

Between Marginality and Marketability: Contesting Representations of Diasporic Pacific Identities

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Abstract

This article offers an analysis of recent works by New Zealand-born writers and artists of various Pacific descents. It focuses on their revision of popular and institutional representations of the diasporic Pacific community addressing the ambivalent tensions between the marginal and the marketable, which have dominated these representations in the last decades. On the one hand, these works condemn stereotypes of Pacific peoples as a burden to the New Zealand economy and a marginalised minority of inefficient, lazy or dependent people. On the other, they address more recent and complex representations of their culture as a marketable commodity and an exotic addition to New Zealand culture.

Keywords: Pacific literature; Pacific diaspora; New Zealand's ethnic minorities; representation; ethnic stereotypes

Introduction

In the last few decades New Zealand society has experimented radical changes due to increasing and more diverse immigration flows arriving in the country from the late 1980s. These demographic and social transformations have resulted in the consolidation of new economic patterns and social relations. This article focuses on how some of these changes have affected the New Zealand Pacific community and how New Zealand-born writers and artists of various Pacific descents have engaged in the revision of popular and institutional representations of the diasporic Pacific population by addressing the ambivalent tensions between the marginal and the marketable which seem to have dominated these representations. Although the examples I will mention are diverse, ranging from theatre and poetry to the visual arts and television, they can be read as collective interventions into negative visions of Pacific migrants as a burden to the New Zealand economy, insignificant to the country's development or, more recently, as reluctant or willing participants in shaping commercialised versions of New Zealand's Pacific profile. My contention is that these works emphasize alternative economic and social relations that highlight both indigenous specificities

Fresno-Calleja, Paloma. 2016. "Between Marginality and Marketability Contesting Representations of Diasporic Pacific Identities." *Nordic Journal of English Studies* 15(1):25-45.

and values and the ability of the Pacific community to survive in contexts in which they are still disadvantaged socially and economically. I have divided my discussion into separate sections, moving from artistic responses to early experiences of migration, which document the first migrants' struggles against social and economic pressures, to more recent articulations of Pacific identity resulting from the experiences of New Zealand-born writers and artists who have redefined their position in increasingly sophisticated and subversive ways thanks to the tools provided by their global and multicultural affiliations.

Bitter Honey and Sour Milk: Revisiting Early Pacific Migration to New Zealand

Although Pacific men and women began migrating to Aotearoa New Zealand in the 1950s to be employed as farm labourers or domestic service, Pacific migration reached its peak in the 1960s as a result of governmental demand for unskilled labour in a period in which the country was undergoing increasing industrialization. Pacific migrants arrived in the country to be employed in a range of agricultural or factory jobs, according to different schemes developed by successive governments that favoured migration from specific countries at specific times (Mahina-Tuai 2012). Pacific peoples embraced migration to the “land of milk and h(m)oney” (Anae 2004: 96) enthusiastically, as New Zealand offered economic and educational improvement for these migrants and their descendants, while those left behind benefitted from the remittances they sent home. After independence, many Pacific microstates developed following what was defined as the MIRAB economic model, an acronym standing for “migration, remittances, Aid and Bureaucracy” (Geoff and Waters 1985). Migration not only had a clear economic impact on migrants and on those left behind, but resulted also in a radical destabilisation of their societies and a profound transformation of their traditions (Mahina-Tuai 2012: 172).

The economic improvement resulting from migration and the idealisation of the host country as a land of opportunities has been questioned by authors like Albert Wendt, the pioneer voice of the Samoan diaspora, or Nieuuan writer and artist John Pule. Their works highlight the tensions between idealised perceptions of New Zealand and the realities encountered by migrants upon arrival. Sia Figiel—a Samoan

