

- ARTICLE -

Cooking Class: Ideology, Identity and the Commodification of New Zealand in *Annabel Langbein—The Free Range Cook*

Donald Reid

Abstract

In the past decade reality TV genres, notably lifestyle television and makeover texts have been the focus of considerable academic analysis through a variety of theoretical constructs. On initial viewing, the Freemantle Media series *Annabel Langbein—The Free Range Cook* adheres to the conventions of a family-orientated cooking/lifestyle programme. However this text, like other contemporary examples, accommodates a number of readings. Alongside the argument that lifestyle texts function as governance, and operate with a range of policy and institutional mechanisms to create disciplined and self-regulating subjects, the *Free Range Cook* is equally informed by the phenomenon of nation branding and the quest for authenticity in the simultaneously local and global aspects of the mediatized world. Furthermore I argue that *Annabel Langbein—The Free Range Cook* is underpinned by neoliberal ideology. Here the text, overtly constructed as 'lifestyle', represents an idealized aspirational environment where the constant markers of domestic and national familiarity serve as duplicitous features in a touchable but unattainable world.

The television expert

Of all television forms, genres and sub-genres, few attract the broad range of scholarly analysis reserved for what is loosely described as 'reality' television. The reason for this is two-fold: firstly, reality TV is a malleable template for a variety of theoretical frameworks; and secondly, reality TV has become an important means of representing significant cultural and political movements and transitions. Through the 1990s and into the first years of the millennium the trend towards 'makeover' texts encouraged a number of scholarly analyses including Andrejevic (2003) and Ouellette & Hay (2004). These texts were based around a transformation narrative where participating subjects submitted to a variety of self-improvement technologies after undergoing a process of confession and catharsis. Given the design of the texts in question, the resulting scholarship primarily favoured a Foucauldian reading, with the self-improvement narrative framed as constitutive of neoliberal governmentality insofar as it represents a

Donald Reid is a lecturer in the Journalism, Media and Communication program at the University of Tasmania. His research interests include public service media in the digital mediascape, national identity and trans-nationalism, and neoliberalism and its many contradictions in the post Global Financial Crisis (GFC) world.

contemporary non-state mechanism operating as a disciplinary and normative technology (see Rose 1996; Sender 2006). From 2008 there has been a shift in the marketability of certain genres as the post-global financial crisis (GFC) environment has influenced the public's notions of personal consumption and lifestyle. The perennial subjects for factual television, including food, travel and real estate-based formats, have come to reflect elements of this new fiscal consciousness in programs that display an overt down-sizing narrative (Thomas 2008).

Besides the durability, marketability and adaptability of the narrative design, the success of reality TV texts have become reliant on two additional elements: i) the presence of an engaging host, and ii) the attractions of location. Tania Lewis (2012) observes that the convention of factual television has demarcated the host's role by virtue of the 'different values and logics' (581) of specific formats or subject matter. The *expert* is 'associated with high culture as well as with the modes of rational knowledge and techniques of social organisation that accompanied the rise of the modern state' (581), the *celebrity* is 'co-extensive with popular and consumer culture'. The collapse of this distinction into the role of *celebrity-expert* is arguably the defining feature of reality TV and a constitutive element in the genre operating as a form of governmentality. Here the cultural authority afforded celebrity is imbued with the illusion of democracy and egalitarianism while the narrative promotes the rationale of self-improvement and a capitalist logic towards one's subjectivity.

Alongside narrative and format, the reality and lifestyle genres are often incorporated into travel programming, resulting in a further hybridization of a show's objective between 'information and spectacle' (Brunsdon et al. 2001). The successful host, when situated in the right location for the narrative, becomes a 'living brand' (Lury 2004: 93) that simultaneously teaches the viewers a range of practical guides to improve everyday living while representing a life few could realistically replicate. The combination of location and presenter varies according to the text and audience, some representing the urban and suburban (Nigella Lawson, Martha Stewart), others the rural or semi-rural (Hugh Fernley-Whittingstall). This categorization is further refined when the physical location is a central feature of the narrative. The travel/food crossover is an established genre in its own right and over the last five years this has been nuanced into more specific lifestyle-specific texts. Series such as *The Little Paris Kitchen: Cooking with Rachel Khoo* or *Made in Italy with Silvia Colloca* are two recent examples where the host acts both as expert and an informed-insider travel guide.

