

Adventures in *One land*: reorienting colonial relations in reality-history television

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Abstract

Popular television reality-history series, of which New Zealand's *One land* (2010) is a recent example, exemplify the extent to which new 'media technologies [are] reorientating everyday epistemologies, ontologies and cultural practices' (CSAA conference call for papers). In these formats, contemporary family groups are immersed in the social and material conditions of everyday life from a nominated period in the past. Rather than a formal re-enactment of times past, these productions take history to task, encouraging participants to critique and even challenge the 'rule book' – regarding gender relations, social etiquette, domestic practices, dress and behavioural codes – handed down by the period in question. Nevertheless, these formats also seek to produce narratives of national history, both through the particularisation and fetishisation of culturally specific domestic details, and a generalised affect of nostalgia (literally, an aching for home), making place at least as important on these shows as time.

This relationship with both history and nation accrues new and more complex significations within a postcolonial context. Rather than confirming national history through the commemorative reification of past domestic experiences (an effect that might characterise British examples of this trend), reality-history series in Australia and New Zealand/Aotearoa approach and/or attempt to represent a colonial history that is both emergent and contested. As scholarly responses to Australian examples of the genre (Arrow 2007; Schwarz 2010) suggest, the re-presentation of colonial settlement in these programs re-imagines a bloodless history, not as it once was but how we might wish it to

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have been. As I will discuss in this paper, the representation of Aotearoa/New Zealand's settler history on *One land* was similarly both idealised and self-evidently problematic. Firstly, *One land* attempted to enact a symbolic and retroactive appeasement of relations between European settlers and indigenous Maori, even as it marshalled cultural distinctions between the two through the careful alternation and explication of sites of ethnic identity, including skin colour, language, social behaviour and material objects (dinghy/waka, cabin/whare, bread/kumera). Secondly, a series of disagreements between participating families, which culminated in a violent altercation and the expulsion of one family from the group (but not from the production), told precisely the story the series might wish to disavow.

Thus, while the generic evolution of a reality format developed in Great Britain (*1900 house*, 2000) and re-modelled for production in the United States (*Frontier house*, 2002), Australia (*Outback house*, 2005 and *The colony*, 2005) and New Zealand/Aotearoa tells its own story of cultural dis-/re-orientation and spatio-temporal transferrals, the representation of race relations in recent postcolonial reality television productions actively, if somewhat brutally, seeks to reinvent cultural history.

In this paper I consider a New Zealand television production entitled *One land*, a reality-history series that screened over the summer of 2009–2010, and which depicted Maori–European settler relations circa 1850 in Aotearoa/New Zealand. I am interested, broadly speaking, in the ways in which the genre of television reality-history produces an alternate model for historiography, presenting the past as a series of affective and visceral experiences wrought upon the bodies of contemporary subjects. More specifically, and with reference to the themes of this conference, I am interested in the particular ways in which *One land*, as a program that represented early relations between European settlers and indigenous Maori, sought to re-cast the history of colonial settlement in light of contemporary fantasies of an idealised biculturalism. Thus, the reality-history show might exemplify the extent to which ‘media technologies [are] reorientating everyday epistemologies, ontologies and cultural practices’ (as noted by the CSAA conference call for papers), as they generate narratives of national identity through the re-enactment and re-embodiment of everyday social histories.

I would like to start by briefly indicating the genre characteristics of the reality-history show, and the evolution of the format, in order to draw attention to the particular affective and discursive potentialities of reality television as a medium. The first of these productions was the British series *1900 house*, produced in 1999 and broadcast in 2000 as part of the UK's commemoration of the turn of the millennium. The immediate popularity of the series, both in

Britain and elsewhere, generated a succession of similar productions in the UK, and locally produced versions of the format (which were, at least initially, made under licence to the UK) subsequently appeared in America, Australia and New Zealand. The premise of the genre, which requires a 'modern day' family to live according to the social mores and material conditions of an earlier period in history, offers a hybrid of the docu-soap (observational documentary/extended duration/domestic setting/everyday life) and the competitive survival or isolation gamedoc (challenging or harsh living conditions/isolation from media/intimate living quarters) all wrapped up nicely by the trimmings of a costume drama.

