



# **Asian Students in New Zealand: From a “Cultural Invasion” to a National Conversation<sup>1</sup>**

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Foreign students are jammed en masse into the lift foyer of an inner city Auckland office building, talking loudly in a cacophony of languages. Not a word of English can be heard. Outside, students congregate at the building entrance, smoking, eating, and spitting, seemingly oblivious to others on the footpath. There's a sudden stampede for the lift, and once inside - packed like sardines - the noise instantly starts again. With your nose wedged against the door, it's easy to feel resentful of this cultural invasion. <sup>2</sup>

However you might want to describe Asian students in New Zealand, a "cultural invasion" is not entirely accurate. 'A historical presence' or 'part of New Zealand's rich diversity', or 'a significant resource' might present a more positive picture that instead of causing resentment, as this journalist suggests, will instead cause a well-informed balanced response that recognises Asian students for what they are: an important part of New Zealand's history and essential participants in a national conversation about New Zealand's identity.

We need to consider Asian students within New Zealand's broader engagement with Asia. Much recent scholarship on Asian students' experiences in New Zealand has tended to isolate their experiences from wider issues of national identity, migration, notions of integration, how we conceptualise the 'Other' and issues around global movement of people, the impact of neo-liberalism on the delivery and marketing of education, and effects on social cohesion. Tangential issues of border control, national security, aid and development, regional security, free-trade agreements, global health issues and the changing contours of the global economic markets receive even less attention in discussions around Asian students in New Zealand or elsewhere.

These gaps present a serious deficiency in our discussions and analysis of the issues surrounding Asian students in New Zealand so that, as Vivienne Anderson points out, "much literature concerned with international students' experiences draws on 'cultural difference' as a 'primary analytical tool'. At a surface level, this results in a distortion or oversimplification of complex human realities. The diversity of both 'New

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<sup>2</sup> Fiona Rotherham, 'Export education - blip or bust', *Unlimited Magazine*, 1 September, 2003, <http://www.sharechat.co.nz/features/unlimited/article.php/ea52f8f5n> [accessed 10 April 2007]

Zealand' and 'international' students (for example) is effectively obscured."<sup>3</sup> Neither the small-scale nature nor the mono-disciplinary approach of many studies on Asian students helps address this deficiency. Most studies are largely descriptive, with very little complex analytical or critical thinking.

The first thing we need to do is interrogate what we mean by "Asian" students. Calling them "international" students is even less helpful. Any conversation about Asian students needs to take note of their history and diversity and therefore caution against any temptation toward homogeneity. Even our conceptions of "Asia" need to change. Benedict Anderson offers a helpful history lesson here:

One should also add that what people have considered to be East and West has varied substantially over time. For well over a century, Ottoman Turkey was commonly referred to in English as the Sick Man of Europe, in spite of the Islamic religious orientation of its population, and today Turkey is still trying hard to enter the European Community. In Europe, which used to regard itself as entirely Christian—forgetting about Muslim Albania—the numbers of Muslims are growing rapidly by the day. Russia was long regarded as largely an Asiatic power, and there are still plenty of people in Europe who think this way. One could add that in Japan itself, there are some people who regard themselves as a kind of White. And where does the East begin and end? Egypt is in Africa, but it used to be part of the Near East and has now, with the end of the Near East, become part of the Middle East. Papua–New Guinea is just as Far East from Europe as is Japan, but does not think of itself this way. The brave new little state of East Timor is trying to decide whether it will be part of Southeast Asia, or of an Oceania which from some standpoints—e.g., Lima and Los Angeles—could be regarded as the Far West.<sup>4</sup>

Recognising that to speak of "Asia" as a homogeneous whole is deeply problematic. One friend of mine in Foreign Affairs recommended that the Asia New Zealand Foundation change its name to reflect something of the diversity of Asia. I think we would find that we'd have a very long title if we did that! But this example serves to

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<sup>3</sup> Vivienne Anderson, "Who's not integrating? International women speak about New Zealand students", in *Conference Proceedings of ISANA 17<sup>th</sup> International Education Conference 5-8 December 2006* [CD-Rom]

<sup>4</sup> Benedict Anderson, 'Western Nationalism and Eastern Nationalism: Is there a difference that matters?' *New Left Review*, 9, May-June 2001, <http://newleftreview.org/A2320> [retrieved 11 April 2007]

illustrate the great limitations of talking about "Asian" students in New Zealand, which, for most people, probably mean foreign-fee paying students, but could equally mean New Zealand-born Asians or migrants or refugees. Moreover, in New Zealand, when we speak of "Asians" I would suggest most people think of Chinese or South-east Asians rather than those from the Indian sub-continent or, indeed, from what we in this part of the world erroneously refer to as the "Middle East".

