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Finding Ourselves in Images: A Cultural Reading of Trans-Tasman Identities

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores salient ideas, metaphors, and meanings embedded in representations of New Zealand, Australian, and trans-Tasman cultural identities. The discussion is grounded in the examination of New Zealand and Australian beer, car, and convenience food advertisements. The study was carried out jointly by U.S. consumer research anthropologists and Australian and New Zealand advertising professionals. We explore what crosses the Tasman, and doesn't – in icons of identity and ideas about nature and gender. We suggest that advertisements are revealing cultural texts that, when analyzed, expose socially constructed 'truths' that can in turn be leveraged, contested, and altered by consumers. Finding Ourselves in Images: A Cultural Reading of Trans-Tasman Identities

ARTICLE

Figure 1: Respondent photo diary images of Australia (Hill's Hoist, "Aussie Boy"), New Zealand ("Boy with Tiki"), and the trans-Tasman region (rugby, surfing, BBQ). Icons of identity?

What does it mean when an Australian announces, with a note of obvious pride in the voice, " *New Zealand has always been a country that punches more than its weight*"? What does it imply about the relationship between Australia and New Zealand ? If beaches, barbeques and backyards are salient symbolic images that

cross the Tasman (see Figure 1), what images do not? And what if one delves deeply into contemporary advertisements? What, for instance, does a Toohey's beer ad in which New Zealand and Australian teams spar in a bottle cap competition say about the relationship between Australia and New Zealand and about culturally shared and what is divergent? What are New Zealand and Australian advertisements communicating about the region – and each other – perhaps without the explicit realization of even the makers?

These were the kinds of questions we posed and explored together during a week-long session in Auckland at the beginning of 2004. It was an immersion in ethnographic and semiotic practices for FCB, an advertising agency, and in the meanings of Australian, New Zealand, and trans-Tasman cultural identities for anthropologists from the Practica Group, a U.S.-based consumer research firm. Prior to the session, the Sydney and Auckland FCB offices selected contemporary print and TV advertisements for automobiles, convenience food, and beer. Australian and New Zealand FCB team members also created photo diaries of cultural identity – images that were trans-Tasman, modern or traditional Australia or New Zealand, respectively. In addition, ethnographic interviews with recruited consumer respondents were carried out in five Auckland area households. Members of these households were asked to complete the same photo diary assignment.

This paper draws on the conversations surrounding the decoding of advertising and photo diary images. Crucially, because the Practica anthropologists are American, team members from Australia and New Zealand often needed to explain the cultural background – in detail. In this, the team members became ethnographic informants, not dissimilar from the recruited respondents. Clearly, given that this session took place in Auckland and all recruited ethnography respondents were New Zealanders, the session analysis favored New Zealand. These facts make the analysis illustrative rather than definitive. Nonetheless, the analysis offers a unique vantage point on the question of what is trans-Tasman.

What Crosses the Tasman?

Males, Sports, Mates

The overwhelming majority of images and pictures chosen by team members as representative of Australian, New Zealand, and trans-Tasman-ness carried an assumption of maleness (consistent with academic research findings). Masculine gendered, male-centric images were chosen by both men and women. The array of images which opens this article was among them. Few would contest the

selection of the All Blacks as iconic New Zealand or an Australian-New Zealand match as a good representation of trans-Tasman-ness; that image is only the most obvious, not the most telling image. More striking was the cumulative effect of the subtler images, for instance of the male surfers (acting like 'mates', itself a cultural concept that takes male-male relations as the standard and starting point) or, for Australia, the image of turned around baseball-capped man as "Aussie Boy" and "Boy with Tiki" (as he was labeled in the digital image) to represent contemporary New Zealand. The barbeque, an icon that surfaced, again and again, in both New Zealand and Australian diaries, was explained as the site of men's cooking. The Hill's hoist is clearly female though? No. The image was explained as the invention that gets women's work out of the way, so (male) sports could be played in the backyard.

Where were the girls? Where are women in the symbolic construction of identity? In an Australian Toohey's television advertisement, she is the hero, she triumphs in a bar battlecap contest among rival Australian and New Zealand teams by shooting the winning cap from her navel. In one sense she wins by cleverness – both the rival team and her own are astonished at her behavior. At the same time, she 'wins' by being a guy and playing the mates game, beating them in a male sport. In essence, she has become the honorary male. In New Zealand, an Export television spot is a riff on the mainstream, ubiquitous wheel barrow. A female is the expert commentator on the ingenuity of young guys as they dissect, reassemble, and re-constitute the 'barrow as a technological invention, yet the creativity is all male – the female only the bystander.