As much as these programs may make 'history' their *mise en scène*, however, the participants' experiences are located very much in the present. The central conflict offered up by this format is, indeed, the critical collision between past and present; the disjunction between the contemporary sensibilities frequently asserted by the participating families and the historically located behavioural codes to which they are obliged to conform. Writing on an Australian example of the format, Michelle Arrow noted that 'It focuses on the material conditions of the past at the expense of politics; it gazes at the past through the prism of personal relationships and conflict, and it reproduces popular social memory of the past' (2007: 64). This emphasis led her to propose an equation: history minus politics = nostalgia. Similarly, Scott Diffrient, writing on the British *1940s house*, suggested that reality-history is all about 'tacticalizing' the past (2007: 43). Thus, the mode of history telling offered up by reality television is personal rather than political, grounded in the everyday and the domestic, based on feelings rather than factual information, and embroicated by the vagaries of nostalgia. While this emphasis – typical of reality television as a genre – has led to the cultural devaluation of such programs, I would argue that it is precisely their sentimentality, and their investment in affect, intimacy and embodiment, that makes them such revealing barometers of contemporary culture.

Recent scholarship on reality television format transfer, by which a successful show is sold to other territories as a format shell and reproduced with local participants and cultural inflections, has considered the degree of cultural transference the format rubric might

perpetuate. As noted, the paradigm established by the British *1900 house*, and its immediate successor *1940s house*, was reproduced in New Zealand as *Pioneer house* and *Colonial house*, in America as *Frontier house* and then *Colonial house*, and in Australia as *Outback house* and *The colony*. As this list indicates, the eponymous ‘house’ of the original series has been used repeatedly as a genre marker, linking subsequent reality-history series to their British progenitor. Thus, *1900 house* effectively supplied a template for the telling of national, social history, and its export to postcolonial nations bears with it an ideological charge.

While the first of the New Zealand productions – *Pioneer house* (2001) – adhered so closely to the format shell provided by *1900 house* that the history of Victorian domesticity that it supplied appeared, disconcertingly, like a re-enactment of someone else’s history, the American productions were the first to coopt the formula of the reality-history show for the purposes of establishing a culturally specific history beyond the British paradigm. In *Frontier house*, set in 1893, and subsequently and more decisively in *Colonial house*, set much earlier in 1628, participants enacted historically significant rites of arrival and settlement, literally breaking ground, building homes and founding small communities, in the apparently unoccupied landscapes of Midwest America.

Similarly, the two Australian shows – *Outback house* (set in 1861) and *The colony* (set circa 1800) – have worked to specify national history through an engagement with issues of race relations, class hierarchies, land ownership and convict history. Like *The colony*, the most recent New Zealand production, *One land*, broke with the genre-marking title construction of ‘house’, indicating both a pull away from the European template, and a discursive and thematic shift from the insularity of a private domestic dwelling to the land and its political status. Furthermore, *One land* addressed, at least in the sense of rendering visible, both Maori and Pakeha cultural identities, language and behavioural codes or Tikanga, as well as acknowledging and dramatising the anterior claim to the land by Maori and the disruption caused by the arrival of Europeans.

Thus, the televisual re-presentation of both history and nation accrues new and more complex significations within a postcolonial context. Rather than confirming national history through the commemorative reification of past domestic experiences (an effect that might characterise British examples of this trend), reality-history series in Australia and Aotearoa/New Zealand approach and/or attempt to represent a colonial history that is both emergent and contested. As scholarly responses to Australian examples of the genre (Arrow 2007; Schwarz 2010) suggest, the re-presentation of colonial settlement in these programs re-imagines a bloodless history, not as it once was but how we might wish it to have been.

The three-minute sequence that introduced the series to viewers illustrates the often contradictory impulses of the program's relationship with both history and culture:

Voice Over [Rachel House]: What would happen if you went back in time? ... to live here, New Zealand as it was in the 1850s; a land where our Maori and European ancestors lived side by side. Three modern-day families – two Maori and one Pakeha – travel back in time to live together, as they did in the mid-19th century. The Smiths will live as a European working-class settler family; their only possessions what they can carry. On the Pa, two very different Maori families will live together: the Ririnui family are deeply immersed in their own culture and will only speak Te Reo Maori, while the Dalrymples have long ago turned their backs on their Maori heritage. No electricity, no toilet, no running water, not even the basics of modern day life. Instead, they must struggle with whale bone corsets, waka, and depending on each other for their survival. In this social and cultural experiment, 21st century families will attempt to live a 19th century life. Three families, but two very different cultures, sharing *One Land*.

