New Zealand cinema and the postcolonial exotic: the case of Apron Strings

ABSTRACT
The New Zealand film industry has played a crucial role in shaping up the symbolic boundaries of this settler nation. Cultural difference (most often indigenous Māori differences) has helped shape the distinctiveness of this nation within a global context. In some ways, this persistent view of a global market, as well as the history of British settlement, makes New Zealand cinema always already transnational. While The Lord of the Rings trilogy seems an obvious example of such transnational trafficking, the 2008 State-funded feature film Apron Strings also offers opportunities for thinking about the out-of-nation-ness of New Zealand film production. Apron Strings is the first South Asian film to be funded through official channels in New Zealand. Two diasporic media producers are responsible for the film – Samoan/New Zealand director Sima Urale and Indian scriptwriter Shuchi Kohli. If, as Will Highes and Song Huey Lin argue, “diasporic or postcolonial ‘transnational’ cinema is consistently located on the margins of dominant film culture” (2010: 10), what of those diasporic film-makers who work within a national film industry? Can they transversally work these cultural margins to reveal the transnational dimensions of settler colonial identity?

KEYWORDS
settler cinema, postcolonial exotic, multiculturalism, settler nationalism, diasporic
According to scholarship in the field, the geopolitical realities of New Zealand society – its relatively small population of approximately four million and its remoteness in relation to western metropolitan centres – help shape its media industries (e.g., Huirie 2004; Horrocks 1999; Dunleavy 2005). In light of these geopolitical constraints, government funding ensures the viability of New Zealand film and television. Such a close state relationship to the film industry suggests that institutionalized notions of nationhood and national identity inform many of the funding decisions behind a feature film. This close proximity allows the State to use the film industry as a national branding exercise within a global environment (Lawn and Beatty 2005), as well as placing pressure on media industries to represent the cultural diversity of the nation. However, for some, the politics of recognition practiced by the State vis-a-vis media industries still maintains the settler subject as the unmarked centre of New Zealand society (Huirie 2004; Bell 1995). How, then, do we understand the 2008 emergence of Apron Strings, a State-funded film based in the multicultural setting of Ohakune, South Auckland and made by diasporic film-makers working within the national film industry?

Not only is Apron Strings the first feature film from noted Samoan/New Zealand short film-maker Sina Urae, and Indian scriptwriter Shuchi Kothari, but it is the first State-funded Indian feature film and it is New Zealand’s first food film.

The theme of consuming difference (gastronomically and otherwise) is a central conceit in Apron Strings, and serves to dramatize the larger sociocultural forces that inform the film’s production and subsequent circulation. As such, Apron Strings raises the perennial problem of how a national cinema might represent the cultural margins without pandering to mainstream desires. Apron Strings reworks these centre/margin relations to reveal how State-sanctioned notions of a New Zealand nation are already crucially transnational. Drawing on Graham Huirie’s notion of the postcolonial exotic (2001), I situete the film within a longer history of New Zealand national cinema and consider the ways in which the film is complicit with established orthodoxies. At once bound up in the domestication and commodification of gendered and cultural difference for the benefit of mainstream audiences, the postcolonial exotic in Apron Strings also challenges the assumed stability of New Zealand national identity.

WHAT IS THE POSTCOLONIAL EXOTIC?

In The Postcolonial Exotic (2001) Graham Huirie focuses on the many different values attributed to postcolonial literature from India, Africa, Canada and Australia (among others). While African, Canadian, Aboriginal Australian and Indian literatures are obvious areas for Huirie’s postcolonial critique, national cinemas from settler colonies also beg a similar examination. Huirie discusses the term postcolonial exotic in relation to two definitions of the postcolonial. Postcoloniality is the term Huirie uses to describe the commercially oriented dimensions of contemporary global culture where cultural difference is a marketable attribute. Postcoloniality is a regime of value that also trades on the language of resistance, agency, struggle and myths of social transformation. This is where the conditions of postcoloniality meet Huirie’s second term, postcolonialism. Postcolonialism refers to the anti-colonial imperatives of postcolonial critique, which reads and valorizes the signs of social struggle in the fault lines of hierarchy and cultural texts (2001: 6).

According to Huirie, the postcolonial exotic operates at the intersection of these two regimes of value. On the one hand, exoticism is an aestheticizing process that translates the cultural other (and the language of resistance or struggle) into a form of domesticated difference that can be easily consumed by mainstream (and most often) Western markets. On the other hand, exoticism is also a critical strategy that can be repoliticized and redeployed "both to unsettle metropolitan expectations of cultural otherness and to effect a grounded critique of differential relations of power" (Huirie 2001: ix-x).

