

This article uses discourse analysis to locate animated primetime cartoon comedy *bro'Town* in terms of ethnicity and identification in both a local New Zealand/Aotearoa (NZ) and a global, postmodern, postcolonial media environment. It analyses and problematises the polarisation of local ethnic discourse between conservative assimilationist and bicultural “politically correct” viewpoints by situating the text in global postmodern media environment and demonstrating the discursive interdependence of such binary oppositions. Finally it looks at the degree to which *bro'Town*'s self-proclaimed status as “hilariously anti-PC” comedy works to both exploit and undermine polarities of ethnic representation through employing “reverse discourse”. The overall aim of the paper is not to present a close reading or textual analysis, but to situate the text in larger discursive frameworks and thus offer a number of possible theoretical approaches.

Given the popular impact of *bro'Town* in NZ since its TV3 debut in 2004, it is surprising that local media scholars have written so little about it. This cartoon series, created by Samoan New Zealanders Oscar Kightley, Shimpal Lelisi, David Fane and Mario Gaoa, aka comedy/theatre troupe the Naked Samoans, now also filmmakers (*Sione's Wedding*) has been a spectacular success, winning awards, attracting good ratings in key demographics, lasting three series, and being exported to overseas markets such as Australia, Canada, the Pacific Islands and Latin America, all unprecedented achievements for any NZ homegrown TV comedy (Best Comedy Programme, Best Comedy Script, New Zealand Screen Awards 2005; Perrot 2004; Tuffery 2006; “Top dogs” 2006). And like its obvious models, *The Simpsons* and *South Park*, the series has spawned multiple merchandising opportunities, therefore creating a high concept multimedia product (“bro'Town Goes Dub” 2005). Finally, as easily the most successful TV show made by and centred to some degree on Polynesians, it is symptomatic of the cultural ascendancy of Pacific Island diaspora culture in a society historically dominated by Pakeha (ie white settlers) and its often antagonistic relationship to indigenous Maori (Awatere 1984).

Popular and critical reactions to the programme have been polarised, but mostly positive. Most commentators celebrate it as an emergence of “indigenous” talent, but a few have condemned its trivialising representation of Polynesian culture (Corry 2004; “Welcome” 2004; “bro'Town” 2004). Dr Melani Anae, author of *Polynesian Panthers* and director of Auckland University Pacific Studies, accuses *bro'Town* of promoting stereotypes “we fought against in the 70s ... We've moved beyond the stereotype of just being entertainers” (Rees 2006). Earl, who has written the only scholarly article to date on the show, states that it commodifies Polynesian youth culture 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 advertising's capitalist roots derive” (Earl 2005). Although intellectual comment on the show has been negative, youth seem to have responded very positively – for example, it is a popular subject for student essays at secondary/tertiary level (“Teenagers” 2005; Karaitiana 2006; Williams 2006). Clearly this disparity needs to be addressed, although it may be precisely *bro'Town*'s popularity as a youth-oriented cartoon comedy that leads some to dismiss it. Perhaps the combination of ethnicity and comedy presents a kind of double whammy to prospective commentators – a politically sensitive, indeed “incorrect” text that is also mass-mediated light entertainment. Dangerous ground. But the combination of social commentary and cartoon is increasingly recognised as culturally significant, even subversive (Alberti 2004;

**Johnson-Woods 2007**): could it be that, in a local context at least, *bro'Town* offers the possibility of raising a different if not directly oppositional voice into the local mediascape, one that speaks of that most sensitive area in New Zealand culture – ethnicity?.

A related problem is how to understand and interpret PC and “anti-PC” discourses in relation to current debates about identity politics. Insofar as a “neutral” definition is possible, PC refers to a politically conscious approach to processes, practices and terminology that aimed not to endorse, highlight or stigmatise social difference and to be inclusive and enabling of “other” groups, for example women or ethnic minorities, although obviously the connotations of this definition differ radically according to context (Sparrow 2002). However, much contemporary popular media, especially comedy, seem to negate the kind of sensitivity about identity politics and difference that defines the worldview of many white middle-class intellectuals such as myself. Is this a right-wing backlash against perceived “state interference” in the public realm? If so, why am I laughing? Why does a feminist who lectures on “cultural safety” in medicine laugh like a drain at a TV programme like *House*? Feminist scholars have long been aware of contradictions between what we know and what we enjoy “since the kinds of fantasy investments at work in the pleasures taken from [media texts] cannot be controlled by conscious political positions” (Tasker 1993: 136). As such, I want also to investigate comedy as discourse, or more accurately the degree to which Foucauldian discourse derives from the Nietzschean apprehension that laughter destroys human pretensions to absolute knowledge (Nietzsche 2001: 29).

