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Heartland Wainuiomata: Rurality to Suburbs, Black Singlets to Naughty Lingerie

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Robyn Longhurst and Carla Wilson enlarge the question of both national identity and gender by investigating the aptly-named Heartland documentary series. They analyse both the series itself and the discourses around it from the book of the series to the press cuttings. In doing so they pinpoint images of nation, masculinity and femininity that are both stable and transgressive and which emerge through the documentaries themselves, their presenter Gary McCormick and the celebrated Chloe of Wainuiomata.

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The *Heartland* documentary television series provides an excellent opportunity to tease out issues of representations of place, 'real' places, 'kiwi culture' and constructions of masculinity. The main presenter of *Heartland*, Gary McCormick, claims that the aim of the series is to demonstrate to viewers 'that life in the countryside and provincial towns of New Zealand is as rich, varied, and as interesting as anywhere else on the planet' (McCormick, 1994: 7). McCormick and his production team go in search of the 'real' (read: rural) New Zealand and, using the genre of documentary, (re)present it to viewers. They draw on 'a rural imagining' (Lees and Berg 1995: 33; *see also* Perry 1994: 40-63) which they link to a pioneering and tough masculinity. This tough masculinity is the focus of the first half of this chapter.¹

The second part dwells on one specific episode in the series – *Heartland*

Wainuiomata: Beyond Nappy Valley – which screened in New Zealand on 2 August 1994. Wainuiomata is an end settlement, separated from other suburbs by the hills surrounding the valley east of Wellington. We focus on this programme because it disrupted representations of rural, pioneering and tough masculinity which dominate the series and instead represented suburban and, at times, transgressive femininity. The producers broke with their usual documentary formula and focused on images often associated with the genre of soap opera. After *Heartland* Wainuiomata screened, controversy erupted as (mainly local) people contested the representation. They voiced their concerns to Television New Zealand, radio stations and newspapers.' In order to better understand this local contestation of media representation, one of the authors of this chapter (Carla Wilson) visited Wainuiomata and conducted interviews with a focus group and engaged other less formal research methods. These findings from Wainuiomata were then contrasted to the dominant images of rural New Zealand in *Heartland*.'

'Rural Imaging' – The 'Real' Heart

The title of the series, *Heartland*, is a rhetorical device used to imply that the 'real' heart of New Zealand is within rural and provincial spaces. The word 'heartland' carries emotive connotations of the rural idyll and nostalgia. The *Heartland* symbol, shown at the beginning of the programme, is of two fence staples forming a heart with the sun setting in the background. These rhetorical devices associate the 'real' New Zealand heartland with 'the land' and rural communities. The producers of the *Heartland* series often represent and mythologise rural and provincial areas as a central, 'real' and valued component of New Zealand's national identity. Bell (1993: 194) identifies the components of rural mythologies in New Zealand as 'the wholesomeness of working the land, joyful community life, satisfying family life, the rural aesthetic ideal, the nature myth, the traditional division of rural labour, rural conformity'. Places in *Heartland* often appear to be selected and reconstructed within discourses of rural nostalgia. There have been few programmes in any of the series that focus on urban places. Cities are frequently denounced by the producers and people screened on many of the programmes as modern, 'plastic' and fickle. In the *Heartland* programme on Hokianga, a local states: 'I wouldn't swap this for anything you can have in Auckland'.

In order to highlight the rural, the producers often present silent images of landscapes and scenery. There is no commentary or voice-over to complement these extended shots of landscapes; instead the sequence is constructed as the natural gaze on the landscape. In these scenes the production team avoids rapid editing and instead lingers on panoramic vistas. These images are slow-moving in tune with the supposedly slower pace of the rural environment.