novelist and performance poet currently living in the United States—and Tusiata Avia—a Christchurch-based performance poet of Samoan and Palagi descent—have also been critical of this image of “Niu Sila” as a migrant’s paradise. Samoana, the ten-year-old protagonist of Sia Figiel’s novella *The Girl in the Moon Circle* (1996), describes the country as a promised fairy-tale land: “In New Zealand everyone’s lucky. Everyone’s rich and has no problems. [...] And we dream about ways of going there. Where we’ll live. Like Cinderella. Happy ever after” (Figiel 1996: 6). These beliefs are reinforced by the arrival of gifts and commodities of various kinds—a television, a made-in-Taiwan Jesus, “perfume. A Sunday hat. Frankie’s rugby shoes. And lollies. Wrapped in blue teddy bears and short Santa Clauses”—(Figiel 1996: 24) sent by migrants to their families. Similarly, the adolescent voice of Avia’s poem “Ode to da Life” expands on the mythologizing of the land of promises and opportunities, not by fantasizing about the unknown paradise, but by encouraging others to join her in “Niu Sila” where “da life is happy an perfek / Everybodys smile, everybodys laugh” and one can “Do anyfing you like / [...] Anyfing, even in front of your fadda” (2004: 25). For the speaker, this perfection not only translates into the accumulation of material commodities, revealing the cultural dependencies to which migrants fall prey in the host country; it also results in the possibility of embracing new moral rules, as the speakers naïvely bypasses the numerous intergenerational conflicts that derive from trying to reconcile communal and parental impositions with the new moral standards operating in the host society as well as generalised perceptions of their cultural practices as primitive or alien to New Zealand’s lifestyle.

The first decades of Pacific migration were in fact dominated by exclusionary practices in employment and housing, and assumptions that Pacific migrants would be unable to handle the complexities of New Zealand as an urban and modern nation (Fleras and Spoonley 1999: 196). These views crystallised in the prevalent stereotype of the gullible, ignorant and happy-go-lucky islander, and in the use of derogatory terms like “coconut” or “fresh off the boat” which reinforced the backward cultural habits to which these migrants appeared to cling stubbornly, resulting in their alienation from the host society and their exclusion from narratives of progress, success and modernity.

Writers and artists have responded to these stereotypes by embracing the figure of the gullible migrant with the aim of condemning these

exclusionary practices and calling attention to the tragic realities behind this apparently benign and comic character. Oscar Kightley and Simon Small have dramatized this figure in their play *Fresh Off the Boat*, first performed in 1993, which narrates the story of Charles, a recently arrived migrant from Samoa, and the conflicts he experiences when facing city life and trying to reconcile his ways with those of his family, already settled in New Zealand. The play emphasizes the ambivalent nature of the fresh-off-the-boat figure, highlighting the tensions between its more comic dimension and the tragic reality of exclusion, unemployment and marginalisation he experiences (Fresno-Calleja 2010).

The problematic and multi-faceted dimension of such stereotypes has also been revised from a gender perspective in Makerita Urale's *Frangipani Perfume*, the first play by a female playwright of Pacific descent. First performed in 1997, *Frangipani Perfume* opens with the description of the three Samoan protagonists, Naiki, Tivi and Pomu, as "exotic maidens, their dark lustrous hair draped over their shoulders as they oil their skin, smooth hands over their bodies" (Urale 2004: 4). The play's opening appears to accommodate to the stereotype of the Polynesian dusky maiden, but as the music disappears, the scene gives way to the noise of the three sisters' breathing heavily as they clean the toilets of an office building. The play highlights the tensions between the static and romanticized figure of the Polynesian maiden and the material realities of unemployment, physical labour and violence experienced by these women in the land of milk and honey. In the opening note Urale invokes some of the most recurrent diasporic tropes and explains that she was inspired by visions and memories of her own childhood in Samoa as well as her experiences as a migrant in New Zealand:

the alienation of a new land, my father's weariness at dawn after nightshift on a factory floor, my mother crying at the kitchen table when there wasn't enough money for her to go back for her mother's funeral –and finally the dreams and fantasies of returning "home". (Urale 2004: 1)

After the initial inflow, Pacific migration to New Zealand declined substantially in the mid-1970s. This decrease continued in the following decade due to the economic recession and to changes and restrictions in official immigration policies which from the late 1980s began to prioritize skilled or more affluent migrants from other countries. Pacific migrants in this period experienced "disproportionate poverty and