In both New Zealand and Australia sports is a currency – an understood, shared form of communication and measurement. Achievement in sports is a symbol of success and standing within and beyond one's borders in both countries. Consider the stories of outcomes of wins and losses in rugby and, for New Zealand, the days of mourning created by loss of the America's Cup. The cultural emphasis on sport and the use of sports as valuable currency is discernable in advertising in which play is often articulated as a sport. In both of the aforementioned television beer advertisements, the Export wheelbarrow re-invention and Toohey's bottlecap competition, games devised to entertain and pass time took on the motif of sports ('teams', winning/losing, competition). In New Zealand car advertising, a vehicle easily becomes the technical equipment in an extreme sport. The Audi Quattro, pulls an extremely competent wake boarder through the water, it does more than take a man and his gear to the beach. Ford cars and trucks not only do work and drive through water, they also drive easily across

frozen terrain with skiing snowboarders in tow. Mitsubishi 4x4s, not to be fenced in, go through water, pull snowboard skiers, and climb rocky barriers in the middle of city streets.

As for mates, New Zealand and Australian photo diaries, advertisements, and ethnographic conversations all invoked the concept of mates. Whether the topic centered on adventure, sport, the pub, the flat, the girlfriend, the wife, advice or, it seemed whatever, there were mates. An Australian Toohey's New advertisement, "Nice Things to Say" simultaneously addresses many of these as it shows four mates in a pub, jointly creating a list of nice things they could say to female partners as strategies that ultimately allow their joint and male-only attendance at a rugby match. One younger man's suggestion of "will you marry me?" momentarily stops and silences not only his mates, but the entire pub. He is willing to go far for his mates. They click glasses and the seemingly oldest mate writes it on the list.

Mates' age differences and the acknowledgement of a mentorship function are what make the mate concept so striking from an American perspective. (The U.S. has no equivalent cultural category; 'friends' comes closest but mentoring, even if it occurs, is not culturally understood or an expected part of that relationship.) So, from New Zealand, a Speights beer advertisement in which a younger man uses the two free tickets provided by an attractive young woman to go with his older mate to a ball was, at first, almost inscrutable for the Americans. Was the older man the younger man's father? What happened here? The difficulty in cultural reading was not shared by participants from either side of the Tasman. Saturated with the flavor of southern New Zealand and its regional values, the narrative was immediately understood by Australians. The two men were mates and the older had (somewhat shamelessly and shamefully) manipulated the situation to his mateship advantage. Participants understood the ways in which this advertisement drew on notions of being true to your mate, of putting your mate first. Laudable values of loyalty are brought to the fore in this cultural emphasis on (male) mates, yet where does this framework leave, and put, relationships with women? Women, just as in these beer spots, have not been picked up as part of the main cultural narrative. History plays a role. Mates, as a social and cultural category, can be traced historically to male labor crews in the history of both Australia and New Zealand (Belich 1996). But aspects and 'facts' of history never assure the whole cultural story. Male crews were part of U.S. history as well, and yet did not survive as a culturally salient category. In the U.S. , male crews were reduced symbolically to the lone individual – the cowboy who does

it alone – known throughout the world, through the construction of advertising, as the Marlboro Man.

What's Different?

Relationship, Ingenuity vs. Resourcefulness, Nature, Multicultural vs. Cosmopolitan

Clearly there *is* a relationship between New Zealand and Australia that spans time, trade and alliances in times of war. Interesting are the terms by which the relationship is framed. Not surprising given history, the relationship is construed as familial but, more specifically, it is articulated implicitly as *brothers* in which New Zealand is "*the younger brother.*" Not twins, not siblings, not sisters, not mates, but younger and older brother. The metaphor of *brother* captures the intense national rivalry in sports as well as the ongoing sparring that occurred through words, jokes, smiles, and intercultural insults among the assembled New Zealanders and Australians in this seminar. 'Younger brother' also captures not only New Zealand's smaller size as a country and population, but also the intense mutual interest in how New Zealand fares relative to Australia (economically, in sports, accomplishments on a world stage, interethnic domestic relations, standards of beauty, the role of sheep, wine, virtually everything).

Given both the similarities between these two countries in time and patterns of immigration and the huge difference in circumstances of immigration as well as historical relations with resident populations, it could be considered remarkable that 'older brother' and 'younger brother' is the current metaphor for expression of relationship between Australia and New Zealand . At the least, one might ask, why not cousins or, indeed, mates? (Or, through the lens of American eyes, why not just 'neighbors', as Canada is culturally-speaking to the U.S. ?) We just would emphasize that these terms and the larger metaphor of brothers are cultural constructions, not in any sense the way it must be, merely the way it happens to be.