McCormick (1994: 31) notes: '... in New Zealand we have space. It is our

crowning glory'. The land, open space, isolation and the past become signifiers of the 'real' and the valued New Zealand. The high country, for example, is described by McCormick (1994) as isolated and therefore a place to respect. Stewart Island is represented as a place exposed to the natural elements and closer to life and death. McCormick (1994: 156) states that in Stewart Island, 'there is little or no crime and it's possible to leave your leather jacket and wallet on the bar and know that they will remain untouched. This is New Zealand as it once was'. According to McCormick, 'New Zealand needs a Stewart Island; it's truly New Zealand the way we were'. In the Maniototo, McCormick describes how the locals wave, 'just like they used to everywhere in New Zealand'. In Opunake, the programme focuses on 'old-fashioned small-town traditions' such as the draper and barber. The representation of the Chatham Islands is another example of reimposing the rural myth on New Zealand's landscape. McCormick (1994: 18) believes: 'The Chathams are a part of our mental and spiritual picture of ourselves – even if we never go there'. In *Heartland*, the Chathams are (re)constructed as part of 'our' imagined national community. Chatham Islanders perform like actors for the rest of the country, reinforcing their mythological role as rural, isolated and wild. They embody the ideals of the 'real' New Zealand.

'Distinctly Male, Countryside Ways'

What is also evident in many of the *Heartland* programmes is that constructions of rural landscapes are often aligned with a specific construction of masculinity – what we will call 'kiwi bloke masculinity'. Kiwi blokes are at home in tough, rural environments. Jock Phillips (1987: 10) explains that in the past (and perhaps the present), 'the heart of the male culture ... was not found in the cities but in the rural and frontier regions of New Zealand ... such places were likely to be the site of exclusively male institutions'. Wiki Brass, a forestry supervisor in Tokoroa (cited in McCormick, 1994: 32), claims:

Good hard-case people – hard workers, they work hard, they play together hard – and it's a good honest bunch of real men. Real men aren't plastic –they're not like your Queen Street fellas. She's [sic] a good life out here –good, clean, healthy, outdoor life.

In *Heartland* nature and rural environments are masculinised and valued. Men are presented as being at home on the land, while (high) culture and the urban are feminised and not valued.⁴ The producers of *Heartland* are interested in culture, but this is frequently masculine, everyday culture in the rural environment. *Heartland* reinforces images of the pioneering colonial Pakeha male as being at the heart of New Zealand's national identity. Examples of pioneering work shown in the *Heartland* include gold mining, sheep farming, forestry and dairying. This is work that traditionally required independent,

tough, physical labour. There is often nostalgic dialogue in the programmes which reinforces the 'hardness' of early men, the tough times they faced and their struggles. The West Coast, for example, has an important place in New Zealand's traditional masculine frontier folklore. This area used to have a nearly all-male population, owing to mining and forestry which predominated in this environment. McCormick (1994: 19) notes:

The West Coast of the South Island ... does play a central role in the mythology of Kiwi life. More so to men possibly than women. Men will often ask me if I've been down 'the Coast' ... It's not that they really want to know. It's more that they are seeking an opportunity to let their eyes glaze over and relive some past real or imagined experience down there
the West Coast is a very satisfying figment in many a Kiwi [man's] imagination, and if it didn't exist, it would be necessary to invent it.

Thus, for many 'people' (usually understood as Pakeha men) the West Coast is an important part of an 'imagined' national identity. McCormick (interview, 1995) states, 'I'm always getting people coming up to me ... and saying, "ah, I've been down the coast. I saw Haast, I loved that programme". And you think they were there the day before yesterday, not 25 years ago.' It is interesting to note, however, that according to the producer of *Heartland* (interview, 1995):

The West Coast was a huge disappointment We were sure there would be good programmes, good *Heartland* sort of programmes to be made on the West Coast with lots of characters and old buffers telling us all the history. And you go over there and it's one of the blandest places in New Zealand. It really is you know ... all the old rocks have died off long ago. Everybody's making their money out of selling lambs-wool slippers to tourists. And it's really actually quite a dull place in a cultural sense.

Regardless of this 'dullness', selective images were used to reinvent Hokitika and Haast as frontier and masculine environments. The programme on Hokitika focused on activities such as gold mining, forestry and greenstone. In the programme on Haast, McCormick described residents as 'a distinctive breed of people' and the place as 'New Zealand's last frontier'.

