# ROMANTICISM AND REALITY ON *THE GC*: TRANSNATIONAL MĀORI ON THE GOLD COAST

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## Introduction

During the dark and chilly autumn months of 2012, New Zealanders settled in front of their televisions to watch a new reality series titled *The GC*. Set on Australia's tropical Gold Coast, it followed the exploits of eleven attractive twenty-something Māori, who, like increasing numbers of New Zealanders, have elected to settle in Australia in search of greater economic opportunity and adventure (Green, Power, and Jang 2008). In the days and weeks following the series' premiere, water cooler chatter and online commentary across the country reached fever pitch. Critics reviled *The GC*'s "structured reality format," loathed the cast's awkward often self-conscious performances, and condemned the series' emphasis upon continuous night clubbing, excessive drinking, and relentless preening. *New Zealand Herald* journalist Paul Little described the men on the series as

> heavily and badly tattooed—there's not a lot of dignity in having "Wassup" written on your chest. They drink too much, dress badly, objectify the opposite sex, are obsessed with their appearance, dance badly, over-groom, overestimate their own abilities and believe the world is waiting for them to reveal their greatness, blame everyone else for failures that are their own responsibility, accessorize badly, lack ambition and are incapable of expressing themselves coherently. And that's their good points (2012).

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Detractors established a "Cancel *The GC*" Facebook page, where demands to take the trashy, cringe-inducing series off the air kept pace with and occasionally outstripped "likes" on *The GC*'s official Facebook page. Fans bit back, accusing critics of racist mean-spiritedness. They argued that *The GC* not only reflected how as many as one in five Māori now live in or were born in Australia[1] but that its cast (however tanned and impossibly toned) offered New Zealand audiences a welcome change from the usual televisual fare of Māori deprivation and distress. *New Zealand Herald* business commentator Fran O'Sullivan wrote,

> The great thing about TV3's new reality show *The GC* is how it openly shows young go-for-it Mozzies (Māori Aussies) having a really good time. Instead of wallowing in some tribal backwater, they have skipped across the Tasman to build successful entrepreneurial futures alongside other Kiwis in Australia and enjoy the "sun, surf and sex" lifestyles (2012).

O'Sullivan was far from alone. Annabelle Lee-Harris, a producer for the critically acclaimed current affairs program *Native Affairs* on New Zealand's indigenous broadcaster Māori Television tweeted,

> Stay in NZ with the other 83 k unemployed youth or go to *The GC* where everyone has $ and lives in bikinis? Seems like a no brainer #TheGC … You can't deny Māori have a far better quality of life on #TheGC. It may seem shallow but actually their kids aint gonna get glue ear etc. (Lee-Harris in Stoddart 2012).

For some weeks the nation appeared significantly divided. Debates about whether the series deserved public funding, whether it was trash, who it appealed to, and who it offended were influenced by an implicit set of assumptions and expectations. Elsewhere I have argued that these assumptions and expectations constitute a coercive and persistent primitivism that influences rhetoric about representation and representation itself in the Pacific (Pearson 2013). Manifest in both liberal and conservative discourse, this primitivism narrowly envisions legitimate and authentic indigeneity as traditional, spiritual, properly outside regimes of commodification, and ideally untainted by Western conventions such as genre (Pearson 2013).

*The GC* drew fire because it violated virtually all of these tenets, envisioning Māori as transnational subjects who were occasionally indistinguishable in terms of affect, aspiration, or appearance from countless international reality television stars, eschewing BBC sobriety in favor of MTV slickness on prime-time commercial television. Nevertheless, despite or more likely because it offered a radically different televisual imagescape of Māori, the series attracted and maintained a significant Māori and Pasifika audience over not just one season but two, with a third just confirmed at the time of writing.

This article argues that the divisive nature of *The GC* and discourses surrounding the series, including heated and at times ugly debates over squandered taxpayer dollars and more reflexive but nevertheless anxiety-ridden discussions about Māori modernity, offers a unique opportunity to explore how romanticism (figured here as primitivism) and "reality" (in its various guises) figure in contemporary Pacific representation and cultural politics.