Recently the NZ Press Council upheld a complaint against an article that claimed Asian immigrants were contributing to rising crime statistics (Coddington 2006). The writer, Deborah Coddington, responded that “the council felt behoved, in these socially responsible times when we must not offend anybody, to rule in favour of the complainants” (Coddington 2007). Coddington, along with a number of other prominent local journalists (eg Rosemary McLeod), is well-known for her attacks on “politically correct” orthodoxies and espousal of “common sense”, which, as any media student knows, usually means the values of dominant social groups. However, I’m not so much interested in the justice of the ruling as what it reveals about ethnic debate in New Zealand media, which seems polarized between a traditional assimilationist viewpoint “we’re all Kiwis”, and a “politically correct” (PC), official language such as that used in government documents and institutions (for other examples and discussions of polarised ethnic discourse, see TV One’s *Seven Periods with Mr Gormsby*; Bell 1996; Bell 2004: 132-134; King 1999: 235-7, Abel 1997, 2006; Walker 2002). Where does *bro'Town* fit in this picture? Do its ethnic stereotypes “reinforce and perpetrate racist thinking” or “hold up a mirror” to society, a problem as old as Aristotle’s theory of dramatic mimesis (Misa 2006). To state that stereotypes can be challenged by showing the “real” characteristics of minority groups, which is basically Anae’s argument, seems simplistic, because it assumes a unitary model of identity that exists outside discourse. Similarly, a critical theory approach, as adopted by Earl (2005), which aims to demystify representation by showing how it is linked to economic imperatives, is limited to the degree that it sidesteps audience interpretation. Given that most popular culture is driven by commerce, to view it only as exploitation is reductive.

But the first part of my argument concerns local ethnic discourse. By taking a “genealogical” approach, I hope to show that, like the history of sexuality, the history of ethnicity in NZ is a discursive construction (Foucault 1984: 76-100). This consists firstly in demonstrating the

specificity of local ethnic discourse; that it is not necessarily continuous with the kind of left/right progressive/conservative formulations that have characterised identity politics discourse in the West (Sparrow 2002; Suhr & Johnson 2003). More broadly, I want to suggest that assimilationist and PC viewpoints are similar insofar as they are teleological or assume the possibility of some kind of linear development towards an end point – the just society, albeit differently achieved. This of course is exactly the kind of reading to which Foucault was opposed (Rabinow 1984: 3-7). To view ethnicity as a discourse is to see diametrically opposed groups as active participants and indeed collaborators in the production of ethnicity. This in turn raises the question of whether any kind of “third way” is possible, and here I look at Foucault’s concept of “reverse discourse” in relation to comedy.

### Ethnicity as discourse

According to Foucault, the role of the intellectual is not to find “who is right” but rather to find out “how things work” (1980: 97). Foucault analyses the processes by which discourse is produced, in effect, a pragmatic approach. He rejects a totalizing perspective, which assumes that you can see the whole from some outside, objective position. Ethnicity is a category constituted in language and no speaker can stand outside language. The advantage of a discursive approach to ethnicity is that it takes the question of truth (and therefore blame) out of consideration, so it avoids the extreme polarities that tend to characterise socially charged debates. It questions whether “the logic of contradiction can actually serve as a principle of intelligibility and a rule of action in political struggle” (Foucault 1980: 143). Rather it aims to historicise and particularise “ethnic” discourse by showing how what kinds of techniques and rhetorical strategies are used, how “knowledge” about ethnicity is produced and to what end. “The ‘economy’ of discourses ... this and not a system of representations, determines what they have to say” (1978: 68-69).