In the *Heartland* programmes and in McCormick's *Heartland* book (1994) there are many images of killing and dead animals. These images emphasise the importance of the kill to the frontier man and how masculine bloodied bodies are naturally positioned and identified in the rural landscape. The frontispiece to the *Heartland* book depicts a man who is muscular, bare chested, his arm splattered with blood. He wears a cowboy hat. The iconography of this image signifies the importance of 'hard masculinity' within rural New Zealand. Hunting is constructed as a way of life in rural areas in many *Heartland* programmes. The Waimarino 'Big Three' Easter hunt, for example, involves

pig hunting, deer stalking and trout fishing over three days. The event also includes a race where the contestants carry a dead pig over their shoulders for a distance. In the *Heartland* book, two men on the Chatham Islands are photographed wearing black jumpers, jeans and gumboots. They face the camera directly. One of the men is holding a gun while the other man has the pig's head over his own head (see McCormick 1994: 164).

In many of the programmes McCormick acts as a catalyst for the New Zealand audience to (re)imagine kiwi bloke frontier culture. According to McCormick (interview, 1995), many people see him as the archetypal kiwi bloke, despite the fact that he is somewhat uncomfortable with this identity.

Apparently it's literally true that in all the research groups, they get groups of people and they ask them what people represent certain images to them ... and I come out every time as being the archetypal kiwi bloke ... I was actually shocked to hear this myself. I thought this was quite a big responsibility ... I'm not altogether sure how I feel about that.

(McCormack, interview, 1995)

McCormick (1994: 167) says that the *Heartland* series has been full of instances where he has tried to be 'one of the boys', often failing and embarrassing himself. When talking about the Haast Whitebaiters' Ball, McCormick (1994: 24) explains, 'it was widely expected that I would be the "life of the party", or, at the very least, stand jug-to-jug with the best of them'. Yet McCormick is not always comfortable in 'hyper-masculinised' environments. He often does not engage in the rural masculine activities shown in *Heartland* and he approaches frontier environments from a position of ignorance and uneasiness. At times he gazes on these masculine activities as if he is an outsider, as if these things are not part of his (urban) culture. McCormick, like his audience, has an acute fascination with, and abhorrence of, this 'blokeness', since it differs from his urban lifestyle.

McCormick, however, is not a complete 'outsider'. He does succeed in talking with men in the backblocks and in the rural pubs. He claims: 'I'm seen as an approachable sort of guy, a bit of a lad around town' (interview, 1995). While McCormick is different from the rural men depicted in many of the programmes, he is incorporated into their culture as a 'mate'. As McCormick (1994: 24) himself states: 'in the heartland of New Zealand, among the believers in mateship, honour and standing your ground, there are various forms of male bonding, there are distinctly male, countryside ways'. One of these countryside ways evidenced in the *Heartland* programmes is using nicknames to identify mates. Examples include 'Baldy', 'Cooch', 'Toots', 'Bald Eagle', 'Stink', 'Bully' and 'Blue Jeans'. McCormick (1994: 146) explains, '...there's a lot to be said for a place which thrills in its own use of nicknames' (see also Phillips 1987: 31). To acknowledge the nicknames of men is to acknowledge their identity as a mate and as a kiwi bloke.

There are many men in contemporary urban Aotearoa/New Zealand who do not subscribe to this rural, frontier notion of masculinity, yet the image is continually (re)presented in *Heartland*. One of the problems with this is that, as Peter Jackson (1991: 201) argues, 'in privileging certain socially approved forms of masculinity, other forms are implicitly subordinated'. Bob Connell (1995: 78) explains that: 'Within the overall framework [of hegemony] there are specific gender relations of dominance and subordination between groups of men'. Connell (1995: 79) continues that although the majority of men gain from hegemonic masculinity, 'not many men actually meet the normative standards'. Part of the power of hegemonic masculinity is that it becomes naturalised (see Connell, 1995: 45-48). For example, it is often seen as natural for men to kill animals, to engage in 'hard' labour, to want to have a beer with their mates and to sometimes be aggressive. Most of the *Heartland* programmes shore up this relationship of hegemonic masculinity with the natural by placing it in a landscape that is also constructed as natural — the great outdoors. The typical *Heartland* programme teaches the viewer that men can be 'real' (read: natural) men when they occupy big, open, rugged, rural (read: natural) places.