## The Controversy

The initial disagreements about the social and artistic merits of *The GC* described at the outset were almost immediately compounded by accusations of mismanaged taxpayer funds. Under pressure from an Official Information Act request by *National Business Review Online* journalist Rod Vaughan (Keall 2012), public service television funding agency New Zealand on Air (NZOA) revealed that it had originally approved a proposal for an eight-part observational documentary series proposal titled *Golden Mozzies,* which bore only superficial resemblance to *The GC* (Frewen 2012; Little 2012; Wichtel 2012). Whereas *Golden Mozzies* proposed to document how seven Māori who left New Zealand less than a decade ago have found financial and personal success as small-business owners, managers, sales representatives, and administrators in Queensland, Season 1 of *The GC* featured a cast of eleven, eight of whom had Māori ancestry, who now live and work on the Gold Coast as entertainers (both aspiring and established), personal trainers, glamour models, and laborers and property investors. Dispatching *Golden Mozzies*' claims to sober social documentary, *The GC* instead emulated MTV reality television franchises *Jersey Shore* (2009–12), *Geordie Shore* (2011–present), and *The Only Way is Essex* (2010–present). These series share the signature and recurring trope of a group of photogenic strangers forced to share domestic living arrangements under near-constant surveillance. Relatively thin on plot, they emphasize romance and stage events or circumstances designed to maximize interpersonal conflict. On *The GC*, core cast members Tame, of Tuhoe tribal descent; Jade and Zane, both from Ngati Porou; and their non-Māori girlfriends Jessi and Rosie lived in a luxury apartment forty stories above the boutiques and nightclubs of Broad Beach. A constellation of ancillary characters, including DJ Tuini, also known as Elyse Minhinnick of Ngati Te Ata descent; vocalists Jade Louise of Ngai Te Rangi/Ngai Tamanuhiri descent[2] and Nuz from Te Arawa; aspiring stripper/rapper Nate; and personal trainers Cole of Rongowhakaata, Rongomaiwahine, and Tuhoe descent and Alby of Te Whanau a Apanui descent, orbited the apartment (referred to as the *whare,* Māori for house) to varying degrees. Together, the core cast members spent a significant amount of time grooming, partying,

hooking up, breaking up, gossiping, and arguing about whose turn it was to clean the kitchen, while the peripheral cast members provided potential love interest, comedic relief, and eventually more substantive narratives about the challenges of displacement and transnational indigenous identity.

Media commentator Tom Frewen (2012) took NZOA to task for failing to enforce its own codes of compliance. His carefully documented litany of discrepancies between the proposal and the ensuing series, while undeniably cause for public dismay, nevertheless looked depressingly like a lack of accountability in yet another government organization. The intensity and divisiveness of the debate seemed oddly out of proportion to an instance of noncompliance involving $420,000. Perhaps, as television blogger Chris Philpott suggested, public outrage could be traced to the perception that NZOA's failure was more fundamental. Its mission statement at the time aimed "to champion local content through skillful investment in quality New Zealand broadcasting" (Philpott 2012).[3] Philpott and his sizable community of online sympathizers contended that while NZOA may have made a shrewd financial investment in *The GC,* quality had been sacrificed at the altar of crass commercialism in the process.

## Uncomfortable Bedfellows: Public Service Broadcasting and Reality Television

Quality, or rather a lack of it, animated a significant amount of the online commentary about the show. Responses to various blogs and articles referred to the series as "useless," "embarrassing," "rubbish," "trash," "crap," or perhaps most common and damning, "s**t." Critics also freely and frequently expressed resentment over what they perceived to be a waste of their tax money (and more than a few demanded a refund). Underlying much of the commentary about wasted taxpayer dollars on trash television seemed to be a sense that public service broadcasting and reality television were fundamentally incommensurable. One respondent to Kiwipolitico's blog titled "*The GC*: This is what we've come to admire?," identified only as "Jade," reinforced the perceived incommensurability between public service broadcasting and reality television when she emphatically asserted that "reality television was not quality television" ("Jade" in Stoddart 2012).