For Foucault, discourse produces identities: categories like ethnicity and gender are brought into being by being named. Historically, such categories were created as “problems” or abnormalities that became “objects of knowledge” of a certain discourse. Such groups, representations or practices thus provide a negative standard for normality (Danaher, Schirato and Webb 2000: 61). Thus “representation of an underrepresented group is necessarily within the hermeneutics of domination, overcharged with allegorical significance” (Shohat 1995: 170). Depictions of minorities have to carry a weight, a “burden of representation” that depictions of the dominant group do not carry, precisely because they break with the norm, a paradox discussed in relation to *bro’Town* by NZ Herald columnist Tapu Misa: “This is the other side of being a prominent brown playwright, comedian, and entertainer, as ... [*bro’Town*] creator Oscar Kightley has found. Everything you do is loaded with meaning and consequence. It isn’t enough that you’re funny and entertaining, as well as commercially successful and critically acclaimed. You have to be socially responsible, too” (Misa 2006).

Left-wing PC discourse aims to recuperate these “abnormal” categories by arguing for their normality, for their right to “fair representation. But participating in a discursive critique of repression “is...in fact part of the same historical network as the thing it denounces... by calling it ‘repression’” (Foucault 1978: 10). Sexism and racism are not so much about misrepresentation or repression of certain groups, but are instead continuous with Western scientisation of difference as a “problem of knowledge” in the last 150 years, which has created a close relation between, for example, sex and truth. Such a “for or against” discourse can also produce problematic ideological

clashes and alliances, for example the early 80s confluence between feminists and the conservative right, both of whom were arguing for censorship of pornography. This totalising perspective rapidly runs into problems when it engages with popular culture, for example, Madonna whose apparent endorsement of sexist stereotypes also produced an empowering role model for both fans and women in the music industry more generally. One could argue that *bro'Town* could produce a similar effect in relation to local cultural production.

The “history” of ethnicity is like the “history” of sexuality: the movement from coercion to regulation through the establishment of institutional categories or objects of knowledge marked as other, problematic, in need of discipline and surveillance, then the emergence of a counterdiscourse (which however is contained within the first by “the logic of contradiction”) based around the emergence of identity politics in the 1960s-70s, in which these “other” identities started to assert themselves as political entities. In NZ history, “race” has been such a “problem” discourse, moving from assimilationist positions to the rise of a counterdiscourse of Maori nationalism, recognition of the Treaty of Waitangi and biculturalism (Awatere 1984; Treaty of Waitangi Act 1975; Maori Language Act 1987). But this debate was in terms of the existing discourse, because it brought these positions into being as discursive categories in the first place. Hence political correctness as a normalisation of difference continued to define itself in terms of a master discourse, similar to how communism and capitalism proceed from the same premise – the primacy of economic relations.

To genealogise PC discourse is also to demonstrate the inherent instability of the term itself, and thus anticipates the general direction of my argument. The term “political correctness” originated in 1960s left-wing Anglo-European circles, where it referred to “toeing the party line”, a definition that was also used ironically to refer to excessive scrupulousness about terminology and practice. This ironic use was later appropriated by right-wing commentators to stigmatise left-wing social liberalism (Suhr & Johnson 2003: 9). Left-wing commentators have tended to interpret right-wing appropriation of the term as an attack: complaints about the “politicisation” of education, the relativisation of traditional values, pandering to “special interest” groups, while also pointing out how right-wing, neo-liberal discourse is just as constructed (Suhr & Johnson 2003: 10-11; Hall 1996). However, while the general profile of this debate holds in most Western democracies, some commentators have also drawn attention to a degree of local specificity (Johnson & Suhr 2003; Toolan 2003). This specificity also applies to New Zealand.

In NZ, the term entered the parlance of left-wing student groups in the early 1980s and more broadly reflected the social agenda of the fourth Labour Government which came to power in 1984 (Abel 2007). Here, however, the left/right model starts to break down, because this administration also had a neo-liberal economic agenda: Rogernomics (like Reaganism in the US and Thatcherism) in Britain. Labour Party historian Bruce Jesson explains this ideological hodgepodge in terms of the anti-intellectual, pragmatic bent of NZ culture and politics, and specifically the history of left-wing politics in NZ (1989: 22-33). That such a contradiction was not much commented on at the time can in turn be attributed to New Zealand’s poorly developed public sphere (Habermas 1989) where in-depth debate on ideological issues is infrequent (for example public debate within a party on an issue is strongly discouraged; there are no national newspapers etc). This ad hoc approach, some have argued, is also a feature of legislation relating to Maori and biculturalism (Rata 2003). The implication is that the recent history of ethnicity in New Zealand is far more complex than a simple split between left and right.

