REPRESENTATIONS OF PASIFIKA: PART TWO

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The 2006 census showed 177,936 or 14.4% Aucklanders were of Pacific Island ethnicity, the highest number of Pacific Islanders in the world. New Zealand has been significantly influenced by this cultural influx: we have begun seeing ourselves not just as a British colony but a part of the Pacific. This influence has affected all aspects of New Zealand life and has become represented more and more in mainstream media.

While most see this popularization of Pacific culture as positive, there has been some controversy over the stereotyping of Pacific culture, and of the portrayal of Pacific culture through a European perspective. Robert Loto from the Maori & Psychology Research Unit at the University of Waikato writes “Although the image of palagi has diversely developed in the media, Pacific people are still captured through one dimensional frames such as those reflecting fantasies of exotic natures for the purpose of tourist attractions and performance”

This 1983 advertisement shows the inclusion of a Pacific Island women to represent the diversity of ethnicities that make up New Zealand: a big change in attitude and approach from a previously Euro centered marketing world that has been forced to accept a Pacific presence in New Zealand.

One of the most prevailing stereotypes we have of Pacific people is that they are ‘colourful’; exotic, natural and free. Perhaps this in part comes from the association Westerners have with the earliest tourist films and photographs: dancing women covered in frangipani’s. Levenes plays with this idea in selling their range of paints.

Robert Loto states in his study of Media Representations of Pacific Islanders that “Pacific Islanders were mainly identified as unmotivated, unhealthy, having criminal issues and being overly dependent on other members of New Zealand society. There were some positive Pacific identities, but often these were limited to topics such as sport, fashion and hip hop”.

While Hip Hop has gained a lot of negative press in New Zealand and around the world as being associated with gang culture, violence, and misogyny; it has been embraced by Maori and Pacific Islanders. By giving a voice to those previously denied one, it has acted to empower an underclass. Hip Hop has now entered mainstream fashion and many Pacific Islander’s are achieving financial success and cultural status in this arena.

These extracts include interviews with Brotha D, Kerry Buchanan, King Kapisi and K.O.S. 163.
THE BROWN FACTOR
_Aka Productions 2004 (extracts). Duration 7.19_

Chris Laidlaw (the former race relations councillor), Kahunguna Baron Afeaki (lawyer and sports agent), Matt Te Pou (NZ Rugby Coach) Peter Leitch (Warriors supporter) Papalii Peter Fatialofa, Bryan Williams (ex All-black) and Michael Jones(All Black) are all interviewed about the reasons Polynesians are doing so well in sports and the effect that this is having on race relations in New Zealand.

While this documentary claims Pacific Island involvement in New Zealand sports has been effective in closing cultural divides, others argue that Pacific Islanders are still playing a palagi game on palagi terms and question why Pacific Islanders are still not represented in sports administration. We have to question whether the perception of equality in sports is perhaps a media construction and misrepresentation.

STREET LEGAL
_Screenworks 2000 (extract). Duration 3.15_

The lead character of David Selisi, written especially to be played by Jay Laga’aia, shows a Pacific Islander portrayed against his stereotype as a successful middle class lawyer. Pacific Islanders are rarely represented as professional in the media. In a Waikato University study on Pacific peoples in the press it was found Pacific Islanders were presented as ‘expert’ sources in stories only once in an examination of 65 articles from three major newspapers.

THE MARKET
_Isola Productions 2005 (extract). Duration 3.38_

Tongan/Samoan Rene Naufahu, and Samoan Damon Pepulea’i wrote and directed this drama set in South Auckland’s Otara Market. The programme follows the lives of this predominantly Polynesian community, and enables them to express their experiences through their own perspective.

ASB POLYFEST
_TVNZ 2005 (extracts). Duration 6.27_

This Auckland High Schools' annual Maori and Pacific Island Cultural Festival is a competition between different ethnic groups to perform their traditional dances: each stage has dances from a different island. While this does reinforce the stereotype of Pacific Islanders as entertainers, the mainstream coverage of the event is testimony to the growing popularity of all things Pacific in our country.

TAGATA PASIFIKA
_TVNZ 2003 (extract). Duration 4.29_

Fashion is an area where Pacific Islanders are portrayed as excelling. Westfield Style Pasifika describes itself as New Zealand's leading fashion award and “The Award encourages designers to create cutting edge fashion that is inspired by the country's unique relationship with the vibrancy of the Pacific.” The event gets mainstream television and media coverage.
PACIFIC BEAT STREET

*Drum Productions 2006 (extract). Duration 2.27*

Like Tagata Pasifika but with a younger target demographic ‘Pacific Beat Street’ puts Pacific Islanders in charge of their own stories, and goes further to report on stories that while not specifically relating to Pacific Islanders will appeal to both them and a wider audience. Perhaps this is a reflection of the growing confidence in their place in New Zealand amongst young Pacific Islanders?

Pacific Beat street visits ‘Ignite’ a two-week-long youth festival that encourages performers between 15 and 25 to be "loud, proud and confident", developing their skills in theatre, dance, music and visual arts.

PACIFIC BEAT STREET

*Drum Productions 2006 (extract). Duration 3.36*

Bro Town, conceived and written by the comedy group ‘The Naked Samoans’ was the unexpected hit television show of 2004. AC Nieslen reported that in its first week on air 13% of the target demographic total potential and 32% of viewing audience watched it during its 8-8:30 time slot. By its second week this had risen to 15%. An animated series detailing the adventures of a group of Polynesian friends growing up in South Auckland, it parodies Pacific Island culture.