Traditionally, we begin our history of Asian students in New Zealand with the Colombo Plan in the 1950s; Asian migrants arrived in New Zealand almost a century before that. We first accepted Asian students in New Zealand under a thinly veiled umbrella of benevolent colonialism. The world was a very different place in 1950 and Asia particularly looked quite different from what it does now. Malaysia and Singapore didn't exist as we now know them; China was a closed communist country that only a year prior had thrown out most foreigners; Hong Kong was firmly under British rule; India had only recently become independent; Japan was still recovering from two devastating nuclear attacks and was in a significant economic recession; Korea was at war with itself; there was a fear of a domino effect of communism sweeping through Asia and into the rest of the world; and flourishing democracies in Asia were hard to find.

And in the 1950s, New Zealand was experiencing a decade of both remarkable economic prosperity but also of new regional alliances, as a signatory to the ANZUS Treaty, with Australia and the United States in 1951; as a founding member of the United Nations in 1950; and as a signatory to the South East Asia Collective Defense Treaty in 1954. New Zealand's migration policy was still firmly a 'white' migration policy and New Zealand's population could still look back to Mother England as their figurative, if not also literal, 'home'.

All of this, of course, was to change in the intervening years that bring us to the twenty-first century. Asian economies, first Japan and then China, would undergo a remarkable ascendancy and growth to become major players on the world economic stage. They would be followed closely by Singapore and Brunei. The rule of the various colonial powers (Britain, France, and The Netherlands) in Asia would fade to insignificance as Asian countries gained or fought for their independence. And economically, New Zealand would be forced to look away from Great Britain as its

primary export market and look to engage more with the growing economic powers in Asia. Here, New Zealand faced a challenge of meeting its history with its geography: born out of England, New Zealand's maturation and its long-term survival would be as part of the Asia-Pacific region.

This history lesson is to put our discussion of Asian students in New Zealand in perspective. Asian students didn't arrive in New Zealand in a political or geographical vacuum, free from the buffeting ideological or political currents of the time. These currents and trends mean that we have to say particular things about Asian students in *New Zealand*. As Johnson and Moloughney illustrate through the title of their recently published book, Asia is instrumental in the making of New Zealand and Asian students are part of that.<sup>5</sup> As an American diplomat said of American foreign policy so the same can be said of New Zealand foreign policy: the best and most effective part of New Zealand's foreign policy has been the student visa. Many of Asia's elite were educated abroad, including here in New Zealand.

What I don't see the need to do here is rehearse the plethora of descriptive research on international students in New Zealand in any detail. However, drawing on a summary by Francis Collins, some broad themes in research about international students can be identified.<sup>6</sup> Research on international students has been undertaken almost exclusively from the perspective of international students; is claimed by some, with a remarkable lack of critical self-reflection, as "unexamined ethnocentrism";<sup>7</sup> is largely focused on improving the 'performance' of export education through economic<sup>8</sup> and demographic<sup>9</sup> management, marketing<sup>10</sup>, and quality control<sup>11</sup>; with far fewer more critical studies on policy critiques<sup>12</sup>, the

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<sup>5</sup> Henry Johnson and Brian Moloughney (eds), *Asia in the Making of New Zealand*, Auckland: Auckland University Press, 2006

<sup>6</sup> Francis Leo Collins, 'Making Asian students, making students Asian: The racialisation of export education in Auckland, New Zealand', *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, 47, 2: 217-234, 2006

<sup>7</sup> Colleen Ward, *The impact of international students on domestic students and host institutions: A literature review*, Wellington: Ministry of Education, 2001