There are other examples of how “anti-sexist” and “anti-racist” stances have been problematic in local practice. For example, a cornerstone of PC discourse is that statements about “different” social groups should come from those groups themselves. In the 1970s, Pakeha historian Michael King produced a number of books and TV programmes on Maori (King 1985: 114-156). By the 1980s, however “the argument was no longer that Pakeha historians *should* write about Maori history, it was that they should not” (King 1985: 174). More broadly, any appropriation of ethnic discourse by dominant groups became problematic. In local alternative music scenes in the 1980s, many white musicians stated to me that they would not perform “black” styles of music, eg reggae, because their ethnic background disqualified them. In my view, this approach was questionable, because it led to a black/white separatism; and because in many cases it masked a hidden agenda (they didn’t *like* “black” music, a fairly common feature of indie music internationally); conversely it led some alternative figures to describe their music as “white”, a disturbing development (Brown 1983). These arguments about the relation of representation and author are also relevant to *bro’Town*: a common interpretation is that the show’s ethnic stereotypes are acceptable because it is created by Polynesians. But this stance can function repressively (in the classroom, for example) to shut down debate about ethnicity – students feel they cannot “speak for” other groups, and in turn, representatives of those groups may not wish to be identified as such or “reduced” to mouthpieces for a particular point of view (the “burden of representation”). Recourse to the ethnic identity of the author can also be read as a form of auteurism; explaining the text by referring to authorial intention. Finally, we have to consider whether linking representations and agents is relevant in postmodern culture – the massive proliferation of media and choice makes any simple identification of the show with a particular ethnic group look increasingly naive. Do Latin American viewers of *bro’Town* know or care who made the show?

#### Identity or identification?

The term identity, in the sense of a fixed or authentic self is highly contestable, being regarded by some as a creation of modernity (Taylor 1994) and by others, most notably Foucault, as merely a site for discursive practice (Hall 1996: 2). Identities are also problematised by physical and cultural mobility, the “flows” that characterise late modernity. Polynesian/Pacific Island (PI) “identity” is similarly complex, diasporic and globally dispersed: even within NZ, it includes over 20 specific cultures (Samoan being the largest single group) (Fairbairn-Dunlop & Makisi 2003: 9-10). Auckland (where *bro’Town* is set) is often described as the largest Polynesian city in the world (“Auckland”). There are organisations and events that stress a common or shared PI heritage, from community groups such as PACIFICA (Fairbairn-Dunlop & Makisi 2003: 31) to the annual cultural event Pasifika, to Niu FM and Dawn Raid Entertainment, a South Auckland music-related business with many PI artists, whose name plays on police crackdowns (“dawn raids”) on PI “overstayers” in the 1970s. The Ministry of Pacific Island Affairs was set up in 1990 (Fairbairn-Dunlop & Makisi 2003: 38). But how do PI identities fit into a local national identity that has been historically defined by a bicultural Maori/Pakeha axis?

Stuart Hall suggests that a more useful notion than identity fixed by location or “selfhood” is identification, which recognises that identity is transitory, multiple, created within and not separable from social relations, for example, recognition by others (Hall 1996: 2). It also implies process – a work in progress, rather than a final state. These kinds of terms seem especially appropriate in “multi-cultural settler-colonial nations ... [which] allow the peculiar problems of

the contemporary identity discourse to be presented in sharper focus” (Docker and Fischer 2000: 5-6). That is, Aotearoa/New Zealand (as its name would imply) is a subject in process, “calling for theories of rootlessness, alienation and psychological distance between individuals and groups” (Appadurai 1994: 29). Identification suggests further that we can choose our affiliations to some degree, or at any rate we are not bound necessarily to a tradition. For example, Stephen Turner discusses how the video and lyrics for “How Bizarre” by Maori-Niuean Pauly Fuemana (of OMC) picture the artist “driving down a freeway in the hot, hot sun”. He suggests that “Precisely because Polynesian culture has always been performed as authentic and indigenous for white settlers and tourists, Polynesians are happy to speak American. It defies a will to be authentic ... that is more white than brown” (2000: 223). Niu FM’s format similarly draws on a broad palette of mainly US black music of the last 20-30 years. *bro’Town* represents a similar confluence of local and global non-whiteness, and it may be precisely the liminal status of “Polynesian culture” within the official bicultural rhetoric of New Zealand that opens up a limited space for alternative representations. Could a show like *bro’Town* have been produced by Maori?

