'Town's* populist approach to cross-cultural relations is due in some measure to the central role of commercial imperatives in the production and consumption of the show.

In disputing the extent of *bro 'Town's* subversive value in the popular cultural imaginary, *Brand New Zealanders* raises the inevitable question, 'how can media representations do justice to the intricacies of identity in contemporary culture?' There are no easy answers and this thesis does not profess to offer an improbable checklist for the ethical production and consumption of difference in television today. Instead, I envisage *Brand New Zealanders* as a reminder that contemporary television is a cultural artefact in a modern society that is infused with commercial influences; this research is, to a degree, an antidote to complacency in media producers and audiences alike regarding the representational politics of a capitalist economy. It is vital to

celebrate the representation of Polynesian youth identity in television programmes such as *bro'Town* and critique their limitations in order to understand the balance of power between social goals and commercial imperatives in the circuit of contemporary culture. It is hoped that future research will be attuned to these nuances in television comedy in general and *bro'Town* specifically. At the time of writing, the third season of *bro'Town* is screening on TV3, which means that there is scope for further critique of the series and its influence in popular culture. Time will tell if *bro'Town's* imbalanced politics of representation are redressed or if, to appropriate the words of The Boys of Morningside for different ends, the show's subversive value remains 'not even, ow'.

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