<sup>8</sup> A. Stroombergen, *International students: Economic benefits for Auckland City*, Auckland: Infometrics for Auckland City Council, 2003

<sup>9</sup> Andrew Butcher, *A report on the demographic, social and economic impact of international students on North Shore City*, Auckland: School of Social and Cultural Studies, Massey University, Auckland 2002b

<sup>10</sup> K.S. Fam and B. Gray, *Asian values and education promotion: an empirical study*. Paper presented at the Marketing in a Global Economy: The International Marketing Educators' Conference, 28 June-1 July, Buenos Aires, Argentina, 2000

<sup>11</sup> Roger Peddie, Marilyn Lewis and Gary Barkhuizen, *Quality improvement? An evaluation of the implementation of the code of practice for the pastoral care of international students*, Wellington: International Policy Development Unit, Ministry of Education, 2003

<sup>12</sup> Nicholas Tarling, *International students in New Zealand: First steps, current challenges – the planned and the unplanned*. Paper presented at the Asia Images, Ideas, Identities 15<sup>th</sup> NZAsia International

connection between immigration policy and international education<sup>13</sup>, governmental technologies in the export education industry<sup>14</sup>, the racialisation of the export education industry<sup>15</sup>, the experiences of international students in New Zealand, particularly in their psychological and social adjustments<sup>16</sup> and notions of belonging<sup>17</sup>, the provision of pastoral care<sup>18</sup>, and the re-entry of international students into their countries of origin<sup>19</sup>.

I also want to make some broader comments around international students in New Zealand, drawing on some work I did with Nick Lewis at the University of Auckland in 2003. In seeking to shift the discourse and debate to what we might call moral territory, we asserted that international students, specifically those of primary school age:

...are children and young people – often naïve but sometimes artful or simply criminal; sometimes respectful, but often rebellious; often accepting of authority, but commonly active regulatory arbitragers; often trusting, but sometimes terrified; commonly impetuous; often ill-informed, but sometimes highly discriminating; often wealthy, but sometimes not; sometimes English speaking, but often not. They are all young, potentially vulnerable, and experiencing often complex and abrupt changes in key identity-forming

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Conference, 21-24 November, University of Auckland, 2003; Nicholas Tarling, *International students in New Zealand: The making of policy since 1950*, Auckland: New Zealand Asia Institute: University of Auckland, 2004

<sup>13</sup> Andrew Butcher, 'Educate, consolidate, immigrate: Educational immigration in Auckland, New Zealand', *Asia Pacific Viewpoint*, 45 (2): 255-278, 2004

<sup>14</sup> Nick Lewis, 'Embedding the reforms in New Zealand schooling: After neo-liberalism?', *GeoJournal*, 59 (2): 149-160, 2004; Nick Lewis, 'Code of Practice for the pastoral care of international students: Making a globalising industry in New Zealand', *Globalisation, Societies and Education*, 3 (1):5-47, 2005

<sup>15</sup> Andrew Butcher & Terry McGrath, International students in New Zealand: Needs and responses, *International Education Journal* 5(4): 540-551, 2004; Paul Spoonley and Andrew Trlin, *Immigration, immigrants and the media: Making sense of multicultural New Zealand*. Palmerston North: New Settlers Programme Massey University, 2004

<sup>16</sup> Colleen Ward and A. Kennedy, The measurement of sociocultural adaptation, *International Journal of Intercultural Relations* 23(4): 659-677, 2004; Colleen Ward and Anne-Marie Masgoret, *The experience of international students in New Zealand: Report on the results of the national survey*. Prepared for the Ministry of Education by the Centre for Applied Cross-cultural Research and School of Psychology, Victoria University of Wellington, Wellington, 2004

<sup>17</sup> Butcher and McGrath, 'International students in New Zealand', 2004

<sup>18</sup> Andrew Butcher Lian-Hong Lim, Terry McGrath and Lorna Revis, *Nga tangata: Partnership in the pastoral care of international students*. Auckland: New Zealand Migration Research Network, 2002; Terry McGrath and Andrew Butcher, *Worthwhile welfare: Pastoral care as a key to sustainability in New Zealand's export education industry*. Paper presented at the Education New Zealand Conference, 12 August, Wellington, 2003