*The GC* was not the first prime-time reality television format adaptation to receive public funding from NZOA. In 2001 NZOA granted $480,000 to *Pioneer House* (2001), a historical reenactment format adapted from the UK where a modern-day family is "transported" back in time to live domestic life as it was a century ago (NZOA 2001). Set in a turn-of-last-century suburban Auckland villa, viewers tuned in each week to see how the Feyen family from

Palmerston North met the various challenges of living middle-class Pākehā[4] life as Victorians (NZOA 2001). *Pioneer House* attracted an average audience of 628,000 viewers per week, placing it as the most viewed show financed by NZOA in 2001. It generated little controversy, saw no public debate about taxpayer funding, and won a Qantas Media Award.[5] NZOA then funded *Colonial House* in 2003. The American format originally devised to historically reenact life in Plymouth Colony circa 1628 was adapted to recreate some of the challenges New Zealand's early European settlers faced circa 1852. Again, the series attracted little public scrutiny and no negative criticism.

The relative lack of controversy over publicly funding these format adaptations, both of which cost NZOA almost as much as *The GC,* can be partly attributed to, despite being reality television series, *Pioneer House* and *Colonial House* looking a lot like conventional public service broadcasting, or near enough to pass muster. They presented themselves as social experiments, guided by academic experts who authenticated the historical validity of their educational premise and offered audiences authoritative analytical commentary. Furthermore, both series had been commissioned by overseas public broadcasting organizations: *1900 House* (1999), on which *Pioneer House* was based, by Channel 4 in the United Kingdom, and *Colonial House* (2004) by PBS in the United States. In short, reality television did not appear to be incommensurable with public service broadcasting as long as it did not look excessively commercial.

Both *Pioneer House* and *Colonial House* could be regarded as part of public service broadcasting's broader experimentation with reality television, or what industry insiders tend to refer to as "popular factual" programming, and they are not alone. Format adaptation has long been acknowledged as a way of strategically mitigating the economic risks associated with contemporary television production while enabling the production of locally specific narratives (Waisbord 2004; Moran 1998). Māori program makers in New Zealand, in particular, have adapted a range of transnational formats, including reality television, to produce popular local indigenous content, often with critical success. For example, *Waka Reo* (2005–08), on indigenous broadcaster Māori Television, built an audience by reworking the global television format of *Survivor* (Smith 2011; Smith and de Bruin 2012: 305).[6] Another popular program, *Ho Mai Te Pakipaki,* is an adapted version of the *Idol* talent contest format (Abel 2013).

Organizations like NZOA face a seemingly intractable paradox. Audiences consistently articulate a desire for quality television documentary (a phenomenon easier to discern than to define), but desiring quality documentary and watching it (at least in significant numbers) are two rather different things. Given the increasingly precarious nature of ratings for stand-alone quality

documentaries and documentary series in New Zealand since the 1990s (NZOA 2012), one might be forgiven for concluding that survey respondents agree quality documentary television ought to exist but that they are not necessarily willing to watch it. Generic hybridity enables funders and broadcasters to broaden the appeal of their programming so that they can attract larger audiences, but there are some limits to the kind of hybridity that gains critical acceptance.

Tolerance for generic experimentation and indigeneity seems to be tolerated and even celebrated if it appears to be strategically negotiating with, subordinating, or subverting popular commercial paradigms to empower indigenous and minority representation. However, this tolerance wanes when minority interests appear to be sublimated to commercial values and interests. For example, NZOA did not face controversy over funding *Pioneer House* and *Colonial House;* however, it was interrogated over funding *NZ Idol,* which was a local version of the transnational *Idol* franchise (Perrott 2004). *Idol,* critics contended, was "too commercial." They inferred that its production in New Zealand would likely produce derivative, standardized fare—the type of programming that would best be left to the commercial market. NZOA defended its decision to loan (rather than grant outright) the series' producers $1.6 million on the basis that without public funding, series like *NZ Idol,* which have broad popular appeal and cultural nationalist value, would not be made. Their decision was partly vindicated when a third of all New Zealanders watched the finale of Season 1 (Zwaan and de Bruin 2013: 3). Despite its transnational format, de Bruin argued, *NZ Idol* successfully pried open a space for the production of contemporary postcolonial locality, giving young Māori and Pasifika greater national visibility on prime time (2012: 239). Historically, ethnic minorities and indigenous groups have been marginalized by a broadcast culture that is overdetermined by colonial history, privileging and normalizing a "homogenous and Eurocentric expression of cultural belonging" (Smith 2006: 27). If left to the market, it is likely that New Zealand audiences would have been tuning in, as they have, to episodes of *American Idol* and *Australian Idol* rather than *NZ Idol.*