In the final section of his book Huirie reflects on the piece of African tourist art that sits on his desk. This African ‘Tintin’ statue (which also adorns the cover of his book) at once panders to ‘white colonialist sensibilities’ and at the same time turns racialized stereotypes on their heads. As he explains it:

[The postcolonial exotic is both a form of commodity fetishism and a revelation of the process by which ‘exotic’ commodities are produced, exchanged, consumed: it is both a mode of consumption and an analysis of consumption. Cultural products operating under the sign of this ‘exotic’ are likely to raise the following question: what really is exotic about me? My Tintin asks that question, eyebrows raised in obvious mischief: ‘so, you find me exotic and what does that say, my friend, about you?’ (2001: 264) (italics and quotations are from the original text)]

The question is, if the postcolonial exotic works on the one hand to mask the historical and material conditions of production so that metropolitan consumers can indulge their desires, what are the conditions necessary to unveil, de-mystify and analyze these circumstances? What are the tools necessary to get to the kind of critical consciousness that Huirie’s Tintin allegedly inaugurates? Does New Zealand cinema have its own cinematic African Tintin, which asks similarly uncomfortable questions of its audience?

NEW ZEALAND CINEMA AND THE CONDITIONS OF POSTCOLONIALITY

To consider Huirie’s model in relation to a film industry such as New Zealand’s, one would have to acknowledge the ways in which cultural difference has been historically used by New Zealand creative industries to sell product globally and to naturalize settler-centric notions of national identity (Blythe 1994; Turner 2000). Official policies of biculturalism and de facto multicultural realities characterize the contemporary social conditions in New Zealand. In his article Representing Multiculturalism in a Bicultural Nation, Henk Huirie outlines the ways in which New Zealand is different from other postcolonial settler societies due to two significant factors: the Māori Cultural Renaissance of the 1970s and 1980s, which led to the Treaty settlement claims process and official discourses of biculturalism, and the 1987 Immigration Act, which has contributed to an increasing multicultural society (2004: 395). According to Huirie, the lack of multicultural New Zealand screen representations is due to the dominance of State-sponsored forms of biculturalism that “not only sees diversity primarily in bicultural terms, but also as existing in opposition to multiculturalism” (2004: 400). Where, on one hand, multiculturalism often appears to negate the rights of indigenous peoples within a contemporary settler nation, bicultural discourses are also often understood as limiting the civic rights of migrants. According to Huirie, Pakeha, (a term used to describe descendants of British settlers) as the dominant group, reap the
benefits of both cultural discourses, as they remain the naturalized paradigm against which all other forms of cultural difference are measured and valued. This is to say, Māori and Pacific become the named categories, named so by an invisible, naturalized non-presence, Pakehā.

Huljic’s critique of Pākehā hegemony intersects with much of the criticism surrounding official bicultural policies. Although it is portrayed as a path to social justice for Māori, many critics perceive biculturalism as a management technique for controlling other forms of political resistance and as assimilatory in character (Sharpe 1997; Fieras and Spoonley 1999). The 2009 Statement of Intent of the New Zealand Film Commission (NZFC) signifies bicultural priorities by making overt mention of its support for Māori cultural production. One of the key outcomes from the NZFC is to ‘grow the New Zealand economy in order to ensure greater prosperity, security and opportunities for all New Zealanders’ (2009: 5). The first key objective for the Commission is framed in the following manner:

Objective 1: To support NZ stories and writers.

Impact of this Objective: That culturally-specific films and voice-driven projects generate interest and attention from audiences in New Zealand and internationally.

The NZFC is committed to supporting the development of scripts that depict New Zealand stories and which are created by New Zealand writers. This includes a commitment to ensuring participation by Māori filmmakers. NZFC supports Te Puea Ataia which is a partnership between the NZFC and Ngā Aho Whakairo which aims to develop Māori films.

The NZFC’s Statement of Intent very clearly articulates an institutionalized form of biculturalism that makes certain that Māori can contribute to the Film Commission’s vision for ‘culturally-specific films’ and ‘voice-driven’ projects. Particular mention of Ngā Aho Whakairo (Māori in Film, Video and Television) also demonstrates the how the NZFC can institutionally accommodate Māori forms of governance.