<sup>19</sup> Andrew Butcher, A grief observed: Grief experiences of East Asian international students returning to their countries of origin, *Journal of Studies in International Education* 6(4): 354-368, 2002a; Andrew Butcher, *A report on the demographic, social and economic impact of international students on North Shore City*. Auckland: School of Social and Cultural Studies Massey University, 2002b

processes. They are not the informed consumers or the rational agents of economic textbooks. These students come to New Zealand for varied reasons and seek to extract varied 'goods' from their experience.<sup>20</sup>

In other words, not all Asian students are the same. If they are international students, their motivations to come and study in New Zealand are as diverse as the countries they come from; the experiences they have in New Zealand are as diverse as the places they study in and the subjects they learn; their experience of English and the way they learn is equally diverse and essentialising either their English-language competency or their learning styles is at best simplistic and naïve and at worst racist.<sup>21</sup> It may be this tendency toward generalization means New Zealand is missing an opportunity to develop cross-cultural communication skills through in-depth interactions with international students.<sup>22</sup>

Moreover, in considering the underpinning philosophical approach being brought to New Zealand's burgeoning export education industry in the late 90s and early period of the 2000's, Nick Lewis and I noted:

The institutional conditions for [New Zealand's export education] market were created by imagining it, enabling it through policy changes, facilitating entrepreneurial behaviour through devolution, exhorting entrepreneurialism through fiscal restraint, N[ew] P[ublic] M[anagement] and competitive funding models, and stimulating enterprising and innovative solutions through bulk funding initiatives.

This laissez faire was quite remarkable as state owned institutions became increasingly dependent on their fees, income and resource inequalities among schools widened, and foreign language students became increasingly visible in city centres stimulating demand for everything from fast food and fast cars to bus tickets and secondary office space, particularly in Auckland. They kept

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<sup>20</sup> Andrew Butcher, Terry McGrath and Nick Lewis, (unpublished paper), *The positioning and problems of the pastoral care of international students in New Zealand*, 2003 cited in Nick Lewis and Andrew Butcher, *Place and Images of Quality in New Zealand's Export Education Industry*, Paper presented at the New Zealand Geography Association Conference Auckland University, July 8, 2003

<sup>21</sup> see Andrew Butcher and Terry McGrath, 'International Students in New Zealand: Needs and Responses', *International Education Journal*, 5, 4, 2004: 540-551

<sup>22</sup> David Pang, 'English as an Asian language: A 'flat world' look at English for global competence in Asia and its implications for New Zealand', Unpublished paper, University of Auckland, 2007

coming: urban schools financed new projects, businesses cashed in, and welfare beneficiaries and low-middle income earners supplemented their incomes by hosting students. This was how schools (or other businesses) were supposed to operate – entrepreneurially in global markets without state interference. However, the extraordinary growth rates and increasing reliance of state institutions led inevitably to regulatory interest in pastoral care issues, the social, cultural and educational impact of international students in schools (see Ward 2001), and the distribution and protection of the rents associated with a New Zealand education (MoE 2000). Laissez faire began to look more like poor government, particularly when the Asian crisis burst the bubble in 1997.<sup>23</sup>

Asian students in New Zealand were fundamentally altering the social landscape of communities and furthering radical change in the economic landscape in which education in New Zealand was delivered. In my opinion, there is still not enough critical literature around the role that the export education ‘industry’ played in the radical changes in New Zealand’s tertiary education system in the late 1980s and 1990s nor, indeed, what signs the Government was sending about responsibility and care as on one hand, they enacted a mandated Code of Practice for Pastoral Care while, on the other hand, demanded that the export education industry (particularly the private schools) bear the risk of the collapse of particular institutions and with it, the loss of international students’ money and damage to New Zealand’s international reputation.<sup>24</sup>

While Asian students’ desire for greater friendship with New Zealand domestic students is a common theme in much research, very little research asks how this interaction is played out on the shifting sands of a university campus or a classroom. Asian students in New Zealand necessarily need to be viewed within the broader picture of Asian migration to New Zealand and New Zealand’s engagement with Asia as a whole.