The divisiveness that characterized *The GC* could be seen as an extension and amplification of earlier debates over the value of format adaptations like *NZ Idol. The GC,* however, seemed to attract more intense condemnation, particularly from critics who accused the cast of being "plastic." "Plastic Māori" is a term often used to describe assimilated Māori with little cultural knowledge, especially about language *(te reo),* custom *(tikanga),* and genealogy *(whakapapa).* It is also used to refer to Māori who live outside of New Zealand. In this case it could also be seen to refer to a sense that Māori

authenticity had been subordinated to the stylistic and aesthetic imperatives of transnational format television.

## Just a Bad Copy?

Comparisons among *The GC*, *Jersey Shore*, and *Geordie Shore* were engendered by *The GC*'s beachside location, its emphasis on gym-hardened male physiques, its distinctive lexicon, and its ethnic subcultural focus. These comparisons were justified in many respects but not all. Like Mike "The Situation" Sorrentino from *Jersey Shore*, Tame was often interviewed bare chested, educating viewers on the finer points of his personal vernacular. On *Jersey Shore*, unattractive women were referred to as "grenades," men pursuing women for sex was called "creepin," and "smooshing" referred to the outcome of a successful "creep." On *The GC*, mates were referred to as "neffs," attractive girls were "aunties," and girlfriends were "mumsies." On all three series, the cast members would drink, dance, flirt, and fight; however, *Jersey Shore* and *Geordie Shore* were more sexually suggestive than *The GC*.

Although Tame was not exactly like Mike "The Situation" or his *Jersey Shore* castmate Pauly D, scopically and performatively they seemed more similar than dissimilar. Their physiognomy, musculature, and tattoos often rendered them virtually interchangeable. The contrived, awkward qualities of unscripted reality television, widely understood to be manufactured for dramatic effect, or according to Poniewozik (2006), "fudged," caused audiences to view these reality television performances as equally inauthentic.

*The GC* also radically transformed the aesthetics and economics of televisual indigeneity by co-opting signature elements from another MTV series, *The Hills* (2006–10). At first glance, *The Hills* may seem like an unlikely comparison.[7] It featured glamorous lifestyles in the culture industries like some parts of *The GC*, but its undisputed star was Lauren Conrad, a rich white girl from Orange County who moved to Los Angeles in pursuit of fame and fortune in the fashion industry. The series followed Conrad and her coterie through their days as interns or entry-level workers and through their nights in the myriad chic clubs and restaurants of West Los Angeles.

*The Hills* rejected the low-fidelity, unpolished, observational video documentary and surveillance aesthetics typically used by shows like *Jersey Shore* to enhance their claims to "reality." Instead, it expressly imitated the aesthetics of scripted drama, emulating the highly cinematic look of director Michael Mann (Gay 2008). The camera work was steady and stylishly smooth. The lighting was soft, controlled, and always flattering. Transitions between locations and characters were often signaled by variable-speed aerial tracking shots. Its overall production values were undeniably lush and

expensive (Leppert and Wilson 2008). Leppert and Wilson argued that *The Hills* used this aesthetic, along with soap opera conventions, to "adapt earlier modes of female stardom to the genre of reality programming" (2008, para 1). The overall effect, they argued, was to produce Conrad as a new kind of phenomenon: an ordinary girl who simultaneously produced the intimacy of reality television (Biressi and Nunn 2005) and transcended the garden variety celetoid (Rojek 2001).[8] She became a star in "what…appears to be a fictionalized narrative of her own life" (Leppert and Wilson 2008, para 19).