unemployment rates, received substandard education and health care and were exploited by unscrupulous landlords” (Anae 2012: 223). Perceptions of the community as an economic and a social threat to the country as well as responsible for the decay of those parts of the cities they had occupied (Spoonley and Bedford 2012: 133) were reflected in the implementation of measures to expel those whose work visas had expired. This included “random” street checks by the police or the assault on houses occupied by alleged “overstayers” in a series of operations which often took place at dawn, thus coming to be known as “Dawn Raids”. Although the majority of overstayers at the time were British or American (Anae 2012: 230), Pacific peoples were deported in large numbers, taken as scapegoats and unfairly blamed by the public opinion. Despite the expansion of the stereotype of the dangerous “overstayer”, marginal to the law and burdensome for New Zealand’s troubled economy, this period was essential in cementing a sense of solidarity and resistance among Pacific peoples, evident in the mobilization of younger members of the community, who in 1971 founded the Polynesian Panthers, adapting the ideology of the US Black Power movement to the New Zealand context (Anae 2012).

Dawn Raids, a 1997 play by Oscar Kightley, was the first to dramatize these conflicts, reflecting the institutionalised racism of the mid-1970s through the story of a family facing the deportation of one of their members, the young Fuarosa, who is sent back to Samoa, while Sione, her fiancé and the father of her future son, stays in New Zealand. The play opens with a speech by Sione to his audience in Auckland’s Paradise Honey-pot Club where he hides his Samoan origins under the name of Fabian, pretending to be of Hawaiian, French and Italian descent, in performances aiming to “bring a slice of our Island paradise right here to New Zealand” (Kightley 1997: 2). Sione’s self-exoticisation works as a strategy of survival at a time in which Samoan and other Pacific migrants are facing social exclusion and are subjected to governmental and police control. Sione’s sister, Teresa, a young law student, becomes involved in the Polynesian Panthers movement, taking part in several actions organized by the group, despite her parents’ opposition. Apart from revealing intergenerational tensions, the play also shows intra-ethnic conflicts through the figure of Steve, a Samoan policeman confronted by Teresa for his betrayal: “How can you work for the government who invites us over to do all the dirty jobs and then kicks

us out when the going gets tough? [...] Why do you think they let you into the police force. They are using you to help keep our people down” (Kightley 1997: 28).

Similar intra-ethnic tensions are seen in a more recent fictionalization of the Dawn Raids period—the short film *Milk and Honey* (2012) by Marina McCartney—based on her own family experience, when her pregnant mother faced deportation. In a television interview, McCartney talks about the collective trauma caused by the Dawn Raids among Pacific peoples, as well as the reticence of the oldest generations to discuss this painful episode of New Zealand history (Film Festival Short). This same point is made by Oscar Kightley in the documentary *Dawn Raids* (2005), when talking about the reluctance of his own family to discuss the issue prior to the writing of his play. These fictional and non-fictional accounts have thus contributed to the visibility of this traumatic period, while attesting to the ongoing need of revising misconceptions of Pacific migrants as an economic burden, reinforcing instead their valuable contribution to the country’s economic and social development.

Maximising Polycultural Capital

From the 1990s the Pacific community started a period of consolidation, as the number of New Zealand-born people increased substantially surpassing the number of new migrants. At the moment, most members of the Pacific community are New Zealand-born and they have become one of the youngest and fastest growing ethnic groups in the country, currently amounting to 7.4% of the population (2013 Census). Significantly, over 90% of New Zealanders of Pacific descent are urban, mostly living in Auckland, with an average 14% of Pacific population, a proportion that is considerably higher in some of its southern suburbs. The changing demographic configuration of the city reflects what Samoan sociologist Melani Anae defines as a process of “browning”, which has not only resulted in a growing Pacific population but also in upward social mobility and increasing visibility for a rising Pacific middle class, as well as “an infiltration of Pacific identity [...] on New Zealand’s infrastructure at national and community levels” (Anae 2004: 92).

The consolidation of a specific New Zealand Pacific identity is particularly noticeable in the proliferation of intra and pan-ethnic labels (Anae 1997: 35) like “Pasifika” or “Tangata Pasifika”, which strategically stress the common heritage of these “Peoples of the Ocean” and the transcultural connections of the community with their diverse homelands. Some of these labels, like “PI”—the acronym of “Pacific Islander”—or derogatory labels like “coconut”, “fresh off the boat”, “FOB” or “freshie”, have also been recycled into numerous instances of urban popular culture, becoming alternative denominations for the identity idiosyncrasies of the younger generations and the ongoing process of identity formation in diaspora. Many of these urban cultural forms reveal that “assimilation and accommodation have become meaningless; stale dichotomies of art/craft, high/low, centre/periphery, good/bad are given little credence; and the central premise of art as an expression of culture is renewed” (Pereira 2012: 262).