The collection of series hosted by chef Annabel Langbein represents New Zealand's contribution to the lifestyle/travel/food genre. Across the series *Annabel Langbein: The Free Range Cook* (2010), *Annabel Langbein: Simple Pleasures* (2012), and *Annabel Langbein: Through the Seasons* (2014), Langbein fulfils the role of expert-host,

demonstrating how to prepare a range of dishes made from high quality, locally-sourced produce. By setting the series at Langbein's own property in the picturesque town of Wanaka in Central Otago, the text also functions as tourism promotion, taking the viewer to a number of attractive South Island locations as part of the show's food sourcing narrative. Langbein's credibility is based on her existing public persona as cook and author. This includes publication of 18 cookbooks, work as a food columnist for a variety of publications and as a guest on numerous radio and television lifestyle programs in New Zealand and internationally since the 1980s. Previously she has been contracted by the governmental body Trade New Zealand to promote local goods in existing and potential export markets. Langbein's brand extends across media, with each series of the *Free Range Cook* is accompanied by a new cookbook and supported by an extensive web and social media presence. The series now screens internationally, in the United States on PBS affiliate stations and on the Australian Broadcasting Corporation.

Lifestyle television such as the *Free Range Cook* series represents a highly ideologically-driven textual form that draws on a range of national and historic tropes in order to perpetuate a dominant set of values and ideals. These texts provide a complex but useful example of the media's role in contemporary power and governance structures. Since 2008, a number of lifestyle texts have assumed a socio-political advocacy of downsizing as a reaction to excessive western consumption associated with the cause of the GFC. In a number of instances the prevailing economic climate has given rise to particular form of class-conscious derision incorporated into a paternalistic narrative. For example, in the publicity for his 2013 series *Jamie's Money Saving Meals*, celebrity chef Jamie Oliver stated both his desire to help people and his bewilderment at the lack of self-awareness and motivation demonstrated by the subjects of his series.

I'm not judgmental, but I've spent a lot of time in poor communities, and I find it quite hard to talk about modern-day poverty. You might remember that scene in [a previous series] *Ministry of Food*, with the mum and the kid eating chips and cheese out of Styrofoam containers, and behind them is a massive fucking TV. It just didn't weigh up. The fascinating thing for me is that seven times out of 10, the poorest families in this country choose the most expensive way to hydrate and feed their families—the ready meals, the convenience foods (Deans 2013).

Oliver's statements pointedly represent the neo-liberal underpinnings of lifestyle television. While other texts are less overtly political, the lifestyle genre remains, I suggest, framed by a neoliberal agenda. The setting and tone of Annabel Langbein's series are quite different from Oliver's political subject matter, but there are commonalities in the way such series favour notions of self-reliance (and with that the implied countering of governmental intervention and welfarism) and self-discipline that underpin the rhetorical basis of neoliberalism's place in the popular imaginary. Following Stuart Hall's classic analysis of the cultural and ideological ascendancy of

Thatcherism (1988) and drawing on accounts of neoliberalism as ideology and the production of the consumer-citizen, this paper examines the lifestyle genre, and the Annabel Langbein series in particular, as both an ideological tool and a vehicle for the production of subjects.

This paper's purpose is to counter the notion that 'lifestyle' texts offer either a portrayal of authentic practices or that they can be situated as an opposing narrative to the globalized consumer culture. Instead I suggest that the Annabel Langbein series is essentially part of the neoliberal ideology that has dominated New Zealand's cultural, political and economic spheres since the 1980s. The text represents an idealized and unattainable version of the New Zealand lifestyle that draws on particular historic and cultural tropes but ultimately serves the dominant neoliberal agenda. Therefore, when considering the appeal of Langbein's series, a set of overlapping definers must be considered. These include lifestyle texts as cultural artefacts in the post-GFC climate; lifestyle texts as a neoliberal mechanism to promote an individualized form of discipline; and the *Free Range Cook* as a vehicle for national commodification.

The following section provides a brief overview of the ideological development of lifestyle television. Firstly a comparison between the instructional paternalism of earlier incarnations of the factual genre and the contemporary lifestyle television model that focuses on participant experience. Secondly, I discuss how lifestyle texts operate in the creation of subjectivities; how certain programs function ideologically by drawing on recognizable class distinctions, or through attractive tropes associated with national identity (for example the reiteration of rural-ness and self-sufficiency running through the *Free Range Cook*). Situated in the context of neoliberalism, these tropes represent the governmentalization of contemporary society, framed through lifestyle television and articulated as the logic of ethical responsibility and conservation. I continue this analysis into the engagement of the *Free Range Cook* as a vehicle for both neoliberal ideology and the creation of subjectivity, as well as in the final section, where I examine the text as part of the process of national branding.