By making particular mention of Māori, the Statement of Intent does two things at the same time: it seeks to incorporate Māori into a shared vision of New Zealand national identity, and it clearly demonstrates how Māori are not a naturalized part of New Zealand national identity. Accordingly, making Māori the named category in the NZFC document works to naturalize a non-Māori identity as the default setting for notions of New Zealand-ness (Bell 1995; McCreemor 2005). Nor is this naturalized New Zealand-ness necessarily multinational, if we acknowledge the death of the NZFC-sponsored multicultural films. In addition, while Māori may be incorporated into the vision of the NZFC, what gets lost out of any debate are the expectations and values placed on film to generate ‘greater prosperity, security and opportunities for all New Zealanders’ (New Zealand Film Commission 2009: 5). This statement assumes that a film industry is relevant, important and able to provide value for an entire population. It assumes that all who participate in the industry do so with an understanding that they contribute more to a economically viable and prosperous nation and that all New Zealanders will have equal access to these new opportunities. In this brief extract we can see that Huljic’s two competing regimes of value (postcoloniality and postcolonialism) are both present. On the one hand, the document naturalizes ‘culturally-specific films’ and ‘voice-driven projects’ as commodities that can benefit imagined and ideal New Zealanders, an assumption of value that highlights the market and globally oriented, logic of postcoloniality. At the same time as it frames film products in economic terms, the NZFC document also makes a claim for an allegedly progressive cultural politics (the recognition of indigenous rights, the inclusive representation of this bicultural nation). Yet, the symbolic value of biculturalism, while enabling many positive outcomes for Māori, can also be mobilized to serve other ends (Barclay 2003). The New Zealand film industry’s domestication of cultural difference is not, however, limited to that of Māori cultural difference, and Aprou Strings represents a more multicultural manifestation of this regime of value.

POSTCOLONIALITY AND APRON STRINGS

Set in the South Auckland suburb of Otahuhu, Aprou Strings involves the parallel stories of two mothers—one Pākehā, the other Indian—who must deal with challenging sons. Pākehā Lorna (Jennifer Ludlam) has a son called Barry (Scott Willis) who lives in her home, struggles with a gambling addiction and prefers a curry from down the road rather than the traditional Sunday lunch. Indian Anita (Lalita Rouss) has a son called Michael (Nathan Whilks) who seeks the hidden history of his Sikh roots and who attempts to build a relationship with Anita’s estranged sister, Tara (Leela Patel). The threads of each family story tightly connect at the Otahuhu curry house run by Tara. It is here that Lorna tracks down Barry, who has forgotten to attend a family dinner. It is also at this curry house that Michael forms a relationship with Tara, which will eventually reunite the estranged sisters. The importance of the relationship between mothers and sons is signalled in the film’s title, and the role of food in nurturing the family is also a central theme of Aprou Strings. Both mothers have careers in the food industry. Lorna has a cake shop that sits in odd juxtaposition to the Indian and Pacific Island shops that line Otahuhu’s main street. Anita has her own Pākehā-produced Indian cooking show, segments of which accent the daily life of Tara. The narrative details, the street scenes and the range of ethnic characters make Aprou Strings a story about the changing social and cultural character of New Zealand society.

Aprou Strings was originally devised for television and received funding from the Signature Schemes, a low-budget financing initiative involving the NZFC. The funding body NZ On Air and State-owned broadcaster Television New Zealand. A filmic representation of the larger political economy that Aprou Strings circulates in can be seen in the film’s opening credits. As the screen fades from black to the logo of the NZFC—subtitled in Māori as Te Tumu Whakarua Toanga—the accompanying soundtrack (a mix of percussion, sitars, muted vocal patterns, shrilling synthesizers and distant chiming) produces an immutable atmosphere of Indian-ness. The sitars and chimes continue as the logo of the next funding body, NZ On Air—subtitled in Tongarewa Te Ira Māta—appears. A crucial aspect of this logo is the accompanying text that claims that NZ On Air supports and funds ‘our stories, our songs, our selves’. In this title sequence, the language of each media funding body logo is dictated by culturally, while the music adds a hint of multicultural difference: an exotic and otherworldly Indian-ness. As the atmospheric Indian music continues alongside these visual cues, the opening title sequence wheats an appetite for...
5. Dahlheim argues that settler nationalism functions by ignoring the native in the national space in ways that support the settler project (1993:128). In this opening credit sequence, both Maori and migrant differences are gathered together to produce a rich mosaic of the settler nation as officially bicultural with a de facto multicultural reality.