Wainuiomata as Emasculated?

In *Heartland* Wainuiomata, however, the producers break with their usual cinematic formula of (re)presenting hegemonic masculinity in natural places. Instead the programme depicts suburban places, which are usually associated with femininity rather than masculinity. The genre of documentary appears to give way, at least in part, to the genre of soap opera in *Heartland* Wainuiomata. The black singlets that have become an icon of rural life in New Zealand give way to naughty lingerie bought and sold in the suburbs. In this way the programme is atypical of the *Heartland* series. It is perhaps not surprising, therefore, that it was heavily contested by the local community as 'unrepresentative'. Wainuiomata has traditionally been feminised through the use of such labels as 'Nappy Valley'. Since the 1950s and 1960s it has been widely thought of as a working-class area offering cheap housing. Over the years Wainuiomata has attracted many young families wanting to buy their first home. Images of women with children and women's identities as housewives form an integral part of the *Heartland* programme on Wainuiomata. Examples include images of a mother making a school lunch in her kitchen and mothers picking up children from school. In particular, the programme focuses on Debbie Cairns and Chloe Reeves (Reeves became a minor national celebrity after the programme) who are identified as 'Wainuiomata housewives'. The discussion between Cairns and McCormick in Cairns' kitchen while she is getting her daughter ready for school constructs the neighbourhood as friendly and as dominated by young families, thereby reinforcing the 'Nappy Valley' image.

Cairns: We've become very good friends with the neighbours next door. Her name is Chloe and they're a very, very nice family and the children get ... yes, urn yeah, the children get on really good and um her boyfriend and my husband get on really good, so we all get on really, really well. It reminds me of like a New Zealand sort of version of *Coronation Street* round here. It's just so friendly, eh.

This discourse of a friendly neighbourhood is reinforced in discussions McCormick has with Reeves. Reeves is shown picking up her daughter from school on her pink scooter. She makes McCormick afternoon tea and plays a tune for him on the piano she bought at a second-hand shop. Reeves talks to McCormick about the conversations that she and Cairns have about their love lives and partners and about how they like to swap clothes. Reeves and Cairns are filmed talking over the fence between their two houses. Images of women talking or 'gossiping' are frequently used in the programme.

A Tupperware party (where women meet to buy plastic kitchenware) is another example in the programme that illustrates women's roles as housewives and mothers. McCormick attends the Tupperware party, which takes place in a suburban house. He is the only man in attendance and he tells one of the women that he has never been to a Tupperware party before. At times he looks confused and perplexed by the proceedings. The party is constructed as women's space.

McCormick also attends a 'Loverware Lingerie' party. The women who attend the party appear to be in their twenties and thirties and are shown drinking alcohol while the host talks about the stripper who is coming. The host shows the audience of women her novelty penis-shaped candle and the crotchless lace underwear she is selling. (After receiving many complaints about this particular scene the New Zealand Broadcasting Standards Authority stopped images of the candle being rescreened in 1995.) McCormick comments that he is the only man at the party and feels uncomfortable. Juxtaposed with the lingerie party are images of men playing pool and watching television (stereotypical masculine activities) in the garage behind the house. The women at the party are shown clapping and yelling encouragingly at the stripper while he takes his clothes off.

These representations of femininity at the lingerie party can be read as somewhat transgressive. The women are portrayed as confident and assertive when they grab the stripper's buttocks and lick his stomach. These activities suggest a reversal in traditional gender roles (*see* Wolf 1990). In *Heartland* Wainuiomata, the usually private, feminine bodies of 'housewives' become part of the dominant discourse as the masculine body is objectified. In an ironic twist, the more usual masculine gaze upon an empty and feminised landscape (*see* Rose 1993) gives ways to a feminised gaze upon a masculinised body.