Factual television: from instruction to symbolic violence of class distinction to the gentle narratives of downsizing

The lifestyle sub-genre has a particular lineage that extends deep into the history of television forms and formats, including food, gardening, DIY-renovation, and travel programming. The objectives and consequences of this programming is manifest in distinct ways. The dominant reading (and taking into account the various institutional and governance models and genre trends over the years) is that they perform an instructional role. With specific reference to the BBC, Charlotte Brunsdon suggests that the contemporary lifestyle genre retains something of the educative function of the Reithian 'educate, inform and entertain' maxim (Brunsdon 2004: 75). However the concept of 'lifestyle'—as opposed to 'hobbyist' (86)—programming is contained in the

totalizing formulation of how one might live, rather than the instruction on performing a given task. This is not to suggest that the Reithian maxim was politically neutral, it is, moreover, greatly infused with the middle class paternalism of its age (Avery 2006). But the political and cultural influence exerted by current media forms is demarcated from the reformist ideals of the Reithian agenda by its staunchly individualistic methods and personalized outcomes. Thus what separates older forms of instructional television from its contemporary iterations is the transition in focus from the task itself to the experience and transformation of subjects. The transformative element in the competitive makeover sub-genre readily lends itself towards a Foucauldian reading through the overt improvement narrative of the text and, following Ouellette & Hay (2008), the post-welfare agenda of neoliberalism that these texts represent through the reiteration of the objective of self-improvement (472). Even when the process of transformation is facilitated by expert assistance (such as the trainer, the surgeon or the confessor) the narrative always situates these changes as being produced by the will and fortitude of the subject themselves. But the dominant reading of these texts is based on pre-conceived cultural norms and, in the case of lifestyle television, class division remains a prominent, if not-articulated, means of subjectification.

The notion of class is constantly being reproduced in reality/lifestyle texts. Narrative focus on individual participants notwithstanding, there remains divisions between the subject and the expert that readily sustains class analysis. In the United States class differentiation often intersects with racial divisions, the articulation of which is increasingly politically problematic. As Theo David Goldberg (2009) explains, a symptom of neoliberal ideology (when incorporated into the semantic and attitudinal transformation derived from the politics of multiculturalism and recognition of diversity) has been a de-emphasis on race as a stratification in favour of socio-economic position, as the latter offers a more mobile set of significations even for severely disadvantaged subjects. Therefore in aspirational/neoliberal texts, such as *Extreme Makeover: Home Edition*, the focus of the profiled subjects is on economic hardship and not the systemic disadvantage created through institutional racism. However, as post-graduate law student Zach Newman writes, the contemporary socio-political culture of the United States, coloured as it has been by the deaths by law enforcement officers of Trayvon Martin in Sanford and Michael Brown in Ferguson, needs to be realigned in order to acknowledge the 'social stratification and subordination, and the continuity of racism' (117) that pervades culture and society in the United States.

Contemporary Britain shares with the United States the prevailing culture of colour-blind neoliberalism in regards to race, however the stratification of class is a familiar trope in popular culture (Brunsdon 2004; McRobbie 2004) and is transferred across popular entertainment genres. Drawing on Bourdieu's concept of cultural production, Angela McRobbie's analysis of the British series *What Not to Wear* and *Would Like to Meet* illustrates the deployment of expert-host and the wider framework of the narrative itself as a form of 'symbolic violence' perpetrated by the (middle class) host onto the

(working class) subjects (McRobbie 2004, 99). In contemporary television a dual form of subordination occurs. Program narratives require people to shape themselves, to be adaptable, to become employable and willing to constantly improve themselves. However the broader cultural setting also establishes set perimeters of what is acceptable behaviour, with these perimeters based (albeit silently) on class.

Denigration, however is now done with a degree of self-conscious irony, both presenters and audiences are assumed to know that no harm is intended and that, in post politically correct times, that this is just good fun. It is now possible, thank goodness, to laugh at less fortunate people once again. (100)

This emphasis on class distinction has become hyper-visible through ubiquitous repetition in popular media, and within a cultural environment where issues of personal identity intersect with consumption the focus on class is situated in the discourse of choice. The inference is that individuals' choices are made not because of economic factors, but because of personal taste. Since the GFC, the interaction between economic and cultural capital in the narrative of reality and lifestyle TV has become complicated. In what David Cameron described as the 'new age of austerity' (Potter & Westall 2013, 155) the economic element in class distinction has been ostensibly reversed. Here the celebration of 'down-sizing' (Thomas, 681), the re-invention of craft and a retreat from urbanisation and excessive consumption have become important thematic elements in lifestyle television as a sub-genre of factual TV.