6. For example, Lamon (2000).

not for a Pakeha-centric Sleeping Dogs (1977) or Maori-oriented Whale Rider (2002), but for a more multicultural and particularly Indian-oriented New Zealand film.

This question of appetite is crucial to understanding the logic of postcoloniality operating in Apron Strings. In this opening sequence, Indian music adds a hint of the exotic to an otherwise conventional opening. According to Huggan, the postcolonial exotic oscillates between strangeness and familiarity and offers "the lure of difference while protecting its practitioners from close involvement" (2001:22). That is to say, at the same time that the soundtrack produces an intangible atmosphere of Indian-ness that adds a point of difference to orthodox notions of the New Zealand nation (as bicultural or Pakeha-centric), the NZ on Air slogan "claims Apron Strings as a media product for the sake of this nation. This is a form of multicultural inclusiveness that adds to, but does not interrupt the orthodox notions of the nation as such. This opening credit sequence functions as an analogy for the larger political economy of this contemporary settler nation where Maori cultural distinctiveness (the subtleties in the Maori language and migrant ethnic differences (the evocative music) are gathered together to produce a somewhat familiar yet tantalizingly strange unity: the contemporary settler nation as such.6 While the credit sequence invokes a strangely familiar New Zealand nation, the reception of the film in the popular press certainly expressed more conventional notions of the relationship between Indian ethnic differences and the New Zealand nation.

The popular reception surrounding Apron Strings echoes the same gastronomic cliches that Huggan argues inform western writings about India. This conflation of South Asian identity and spiced food is a feature of Peter Calder’s review of Apron Strings in the Auckland newspaper The New Zealand Herald where he reduces the film to a snack-sized moment of consumer pleasure. He writes:

"Apron Strings is, to use its own idiom, overspiced, but the taste is not as rich as it should be and is ultimately a little unsatisfying. This is not to say it is devoid of pleasures, many of them rather tasty."

Clearly playful, the review claims to follow the characteristic style of the film by drawing a metaphorical relationship between food, film consumption and the representational function of Apron Strings. Calder notes that the “tasty” elements of the film include its depiction of a multicultural New Zealand seldom seen on screen. Yet, the film ultimately fails to “verify” Calder’s appetite, and is “not as rich as it should be”.

In some ways, the food metaphors in Apron Strings clearly authorize the reviewer’s subsequent conflation of food, film and representational politics. The opening sequence features a close-up shot of TV chef Anita’s face (played by Lalita Raniwala from the British television show Footballers’ Wives) and traditional costume, which highlights the film’s over-determined use of exotic sari, beautiful Indian women and spiced food. As a food film that trades on the spectacular value of South Asian cuisine, ritual and dress, Apron Strings is complicit with exoticist discourses. Yet Calder’s review also mentions how Apron Strings expresses a recurring theme of food and identity in the work of one of the screenwriters, Shashik Kothari. By understanding the wider conditions of production surrounding the film, including the prior works of both Kothari and director Sima Urale, we might unsettle the more cliché understandings of the ways that Apron Strings functions as part of a New Zealand national cinema. We might then be able to turn the exoticist discourse in Calder’s review back on itself to reflect on the ‘differential relations of power’ operating in Apron Strings and New Zealand cinema more widely (Huggan 2001:16)."
New Zealand television food shows, the authors argue that these shows work to normalize and incorporate ethnic difference and ethnic food into an easily consumable and domesticated image of a multicultural nation. In contrast to these food shows, Kohani and Pearson argue that Taste of Place offers a 'simmering dissatisfaction with the way immigrants have been incorporated into the national imaginary as signifiers of cosmopolitan chic' (2007: 54). The documentary told more unsavoury stories about the way migrants had to hide their food practices and conform to mainstream expectations. By offering migrants the opportunity to air their stories of isolation, judgement and exclusion, Taste of Place offers a form of postcolonial critique that articulates the way in which food can be a source of intercultural tension and a site of control and regulation.

Kohani’s preoccupation with the politics of food, and Urale’s long-standing interest in filmic form and social justice, gestures to Apron Strings’ critical potential. However, the film must be understood in relation to the economic constraints facing film-makers and the key role of funding bodies and broadcasting authorities in supporting creative productions. That is to say, Apron Strings depends on public funding and the agreement of the State broadcaster to screen the film on television. Any critique offered in Apron Strings must negotiate a fine balance between the desires of the mainstream and a critique of these desires. How then can we read Apron Strings as ‘both a mode of consumption and an analysis of consumption’ (Huggan 2001: 26)?