Pasifika hip hop artists, for instance, have appropriated these terms as signs of pride and self-identification in their lyrics or as logos in various types of merchandising. This is the case of the Overstayer Clothing label, created by hip hop artist King Kapisi, where the term “overstayer” is employed as a synonym of pride and belonging rather than shame or exclusion. Similarly, the textile company PopoHardWear, established by artist Siliga Setoga, employs these terms in T-shirts intended “to empower the wearer, address the viewer in the hope of accomplishing a smile in the relationship of the two” (Popohardwear). The company’s economic success, as Setoga explains, has contributed

to the household income [...] keeping Mum and Dad happy by sending money to family in Samoa, chipping in to extended Family expenses (weddings, birthdays, funerals of people we don’t know and have never met) and of course the deposit for our place in the Palace in the sky—Church Donations. (Popohardwear)

This tongue-in-cheek explanation addresses identity politics as well as familial and cultural obligations, presenting these products—which ironically capitalise on views of Pacific people as economically inefficient—as responsible for the family’s financial stability. Moreover, as Colchester points out, the popularity of these T-shirts has established “a new gift economy interlinking the diaspora community” (2003: 183) in different countries, as they offer an ironic take and a critical commentary on identity issues that affect these younger generations

transnationally and re-inscribe the traditional practice of gift-giving. One of these designs reads:

‘Freshie’: n. derived from the abbreviated expression f.o.b., fresh off the boat, a term given to polynesian natives. The expression must only be used in a light humorous manner as this fob may perceive your humorous intentions derogatorily and bust you in the eye. (Popohardware)

The definition shows the comic appropriation of the word while it condemns its persistence as a term of offence, with the mock academic register of the fake dictionary entry contradicting the notion of Pacific people as uneducated. Another example—“Fob Power: Outstanding in the Football Field, the Factory Floor, and the Footpath Brawl” (Popohardware)—is an alliterative reworking of a well-known washing powder logo which serves to criticise the exclusive identification of Pacific identity with rugby, factory work and street violence, showcasing the commodification of the Pacific body as cheap labour or, more recently, as sporting force (Grainger 2009).

In her *Savage Nobility* series (2001), Samoan artist Shigeyuki Kihara combines the conventions of fashion and ethnographic photography to subvert the stereotype of the Noble Savage in both its male and female versions. In one of these group images (Brownson et al. 2012: 61) Kihara chooses members of the Pacific diaspora who have excelled in different fields—playwright Oscar Kightley, musician Igelese Ete, and skateboarder Chey Ataria, of Maori descent—and presents them as ancient chiefs, using as inspiration the photographs of leaders of the Samoan Mau movement of independence. Kihara thus recuperates the centrality of these subjects, as the combination of contemporary and colonial portraiture aesthetics allows her to re-dress the othered body, redressing popular negative representations of both colonial and diasporic Pacific peoples.

Both Setoga and Kihara were among the New Zealand based Pacific artists who in 2012 participated in the collective exhibition *Home AKL*. The name of the exhibition employs the airport code of the city to stress their multiple transcultural connections, while firmly rooting their artistic practice in New Zealand soil. This exhibition, like the examples mentioned above, demonstrate that the younger generations possess what Karlo Mila-Schaaf—a New Zealand poet of Tongan, Samoan and Palagi descent—calls “Polycultural capital”, drawing on Bourdieu’s concept

and punning on the word “Polynesia”. Mila defines this term as the “cross-cultural resources and intertextual skills” (2010: 144) acquired by New Zealand-born Pacific people, which place them in a better position to “negotiate the spaces between selves and others, at an individual as well as a collective level” (2010: 36). This articulateness allows them to devalue these stereotypical images and turn them into currency for more subversive transactions, proving their agency and their capacity for cultural regeneration and socioeconomic success.