Hesmondhalgh (2006) also applies Bourdieu in examining the media's role in cultural production, returning to Bourdieu's scale of economic capital against cultural capital. However the neoliberal undertones of lifestyle television mean that rather than providing a counter-narrative to the prevailing neoliberal and consumerist agenda, lifestyle texts merely represent a new articulation of the dominant economic and cultural logic. In some cases, the fissure between the message presented in the texts and the underlying neoliberal logic is overt. Thomas points to the British real estate-based series *Relocation Relocation* in which the remedy for contemporary lifestyle stress is the purchase of a second house; or the 'downshifting experiment' conducted by Hugh Fernley-Whittingstall through his *River Cottage* brand, in which the narrative of self-sufficiency and small enterprise is seemingly at odds with the extensive business elements associated with the series, including ancillary media products, food products, cookery classes and restaurants.

Despite these gaps, there is widespread popular appeal for lifestyle programming. Unlike the transformation narratives popular in other reality TV sub-genres, the lifestyle text lends itself toward a politically neutral reading. However the expert-led narratives, the role of the host, their practices and the program's setting carry significant ideological weight. Annabel Langbein's *Free Range Cook* series represents an idealized version of

rural New Zealand life in a similar fashion to Fernley-Whittingstall's depiction of self-sufficiency in Britain. Alongside similarities in genre, a number of parallels can be made in both the on-screen and off-screen personas of Langbein and Fernley-Whittingstall. Both hosts are members of the influential middle class. Fernley-Whittingstall, the son of celebrated writer Jane Fernley-Whittingstall, is Eton and Oxford educated and related by marriage to British Prime Minister David Cameron. Langbein, who spends her time between houses in the exclusive Auckland suburb of Remuera and the South Island resort town of Wanaka is married to millionaire businessman Ted Hewetson—affording them the ability to inhabit their respective exotic locales and also providing them with a platform of ideological superiority from which that may deliver a normalizing treatise on practice and behaviour. These hosts 'function as standard bearers for middle class family values, for certain norms of citizenship and also for safeguarding the valuable cultural capital accruing to them and their families through access to education, refinement and other privileges' (McRobbie, 101). In this respect, Fernley-Whittingstall and Langbein's advocacy of the simple life is fundamentally disingenuous. But rather than merely portray to an audience an unattainable life, the narrative of these texts incorporates ideological and disciplinary elements. Furthermore, the valorisation of labour on which the narratives are driven and the commodification of place situate these texts as part of the dominant neoliberal hegemony. The attraction for audiences of the *Free Range Cook* is therefore based on two interlaced elements: Langbein's idealised persona, and the appeal to a mythologized articulation of New Zealand cultural identity.

In the following section I situate these elements in the context of neoliberalism by firstly drawing on Stuart Hall's seminal analysis of the ideological appeal of Thatcherism to examine lifestyle texts as perpetuating a familiar but unattainable version of New Zealand life and the disciplinary aspect of lifestyle programming. Secondly I argue that the *Free Range Cook* is an element in the commodification of New Zealand cultural identity, writ large in process of nation branding.

Neoliberalism as Ideology

Neoliberalism constitutes a program of socio-economic transformation from a state-centric model to one built on the dynamism of private enterprise and with that the potential and capacities of individuals (Harvey 2005). The transformation of the political state represents a re-ordering of the state's economic framework. The response to this transformation of the state's role by cultural producers has been the development of texts that celebrate the productive virtues of private enterprise, and its metaphorical cousins, self-reliance, hard work and capital gain. For Stuart Hall, the act and depiction of work is fetishized in modern neoliberal economies, 'not since the workhouse has labour been so fervently and single-mindedly valorized' (Hall 1998, 83). Lifestyle narratives reinforce this trope through both literal demonstrations of work and via the metaphorical representation of the fruits of labour. In the case of the *Free Range Cook* the bucolic existence, notably the acre-wide kitchen garden on the shores on Lake

Wanaka is symbolic of the latter. The retreat from the state-ist framework towards a culture based on individual enterprise represents the inverse of the Keynesian agenda that had been regarded as integral to New Zealand's internal and projected image through most of the twentieth century (Collins & Kessing 1987). But in the logic of contemporary neoliberalism this disconnect is ideologically resolved by the text's hailing of various mythic elements associated with national identity: food production, self-sufficiency and the moral value of rural life (I will return to this topic in the following section).

The perpetuation of an idealized version of national identity, coloured and framed through a neoliberal lens lends itself to comparisons with Stuart Hall's analysis of the British Conservative Party's nationalist and mythologizing rhetoric during the Thatcher years. The rise of Thatcherism was 'conceived on no narrow economic basis. The aim was to re-construct social life as a whole around a return to the old values—the philosophies of tradition, Englishness, respectability, patriarchalism, family and nation' (Hall 1988, 39). In the rhetoric of the 'new right' these values are normalized as attainable through work. For Hall, Thatcherism's principal achievement was to gain electoral popularity among communities most adversely affected by the government's monetarist and privatisation agenda (notably the unskilled and semi-skilled workforces) through a combination of popular nationalism—in this case dramatically symbolized by the Falklands War in 1982-3—and the rhetoric of social discipline that stressed the economic necessity of the government's policies but promised better fortunes to come (40-1).