THE POSTCOLONIAL EXOTIC IN APRON STRINGS

In the first instance, Urale’s insistence on her status as a film-maker leads us to consider how her cinematic style and aesthetic sensibilities align with, and enrich, her political investments. Urale’s films consistently demonstrate an acute attention to light, shade, colour, camera movement and close-ups. Urale’s cinematic style produces an aesthetic that highlights the act of seeing itself. From the black and white chiaroscuro world of O Tamati to the kitsch aesthetics of Velvet Dreams, the language of cinema, and the labour involved in constructing and consuming these visions, is constantly reiterated. Apron Strings is no different. In its opening sequence we see the meditated world of Anita’s television show blend seamlessly with Lorna’s decorating labours in her cake shop and also with Tara’s deep-fried dessert preparations in her curry house. Anita’s direct address to camera as she delivers the lines ‘with that Indian bit of spice’ alerts us to the conventions of the cooking show and the act of consumption itself. This self-reflexive ethos is continued in the ‘behind-the-scenes’ sequences featuring Anita as an exotic celebrity chef. If exoticist discourses flatten out historical experience and offer up simultaneously strange and familiar representations of cultural difference for a western consumer, Apron Strings’ behind-the-scenes sequences reveal these clichés by repeating them ironically.

In the first of two such sequences, Anita prepares for a televised kitchen scene that features a prop of a religious deity (Chiva) that has been chosen by the director. When the director defends his decision to frame the sequence in this way, Anita snorts, ‘I’m not cooking in a bloody temple’. She then storms off the set. The second behind-the-scenes sequence re-creates the costume and décor of an Orientalist oil painting. Anita is preparing for a photo shoot and sits on a sofa strewn with red, green and gold saris, behind which hangs colourful lace drapery. Clearly disgruntled, Anita asks the approaching director, ‘Why don’t you throw in a couple of belly dancers?’ The director shrugs and reminds her that it is just a photo shoot. He then makes reference to Indian celebrity Padma Lakshmi when he says, ‘You’re the Mistress of Spices, just lie back and think of India’. Again, Anita responds to this imposition of an exoticist point of view aggressively when she declares, ‘I did not spend ten years of my life working in the best restaurants in London and Paris to audition for Jewel in the Crown’. In both sequences the Pakeha director stands in for industry expectations as to how an Indian (and female) chef should look for New Zealand television.

These re-enactment sequences reiterate the processes of de- and re-contextualization that are hallmarks of exoticism. In the photo shoot sequence the director attempts to frame Anita’s body using art historical techniques drawn from western colonial discourse. This sequence gestures to colonial forms of sexualized exotica such as those that circulated in the Pacific, including Paul Gauguin and the use he made of his first wife and model Teha’amaana. Even while Teha’amaana came to Gauguin with her own history and context, the artist subsequently erased, elided and made over representations of Teha’amaana to depict prevailing western myths of Tahiti as a classical golden age. Teresa Teiwa makes this point when she notes how Gauguin sought out a ‘polymorphous Polynesian body’

This might not seem so problematic if Gauguin had not understood that his first model and wife, Teha’amaana, was Tongan, (although she was, according to Bengt Danielsen, originally from Ratonga). By insisting on making Teha’amaana ‘perform’ for him and ‘inform’ him as a Tahitian the second most Tahitian women to be either too ‘tainted’ by Runik blood or too execrative of cannibal past), Gauguin enacted a significant set of cultural substitutions.

(1999: 254)

So too, in Apron Strings the character of the television director seeks to elide, erase and mask Anita’s years of training in the metropolitan centres of western culture using colourful drapery and exotic costumes that freeze-frame her as an alluring, strange and yet familiar, object of televised attention. What makes these sequences a form of postcolonial exotica are the knowing references to the ways in which contemporary depictions of Indian cultural differences (Mistress of Spices and Jewel in the Crown) trade on forms of ‘free-orientalisers’ and ‘postcolonial opportunists’ (Gandhi 1998: 128). That is to say, when the director makes reference to Mistress of Spices he attempts to naturalize exotic depictions of Asian femininity as a necessary part of the media industry; he literally articulates the logics of prevailing regimes of postcoloniality. Anita’s response is to cite an earlier and more nostalgic version of Indian exoticism (the British television series Jewel in the Crown), thus highlighting the continuities between earlier and contemporary media practices.