We really need to speak about communities of Asian students in New Zealand, as we must speak of ‘Chinese communities of New Zealand’ rather than *the* Chinese

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<sup>23</sup> Nick Lewis and Andrew Butcher, ‘Place and Images of Quality in New Zealand’s Export Education Industry’, 2003

<sup>24</sup> However, Collins, ‘Making Students Asian’ 2006, makes some brief comment in this area

community, as if the definite article provides homogeneity.<sup>25</sup> We would equally want to speak of Singaporean-Chinese or Malaysian-Chinese, recognizing that ethnic and national identity is complex.<sup>26</sup> Asian students have been in New Zealand for over fifty years now and yet we still struggle to accept them as a significant part of the social fabric of New Zealand, let alone as the potential group of long-term migrants that they are now becoming.<sup>27</sup>

### **Asian students returning home**

Much of my research has also considered Asian students returning to their countries of origin after they have studied in New Zealand. The paucity of New Zealand research in this area is quite extraordinary. In a modest response to this, Asia:NZ is commissioning research on issues around re-entry and social and business networks amongst returnees.<sup>28</sup> Engaging with Asia and increasing our awareness of Asia can be helped by tapping into the resource of New Zealand graduates that have now returned to Asia to live and work. Recent research by Asia:NZ has shown that New Zealand needs to significantly improve in its business engagement with Asia, which is becoming more economically important to New Zealand's long-term sustainability.<sup>29</sup> Building upon the person-to-person networks that already exist amongst New Zealand alumni in Asia can only benefit New Zealand longer-term as it seeks to position itself culturally and economically in the Asia-Pacific region.

Amongst many Colombo Plan students there is tremendous good-will toward New Zealand because of the positive experience many of those students had had here and the ongoing contacts they have with New Zealanders and other alumni. Will the same be able to be said of present Asian students in New Zealand? Or has globalization wrought its effect upon the world in such a fundamental way that we need to completely reconceptualise how effective person-to-person relationships are and instead undertake a broader, more significant engagement socially, politically and economically with the Asian region, whence most, though not all, these Asian

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<sup>25</sup> Manying Ip, *Unfolding History, Evolving Identity: The Chinese in New Zealand*, 2003. p.140

<sup>26</sup> see Aihwa Ong *Flexible Citizenship: The Cultural Logics of Transnationality*. Durham: Duke University Press, 1999

<sup>27</sup> see Department of Labour, *Migration Trends 2005/6*, Wellington: Department of Labour, 2006

<sup>28</sup> Terry McGrath, Paul Stock and Andrew Butcher, *The Impact of returning Asian students on New Zealand-Asia Relationships*, Wellington: Asia New Zealand Foundation, 2007 (in press)

<sup>29</sup> Asia New Zealand Foundation, *Reality Check: Asian Perceptions of New Zealand Business People*, Wellington: Asia New Zealand Foundation, 2007

students return? I would suggest that we need to be careful about how much we rely on nostalgia and the good-will of students' past. This will only get us so far.

By all means, we need to support building, facilitating and maintaining person-to-person relationships between Asian students and others in New Zealand, whether that is done formally through educational institutions or informally through churches and sports-clubs. Incidentally, it is more often than not that Asian students in New Zealand have found their social support through these informal groups rather than through any institutional support and yet these informal groups are often ad hoc and sometimes have hidden agendas.<sup>30</sup>

Not only do we need to strengthen these informal groups that play such a crucial role in providing social networks for Asian students, but we also need address issues in the school or university, of mono-cultural curriculum and pedagogy; and in the society at large, of social exclusion and discrimination. We need to discuss "Asian students" as part of a broader conversation about what it means for New Zealand to engage with Asia.