Selina Tusitala Marsh’s long performance poem “Fast Talking PI” (2009) can be read in the light of these polycultural skills and strategies. Marsh, of Samoan, Tuvaluan, English and French descent, explains that she conceived the poem as a reaction to the recurrent misrepresentation of a community “relentlessly cast as rapists, pillagers and murderers, [...] accused of dragging New Zealand’s good name (and the economy) through the mud” (2011: 33). Marsh refers here to the controversy generated in 2008 after *The Dominion Post* reported on the results of a study by Greg Clydesdale, commonly known as “the Clydesdale Report”, stressing Pacific Islanders’ underachievement and their negative impact on New Zealand’s economy. The report reinforced the persistent association of the community with social and economic marginality (Grainger 2009: 2336), although its findings were reviewed and questioned by the Human Rights Commission (Review of Pacific Peoples 2008).

There were diverse literary and artistic responses to this controversial report, like the 2009 show “Gathering Clouds” by Samoan dancer Neil Jeremia, founder of the Black Grace Company. Likewise, the poem “AKA. PC. Bully” (2009), by Samoan poet Doug Poole, challenges the academic to test his claims empirically: “Why don’t you come over / to my island, so I can ask / about the underclass” (2009: 11), while recalling the harshness experienced by early migrants in overcrowded houses and low-paid jobs. Marsh also responds to these negative views in “Fast Talking PI” by reaffirming individual and collective Pacific identity and embracing a number of heterogeneous subject positions, conveyed through variations on the acronym “PI”:

I’m a slot machine PI
 I’m a lotto queen PI
 I’m tote-ticket church bingo TAB PI
 [...]

34 *Paloma Fresno-Calleja*

I'm a criminal PI
behind the bar graphs PI
I'm a gun smokin' patching totin' king cobra PI
[...]
I'm a lazy PI
I'm a p-crazy PI
I'm a hard drinkin' hard speakin' where my eggs? PI. (2009: 58)

The poem condemns images of Pacific peoples as violent, careless or indolent, as economically dependent or socially marginal individuals, as the speaker rejects these views precisely by impersonating each of these positions momentarily (Fresno-Calleja 2014). The chant structure of the poem combines these references with more positive ones, centred on Pacific economic success and social visibility:

I'm a theorising PI
I'm a strategizing PI
I'm a published in a peer reviewed journal PI
[...]
I'm a propertied PI
a self-employed PI
I'm a mocha-drinkin', horn-rimmed glasses, real TV PI
[...]
I'm a freezing works PI
I'm an IT PI
I'm a sewing, stuffing, soaking, shaking, stirring PI. (2009: 58-61)

The poem thus reflects the process of “browning” and “infiltration” (Anae 2004) mentioned above while addressing persistent problems for the community, revealing the internal complexity of Pacific families where “you will find people who are teachers and lawyers—very ‘middle-class’; however, you will also find labourers and people in prisons” (Anae 2004: 98).

There have been other constructive responses working against the persistent association of Pacific peoples with economic and social marginalisation. In *The Taro King*, the first play by Vela Manusaute, of Niuean and Samoan descent, we witness Filipino's struggles to support his family while working as a taro cutter at The Taro King supermarket. At his sister's house, Filipino attends the celebrations in honour of his nephew, Vegi, who is about to migrate to the United States to become a professional boxer. The family and members of the community

contribute to collect Vegi's "pocket money" with the certainty that his future success will revert in the benefit of the family. This is seen in Filipino's speech, which stresses such economic interdependency as the basis of many Pacific households:

It says in the Bible that if you give, the Lord will provide, and we have given a lot to make sure that our son reaches the shores of the United States of America. He will provide for our family and he will provide for all those that believe in his dream. One day, Vegi will buy his mother a new house that comes with a brand new dish-washing machine. (Manusaute 2012: 158)