So what other kinds of identification work could *bro’Town* do? Clearly it has worked to some degree as a branding device for TV3, identifying the broadcaster with a local market, but in a way that distinguishes it from TV1, which is locked into a traditional, Pakeha iconography (think *Country Calendar*, *Fair Go* etc). *Bro’town* gives TV3 an irreverent, youth, non-Pakeha, Auckland based set of icons which identify a growing market (Chalmers 2004). This is also shown by the huge popularity of many *bro’Town* catchphrases such as “piow, piow” and “not even ow!” (“The word of the year” 2006). Anecdotally, there is some evidence that this very popularity has led to *bro’Town* slang being perceived as a problem at some Auckland schools (Horn 2007). This suggests a youth audience identification that extends well beyond ethnic minorities. Finally, *bro’Town*’s popularity in overseas markets parallels the rise of non-white ethnicities “representing” New Zealand in a number of areas of global popular culture, eg musicians such as Bic Runga, King Kapisi, Flight of the Conchords, as well as the trend towards exploitation of the “plasticity” of Polynesian physiognomies in mainstream media (eg Hollywood) (Smith 2003; Zemke-White 2004).

#### Postmodern media culture

The argument about identification (as opposed to identity) exemplifies the cultural logic of late capitalism, ceaselessly producing, exploiting and commodifying cultural forms, establishing proliferating flows and networks of capital, media and information on a global scale (Castells 1996; Jameson 1991, 1983). A central assumption of postmodern media culture is that of an infinite and endless prolixity of representations and signs, circulating and referencing each other without being tied to source. In many ways, *bro’Town* exemplifies this kind of ambiguity: it is (arguably) an “adult” cartoon, although its primetime scheduling, usually between 7 and 8 pm on weeknights suggests a clear desire to target children as well; and of course animation itself is an ambiguous category in regards to its audience, something that the show’s influences (*The Simpsons*; *South Park*) have played on both to court a larger audience and possibly in the range of themes that they can tackle; *bro’Town* was the top rating series for 5-12 year olds in 2005 (“Reality television” 2006). Another example of the fluidity of animation is the virtuality of location of the series – like Springfield, which moves and changes according to the demands of the plot, Morningside (which is the Auckland inner-city suburb of the creators’ childhoods) does triple service as South Auckland, which is popularly identified with Polynesian culture (for

example OMC standing for Otara Millionaires Club), and also Waitakere (West Auckland), as in “Survival of the Fattest” when the boys enact a “Lord of the Flies” scenario in the Morningside (Waitakere) Ranges. Cartoons also question cultural distinctions by their very form; they are notoriously intertextual, almost always drawing a wide range of genre references; they are postmodern in their elision of time and space, use of outlandish and spectacular effects and locations, and in their surface (2-D) quality. Moreover, television is the postmodern media form par excellence. In terms of its influence, it is both ubiquitous and hugely popular. It too collapses distinctions between commerce and art, between art and popular culture, and between reality and representation. Although these considerations problematise any simple notion of TV as having political agency, it can be argued that the very popularity of some programmes may have political consequences (Alberti 2004: xix).

Any consideration of *bro'Town* therefore needs to frame not only in relation to the local, but to the larger field of works in related genres. This would include not only cartoons, but other forms such as “brat” comedy - male buffoon-type low comedy feature films, such as the work of the Farrelly brothers, eg *Dumb and Dumber*, *There's Something About Mary*, *Me, Myself and Irene* etc. on the one hand and *Jackass*-style male humiliation reality TV on the other. Of course the recurrent trope of male stupidity and grossness is also a feature of cartoon comedy (Homer and Bart Simpson, *Family Guy*, *King of the Hill*, *Beavis and Butthead*, *South Park*) (Chow 2004: 110). Its hallmarks are a concentration on pain, humiliation and bodily functions, coupled with an attack on “political correctness”, in terms of violations of good taste on the one hand and liberal perceptions about sexism and racism. To view *bro'Town* in this light is to see its close relationship with a very marketable set of texts with a strong appeal for the prized demographic of young male viewers (Alberti 2004: xiii). Interestingly, the toilet humour of *bro'Town* (“poos and wees”) is not unprecedented in Polynesian culture, as any reader of the work of Epeli Hau'ofa can attest (Hau'ofa 1987; 1983). In terms of gender, *bro'Town*'s male-dominated format acknowledges both the conventional identification of NZ identity with masculinity, but also the male orientation of related US media. These examples again suggest the complex interrelationship of global and local, and how confluences can create the possibility for temporary alliances between different discourses, in this case between PI and a globalised genre of “male low humour”.