What connects the political rhetoric of 1980s Britain with media depictions of the good life in post-millennial New Zealand is the yawning divide between the promises offered by the fruits of labour and what outcomes are actually achieved and attainable. Hall notes that despite Thatcherism's efficacy at 'defining new contours of political language' (41) and the establishment of a range of policies aimed at achieving high productivity and re-vitalizing a flagging economy, on the whole these ambitions failed to materialize. However despite this failure the aspirational ideology associated with neoliberal capitalism fuels its ongoing appeal. The media is an integral element in perpetuating this promise. Potter & Westall (2013) observe (again in the context of Britain) that post-GFC politics of austerity has been re-framed in popular culture through the hailing of a nuanced form of nostalgia that includes both the down-sizing narrative and an ironic but comforting reading of popular nationalism: illustrated in the ironic re-emergence of the "keep calm and carry on" logo from its World War Two origins. The aspirational narrative relates to a constructed ideal Britain. Ironically both are depicted as an antidote to the boom and bust vagaries foisted on the public by monetarist policies, but are also conceived as representing individual agency and a 'new localism' where self-sufficiency represents a 'moral, ecological and economic good' (Potter and Westall, 161). The focus on agency is aligned with Nikolas Rose's observation that neoliberalism

constitutes the responsabilization of citizens over their lives (1999), thus returning to Harvey's primary definition of neoliberalism as a retreat of state enterprises and the advance of private interests. But as I have noted, rather than portray this in the language of risk and fear, contemporary media texts convey individual agency as empowering, enlightening and, as Potter and Westall note, morally virtuous. Lifestyle, therefore, signifies two overlapping concepts. The first is aspirational; the second is akin to class or culture (in a form primarily associated with Raymond Williams), that being 'expressing and identifying social groupings and sub-groupings which are connected to, and intersect with, factors such as class, gender, sexuality, age, ethnicity and "race", but which cannot necessarily be straightforwardly mapped on to these formations' (Thomas: 682). Lifestyle, as it has developed in neoliberal societies and represented in media texts, is partially normalized as an expectation and as a right, but is also rarefied.

The lifestyle text is a space where the ideological interpretation of the ideal citizen combines with practices and techniques designed to create subjectivities. The perimeters of makeover and lifestyle TV provide an effective analogy for contemporary neoliberal society. Following Ouellette and Hay, the conventions of makeover television constitute governmentality through the creation of the enterprising subject. The narratives of specific shows make the creation of subjectivity explicit through the transformation of un-disciplined (and invariably unhappy) subjects into productive, controlled and self-regulating citizens. Lifestyle television offers a far gentler host-audience relationship, but the inherent objectives are the same. The genre downplays the competitive and overtly commercial aspects of reality TV, but the principal rationale remains of improving the lives of the subject-audience. Here, the recognizable attributes of the neoliberal subject (the desirable end-product of the transformation narrative) are situated alongside specific ideological conditions, notably elements perpetuating particular tropes of national identity. David Chaney (1996) notes the concept of lifestyles is symptomatic of a mediated, neoliberal culture where consumption choices dictate identity roles. But when these choices are situated in the context of national identity they contain characteristics that perpetuate familiar and favourable nationalistic attributes. Thus programming belonging to the variants of the travel/lifestyle genre, including the *Free Range Cook*, can and do have a role in the process of nation branding, especially if they are screened internationally. National branding is a conservative process. As Somogy Varga notes in reference to the directives of Branding New Zealand, the rationale of these bodies is to 'consolidate and formalize' (829) the existing (stereotypical) portrayal of the nation state. In the case of the *Free Range Cook* this means an embrace of various tangible and intangible features that dominant the perception of New Zealand including the primacy and perceived authenticity of rural life and its related signification to attributes of egalitarianism and self-sufficiency.