At the supermarket there are other kinds of economic and personal tensions at stake. The action takes place during the time of the Fiji coup, led by George Speight in 2000, which resulted in trade sanctions imposed on the country by New Zealand. As a result, the supplies of fresh taro coming from Fiji have been cut. In an ironic reversal of the economic dependence determining daily life in Pacific microstates, the supermarket employees are forced to keep up with the sales by persuading customers to buy their tinned low quality products in the absence of fresh taro. These tensions are also reinforced by interethnic conflicts evident in the staff dynamics and hierarchy. The Indo-Fijian supermarket owner is a sort of "big brother" figure who never appears on stage and gives the position of manager, which Filipino has been hoping to obtain, to Raj, an Indo-Fijian taro cutter who had not even applied for the job. Unable to face his economic problems, Filipino eventually decides to go back to Samoa to cultivate taro in his own family plantation. The play, however, ends on a promising note when Raj envisions a future plan: "when I have enough money, I buy a bigger supermarket and we kill this one. I buy taros from you. You plant and supply me from Samoa" (Manusaute 2012: 164). The play thus reveals the potential development of an alternative economy, based on the recovery of traditional activities, which allows both Filipino and Raj to move from unskilled workforce to entrepreneurs. At the same time, it highlights the value of inter-ethnic alliances for collaborative modes of sustenance and advancement. The play, like the rest of the works mentioned in this section, addresses the ongoing socio-economic problems affecting the community, but illustrates the possibility of economic and creative interventions to overcome such problems.

From the Margins to the Market: Negotiating Recent Pasifika Representations

In this section I would like to consider more recent responses to articulations of Pacific culture as marketable, rather than marginal. As Grainger remarks, “New Zealand has never been so self-aware, and so unashamed, of itself as a so-called ‘Pacific nation’” (2009: 2336) and the need to shape and brand New Zealand’s unique Pacific heritage has resulted in the recognition, and occasionally in the appropriation, of Pasifika culture as an asset to shape New Zealand’s unique cultural profile and its role as a key player in the Asia-Pacific region. A significant example that attests to this increasing recognition is the long term exhibition “Tangata o le Moana: The Story of Pacific People in New Zealand” which opened in 2007 at The Museum of New Zealand Te Papa Tongarewa.

As discussed by Alice Te Punga Somerville in her full-length study *Once Were Pacific* (2012), “such a major permanent exhibition requires compelling, clear and ‘Pacific’ branding” (2012: 91), which she analyses extensively in relation to the photo originally chosen to promote the event. Taken in the 1980s, the image showed a Polynesian man wearing a sweatshirt with the design “London Paris New York Rome Otago”, thus appearing to conform to the spirit of the exhibition by revealing “the complex relationships between modernity, capital, race, gender, migration, place and colonialism” (2012: 93) that have intersected in the history of the Pacific community. On discovering that the man was actually Maori, the Museum substituted his photo for a contemporary version, featuring a Pacific man. The substitution of the original image for a replica, “a copy of a Pacific moment that never existed” (2012: 94), not only disregards the common origin of Maori and other Pacific peoples, it also highlights the preference for a specific official version of Pacific identity, exclusively linked to contemporary migration (2012: 94). This strict visual branding contrasts with the more elusive text included in the museum’s website, which clearly recognises that “New Zealand is a Pacific place in location and history” (Tangata o le Moana), yet encourages the potential visitors to engage in the discussion of what constitutes Pacific identity: “But do New Zealanders consider themselves Pacific Islanders? Do you? Come and decide for yourself” (Tangata o le Moana).

The tension between inclusive or exclusive definitions of Pacific identity are also evident in commercial articulations of multi-ethnic Auckland as “the largest Polynesian city in the world”, the marketing of cultural events like the Pasifika Festival or the tourist promotion of places like Otara Market, in South Auckland. These articulations have employed more positive, although equally stereotypical images, which have capitalised on the exotic dimension of Pacific cultures, stressing their valuable contribution to New Zealand’s renewed national narratives in ways that nevertheless tend to be confined to very specific fields, like gastronomy, entertainment, the arts or sports. Mackley-Crump has discussed the increasing “festivalisation” of Pacific cultures, arguing that it has a cohesive function to grant the community with an increasing visibility. Because most of the people who participate are of Pacific descent, he concludes that the event “is therefore not purely or only a consumption of ‘otherness’, but rather a celebration of culture through consumption” (2013: 22). There have been, however, more critical takes on the function of these colourful and vibrant festivals. Ema Tavola, for instance, argues that they may place “the civic limelight [on the community] for one or two days in the year” (2012: 58) in a way that overshadows their achievements in less marketable areas, while failing to intervene in the ongoing problems that keep some Pacific people in disadvantaged economic and social positions. Sociologist Melani Anae has also emphasized the relevance of these events in showcasing the contribution of Pacific people, but warns about reducing Pacific ‘culture’ “to aesthetic, traditional elements represented in music, dance and fashion mixed with modern globalizing influences” (Anae 2004: 94).