This introductory sequence, and particularly the scripted voice-over, pointed to a number of critical contentions, both typical of the reality-history television production as a genre and specific to this series and its rather audacious attempt to 'do' the origins of New Zealand biculturalism as a reality show. Firstly, the voice-over drew on the now established rhetoric of the genre, which promises to take audiences 'back in time', or conversely to bring history 'here' into the present. The concept of 'living history' has become a standard trope of the

reality-history genre, one that posits an oxymoron and promises the potential disruption of linear conceptions of historical temporality. Secondly, the introduction reminded us that austerity, deprivation and survival would be key challenges posited by the experience of immersion in the 'past', an emphasis that linked the format (as I have suggested) with other reality challenge shows – from *Survivor* to *Outback Jack* – which have nothing to do with history, and everything to do with social isolation and the absence of technologies of modernity. This strategy in and of itself, enhances the format's reality claim via tropes of authenticity, naturalism, realism and even primitivism.

Thirdly, in its use of the collective pronoun ('our Maori and Pakeha ancestors'), its designation of 'here' as New Zealand both past and present, and its will to situate Maori and Pakeha as living 'side by side', the rhetoric of the introduction laboured to incorporate the television audience into a shared experience of national biculturalism. The closing statement, which was repeated at the beginning of each episode thereafter and became the series' by-line – 'Three families, but two very different cultures, sharing *One Land*' – further articulated the dubious ideological ambitions of the project. As this introduction delineated, the challenges presented within this curious format were multi-layered. Participants had to contend with the irritations of history (the stiff corsets, the lack of plumbing), with each other (indeed, inter-family squabbling became the focal point of drama within the show), with their ascribed cultural identity (something with which the Dalrymples had a particularly antagonistic relationship from the start) and with, more profoundly, the diminishing effect of the program's mantra, which insisted on funnelling three families into two cultures, and thereafter into *One land*.

I would like to highlight three aspects of the *One land* narrative that might explicate the problematic representation of land and culture. Firstly, I will discuss the representation of arrival and home making; secondly, the symbolic function of trade between the two cultures; and, finally, the repudiation of the Dalrymple family and the consequences of their departure from the Pa. Respectively, a close reading of these moments in the text reveal, firstly, the extent to which the series worked in the service of settler fantasies of belonging, as it actualised and naturalised the act of settlement, perpetuating settler mythologies of hard

work and ingenuity in ways that indicated that settlers earned their right to occupy the land. Secondly, ritualised exchanges between the settler and Pa families established an idealised biculturalism founded upon cooperation, reciprocity, mutual benefit and respect for difference. Thirdly, a series of disagreements between participating families, which culminate in a violent altercation and the expulsion of one family from the group (but not from the production), told precisely the story the series might wish to disavow.

The arrival of the three families at the site of the production was stage managed in a number of ways. Firstly, the Dalrymples and the Heke-Ririnuis were set up at the Pa site several days before the Smith family joined the production. Secondly, when the two Maori families arrived for the first time at the gates of the Pa, the home fires were already burning, vegetables were growing in the garden, fresh-laid eggs awaited discovery in the hen house. In this way, the Pa families were inducted into a place where they already lived and had been living for some time. In contrast, when the Smiths set foot on land several days later, it was for the first time both within the framework of an imagined historicity and in the present. This is when reality-history programming is at its most affective – when the enactment of experiences that are located in the past are authentically ‘doubled’ in the present. Their shack was bare and dilapidated, and, as the voice-over intoned, they had ‘only what they can carry’, including livestock, food and utensils, with which to set up home. Thirdly, while the magic of television cut straight from the coastal arrival of the Maori families by waka to a shot of them entering the Pa gates, the Smith family took two days to travel the same distance to their cabin, camping overnight on the beach, and trekking through bush with trunks on their backs. While these three aspects of the constructed arrival sequence served to establish the anteriority of Maori as prior occupants of the land, the extended narrative surrounding the arrival of the Smiths exhibited what Anja Schwarz has discussed as ‘the fixation with the moment of colonisation and an underlying sense of unease about belonging’ (McCalman and Pickering 2010: 10) and underscored the labour of settlement in ways that gratified popular mythologies of settler hardiness and perseverance. By making the Smith’s journey more of a pilgrimage, the ‘home’ they created by the river bank appeared more deserved, because it had been harder won.