These self-referential gestures not only underscore the persistence of ethnic and gendered stereotyping, but they also demonstrate the possibilities of re-deploying exoticist discourses for alternate ends.

We could treat these behind-the-scenes sequences as cues not only to the conditions of production surrounding Anita’s celebrity status, but also to the status of Apron Strings as part of a New Zealand national cinema. As we know, irony is a tricky practice. On the one hand, the TV studio scenes
lay bare the device of media representations in general and the institutionalized racism that informs much media production. On the other hand, these scenes intertwine in the same de- and re-contextualizing processes they ostensibly critique. While highlighting the over-determined use of exotic sana, the film also repeats these exotic visions and provides the conditions for reviews such as Calder’s that approach the film as a slight snack. How then, following Huggan, is it possible to ‘account for cultural difference without at the same time mystifying it? To promote the cultural margins without ministering to the needs of the mainstream?’ (2001: 3).

In many ways Apron Strings articulates and dramatizes these relations of complicity and potential criticality. It is one thing to say that Apron Strings perpetuates exoticist discourses, but how might the film redeploy exoticist discourse for more critical purposes? To consider this approach we must look beyond the obvious spectacles of Indian difference for this critical dimension. For example, just as the film renders sari, Indian women and food in close-up detail, so too does it pay close (almost ethnographic) attention to food, native scenes and rituals of Pakēhā familial encounters. An example of this is seen in the figure of Lorna, a middle-aged Pakēhā woman at odds with her children and carrying guilt over the suicide of her estranged husband.

Food, with its children, agitated over the changes occurring in her neighbourhood and unwilling to sell her cake shop to ‘those Vietnamese’. Lorna represents a form of Pakēhā identity more at home with a cup of tea and a roast dinner than with the smell of garlic that allegedly encroaches upon the streets of Otaheite. As with many food films, (Eat, Drink, Man, Woman [1994], Like Water for Chocolate [1995] or Tortilla Soup [2001]), intergenerational conflict is a common theme. Lorna represents a conservative Pakēhā identity at odds with her curry-loving son and peppermint-tea-drinking daughter. While her son is at home in the multicultural streets of Otaheite, her daughter is a stereotype of Pakēhā identity that is certainly not the same kind of exoticism as the racial and sexual representations of Anita, ‘Mistress of Spices’. Lorna, as a middle-aged white woman, does not offer the same range of fantasies as Anita’s image (or Tara’s) does. Indeed, it is hard to see Lorna as something exotic. Rather than exoticism, Urale invokes a nostalgic form of Pakēhā motherhood. This is a form of Pakēhā identity decidedly wedded to the orthodoxy of Englishness, and increasingly couched by the multicultural tastes and sensibilities of her children. If, in colonial times, women’s moral authority played a crucial role in ‘the transplantation of civilization’, Apron Strings’ depiction of Pakēhā motherhood in postcolonial New Zealand depicts a form of femininity whose authority and privilege is increasingly on the wane. This articulation of changing Pakēhā stereotypes foregrounds the contingent nature of Pakēhā identity: an identity among other identities that needs to be historicized, contextualized and treated as site specific. This is the performative function of the television studio scenes: to reveal the labour behind modes of representation and the fantasies that accompany all representations. In addition to these pedagogically inclined ‘behind-the-scenes’ sequences, we also have lessons to learn from the parallel making sequences that end the film.

In these final sequences the women in the Pakēhā families spend the night at home while Barry sits in jail. The Sikhs family spend the night confronting the past and reconciling differences. As the new day dawns both families proceed to make a cup of tea, each in their own way, in their own homes. Editing and music bring these distinct worlds together. As Lorna’s daughter (Virginia).
fills a kettle, editing cuts to a scene of Tara crushing cinnamon sticks into a mortar. As Virginia pours milk into a milk jug, Tara places three chai teacups on a tray. The cool colour palate of the Pākehā sequence offers a sharp contrast to the rich reds, golds and warm tones of Tara's kitchen, and overhead camera shots accentuate the aesthetic differences of each household and each tea-making process. Once the tea-making sequence is complete Virginia takes her tees into the lounge and offers her mother a cup saying, 'I hope it's how you like it'. Her mother takes a sip, sighs, and says, 'Yes, it's good'. They exchange looks and the audience is left with a sense that some resolutions have been accomplished. The sequence then moves to the Sikh family where Anu and her son Michael sit in Tara's restaurant as the sun streams in through the windows. Mobile framing encompasses the three family members, demonstrating togetherness and reconciliation. As the sequence fades to black, the last image we see is of Anu's hand clasped around her chai tea.