## Comedy

If the pleasures of *bro'Town* are basically comic, this necessitates a rethinking of how we read its use of ethnic stereotypes. Stereotypes are fundamental to comedy, so to read them “straight”, either as a distortion or reflection of the “true” misses the way that genre (particularly comedy) mediates and reshapes viewer expectations. Put simply, no one expects a comedy to be real, although of course if the comedy is viewed as unsuccessful this can in turn be referred back to its supposed lack of verisimilitude. However, “racist and sexist stereotypes ... provide a ready-made set of images of deviation from social and cultural norms” (Neale and Krutnik 1990: 93); comedy draws on stereotypes because it is both a “transgression of the familiar” but also a “familiarisation of the transgression” (Eaton 1981: 25). This ambivalence of the comic can of course give rise to accusations of minority scapegoating, but such “deviancy” is itself ambiguous in its connotations. “Low” humour could be viewed as having a long and dishonourable tradition: in the way that Bakhtin viewed carnival's “folk” or body humour as a way for lower classes to mock the pretensions of the dominant culture, such as organised religion (as in *bro'Town*'s “God” preamble to each episode) (Bakhtin 1994). Thus comic grotesquery can operate as a form of

oppositionality. However, this oppositionality may be “severely curtailed by the fact that ‘subversion’ and transgression are institutionalised generic requirements” of comedy (Neale and Krutnik 1990: 4). Moreover, in the postmodern media environment “attempts ... to engage in oppositional critique are always circumscribed by the very structures they seek to criticize, because commodity culture ... represents the constraining condition of possibility in ... art” (Koenigsberger 1990: 32).

However, these strictures have not prevented *bro'Town* from offering satirical observations and themes on occasion: the very first episode “The Weakest Link” offered an unflattering portrait of “White Boys Grammar”, a reference to Auckland Grammar, which occupies a dominant position in the NZ secondary education system. In “Go Home Stay Home”, two of the boys become wards of the State: one goes to a State children’s home where he is alternately beaten by delinquents and coddled by counsellors: “Kia ora broken child from displaced proud and noble race... I’m Tim yeh, can you say that?”; the other is fostered by a rich white Parnell couple, the Witchwhites, who educate their charge in free market values: “War is good too, but you run out of people.” Primetime animation can demonstrate a “potential for the ... treatment of social issues and concerns in ways that violate the norms and traditions of the standard television genres” (Alberti 2004: xiv). However this critique is qualified, for example, the social worker who takes the boys into custody has a Scottish accent, and the Witchwhites are represented as essentially benign, once again suggesting a certain reluctance to alienate Pakeha viewers. In general, Pakeha liberals are satirised far more than Pakeha racists (the only white racist character is Joost, a South African), and this lack of censure accommodates Pakeha “middle New Zealand”. This is not to say that we do not see Pakeha characters and institutions being ridiculed on occasion, but rather that ethnicity is not the basis of ridicule – whiteness thus remains largely “invisible” and implicitly normative (Nakayama and Krizek 1995: 297).

Comedy cannot be reduced to satire however: Fredric Jameson argues that in postmodernity, the satirical or corrective impulse of comedy is largely negated by the loss of a totalising perspective that enables a position of superior, moral awareness (Jameson 1983: 117). In turn, Foucault describes genealogy as “history in the form of a concerted carnival” and as a demonic parody or “parodic double” of orthodox teleological humanist accounts (Foucault 1984: 94). There is therefore something comic in Foucault’s Nietzschean method that dissipates what he sees as the “solidifying” process by which knowledge/truth accumulates. Both discourse and comedy are performative and rhetorical; that is, their meaning lies in their style of delivery rather than in their content. Hence they are also both highly specific, ie to a particular body or to a particular time and place, the latter because the kinds of patterns and references comedy draws on are often culturally specific. To look uncomprehendingly upon a spectacle that other people find amusing is to be reminded of what Foucault might term the radical discontinuity of different epistemes of history and culture.