From Documentary to Soap Opera

Images of women talking to each other and partaking in Tupperware and lingerie parties worked to align this particular documentary with soap opera. Popular-culture theorist John Fiske (1987) defines the news and documentary as having a 'masculine narrative form', while soap opera has a feminine form. Fiske (1987: 76) states, 'the male's preference for news, documentary, sport, and realistic "muscle" drama becomes translated into the "natural" superiority of these genres'.

Heartland Wainuiomata borrows the form of the soap opera through such images as female neighbours chatting over the fence without acknowledging the camera and through images of women talking about their 'love lives', clothes and going to parties. *Wainuiomata* embodies both suburbia and the local neighbourhood, places which are the focus of many soap operas. In the programme Cairns compares her street to *Coronation Street*. A review in the *New Zealand Herald* (3 August 1994) also stated 'a housewives-over-the-fence scene came across like a devastating soap opera send-up'. A letter to *Wainuiomata News* (11 August 1994a) reinforces this: 'the makers of the programme deliberately portrayed a caricature of suburbia in order to provide entertainment at our expense'. These feelings were reiterated in the interviews conducted by Carla Wilson (1996) with some people believing the dialogues and interactions in the programme among the women were staged for the benefit of the camera. For instance, people questioned whether scenes such as the neighbours chatting over the fence, the lingerie party and even the identity or persona of Reeves herself were 'authentic' or whether people were acting.

One of the main ingredients in soap opera is gossip. Mary Ellen Brown (1989: 175) notes: 'gossip is denigrated in much the same way that soaps and other cultural forms practised by women are denigrated'. Gossip, which is widely considered to be part of 'feminine culture', is defined by Deborah Jones (1980: 194) as:

a way of talking between women in their roles as women, intimate in style, personal and domestic in topic and setting, a female cultural event which springs from and perpetuates the restrictions of the female role, but also gives the comfort of validation.

Gossip is a private, intimate, female discourse not usually evident in public space. Gossip can be contrasted with the 'yarning' of men in a pub environment, which is shown as a positive image in *Heartland* and within particular discourses of national identity. Women's gossip is traditionally presented only in the public sphere through the medium of soap opera, which is constructed as imaginary. Thus, women's gossip is not legitimised by, or valued within, the genre of documentary. Brown (1989: 186) notes:

... in dominant discourse, talking for a purpose is acceptable, but talking for pleasure is not. Men's public purposeful talk is revered, but women's private talk is denigrated as purposeless and malicious.

Perhaps it is not surprising, therefore, that images and dialogue that tended to be considered 'acceptable' by members of the Wainuiomata community were public and often masculine ones. Participants in the research identified as positive the interviews with men involved in rugby league, including Alec Gauge, chairperson of the rugby league club; an interview with a police officer; and an interview with the older male resident, Ray Mustard, who had helped build some of the houses in the valley. Talking with an older resident was also valued by some community members, as it engaged in nostalgia often associated with belonging to and knowing a place. Although men were shown to be drinking heavily and fighting on the rugby league field (which could be interpreted as negative images), the majority of complaints (in newspapers, to Television New Zealand and in interviews) were against *Heartland* showing the feminised, usually private, unseen, unspoken, domesticated and sexualised activities. In their complaints, community members suggested scenic images such as Rimutaka Forest Park, the gardens, the parks and the coastline ought to have been used in the programme. These types of images are seen as important and relevant to representations of place in the context of the *Heartland* series. Thus, to sum up this second part of the chapter, *Heartland* Wainuiomata disrupted the binary between documentary as masculine and 'real' and soap opera as feminine and imaginary. Many viewers did not appreciate the popular culture of women being included in what is widely considered to be a documentary.