One move simply following the narrative trajectory of the Pākehā family, this ending would be remarkably banal. A family has experienced trauma, the son has been expelled from the home and a nice cup of tea demonstrates the potential for a mother to find peace with a daughter. In a sense though, this banal ending is also quite a violent one. The expulsion of Barry from the family home echoes common tropes of Pākehā masculinity that accentuate the domestic space as an alienating one for men (Campbell 2000). It seems that the resolution between mother and daughter must come at the cost of a son. Accordingly, the symbolic value of the cup of tea, made by a daughter who is attempting to acknowledge her mother's needs, provides quite a conservative and problematic closure to the family narrative. However, the Sikh family's tea ritual parallels this seemingly banal Pākehā tea ceremony, providing the film's ending with an exotic deployment of food metaphors that have ambivalent effects. That is to say, the aesthetic structure of this final sequence sums up the postcolonial exoticist logic in operation throughout the film as a whole. As much multicultural spectacle as Pākehā nostalgia, Apron Strings 'speaks' in forked tongues.

On the side of postcoloniality, the chai tea sequence foregrounds the ways in which cultural difference functions as a selling point for the New Zealand film and television market. The final chai tea sequence is an overt indulgence in warm sumptuous colours, boiling pots and freshly crushed spices, and this indulgence authorizes Peter Calder's somewhat clichéd review of the film when he writes, 'Apron Strings is, to use its own idiom, over praised' (The New Zealand Herald). Yet, does Calder misread the idiom of Apron Strings and impose a meaning-making system that naturalizes a form of culinary cosmopolitanism or boutique multiculturalism? Are there other ways of listening to, watching and thinking of the characteristic style of the film that might make this final sequence meaningful? How can we affirm the regime of postcolonialism where critical engagement might reveal the signs of social struggle going on in a text?

Huggins' discussion of the postcolonial exotic as that which operates at the intersection of two regimes of value (postcoloniality and postcolonialism) provides a way of understanding how the exotic is a mobile and flexible phenomenon, more an ideological marker than any kind of object as such. The postcolonial exotic points to the shifting nature of regimes of value that involve varying modes of consumption and production. The mobile aspect of the postcolonial exotic intersects with what Peter Mason describes as key characteristics of other forms of exoticism: the exotic as 'that which is never at home' (1998: 5). For Mason, the exotic has 'no origin' outside of its own conditions of production. As he explains it, 'is not something that exists prior to its "discovery". It is the very act of discovery that produces the exotic as such, and it produces it in varying degrees of wildness or domestication' (1998: 1–2). Exotic discourse, then, is a representational process that obscures, evacuates or elides context. Drawing on J.L. Austin's 'doctrine of indefiniteness' and Austin's interest in 'the things that can be and go wrong on the occasion of such utterances' (Mason 1998: 7), Mason emphasizes how exoticism multiplies the many ways that context and meaning can be misread. If the exotic object is, in general, 'taken out of its original context and given a meaning and significance it never had', it is a mobile entity productive of many 'indelicacies'. Accordingly, where Calder sees Apron Strings as an essentially consumable Indian spectacle that demonstrates and represents an increasingly boutique multicultural nation space, other kinds of readings of the film's idiom are also possible. If the logic of exoticism is to move between familiarity and strangeness, then the intervals opened up by these oscillations in understanding pose a productive ambivalence from which to retrieve a critical dimension. How then do we seize on the ambivalences in Apron Strings to read more critically the banal image of tea that resolves the Pākehā story?

If we understand the logic of the exotic as that which is never at home (Mason 1998: 5), then exoticism can be treated as an irritant in a system of representation that defines any naturalized claim to context, 'home' or history. If this is so, then the link made between Lorna, food and family and Pākehā identity must be seen as conditional, contingent and fragile. By contrasting the Pākehā tea-making sequence with the Indian chai tea sequence, Apron Strings demonstrates the historically contingent relationship between food and ideas of collective identity. To recall Stuart Hall's critique of any naturalized connection between food and identity, even the English cup of tea has a history of relationships covered over by the banal act of consumption. First of all emphasizing his Jamaican heritage, Hall goes on to write:

People like me who came to England in the 1950s have been there for centuries; symbolically, we have been there for centuries. I was coming to a country that is the sugar at the bottom of the English cup of tea [...] The sweet tooth, the sugar plantation that rotted generations of English children's teeth.