The marketing of this “cool Pasifika” (Anae 2004: 94) seems to serve two simultaneous purposes: on the one hand, it allows the New Zealand-born generations to recreate new pan-Pacific cultural affiliations by concentrating on the more attractive and less problematic aspects of their cultures, what Mackley-Crump calls the “celebration of culture through consumption” (2013: 22). On the other, it is addressed at a non-Pacific cosmopolitan audience keen on experiencing the exotic elements of Pacific cultures in their own city. This is evident, for instance, in the Pasifika Festival official website where the emphasis is placed on food and performances and the visitor is encouraged to visit the different villages and enjoy the “sights, sounds, tastes and colours of the Pacific—without even leaving Auckland” (Pasifika Festival).

The difficulty of promoting Pacific culture without falling prey to commercialization and the capacity to transcend these feelings of conviviality beyond a particular day or a specific celebration have been the object of literary and artistic reflection. Karlo Mila's poem "Sacred Pulu", included in the section "Pasifika revisited" from her first collection *Dream Fish Floating* (2005a), responds to forms of control over authenticity imposed both externally and internally (Mila 2005b). Mila addresses the ambivalences encapsulated in the promotion of stereotypical visions of Pacific culture, which require exclusion and specific branding, and the simultaneous marketing of Pasifika as an accessible object of consumption included in the list of New Zealand's "ethnic" cultures. The poetic voice stresses her credentials as an urban diasporic dweller, a vantage position from which she can reassign meanings to both the apparently authentic and apparently fake icons of Pacific identity. The poem addresses the polarised and reductive views of the marginal and the marketable and, in a radical departure from the representation of Niu Sila as the land of milk and honey, concludes on a bleak and cautionary note:

you're always a gold coin koha
 away from winning lotto
 [...] we're halfway between
 buttnaked and never-never land
 Hawaiki
 it is a trip
 I've never been able to save for
 I tell you
 Stuck in rainy days all the time
 Hawaiki
 so far a lave lave away
 from us all. (Mila 2005a: 37)

The image of rainy days and economic shortages stresses the frustrated attempts to reach paradise, whether it is articulated as the Christian concept of salvation, presented as the ancestral land of Hawaiki, or located in a more terrestrial haven of lottery money. As opposed to the previous stanzas, which condemned the mainstream perception and commercialisation of their cultures, this stanza openly questions the community's internal requirements. The last two lines in particular play on the Samoan concept of *fa'alavelave*, the money with

which members to the community are expected to contribute to the church or the family and which, as Mila explains in the glossary “many in the Pacific community [feel] can very often be excessive” (Mila 2005a: 145). The poem thus puts into question the social and communal pressures preserved in the name of tradition and authenticity, and detaches these moral obligations and the economic dependencies they imply from her understanding of contemporary Pacific identity. Like the multiple personae conjured by Marsh in “Fast Talking PI”, the transition from the second to the first person pronoun, and then from the plural “we” to the singular “I”, suggests intergenerational differences but also connections among members of the community whose socio-economic status may differ, but which remain equally affected by the contradictory forces which continue to present their cultures as both marginal and marketable.

These tensions are perhaps more significantly played out in the example I have chosen to close my discussion: the animated sitcom *bro'Town* (2004-2009), which reflects the contradictory yet apparently complementary visions of Pacific peoples as both social burden and cultural asset. Often referred to as “The Simpsons of the South Pacific”, the series features five Polynesian boys who live in the multi-ethnic suburb of Morningside, deliberately chosen to set the action away from the more economically and socially deprived southern Auckland suburbs (Keown 2008: 48). The characters are modelled after the well-known members of *The Naked Samoans*, the comic group formed by Oscar Kightley, David Fane, Shimpal Lelisi, and Mario Gaoa, responsible, together with producer Elizabeth Mitchell, for the creation of the series.