National branding is a phenomenon born of globalization and neoliberalism but one that constantly reiterates and intensifies preconceived notions of national identity. This is

based on seemingly contradictory elements, but ones that are resolved via the process of commodification and within the post-modern re-imagination of nationhood. Firstly, the dominant cultural impulse in the past half-century has been the de-coupling of personal identity from citizenship. The cultural logic of post-colonialism has provided individuals with a range of non-state means of asserting personal identity, ethnicity, religion and sexuality being among the most prominent (Hunt & Purvis 1999). Occurring concurrently with the freedom towards identity formation has been the commodification of national identity that serves to re-affirm particular national traits. Secondly, particular tropes are reiterated despite being increasingly abstracted from material existence. In the case of New Zealand, the rural ideal and its associations with concepts of authenticity, naturalness and an esteemed version of morality are baselessly perpetuated. But despite the fissures between the material and imagined existence of the nation state, acceptance of the mediated form comes from both domestic and exotic consumers. Nationalism may represent a fiction insofar as it prescribes essentialness to an arbitrary location (Anderson 1991), but the ideological weight of nationalism remains a significant feature of the human condition (Bauman: 20). The *Free Range Cook* is underpinned by an idealized notion of New Zealand-ness replicated from the wider branded image of the country. Alongside the commodification of the physical landscape, the text draws on a range of familiar national traits in order to convey an authentic experience for the viewer.

The *Free Range Cook*, neoliberalism and the branding of New Zealand

The rural ideal popularized in the conventional New Zealand national narrative and reiterated in texts like the *Free Range Cook* contradicts the high degree of urbanization of contemporary society (Perry 1994). The longevity and endurance of this fallacy is a product of economic as well as cultural factors.

Of the composite elements that comprise New Zealand's colonial identity, the analogous relationship between food production, the farmer, and the value (in cultural terms) and the worth (in fiscal terms) of the nation is significant. Both the narrative of the *Free Range Cook* and the crafting of Langbein's persona are based on the promise of Langbein's authenticity in regards to the concept of ruralness. The interlaced elements of Langbein's off-screen and on-screen personas, the portrayal of the New Zealand physical space and the mythic tropes of cultural identity together form a totalizing narrative. Here strategic emphasis is on elements of Langbein's biography that affirm her credibility as expert host.

At this juncture the notion of 'unattainability' demands definition. Langbein's public persona is based on her appeal to an idealised version of stereotypical New Zealandness, created through her backstory and her cooking/lifestyle expertise. I suggest this idealized version is comprised of the four terms in two contrasting pairs: the rural-urban and the domestic-professional, with both pairs representing fundamental aspects

of 'lifestyle'. Rather than emphasise one side of each pair and downplay the other, Langbein moves effortlessly between all four. In contrast with her British counterpart Hugh Fernley-Whittingstall, whose persona underplays both his privileged background and the enterprise elements of his media and food interests (Thomas, 690), Langbein effortlessly shifts between her urban and rural self. She situates herself between Remuera in Auckland and Wanaka in Otago, both representing the highest priced real estate in the country.¹ Furthermore, and most obviously, Langbein's texts represent her ability to deftly combine the domestic and the professional spheres. This may make Langbein a figure of envy, but also situates her as the personification of what Vikki Bell calls the 'liberal promise' (81) symptomatic of the general post-welfarist mythology that is easily reproduced in media texts. As I examine below, Langbein's authenticity and capability across a range of tasks are central to her persona and she employs these well. But rather than being established as a replicable lifestyle, the enviable aspects of Langbein's life and enterprise (her real estate, her domestic and professional life, her skill) are conceived for the audience as a performance of the perfect New Zealand existence. On one level, such notions can be articulated via a Barthesian reading, Langbein's Wanaka garden functioning as a signifier for the affluent rural-urban ideal. However, according to the notion of Bell's liberal promise and/or Lauren Berlant's notion of 'cruel optimism' (2011), the consequences of affect in the age of late capitalism has equal resonance. For Berlant, the central affect of modernity is the constant quest for the 'good life', even when 'the evidence of their instability, fragility and dear costs abound' (2). In contemporary New Zealand, with its colonial mythology and prevailing neoliberalism, the good life combines rural sustainability with urban entrepreneurialism. But if this is the promise of the liberal ideal, it is (to concur with Bell) highly unstable. The crux of the liberal and neoliberal ideology is one of risk and success, and because of this the notion of failure is also part of the narrative. Thus for a New Zealand audience well-versed in the precarious socio-economics of the free-market agenda, Langbein's success, her skill, her life in general, exists beyond the normal realm of goal-orientated work and instead represents the far end of neoliberalism's mythologized capability.

This mythology is perpetuated in the media generated by and about Langbein, all emphasizing her multiple skills, desirable experience and especially her authenticity and capability in the rural and urban sectors. In an article titled 'Why we all want to cook (and live) like Annabel Langbein' (2006) for the online publication *Food & Wine*, Gareth Renowden describes events from Langbein's early adulthood that have informed her later personality and skill set.