*The GC* imitates *The Hills*' cinematic production values, producing similarly enhanced effects. Critics may have characterized the storyline as thin and banal, but like it or hate it, most commentators agreed that the series served up a half broadcast hour of visual spectacle. The cast was young, attractive, and affluent. They inhabited a glamorous and exciting beachside city. Several narrative arcs, such as Cole's heroic efforts to open his specialized MMA training gym, reinforced the value of ambition, hard work, and risk. *The GC*'s aesthetics did not produce televisual "reality" so much as a cinematically intensified extraordinary version of ordinary transnational lives.

Whether this type of hyperaestheticization was axiomatically progressive is debatable, but it certainly was unprecedented (Wichtel 2012). By using an aesthetic closely tied to big-budget feature film production and the representation of young privileged white women, *The GC* radically reconfigured the visual repertoire historically used to denote indigeneity.

To New Zealand audiences who have been trained by decades of national television to expect images of Māori authenticity to accord with a set of established visual and narrative tropes, Tame and company no longer coded as quintessentially Māori. Although these tropes vary, they are typically premised upon "fix[ing] Indigeneity within an unrecoverable past of fetishized tradition, propinquity with nature, and immutable connections to land…" (Coombes et al. 2011: 475). Far from "home" in their executive suite, at the flash bar in Broad Beach, or opening an upscale gym, the cast of *The GC* failed to fulfill the critical audience's expectations, which continue to be shaped in many respects by the structural symbolic relation between the modern West and the primitive rest, a relation Trouillot (2003) referred to as the "Savage slot."

Originally conceptualized in relation to anthropology and its late-twentieth-century disciplinary crisis, which was precipitated by the vicissitudes of modernity and postmodern critique, the savage slot continues to be a useful idea because romanticism endures as a powerful conceptual force in the contemporary Pacific. While romanticism retains some of its early twentieth-century antecedents, imagining Pacific peoples properly outside of time and history as in classic films of the 1920s, such as *Moana: Romance of a Golden*

*Age* (1925), it has also proven highly adaptive imagining proper, authentic Pacific representation to eschew commodification, commercialism, genre, or traces of contemporary popular global culture (Pearson 2013).

Unlike the locally celebrated and popular film *BOY* (2010), which also "refused to deliver more domesticated ideas of Indigenous culture" (Smith 2012: 67) by incorporating elements of global popular culture, including Michael Jackson and The Hulk, *The GC* seemed to test notions of authenticity and romanticism more thoroughly. Its critics failed to warm to its use of global mediated idioms to represent modern, mobile, deterritorialized Māori subjectivities and experiences.

Online and anecdotally, *The GC* attracted criticism from both Pākehā and Māori. A number of negative online comments were written by critics who identified themselves as Māori or expressed embarrassment on behalf of Māori. However, a disproportionate number of critical responses, particularly those voicing concern about wasting taxpayer money and the inauthenticity of the show, appear to have come from middle-class, middle-aged Pākehā sources. Considering that Season 1 of *The GC* is reported to have attracted an average of 92,000 young Māori and Pasifika viewers, the divide between the series' critics and its fans appears to have fractured along fault lines of age and ethnicity.

A significant number of online critics claim to have either watched the first ten minutes of *The GC*'s debut episode or to have decided not to watch the series on the basis of its premise or its promotional material. The ratings reflect initial curiosity about the show, with an audience of about 375,000 that drops to a low of just under 250,000 midway through and recovers to 325,000 by the first season's finale. For the nonindigenous audience members who tuned in beyond the first episode, *The GC* may not have delivered expected images of indigeneity but ironically offered something uncomfortably and perhaps unexpectedly familiar.

## Unsettling Narratives on *The GC*

When Little (2012) wrote "the negative reaction to *The GC* wasn't that of decent folk shocked at some uncouth behavior. It was the horror of the monster confronted with its own reflection," he meant that outraged New Zealand audiences were hypocrites, failing to detect their own complicity in the world *The GC* represented. Read another way, however, Little's comment could also be interpreted to mean that *The GC* foregrounded the loss and disconnection of migration not just of Māori but for many Pākehā as well.