#### Reverse discourse

A final way we can interpret the representations of *bro'Town*, starting from the premise that identities are created in discourse, not outside it (Hall 1996: 4), is that stereotypical representations are discursively just as “real” as the identities they supposedly misrepresent, just as media discourse not only reflects but also creates lived experience. While it can be argued that stereotypes are created and imposed by dominant social groups, this does not determine the ways



in which the “labelled” can respond by reappropriating and rearticulating them. Similarly we can argue that the meanings of representations are not fixed, but change according to context. Foucault states that “There is not, on the one side, a discourse of power, and opposite it, another discourse that runs counter to it. Discourses are tactical elements ... operating in the field of force relations”. The “labelled” can use “the same vocabulary ... the same categories by which it was disqualified ... to demand that its legitimacy be acknowledged” (Foucault 1978: 101-2). Discourse can be reversed so that “a representation in the external world is subjectively assumed, reworked through fantasy, in the internal world and then returned to the material world resignified, rearticulated discursively, and/or performatively in the subject’s self-representation” (de Lauretis 1994: 308). An example is the word “nigger”, which New York City recently banned. From an anti-racist point of view, this seems reasonable – it is a derogatory term. However, what it doesn’t take account of is the fact that some black Americans use the word to refer to themselves, as any hip-hop fan can attest (eg “The Nigga You Love to Hate” Ice Cube 1990). Banning the word would therefore also be prejudicial towards the very group that it is supposed to benefit. “Power is successful in writing people” but this doesn’t determine how individuals use these identifications: “the effects ... are not what was intended” (Jagose 1996: 80). That is, discourse maps out a restricted range of possibilities, but not how these possibilities are deployed: “marginalised ... identities are not simply victims of the operations of power... they are produced by those same operations” (Jagose 1996: 80). The labelling of groups as deviant can provide grounds for those same groups to organise themselves into a coherent voice. For example, Foucault in discussion with Bernard-Henri Lévy discusses homosexuality as deviancy: “they were looked upon as libertines and sometimes delinquents ... But taking such discourses literally, and turning them round, we see responses arising in the form of defiance: ‘all right, we are the same as you, by nature sick or perverse, whichever you want. And if so we are, let us be so, and if you want to know what we are, we can tell us better than you can’” (Kritzman 1988: 115).

Foucault calls this argument “reverse discourse” (Foucault 1978: 101). Minority groups can “resist” not by denying or critiquing power, but rather by exaggerating it, saying in effect: “I am the thing that you fear or despise. What are you going to do about it?” Sarah Thornton has argued that rather than reading minority subcultures as sites of authenticity that the media misrepresent, instead we should recognise the way that such misrecognition feeds into their self-image – ie being seen as deviant in fact legitimises that culture and this misrecognition feeds their sense of their own uniqueness (Thornton 1995: 119-120). Again this shows how cultural identity, however perversely, is constituted in relation to others’ perceptions. Of course, not everybody has choice in the matter; there is a difference between white middle-class kids rebelling, and being an outcast because of your skin colour or sexual preference.

One way *bro’Town* employs reverse discourse is through intertextuality – referring to other, negative representations of ethnic culture. The character of Jeff da Maori for example is straight out of *Once Were Warriors*: illiterate, ignorant, with his “eight Dads” hanging round in leather jackets, wearing sunglasses and drinking beer; he lives in an abandoned car on the lawn, much like the character Tu. This plays, then, not on a “true” but rather a familiar representation of Maori as “pot smoking dole-bludgers who are also really good singers” (“A Maori at my Table”). “A Maori at my Table” references *Whale Rider* similarly. “Sionerella” plays on media representations of and panics about PI teenage promiscuity through the framing device of a TV3 news item in which reporter Carol Hirschfeld describes the participants as “dumbass P-heads”. Vale and