It's hard to believe Langbein once made a living trapping possums and jumping out of helicopters catching wild deer for New Zealand's nascent venison-farming industry. A series of adventures eventually led her to cooking. In the early '80s, with a horticulture degree but no clear career goals, Langbein and a group of friends built a 52-foot catamaran, intending to

sail round the world. They set off from Wellington at 8 p.m. on an autumn night, knowing a storm was about to hit. 'I was just stowing my gear when the first wave came through a porthole and soaked my bunk', Langbein recalls. 'Then I was sick every 15 minutes for the 10 days it took to sail round to Gisborne'. That's where she got off, to leave world travels until later in the decade.

In her own publicity material Langbein reiterates these qualities of capability, practicality and her own authenticity especially within a rural environment. Commenting on the vehicle she uses in the series, a 1978 Jeep A20, Langbein writes:

So here I was back in Wanaka with a truck that simply would not start, knowing I had no time to spare and no one to help me. It called for a hair-raising James Bond type manoeuvre to jump-start the truck—a tight freewheeling turn on the hill, missing the wall by a fingerbreath, into a 90-degree turn for the narrowest of lanes in order to reach the bit that was steep enough to really get the old girl going—maybe 25 metres that ended wham at the main road with the early morning traffic.

I don't know if you have ever driven an A20 Jeep but they are actually quite big and high and very unwieldy. There is nothing glamorous about doubling the clutch to change gear or having to hold the brake on with one foot while you rev the motor with your heel and then slowly release the clutch with the other while you release the hand brake.

The celebration of Langbein's multi-facteted skill-set is part of the 'celebritization' of ordinary tasks (Lewis: 584) that is significant to the popularity of instructional reality TV. The description of Langbein's persona encourages multiple readings. Her image, projected via the text, exemplifies the 'intimate public sphere' (Bertant 1997), combining, firstly, a particular and complex representation of gender roles—Langbein both transcends and exaggerates conventional gender types as the home-maker, provider, driver and mechanic—and, secondly, a notion of New Zealand as an environment that can and does produce such subjectivities as almost an organic feature of its colonial culture.

The purchase and screening of the *Free Range Cook* on US and Australian television and Langbein's inclusion in Tourism New Zealand's *100% Pure New Zealand* campaign (see Tourism New Zealand 2015) is evidence of the touristic appeal of the series and Langbein as a personality. Although the marketing of particular nation states has been part of inter-national and geo-economic operations since the nineteenth century (Varga 2013: 825), the increasing influence of globalization has resulted in a greater emphasis on national branding as a valuable differentiating tool for individual states.

Nation branding is influential in different ways depending on what audiences are being targeted. For an international audience, images and ideals of a given nation state are used to attract investment and capital in various forms. 'Both traditional and emerging market economies devote considerable financial resources that aim to establish and communicate a specific image of national identity with the "official" goal to attract tourists, skilled students and workforce, investments and to increase exports' (Varga, 828). In addition national branding strategies also influence the way domestic consumers and audiences view their own country by galvanizing the population by formalizing a positive nationalist ideal through existing media, marketing or cultural forms (829). As a neoliberal mechanism, nation branding operates on both an ideological and disciplinary level: perpetuating dominant beliefs and producing subjectivities. The concept of nation branding operates via a central contradiction: the perpetuation of an image of the nation as both exceptional and essential, while globalisation, as the political and economic force which fostered the phenomenon of nation branding, operated to radically de-historicize and re-define 'national identity as a capitalizable entity that mirrors neoliberal logic' (833).

Notwithstanding the erosion of political and economic sovereignty resulting from the prevailing neoliberal agenda, the nation remains culturally and politically significant. The branded version of the nation operates by drawing on the same elements that contribute to nationalism, these being what Eric Hobsbawm describes as 'invention of tradition' (1). Just as the process of nationalism serves to make natural and essential those aspects of political, economic and cultural life that bind a hitherto arbitrary collective of citizens (Anderson 1991), the branded nation re-produces attributes not just desirable in a touristic form, but also aspirational and designed to resonate with the cultural makeup of the citizenry irrespective of their own background. 'Nation branding is thought to enhance the cultural stability of the nation, to ameliorate social integration and cohesion by advancing national confidence, and to bring together local and national interests' (Varga, 829). For a nation to be successfully branded and marketed in the age of globalization there must be: i) the prevailing dominance of neoliberalism that fuels a widespread belief that the economic fortunes of the 'nation' (or corporate entities branded as the nation) have a corresponding impact on individual citizens; and ii) an acceptance of the dominant version of the national narrative and, equally, an acceptance that the negative consequences of this dominant narrative (colonialism being a significant example) may be downplayed or erased.