New Zealand settler subjects have been described as "uneasy, unsettled [and] uncomfortable" (Smith 2011: 111), perhaps more so in the present

because debates about the morality (or rather immorality) of settlement have received increasing public attention (Bell 2006: 256). The legitimacy of Pākehā claims to peoplehood has been cast into doubt because Māori dispute the legality of settler claims to territory. The chief instrument through which these disputes have been expressed is the Treaty of Waitangi Settlements Process, whereby Māori have sought redress and financial compensation for historical breaches of their agreement with the Crown. Territory is particularly significant in this equation because of longstanding conceptions of culture and legitimacy arising from "sedentarism" (Bell 2006: 254).

Sedentarism refers to the deeply "rooted" and taken-for-granted modern metaphysical relation between people and territory (Malkki 1992; Bell 2006). Authentic culture, according to sedentarism, is produced through sustained interactions between a people and their geographic environment. Migration therefore is seen as a rupture of this natural order. Uprooted and transplanted (however carefully) onto foreign soil, the morality and validity of settler cultures is forever regarded as precarious.

At first glance, DJ Tuini's storyline on the first season of *The GC* served as a stirring tale about the cultural losses migration and settlement exact. Raised in Australia, established Brisbane DJ Tuini (Elyse Minhinnick) has little Māori cultural knowledge or experience. In an early episode she struggles to pronounce *kia ora* (a Māori greeting) and *hangi* (Māori for an earthen oven). However, inspired by meeting Tame and other castmates, she expresses a desire to meet her New Zealand–based *whanau* and visit her *marae.* Her father, who left New Zealand under traumatic and tragic circumstances more than twenty years previously, agrees to return with her. In the penultimate episode, they both arrive at Tahuna *marae* in Waiuku and speak with *kuia* (a Māori female elder) Dame Nganeko Minhinnick, who is welcoming but formidable. Their initial exchange is warm but terse. Afterward, Elyse, her father, and her auntie visit her grandmother's and uncles' graves at the *urupa* (Māori for cemetery or burial ground). These sequences reaffirm DJ Tuini's Māori identity by observing and representing her genealogical ties to this ancestral place. In this way, *The GC* reaffirms the fundamental aspects of Māori identity and belonging through *whakapapa.*[9] The sequence, however, also functions as a reminder of the fragility of cultural belonging and performance. DJ Tuini is profoundly alienated from her *Māoritanga.* The fact that she lives in another world is underscored by the way she teeters up to the *whare tipuna* in her dramatic makeup, big-city fashion, and stiletto hills, past a woman and child sitting on the floor weaving flax.[10] Her awkward uncertainty is palpable. She is "home" but not at home. For settler audiences who may have themselves made the pilgrimage "home" to the "mother" country, DJ Tuini's vague expression of unease as she struggles to pronounce Māori

words might have seemed uncannily familiar, offering an unexpected opportunity to reflect upon their own historical processes of severing ties with one place and settling in another.

DJ Tuini's return to her *marae* has potentially more significant and confronting symbolic consequences for settler subjectivity than simply an opportunity to identify with her and to reflexively contemplate displacement and loss. These consequences might account in some sense for the intensely negative reaction some critics had to what Little (2012) describes as the sensation of "looking in the mirror." Settler identity is constructed in relation to a specific iteration of indigeneity. Although the realities are far more complex, the populist and commonsense version of Māori continues to envision them as primordial because of their relationship to Aotearoa New Zealand. Settlers lay privileged claim to belonging because of their historical relationship with Māori, codified in part at least by the Treaty of Waitangi, which permitted permanent settlement and cultural "partnership." When Māori are represented as migrants, their primordial ties undermined by displacement and the tangible loss of distinctive cultural practices (*te reo, tikanga,* and *whakapapa*), settler identities, already uneasy, potentially become more precarious. Without their privileged relation to Māori primordialism, settlers may find it difficult to differentiate themselves from mere migrants whose claims to belonging are particularly tenuous in New Zealand.[11] Admittedly, there's little solid proof that audiences felt threatened in this way; however, Little's mirror comment, in conjunction with *The GC* producer Bailey Mackey's view that "negative comments often say more about the people making the comment than…what the show is doing" (2013), and the depth of feeling the series engendered suggest that middle-class, middle-aged critics were responding to more than just misappropriated public funds.