Valea's alcoholic, porn-watching Dad is a ringer for Maori comedian Billy T James, who was a popular presence on 1980s NZ TV. But like *bro'Town*, he was subject to the same kind of investigation in terms of his use of stereotypes ("Billy T" 1990). Intertextuality is also comic: Henri Bergson (1911) suggests that comedy works through inserting characters into a routine or pattern that is invisible to them, for example "Sionerella" references "Cinderella", humour arising from the incongruity of imposing a fairytale scenario onto the everyday circumstances of a school dance, and the corresponding gender reversal suggested by the episode title. "The Wong One" tackles Asian stereotypes, again through a mishmash of references to Hollywood Asian appropriations: Kung Fu (the character Grasshopper); and the Karate Kids. This conflation of Asian and Polynesian comic stereotypes is taken even further in the NZ film *Tongan Ninja*. Perhaps a useful analogy here would be the slippage in the word "comic" which can refer both to the "comedic" and "comic" graphic art and animation. In this second sense, comic refers to two-dimensional imagery which denies the illusion of depth that is central to Western ocularity. Its informational minimalism relies on audience participation and knowledge to "fill in the gaps". This we do by drawing on the vast visual chaos of signs, forms and types that postmodern media and living continually press upon us. To invoke referentiality or content as a prime criterion for understanding this environment would be like using a telescope to read a newspaper. The concern is not with how accurate representations are but how they talk to and play off each other, as in Marshall McLuhan's summary of the relevance of comic imagery: "To live and experience anything is to translate its direct impact into many indirect forms of awareness. We provided the young with a shrill and raucous asphalt jungle ... When the entertainment industries tried to provide a reasonable facsimile of the ordinary city vehemence, eyebrows were raised" (McLuhan 1994: 168-9).

## Conclusion

This article has been an attempt to understand ethnic discourse in a postmodern, postcolonial context. I want to conclude by looking at how these two ideas might be linked. Homi Bhabha (1994) has argued that the postcolonial context complicates any attempt to understand representations of ethnicity as symbols of "national" cultures – rather the postcolonial foregrounds subject positions that are "in between" or liminal, a formulation that applies to both coloniser and colonised, and is especially relevant to diasporic subjects, of which Polynesian culture in New Zealand could be regarded as an example. I might suggest that identification with Polynesian culture could potentially play a role in New Zealand culture, especially in the space between a "bicultural" and a "multicultural" nation. In "A Maori at my table" for example, we view Maori culture through the eyes of young Polynesians, who are just as ignorant of Maori protocol as Pakeha. They therefore act as mediators in the most charged opposition in New Zealand society, that between Pakeha and Maori. It may even be that PIs, precisely because they are not identified with the bicultural Maori/Pakeha axis that officially defines New Zealand culture, occupy an in-between or liminal space that offers some possibility of a "third way" or alternative space for playing with representations of the local. But this may be oversimplifying Bhabha's argument, which is more about how dominant representations, specifically in the forms of media texts, historically the Bible as an agent of colonial authority, but in postmodernity say TV, seem to authorize and legitimate power, but in that in the act of being taken up and adopted, in Bhabha's term "mimicked", enable some kind of opposition in the ways that they are translated. For Bhabha, ethnic stereotyping in colonial discourse **"is not the setting up of a false image which becomes the scapegoat of discriminatory practices. It is a much more ambivalent text ... By**

acceding to the wildest fantasies ... of the colonizer, the stereotyped Other reveals something of the 'fantasy' ... of that position of mastery" (1994: 81-2). To read *bro'Town* in this way is to suggest that its characterisation of ethnicity is part of a process of colonial fantasy in which the disavowed parts of the dominant discourse are projected on to a racialised Other. This is, Bhabha stresses, an ambivalent process: the Other represents both what is feared and what is desired, that is not only stupidity, violence and ignorance, but also freedom, innocence, spontaneity and laughter. Additionally, comic discourse (in both senses of the word) seems to have some role to play in mediating social debate around edgy topics such as ethnic and sexual difference. In the postcolonial context of Aotearoa/New Zealand, *bro'Town* opens up a space for a social discourse that can negotiate between or through binaries of cultural difference and discourse about ethnicity. I hope that this article will enable others to continue, expand and critique this discussion of how popular culture and ethnicity can interact in a local context.

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