A narrative of ingenuity runs through New Zealand advertising, as it did in the photo diaries and ethnographic interviews. This contrasts with a narrative of resourcefulness for Australia . Ingenuity in design, invention, sheep and dairy industries, and more recently, wine, were seen as testaments to ingenuity in New Zealand . Perhaps not unrelated to traditional social roles of the British younger brother, was the overall mantra and recurrent refrain: 'making the best out of what you have.' It is also the uniqueness of contribution that is a crucial bit of New Zealand cultural identity. New Zealand does not want to play on the world stage (as others, or brothers, have defined it) as much as it wants its achievements

to make unique contributions to that stage. It wants 'nothing less than first class,' carried out with distinctive New Zealand ingenuity as well as connection to the country, recently exemplified by Peter Jackson's Lord of the Rings trilogy.

In New Zealand 's Toyota advertising, even the cars are clever. For instance, in a spot for the "smaller, bigger, smarter" Echo, the Echo is, to the tune of 'The Pied Piper,' *the* pied piper that other brands follow, emptying the town to the consternation and confusion of their owners. At the edge of sea cliff, the Echo swiftly turns and observes as the long line of following cars careen over the cliff. There were no drivers, the cars drove themselves. In an advertisement for a new Corolla model, scored to the tune of "Please Release Me," owners' cars stop and trap them and block their vision when they try to look at and admire a passing Corolla. A door slams shut catching a coat; another door locks an owner inside; sun visors and convertible tops clamp down; seats, mirrors and emergency brakes work on their own accord; an air bag explodes. The car is not only a technological device to be mastered; it is a clever sentient, inspired, ingenious being.

One might assume that given the vast amount of desert that makes much of Australia barely habitable, ingenuity would also be a prominent narrative. But not so. Rather Australian narratives emphasize self-sufficiency and resourcefulness in which survival skills, technical knowledge, physical strength and stamina are foregrounded. In Australia , the Toyota Landcruiser 100, "*with earth-moving v-8 power. . . the most powerful Landcruiser ever*" is a vehicle that reverses global rotation when it reverses gears.

On the surface, both New Zealand and Australia are grounded by a shared symbol of nature. Photo diaries from both countries were replete with images of gardens, plants, camping, the sea, the beach, the ubiquitous barbeque and love of outdoor cafes. There the similarities end. Nature as a symbolic category is nuanced differently in each country. In Australia nature is something to be mastered; in New Zealand , something to be partnered.

In Australia , nature is harsh, potentially deadly; it can kill you by virtue of its sheer vastness, the deadliness of flora and fauna and extreme climactic conditions as seen in photo diary images of snakes or brushfires (Figure 2). In Australia it is important to be proficient in one's survival skills and resourceful. In a similar vein, nature is something to tame or domesticate. Climactic differences notwithstanding, swimming pools as icons of the outdoors loom large in Australian diaries. Nature is engaged but not as a partner; it must be controlled for one's own welfare, for one's own benefit.

Figure 2: Images of 'traditional' Australia from respondent photo diaries – nature is deadly.

In New Zealand it is important to engage and challenge nature – to push boundaries of one's own limits. This was seen in photo diaries and is highly salient in automobile advertising (as in the Audi Quattro wake boarder ad). A Subaru ad shows the car going through water as well as a high flying, flipping snowboarder and features Glen Sisarich, two-time New Zealand downhill champion, cycling over natural hills; Steve Gurney, coast to coast winner running nature's more rocky spots; and it seems for good measure Angela Paul, Olympic luge champion, on a luge barreling down a city street. In all, what looms large is an intense, personal engagement and interaction with nature. Nature is a partner, a partner in endeavors, a partner in culture.

In ethnographic discussions with New Zealanders, the therapeutic function of nature was articulated. Through the engagement with nature – whether through camping, rowing on the bay in early morning hours, sailing, walking the beach with the dog – one's very being is reconstituted. We observed in Auckland homes the extent to which the outside was brought inside through porches, plants, open and unscreened windows, the barbeque always somewhere, even if squeezed onto a very small balcony (see Figure 3). In New Zealanders' partnership with nature, they have, in the language of semiotics, an indexical relationship with nature in which the acts of participation with the outdoors is at the heart of it. For New Zealanders it is the doing that matters; to separate New Zealanders from the land is akin to severing an artery. (In the U.S. , by contrast, the 'doing' doesn't matter; nature is more like a museum – something to witness or 'see'.)

Figure 3: Observations of nature in Aucklanders' lives: blurring boundaries between indoor and outdoors (flowers, plants, windows, muddy boots at the front door); photo diary image situating oneself quite literally in the outdoors (feet in water), as though one's legs were a plant stem and feet, roots.

New Zealanders pride themselves on their multicultural history and multicultural attitude. Maori images, symbols, art are pointed to proudly. In part, this multiculturalism is a way to articulate a clear separation from Australia where the national history with Aboriginal

populations provides for New Zealanders clear evidence of Australia's monocultural leanings. In fact, the history of Maori and European engagement and the extant presence of Maori cultural forms are used not just to separate New Zealanders from Australians but New Zealand from other countries which share similar settlement history or patterns, e.g., the U.S. and Canada. Thus New Zealand, because of its Maori history of engagement, is unique.