(Hall 2000: 147)

In this quotation, Hall acknowledges the palimpsestic nature of all cultural identities and how colonization produces a history of 'apron strings' that tie the metropolitan centres to their colonial outposts. 'To think of the phrase as English as a cup of tea' means on the one hand to conjure up images from the television soap Coronation Street as much as to acknowledge the colonial trade histories that brought sugars, spices and tea to the British Empire. Hall's description of 'England' as always having been tied to – and indeed its colonies destabilizes any notion of an authentic or singular English identity.

When we apply this palimpsestic logic to the final sequence in Apron Strings we can see how the juxtaposition of Pākehā and Indian tea rituals reveals a symbolically rich resolution. Just as the exotic chai sequence decontextualizes Sikh culture and recontextualizes it within the multicultural milieu of Otaheite, the Pākehā tea sequence underscores the historical links between England and Pākehā identity, and reveals the dispos
roots of Pakeha identity. For all Lorna’s commitment to cultural tradition, the aesthetic structure of *Apron Strings* produces a reversible gaze that throws Lorna’s settler-centric assumption of ‘femininity’ and Pakeha authenticity into question. Here, Pakeha identity is revealed as an unsettled and disturbed form of authority that seeks to mask its more transnational connections.

If the banal image of a cup of tea links Pakeha to colonial England, the very banality of the cup of tea—a naturalized relationship to notions of home and comfort—also signals the erasure of indigenous contexts and histories. Throughout the film the parallel narratives of the *Pakeha* and Sikh families play out against a multicultural backdrop that nonetheless retains an indigenous name: Obiabu. As such, the domestic scenes in *Apron Strings* must be read against prior and indigenous notions of home and belonging, an indigenous knowing that renders subsequent acts of settlement as unheimlich. In the final analysis, what makes *Apron Strings* a form of postcolonial exoticism is the way in which the film reiterates prevailing myths of multiculturalism—bouquet, cosmetic and spectacular—even as it gestures to another history of settlement and migration—Pakeha as migrant, and the prior conditions of indigenous habitation. At once a multicultural spectacle and a film that places Pakeha identity within a continuum of diasporic identities, reading *Apron Strings* through the lens of the postcolonial exotic helps us to see the critical dimensions of a film product that, at first glance, appears to be easily consumable.

CONCLUSIONS

*Apron Strings* exemplifies the persistence of notions of New Zealand national identity that are tied to British settler history even as it demonstrates how an increasingly multicultural South Auckland, South Asian cooking and the rituals and customs of a Sikh community in relation to a particular representation of settler identity that works to reveal the transnational dimensions of Pakeha identity. If, as Highbee and Lim argue, ‘diasporic or postcolonial “transnational” cinema is consistently located on the margins of dominant film culture’ (2010: 10), Kothari and Uracle demonstrate how the margins can become mainstream in the context of contemporary settler cinema. By understanding this mainstream or dominant settler culture as always already crucially mixed and transnational, one can begin to situate the study of New Zealand cinema in relation to a wider conversation about changing regimes of value and emerging forms of critique. Such conversations might begin with questions of the national, but will inevitably lead to more complex and transnational articulations of home, belonging and community.

REFERENCES

Connecting the regional and the global in the UK film industry

ABSTRACT
Film policy in the United Kingdom is comprised of two complementary strands: the development of regional production clusters and the positioning of the United Kingdom as a film hub in the global film industry. This article examines the relationship between the regional, national and global scales in feature film production in three UK regions – Northern Ireland, Scotland and the South West of England – from 2004 to 2006. The results indicate that connections between the regions of the United Kingdom and the global film industry are limited, and that where they do exist these connections are either direct or mediated through London, which functions as the dominant centre of distribution and finance – and therefore decision-making – in the UK film industry. Northern Ireland, by virtue of its cultural and economic relationship to the Republic of Ireland, stands out as a region in which its connections to other major decision-making centres are as important as its connections to London. The results suggest that while UK film policy has sought to redistribute the productive capacity of the industry, the autonomy of regional production centres remains limited.

Since 2000, policy-makers have sought to boost the global competitiveness of the film industry in the United Kingdom and to enhance its capacity for endogenous...