Fans of *The GC* were considerably less vocal online and in the media more generally; however, there were a number of self-identified Māori who described *The GC* as a welcome intervention in a mediascape primarily focused upon representing indigenous communities as deprived and distressed. There were also, to be fair, a number of Māori critics who detested the show, usually citing its inauthenticity and superficiality as key issues. To critics who argued that the show lacked "realism" and "Māori don't even live like that," Mackey responded:

> Yeah, well I've got an overwhelming response that suggests that they do. I think what the issue here could be is that we're not used to seeing Māori in prime-time mainstream living like that. Too often, you know we sit at the top of some really bad statistics and it's easier to shine the light on those statistics. Yet when we present Māori in a different way that even some Māori find it hard to come to terms with sometimes that sort of a big paradigm shift or perspective shift is hard to take (2012).

For some viewers, however, the series' lack of realism was not an issue. Unperturbed by *The GC*'s failure to "accurately" represent the quotidian struggles of trans-Tasman Māori, Māori students in my postgraduate media studies seminar at Auckland University reported that their Māori friends enjoyed the show because of rather than despite its glamour and glossiness—a sentiment apparently shared by Kelly Tahiwi, whose Facebook comment read, "It's plastic as…but that's why we love *The GC*!" (2012).

More than 40% of Māori watching television on the night of *The GC*'s premiere tuned in (Keall 2012). In their commentary and viewing numbers, younger Māori and Pasifika fans expressed an appetite for and a desire to see images that do not conform to the constraints of primitivist expectation and the savage slot. They were not an audience necessarily receptive to the hallmark aesthetics and content of quality documentary. *The GC* offered an appealing and complex vision of transnational Māori modernity substantively, stylistically, and politically.

## Season 2

Throughout the controversy, NZOA remained unrepentant about its funding decision, asserting that *The GC* met the agency's key objectives of showing "positive, confident Māori in prime time on a commercial channel…to a younger audience" (NZOA 2012). They do not appear to have been asked to fund a second season. In 2013 Māori broadcast funding agency Te Mangai Paho (TMP) announced that it would step in to fund a second season of *The GC*. Clearly keen to retain if not build upon the Māori and Pasifika audience that watched Season 1, TMP appeared to be capitalizing upon the momentum that would potentially be lost if NZOA declined to court further controversy. Acknowledging that *The GC* did not meet TMP's minimum requirements for Māori language content, they required the show to increase its use of Māori. However, the organization did not appear to place any other restrictions on the show's format adaptation, its cast, or its aesthetics. This could be seen as TMP's endorsement of the show's overall approach. Furthermore, the symbolic value of Season 1 as an intervention in debates about national public service broadcasting, commercialism, and indigeneity could be seen in Season 2's provocative new title card, which read,

*WARNING*
*THIS MEAN-AS PROGRAMME HAS*
*HOT AUNTIES*
*AND NEFFS*
*AND CUZZIES THAT HAVE JOBS*
*MĀORI STEREOTYPES*

*WERE HARMED IN THE MAKING*
*OF THIS TELEVISION SHOW*
*AND MAY NOT BE SUITABLE*
*FOR SOME VIEWERS*

Season 2 of *The GC* was greeted by comparative silence. Viewing numbers were about half of Season 1, possibly as a result of fewer Pākehā viewers, although strong enough for TV3 to announce a third season in its 2015 lineup. Facebook likes on *The GC*'s official page stabilized above 53,000, whereas "Cancel *The GC*" stalled at 9,700. When TMP agreed to fund the show, there was a public perception that the show was now a special-interest program, of interest principally to Māori. The same taxpayer dollars were being "squandered" insofar as general taxation pays for both NZOA and TMP. The non-Māori audience members, however, no longer felt that the show was relevant to them; therefore, they may have declined to comment further. This could be seen as an example of how biculturalism tends to divide Pākehā from Māori rather than bring them into relation with each other (Bell 2006, 258).