In this extract ‘Pacific Beat Street’ go behind the scenes to look at the production process involved in making the series.

BRO TOWN

*Firehorse Films 2004 (extract). Duration 5.04*

Tapu Misa writing for the New Zealand Herald said that “In it’s optimism and humour it’s more truly Pacific then anything else on our screen”, but also questioned whether the use of negative stereotyping reinforced racist thinking. This was a view shared by Samoan academic Melani Anae who was quoted in the same article as saying “We fought against (these stereotypes) in the 70’s: the happy-go-lucky brown coconuts, good at singing, dancing and making people laugh. We’ve moved beyond the stereotype of just being entertainers”.

Misa goes on to discuss the dilemma that exists in using stereotypes to highlight problems needing to be addressed within the Pacific Island community “It’s difficult to get the kind of policy action that leads to societal change without highlighting the real problems in our communities. But how do you highlight the negatives without becoming hostage to them?” American academic Ilana Gershon in her essay ‘Indigeneity for life’ argues that as ‘Bro Town’ producers have asserted it is possible to engage with stereotypes without being racist “The show offers a strong critique of any attempts to make ethnic relations hierarchical - no ethnicity should be privileged over any other ethnicity”.

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THE BIG ART TRIP
*Communicado Productions 2001 (extract). Duration 8.38*

When Pacific Islanders are shown as successful it is often in the terms of the more dominant culture. Andy Leleisi’uao is seen as a success story because despite growing up in South Auckland he has achieved mainstream success by being embraced by the mainstream art community.

SIONE’S WEDDING
*South Pacific Pictures 2006 (extract). Duration 6.38*

While ‘Sione’s Wedding’ has been criticised for its representation of Pacific culture: Tapu Misa in the New Zealand Herald says “I touched on the negative reaction of many of my family and Samoan friends to ‘Sione’s Wedding’ despite its mainstream success, and the discomfort felt by many Samoan men at their portrayal in ‘Bro town’ and ‘Sione’s Wedding’, it did much to popularise Samoan Culture within New Zealand. One of the lead character’s Robbie Magasiva is seen as a sex symbol in both Pacific Island and palagi communities.

NZ IDOL
*South Pacific Pictures 2004 (extract). Duration 6.55*

The stereotype of Pacific Islanders as entertainers is somewhat reinforced by the success of Pacific Islanders on New Zealand Idol: a popular television talent show. All three winners have been Pacific Islanders: Rosita Vai and Matt Saunoa of Samoan decent, and Ben Lummis of Tongan and Samoan descent. In Robert Loto’s research into media representations of Pacific Islanders, his discussion groups consisting of Pacific Islanders covering a range of ages, who specifically cited Vai, Saunoa and Lummis as role models in their communities.

DANCING WITH THE STARS
*TVNZ 2006 (extract). Duration 7.06*

Beatrice Faumuina won two Commonwealth Games gold medals for Discus and became the world champion in 1997, but gained an even wider audience when she appeared in the popular ‘Dancing with the Stars’. R. Michelle Schaaf (nee Saisoa’a) argues that Pacific Island women are only deemed to be attractive when they fit Western standards of beauty and those that receive the most positive media coverage fit these ideals. She quotes B. Danielson from her book ‘Love in the South Sea’ who describes the idealised body-type of woman in Polynesian society, “(as) strikingly contrary to the historical and contemporary Westernised standard of the ‘desired’ women’s body.”

Beatrice Faumuina openly challenged this standard and as a large women asked to be recognised as beautiful and graceful.
Bernice Mene who played netball for the Silver Ferns, whose mother is palagi and father Samoan, more readily fits Western standards of beauty and has therefore been adopted by the media as a Polynesian poster girl - regularly gracing the cover of womens’ magazines. R.Michelle Schaaf says of Mene “Mene has had a high profile in all media forms, appearing in numerous newspaper and magazine articles, and television features. Mene continues to have a celebrity-like profile, especially because of her romance with Palagi international cricketer, Dion Nash. While, admittedly Mene’s netball career is far more impressive than [April Ieremia] Bruce’s, much of the media attention she has received has focused on her exotic looks and body, as opposed to her sporting feats.”

David Tua, born in Samoa, but raised in South Auckland, became an international celebrity as a heavyweight boxer. Tua, and other sports celebrities are held up as heroes in mainstream contemporary society.

Sonny B. Williams, a rugby league player who plays for Australian professional team ‘The Bulldogs’, is held up as a New Zealand sporting icon despite his sometimes questionable behaviour.

Academic Greg Clydesdale’s study on Pacific Island Immigration caused significant controversy when highlighted in the print media. In this studio interview between the Dominion Post Editor Tim Pankhurst, Pacific Island journalist Barbara Dreaver and broadcaster/actor Oscar Kightley discuss the publication of the article in the Dominion Post.

While there has been a Pacific Renaissance of sorts and New Zealanders have embraced Pasifika as part of their developing identity, Pacific Islanders, like most minority groups, are still stereotyped within mainstream media and represented as ‘the other’. Showing the diversity of Pacific Island peoples and encouraging Pacific Island perspectives within the media will help breakdown cultural divides within New Zealand.