The Australian images collected in photo diaries or in advertising made no implicit or explicit claim to multiculturalism. Rather the Australian value was articulated as contemporary cosmopolitanism with the goal of playing (and being recognized) on the world stage. Diary images selected to express modern or contemporary Australia included images of restaurants and chefs, ethnic foods, the gay and lesbian Mardi Gras parade. These images, as well as advertising that assumed acceptance of cosmopolitanism and male metrosexuality (e.g., imagery of parties, restaurants, music that could easily be located in many of the world's elite cities; a Birds Eye advertisement in which a young man knows better than his date how to cook a stir-fry and use chopsticks) become evidence of 'taking the best from other cultures', that is of a selective integration of symbols from elsewhere inserted into contemporary Australia.

In both Australia and New Zealand current immigration practices are in tension with the articulated values of cosmopolitanism and multiculturalism, respectively (Abel 2004; Hudson 1997). Australia's current policy of turning immigrant boats away from its shores makes visible the heavy handedness with which 'cosmopolitan' is constructed; the Tampa is not forgotten. Aucklanders' angry reactions to recently immigrated Chinese populations fly in the face of professed acceptance of ethnic diversity. Some rail against Chinese cyber-cafes and shopping centers and areas that show (presumably) only Chinese signs. Others vent disgust at the fact that some young teenagers who come to New Zealand to go to school 'stay inside and study all the time,' thereby changing the norm for the New Zealand students (see Abel 2004). For Aucklanders it seems not that ethnic difference per se is what is so offensive, but that recent immigrants are not *doing* in the way New Zealanders can understand/accept – by not participating/engaging with nature, by separating inside and outside so thoroughly, and perhaps by not embracing ingenuity New Zealand style and melding shopping centers or language use more ingeniously in an Anglo-Maori world.

Conclusion

The foregoing analysis is necessarily incomplete, limited by very real constraints of time and space. Yet we would hope that this essay nonetheless offers a glimpse into the potential powers of an analysis of cultural symbols and of the value of deconstructing the cultural details and messages that are implicated in the advertising images that both reflect and constitute our cultural worlds.

A cultural analysis of advertising can be an insightful source of understanding or self-realization (depending on one's relationship to the advertisements under scrutiny) not necessarily garnered elsewhere. We do not think that New Zealanders' relationship with nature as a source of explanation for criticism or antipathy toward recent Asian immigrants would have been readily revealed through simple discussion. Moreover, understanding the nature of one's immediate and 'automatic' reactions offers the potential for altering the reactions. Research team participants from New Zealand were visibly embarrassed, horrified even, by some of the images and statements regarding Chinese immigrants. Criticisms of Aboriginal policy produced bruised looks on the faces of Australian team members. No one was particularly proud of the realization that almost everyone had selected distinctly male-centered imagery as representative of their individual countries as well as the trans-Tasman region. As anthropologists and social analysts we suggest, however, that one can see the careful deconstructive analysis of cultural imagery as a first step in the strategic rethinking and recasting of those images. That is, with self-awareness comes the potential to shift the discourse.

A cultural analysis also requires a recognition that the 'truths' on which advertisements depend, (e.g., what it means to be a girl or boy or mate or Australian or New Zealander) are social constructions. Neither false nor true in an epistemological sense, they simply are. Grounded (though in no way determined) by social, historical, economic and political forces, these 'truths' are subject to change – if we notice, if we comment, if we contest, if we question.

Figure 4: Diary images from New Zealand : Males and sports are an immediate fit. Women's breastfeeding offered as a unique, alternative iconic image of New Zealand . Yet what gendered assumptions do these images still telegraph?

So for example, one of the New Zealand participants had collected noticeably more images of women as part of her representations of New Zealand, for instance, the breast-feeding image in Figure 4. She cited this image as reflective of a long-standing New Zealand tradition of valuing breast over formula feeding (again an issue with links to ideas about active partnering with nature?). Part of her project was clearly inclusion of women in the representations of New Zealand in order to counteract the underlying gender bias that prioritized men. Similarly, the man as the caregiver of a baby while overlooking young boy's sports could also be put forward as an image indicative of change in gender roles. But in putting forward alternative images, one must still look further into the cultural assumptions implicit in the images. Are there recurrent images that feature women's caregiving in a nourishing, comforting, passive (sitting down) stance versus men's that indicates active challenging? Is the gender of women's children depicted as mixed or ambiguous while for men the tendency is unambiguous depiction of boys? Are women depicted as caregivers, operating within an adult group situation, while men are going it alone with the kids? A cultural reading of advertisements requires us to question, re-question and then to question again.

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