The multi-faceted aspect of nation branding is designed to transform the idealized version of national identity from a media text to an embodied experience for consumers. Through mediated and visceral experiences such as sports events, food, wine, and customer relations, alongside conventional marketing and advertising strategies, those charged with nation branding seek to engage domestic citizens into the role of embodied advocates. Citizens thus become 'brand ambassadors' and 'act and think in ways that are

well suited to the general contours of the national brand' (Varga, 836) and for individuals to regards themselves as stakeholders (Dinnie, 165). To successfully achieve that connection between the subject of the brand and its market, the message needs to have a high degree of authenticity, albeit a subjective form of authenticity, but one that both resonates and is identifiable enough for the "ambassadors" to carry with them. As noted above, the lifestyle portrayed in the *Free Range Cook* is exclusive but recognizable and attractive. Langbein's autobiography, divided into the popular version which is played on through the narrative of the series (that highlights her work on back country properties) and the well known but secondary narrative of her privileged life between Auckland and Wanaka, reflects neoliberal New Zealand through the valorisation of the self-made and self-sufficient entrepreneur. The elements that makeup Langbein's persona: the depiction of rural (read: natural) life and the capacity for economic self-sufficiency have been fundamental to the western concept of authenticity since the Enlightenment, and have grown in ideological dominance since the ascendancy of the neoliberal agenda (Zukon 2008).

The cultural and mediated celebration of the self-sufficient individual conveniently bypasses that country's welfarist legacy and the modernist celebration of collectivism that formed the basis of New Zealand's international reputation during the mid-twentieth century. However the skill of contemporary marketeers and media producers is not to ignore or disavow this aspect of history, but to subsume the various attractive messages into a coherent—though inconsistent—whole. Consistency, notes Grant (2006) suggests uniformity, an attribute out of step with the articulation of globalisation, the attraction of inclusion and diversity, and consumer gratification. The *Free Range Cook* conveys an unreliable notion of what constitutes New Zealand life, but within a narrative framework of ideologically neutral modality. Such action represents a political statement affirming the primacy of a neoliberal agenda within New Zealand's cultural identity. Whilst the overt elements associated both monetarism and the disciplinary zeal of makeover texts are replaced with a gentle narrative of self-sufficiency and even (although not politically loaded) celebration of non-consumption. Thus the wider implications of the text reveal an association between the branded nation and the ideology of neoliberalism, and this association is perpetuated across a number of media fronts.

Conclusions

As a textual form, lifestyle television provides something of a re-imagining of Reithian paternalism with programmes designed to improve the viewers' lives through practical instruction. But despite similarities in subject matter and style between lifestyle and instructional programmes, the two forms differ in the political and ideological frameworks that underpin the text. Rather than a guide towards completing a task, lifestyle television provides a guide towards an ideal subjectivity. As a set of practices and guiding a guiding political and cultural force, the principles of neoliberalism drive

the narrative construction of lifestyle texts. In the makeover genre (as a distinct, but related sub-genre to lifestyle television) the narrative revolves around the transformation of the individual from an un-disciplined subject to a self-disciplined one. In the years since the Global Financial Crisis the lifestyle genre, with a greater emphasis on craft, has become popular as the culture of downsizing and self-sufficiency gains political and cultural cache. Whilst the tone of lifestyle television suggest something contradictory to the overt governmentality through which makeover TV operates, the craft genre—often guided by the expert-celebrity host—also perpetuates the dominant neoliberal agenda, through both the narrative regimes that promote particular practices but also via the reiteration of modes of living that are simultaneously recognizable and unattainable.

In the New Zealand context, the on and off-screen persona of Annabel Langbein represents this recognizable but unattainable ideal. The twin elements of Langbein's media presence—the series narrative focusing domestic craft, and the extra-textual narrative celebrating her material privilege—are both features of the wider neoliberal ideology that is integral to the contemporary New Zealand popular narrative and are reiterated in national branding campaigns. These elements constitute a primary contradiction: the influences of neoliberal globalization that wield powerful commodifying influences, versus the anchoring essential qualities of the nation state (signified in rural-ness, food production and the quality of individual self-sufficiency apparent in the *Free Range Cook*). This contradiction is resolved through the prevailing neoliberal agenda. The aspiration appeal of Langbein's lifestyle is normalized by the everyday discourse of individualism and capitalism fuelled by the cultural familiarity of rural-ness shared by domestic and international audiences alike, and the commodification of national identity has become equally mundane via the processes of globalization.

Notes

1. According to the Real Estate Institute of New Zealand, current (December 2015) figures show the media house price in Auckland as the highest in New Zealand at \$770,000 and the Queenstown Lakes District, which includes Wanaka, as the second highest at \$560,000 (<https://www.reinz.co.nz/residential-property-data-gallery>). Within the widespread Auckland market Remuera is among the most expensive suburbs, with the current average house price being \$1.7 million (<http://www.hometopia.co.nz/help-me-sell/suburbs/agenttype/view/propertyid/78>),

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