

# Animated representation of indigenous cultural identity

New Zealand  
Australia  
Singapore







Purpose of this short talk is to share Bro'Town, sometimes seen as the New Zealand's version of South Park or The Simpsons.

Both South Park and Simpson have been extensively studied, and demonstrate that parody is alive and well.

Bro'Town is a little different. It is in New Zealand. It is produced by Samoans, not Europeans.



Ran on prime-time New Zealand television between 2004 to 2009.

Written and created by the comedy theatre troupe The Naked Samoans, the series embraces colourful aspects of Maori and Polynesian culture.

Satirises attitudes, behaviours, social issues and topical events. Religion plays a integral part, although the conversations between God and Jesus are not all that serious.

Reaction to the show has been widely positive, resulting in sales to Australia, Canada, and the Pacific Islands, and merchandising.

Negative critical reaction focused on the trivialising and commodifying of Polynesian culture.







Much studied by Media Studies courses and in schools

Is an exemplar on the NZ Qualifications Framework

Is recognised as controversial



Respected academic and leading Samoan figurehead Dr Melanie Anae in the New Zealand Herald (2006):

"People like Oscar Kightley promote those kinds of stereotypes, the happy-go-lucky funny brown coconut, the kinds of stereotypes we fought against in the 70s. We've moved beyond that stereotype of just being entertainers..."

It is time for Pacific Island youth to change their attitudes and start taking responsibility. At the moment, they are politically and socially ignorant....



Oscar Kightley of the Naked Somoans replies:

"All I try to do is tell stories. The point is to hold up a mirror. ... I know all the statistics about Pacific Islanders, I know all the depressing stuff. That's why I chose to write about that stuff and make people laugh. Otherwise you'd cry."





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.

Matthew Bannister in *New Zealand Journal of Media Studies*, (2008)







By reclaiming the behaviour, attitudes and terminology, bro'Town exploits and undermines polarities of ethnic representation through "reverse discourse" (Bannister 2008).

The term reverse discourse comes from Foucault and describes how every instance of power also presents some form of resistance, a resistance that uses the very terms from the dominant power. Hence the term "reverse".

Reclaiming these things does not significantly change the meanings, even though that meaning was typically created as a mechanism of repression. Rather, reclaiming borrows its power from the vagueness and force of the term without altering those qualities. It only seeks to change the value judgment or connotation of the term. (Live Journal 2004)

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?"<sup>1</sup>

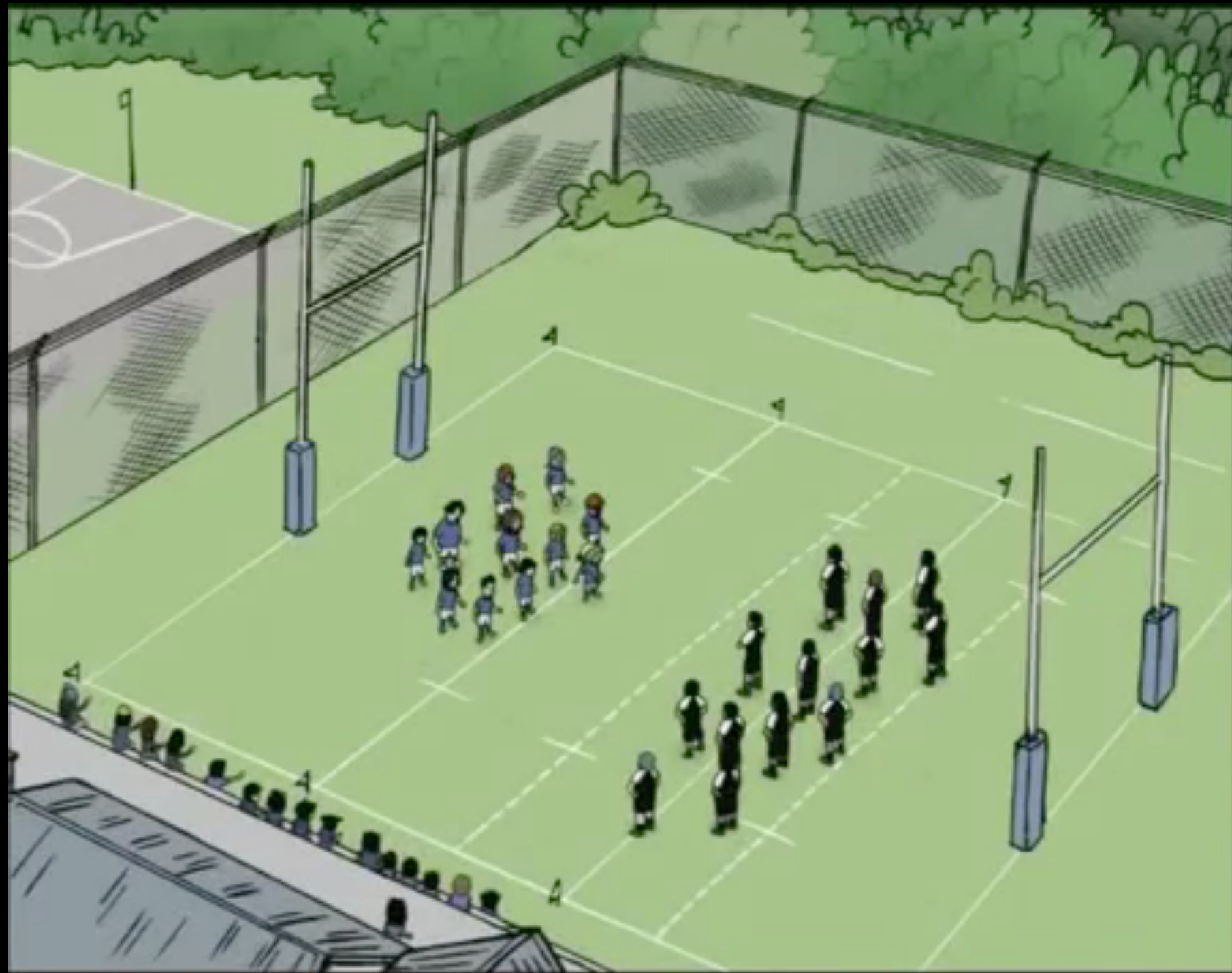




Defiance can legitimise culture.

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.

Bannister (2008)









No one is safe ....

How do they get away with it!

- They are within the culture, the source of the “reverse discourse”
- They are funny
- They use animation – which is representative and so not “real”.





The cartoon (animation) format also questions 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. (Bannister 2008)

Literalness is reduced, possibly eliminated.



## A summary

Primetime animation demonstrates the “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).

Bro'Town is a non-literal mirror, it is not a commentary, and is probably not very informative, accurate, nor true. The viewer will learn as much about Pasifika culture from Bro'Town as they would about U.S. culture from The Simpsons.

Bro'Town demonstrates how animation can makes use of comedy, satire and parody to represent indigenous cultural groups through a self-effacing reverse discourse.



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