Conclusion

Jacquelin Burgess and John Gold (1985: 1) note that the media 'are an essential element in moulding individual and social experiences of the world and in shaping the relationship between people and place'. The *Heartland* programmes, therefore, do not simply reflect or (re)present 'kiwi bloke' masculinity, but also recreate it. In *Heartland* Wainuiomata, however, the producers break away from their usual formula and focus on (what can be read as transgressive) images of femininity and the suburban. The Wainuiomata programme reclaims women's private identities from the margins and puts them centre-stage. After its first screening some of the women who appeared in the programme were described in letters from Wainuiomata residents to Television New Zealand and the local paper, *Wainuiomata News*, as 'weirdos', 'dizzy blondes' and 'peroxided, unintelligent bimbos'. A writer to *Wainuiomata News* (11 August 1994b) believed the programme portrayed Wainuiomata housewives as 'thick, blonde bimbos who lived for Tupperware and naughty lingerie parties'. While there may be a valid point to be made here, we argue

that these representations of Wainuiomata women can also be read as positive and as amazingly successful in disrupting (at least temporarily) *Heartland's* more usual postcard shots of seemingly empty rural landscapes coupled with images of kiwi blokes in gumboots and black singlets.

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Notes

¹ The first half of this chapter is based on a critical reading of 27 *Heartland* programmes. *Heartland* first screened on national television in Aotearoa/New Zealand in 1993. The series proved popular with viewers and a second series screened in 1994. In 1995 a third series screened.

² Below is a list of some of the letters, articles and reports on *Heartland* Wainuiomata: Beyond Nappy Valley, published in newspapers:

Evening Post: 3 August 1994: 'We're Not Like That,' say outraged Wainui residents

6 August 1994: 'Lingerie Parties Set Bad Example,' says Mrs Bolger.

New Zealand Herald: 3 August 1994: 'Suburb With a Country Heart.'

2 August 1995: 'Heartland Censored Second Time Round.'

This Week: 15 December 1994: 'Outcry Over Heartland.'

20 April 1995: 'Field Day Fun.'

Waikato Times: 1 October 1994: 'Chloe Ungloved.'

17 December 1994: 'McCormick Unrepentant Over Wainuiomata Programme.'

19 December 1994: Beauty Not Always in the Eyes of all Beholders.'

24 April 1995: 'Who Needs Heartland - We'll Have Fun.'

Wainuiomata News: 11 August 1994a: 'Makers of Heartland Cop an Earful.'

11 August 1994b: 'What About Positive Aspects?'

11 August 1994c: 'Chloe's in the Pink ... A Star is Born.'

11 August 1994d: 'Just How Angry Heartland Made the People of Wainuiomata.'

11 August 1994e: 'Heartland Petition Signatures Pour In.'

11 August 1994f: '... a Pathetic Documentary.'

11 August 1994g: 'Refuse to Pay Television Licence.'

25 August 1994: 'Wainui Has Last Laugh on Heartland.'

15 December 1994a: 'Heartland Decision a Licence to Defame: Mallard.'

15 December 1994b: 'Over the Hill' Day is Just Over the Horizon.'

4 May 1995: 'Heartland Documentary Goes Under University Spotlight.'

1 June 1995: 'Pay-back Time for Heartland.'

³ The Anson Grieve production company supplied Carla Wilson with copies of the 35 *Heartland* programmes screened prior to 1995. We watched most of these as well as most of the successive series screened on Television New Zealand. In addition to this, Carla transcribed the dialogue from *Heartland* Wainuiomata and conducted interviews with four men who worked for Anson Grieve, including the director and producer of *Heartland* Wainuiomata. All interviews were recorded and lasted between 20 minutes and two hours.

Carla visited Wainuiomata from 14 May 1995 to 17 May 1995 (approximately six weeks after the programme had rescreened) and contacted *Wainuiomata News* — a free suburban newspaper that published an article on the research entitled,

'*Heartland* documentary goes under university spotlight' (Wainuiomata News, 4 May 1995). This visit resulted in Carla conducting six interviews and convening a focus group with 12 participants. Carla also received two letters and chatted informally with people in the community. (For more information on the methodological process and the analysis of the data that were collected see Wilson, 1996.)

Gillian Rose (1993) argues that there is a dualism between nature and culture in Western thought. Nature and the rural tend to be coded as feminine, and culture and the urban as masculine. The *Heartland* programmes, however, provide a basis for re-examining ideas about the 'gendering' of the nature/culture dualism since within the context of Aotearoa/New Zealand, nature is often associated with that which is considered masculine, while the urban is often associated with that which is considered feminine (see Berg, 1994).

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