bro'Town derives its humour from the capitalisation of widespread stereotypical images of Pacific peoples as marginalised, primitive, violent, uneducated or economically inefficient peoples. This is seen in characters like Agnes Tapili, Sione’s over-religious and abusive mother, or Pepelo Pepelo, the careless father of Vale and Valea, an alcoholic forklift driver who neglects his parental duties and lives on benefit money. In the episode “Go Home Stay Home” (Season One), for instance, Vale and Valea are taken by the social services when Pepelo—after repeating his catchphrase “I’m going to the pub, I may be some time”—disappears for four days. Whereas Vale is taken to a boys’ home, Valea is put at the care of a rich family who instruct him in the glories of capitalism. These “civilised” exchanges take place over a

pristine breakfast table, while the foster father eyes a newspaper whose front page reads: “Poor people still can’t look after themselves”. Mr Pepelo’s euphoria in finding out that his sons have been taken away only disappears when he realises that he cannot continue to enjoy the benefit.

Examples like this show why some commentators have taken the series to task for perpetuating notions of Pacific peoples as uncaring or socially dependent (Spratt 2006). Tapu Misa remarks on the psychological as well as material effects of this negative stereotyping, since focusing on such specific images excludes other positive ways of reflecting communal dynamics, yet she concedes that “it’s difficult to get the kind of policy action that leads to societal change without highlighting the real problems in our communities” (2006). Kightley himself has stressed the therapeutic nature of the show in exerting social critique through non-PC humour and satire and its ability to engage in current problems of the Pacific community by making people laugh (Spratt 2006). Keown has analysed the social critique behind the farcical elements, but also the simultaneous reinscription of some of the stereotypes, demonstrating the show’s “complex but ultimately inclusive racial politics” (2012: 34).

Smith and Luystik quote producer Elizabeth Mitchell’s explanation that the episodes are “twisted moral tales” (2008: 165), whereby humour and satire are used to disguise the otherwise fairly obvious moralising content of the episodes. In the example mentioned above, Pepelo’s disgraceful behaviour at court persuades the judge of his inability to take his children back. Yet, he suddenly conjures up memories of his deceased wife and magically comes to pronounce the phrase “I love you kids”, which seems to be good enough for the judge and the social worker to realise his good intentions and allow him to recover his children and the benefit money. Although this seems a fairly conventional happy ending and the episodes always “flirt with didacticism”—as Keown reminds us—such moral content “is often turned on its head during the closing credits, when characters [...] intervene to puncture any sense of moral worthiness which may have temporarily been imposed” (2008: 53). The disparity of critical responses is but the reflection of the show’s ambivalent representation of Pacific peoples as conforming to and questioning the stereotypes simultaneously.

Equally contradictory are the reactions to its economic side effects. The popularity and profitability of the show since its 2004 debut illustrates Pacific entrepreneurial and creative success, with high audience shares in its weekly prime time screenings at home and abroad. The capitalisation of urban Pacific culture, evident in the contents of the episodes as well as in the merchandising of its products, has nevertheless been read as contributing to the marketing and commodification of Polynesian street culture. Emma Earl argues that *bro'Town* presents its young Pacific protagonists as “it kids”, mere instruments for the programme’s emphasis on consumption, as seen for instance in the conspicuous product placement and advertising, despite the series’ satirical tone and its implicit critique of consumer society (2008). Sarina Pearson has questioned Earl’s analysis as perpetuating the dangerous idea that “Pasifika become latter day victims of consumption rather than participants in modernity” (2013: 32), arguing instead that the series illustrates new possibilities of performing “Pasifika modernities and can be seen as a small intervention in discourses of persistent primitivism” (Pearson 2013: 36) which otherwise prevail in representations of Pacific peoples. These divergent responses illustrate the extent to which *bro'Town* engages its viewers in discussions of both the marginal and the marketable, directly addressing negative stereotypical images while allowing for more elaborate articulations of young urban diasporic Pasifika identities.

Conclusion

The aforementioned works by New Zealand artists and writers of Pacific descent address the ambivalent tensions that have determined economic, social and cultural representations of their community as both marginal and marketable in a country where the Pacific community still faces important challenges. Apart from engaging in the ironic and critical revision of the stereotypes through diverse tools and media, these works emphasize the possibility of establishing alternative economic and social relations in tune with their cultural specificities, as well as the ability of the younger members of the Pacific community to employ their polycultural capital as a valuable tool for cultural regeneration and for socioeconomic success.

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