Thenceforth, in its representation of Maori–Pakeha relations, the program enacted both a merger between two cultures and the emergence of new cultural identities. The ‘journey’ of the Smith family from Christchurch enacted the emergence of the Pakeha New Zealander as resident of the land. They arrived as Europeans – hopeful and determined, yet ill at ease with the landscape, unable to fish with a line, cook on an open fire, or milk a goat. After six weeks in the bush they left as Pakeha – sunburnt, calloused, relaxed, ‘at home’ on the land, and even speaking a few words of Te Reo.

More critically, the ‘temporal doubling’ (Schwarz 2010: 34) effected by reality-history productions enables a more complex positioning of contemporary New Zealanders within their own history. Writing on a major documentary series about New Zealand’s history, Stephen Turner suggested that the docudrama of European settlement involves ‘The hollowing-out of a fully Maori place and the embedding within it of a settler place’ (2009: 251). Unlike the formal re-enactments of historically significant events, such as the signing of the Treaty of Waitangi, to which Turner was referring, the embodied enactment of settlement in *One land* is all about establishing a home (literally and metaphorically) for European settlers in the New Zealand landscape. It is also about inserting (contemporary) Pakeha into the fabric of the country’s history, allowing them to be both there and here at once, both anterior and fully present. To quote Turner again, ‘While Pakeha in the first instance stepped ashore in somebody else’s country, the re-enactment of this moment has them stepping ashore in their own country – the new country of New Zealand. In re-enactment scenarios, settlers are already at home’ (2009: 245). Taking this even further, Turner suggested that within these re-enactments ‘Today’s second settlers appear fully present in the past, and therefore as if they are indigenous’ (p 247), as ‘Their homeland turns out to have been here all along’ (p 245).

As suggested, the title of the series, *One land*, presupposed or insisted upon the merging of ‘two very different cultures’. There cannot be ‘two’ New Zealands, the title suggested, and so both cultural identities, diametrically positioned at the outset, had to move towards the other

for the implied narrative of the series' title to come to fruition. According to such a reading, moments of cultural and commercial exchange took on a special significance. The first meeting between the two parties was both an official welcome from the resident group to the newcomer and an eager commercial exchange. The Maori families brought fish, kumera and (European) onions to the bartering table; organic produce that asserted their affinity with the land. In return, the settler family offered inorganic articles that signified their relationship with an industrialised alterity: a candle in a glass bottle, a teapot and a mirror.

While the Smiths and the Ririnui families sustained a complementary patterning of cultural identity through an ongoing reciprocation of food/labour/advice, the third family – the Dalrymples – were caught on the cusp of the Maori–Pakeha binary in all the wrong ways. As the voice-over intoned: ‘This family were so out of touch with their Maori roots that they actually applied to be on the show as the Pakeha family’. This apparent error in personal identity formation was never forgiven and, I would go so far as to say, actively punished throughout the series. Required to live on the Pa with the Heke-Ririnui family, speak Te Reo Maori (of which they have not a single word), respect Tikanga Maori (protocol of which they have no understanding), and adopt culturally specific attitudes to gender, tapu, child rearing and communal living, the Dalrymples were set up to fail. When simmering inter-family tensions regarding the division of labour and responsibilities on the Pa erupted in a violent altercation between Evan (Dalrymple) and Aramahou (Ririnui), the Dalrymple clan staged a dramatic exodus from the Pa site, only to find themselves in a cultural no-man’s-land, repudiated in turn by the Ririnui family of the Pa and the Smiths in their settler encampment. *One land* concluded, then, with an uncomfortable portrait of cultural disaffection. The cabin on the hill (hastily constructed by the production team to house the Dalrymples) ideologically and geographically triangulated a determinedly binary relationship and the bicultural project was rent asunder. While I agree with Michelle Arrow, who suggested that these formats manifest ‘a settler fantasy of a colonisation without violence’ (2007: 64), the repressed narrative of conflict, cultural subjugation and an apology that never comes was acted out via the ‘problem’ of the Dalrymple family, in ways that the series was unable either to contain or resolve.

References

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