## Conclusion

The controversy over *The GC* began as outrage over the public funding of what many felt was trash television. When critics argued that quality public service broadcasting and format adaption were incommensurable, they neglected to acknowledge that taxpayer dollars had already funded several format adaptations in the past, two of which generated little negative criticism. These series, *Pioneer House* and *Colonial House*, were consistent with settler-centric notions of national history and culture. Both series conformed to the stylistic expectations and assumptions of quality public television. *The GC*, however, was significantly at odds with the expectations and assumptions about appropriate and acceptable Māori televisual representation. Its highly stylized aesthetic; its use of recognizable reality television structure, premise, and narrative focus; and its unrepentant commercial appeal not only alienated many viewers but also exposed how romanticist notions of autochthony, primordialism, purity, tradition, and spirituality are translated into an aesthetic that privileges noncommercial, nongenre, realist representation. Tame and his fellow GC castmates were in many respects illegible according to the narrative and aesthetic constraints of New Zealand quality television. As a result, many critics argued, middle-class, middle-aged New Zealanders of European descent took offense.

To characterize the controversy over *The GC* as one that neatly divided middle-class, middle-aged European New Zealanders from young Māori

and Pasifika is too simplistic. The series clearly had supporters and detractors in both communities. The public discourse surrounding the show, however, including how the funding agencies NZOA and TMP rationalized their support, appeared to characterize the split as motivated in part by age and ethnicity. The series also potentially challenged Pākehā settler identities by representing Māori as deterritorialized migrants, calling into question Pākehā senses of self.

*The GC* was not necessarily a good television series. It was contrived, repetitive, often boring, and stilted. If the ratings data are accurate, however, the show appealed to an audience that national television has historically struggled to attract. Young Māori and Pasifika commentators did not appear to be phased by the show's lack of realism; instead, part of its appeal was its symbolic capital as a prime-time series showing young, attractive Māori having fun and taking ambitious risks that occasionally pay off (in the case of Cole's gym venture). Adapting an overseas format may have standardized or assimilated Māori into a generic transnational flow of television, but it also sutured Māori into that flow, permitting expressions of modernity that previous regimes of representation have often suppressed or ignored. In the case of *The GC,* the divisive furor may have been less about taxpayers funding trash television and more about ongoing tensions between romantic primitivist expectations about Pacific representation and contemporary realities of indigenous and settler transnational modernity.

## NOTES

1. Since the 1990s there has been a sustained exodus of New Zealanders seeking greater prosperity overseas, particularly across the Tasman (Bedford et al. 2000). In 2006 almost 12% of New Zealand citizens resided in Australia (Department of Immigration and Multicultural and Indigenous Affairs 2007). The figure for Māori has tended to trend significantly higher. Some estimates suggest that one in six individuals claiming Māori ancestry were either born in or are now living in Australia (Hamer 2011: 47). Others like Black Inc Media, which produced *The GC,* suggest that the figure is closer to one in five. Queensland now has more Māori than New Zealand's fourth-largest city, Hamilton.

2. One of the major storylines toward the end of Season 1 of *The GC* explains how Jade Louise, who has no Māori ancestry, is the *whangai* (Māori customary adoption) child of Māori parents living in Australia (Keane 2013).

3. In its current 2015 avatar, NZOA has changed its mission statement to read "to champion local content that engages, stimulates, and satisfies intended audiences."

4. Pākehā is a contested term, but it is commonly used to refer to white New Zealanders, specifically settlers of British descent.

5. Amy West describes it as adhering so closely to the British series upon which it was based as to feel "like the re-enactment of someone else's history" (West 2012: 113).

6. Another example would be the supernatural drama series *Mataku;* see Glynn and Tyson (2007).

7. Barry Hill (2012) notes in passing that *The GC* bears more resemblance to *The Hills* than to *Jersey Shore.*

8. Rojek (2001) defines "celetoid as the term for any form of compressed, concentrated, attributed celebrity. I distinguish celetoids from celebrities because, generally the latter enjoy a more durable career with the public" (20).

9. *Whakapapa* expresses genealogical ties, social relations, and connection to place (Rāwiri 2013).

10. The *whare tipuna* is one of the buildings on a *marae.* It is the ancestral house where meetings take place.

11. For example, Chinese who have been present in New Zealand since the midnineteenth century are almost always referred to as migrants, not settlers (Pearson 2011).

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