### **Conclusion: the "national conversation" about engaging Asia**

In considering a "national conversation" about engaging Asia, I wish to draw on Edward Said, who, amongst other things, made his name critiquing notions of essentialising particular groups of people into a binary of the 'Occident' and the 'Orient'. In an article entitled 'Preface to Orientalism', Said writes:

Rather than the manufactured clash of civilisations, we need to concentrate on the slow working together of cultures that overlap, borrow from each other, and live together in far more interesting ways than any abridged or inauthentic mode of understanding can allow. But for that kind of wider perception we need time, patient and sceptical enquiry, supported by faith in

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<sup>30</sup> See Terry McGrath and Andrew Butcher (2004), *Campus-Community Linkages in the Pastoral Care of International Students with specific reference to Palmerston North, Wellington and Christchurch*, for the Ministry of Education and Education New Zealand.

communities of interpretation that are difficult to sustain in a world demanding instant action and reaction.<sup>31</sup>

Engaging Asian students necessarily requires us to move beyond what are simplistic notions of trade. To see Asian students in New Zealand in purely these terms is functional at best and exploitative at worst. As ongoing work by the Department of Labour is showing, an increasing number of Asian students are remaining in New Zealand and are seeing a student visa as a precursor to residency in New Zealand. Twenty-first migration patterns being what they are, these students aren't necessarily going to remain in New Zealand permanently; New Zealand may only be one stop on a global trek from one country to another as factors of social and economic capital and networks demand. Yet, if Asian students are intending to remain in New Zealand beyond their student years, then we need to quite quickly move the debate from discussions around their experiences whilst at university or school and into discussions around employment and social and economic integration. As Said phrases it, we need that 'wider perception' in order to get the best picture.

Part of this national conversation around Asia, specifically Asian students, of course has its 'dark side'. Deborah Coddington's recent article on "Asian Angst"<sup>32</sup> featured again the convenient (or should we say 'arranged'?) marriage between Asians and crime. In a less recent moral panic, in 2003, I was asked in a television interview whether more Asian students in New Zealand equaled more kidnapping! The debate resurfaced at the end of 2006 in Coddington's scurrilous use of statistics, ably refuted by a number of commentators, including my colleague at Asia:NZ Charles Mabbett<sup>33</sup> and Listener columnist Keith Ng<sup>34</sup>.

But the cliché of 'lies, damn lies and statistics' exists for a reason and what Coddington presented was not just a poorly informed and highly biased article, but also revealed a disquieting perception that evidently exists amongst some New Zealanders. These ugly perceptions will not go away. The role that the media play as

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<sup>31</sup> Edward Said, 'Preface to Orientalism' 2003, in Al-Ahram Weekly <http://weekly.ahram.org.eg/2003/650/op11.htm> [retrieved 11 April 2007]

<sup>32</sup> Deborah Coddington, 'Asian Angst', *North and South*, December 2006, pp. 40-47; Deborah Coddington, "Let's not pretend that all Asians are good", *New Zealand Herald*, November 19, 2006

<sup>33</sup> Charles Mabbett, Asia New Zealand Media e-newsletter 13 December 2006

<sup>34</sup> Keith Ng, 'Damned Statistics', *New Zealand Listener*, December 2-8 2006, Vol 206, No. 3473 [http://www.listener.co.nz/issue/3473/features/7614/damned\\_statistics.html;jsessionid=A059E0169852027D35FEAABB669E5AD4](http://www.listener.co.nz/issue/3473/features/7614/damned_statistics.html;jsessionid=A059E0169852027D35FEAABB669E5AD4) [retrieved 15 May 2007]

part of this “national conversation” in informing public and leading debate has featured in some recent New Zealand scholarship,<sup>35</sup> has extensive international scholarship about it,<sup>36</sup> and also forms a significant plank of the work that Asia:NZ undertakes. It is not only the media, of course, whom we should hold to account. Educational institutions, government policies and local initiatives also take their place as important interlocutors in this conversation. As we approach 2008 and another General Election, the issue of where Asians come in this national conversation will again be salient, although perhaps on different terms. We may again see a turn toward discrimination in the public space; or we may instead see recognition of New Zealand’s place in the world in the twenty-first century and the importance of Asia to New Zealand’s ongoing growth going forward. Therefore, we can only hope that Asians, whether students, migrants, or refugees, are participants in this conversation and not merely the topic of it.

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<sup>35</sup> For recent scholarship see Paul Spoonley and Andrew Trlin *Immigration, immigrants and the media: Making sense of multicultural New Zealand*. Palmerston North: New Settlers Programme Massey University. Ministry of Education, 2004

<sup>36</sup> see for example, Philo, G. and L. Beattie (1999) Race, migration and media, in G. Philo (ed.), *Message received*, pp. 171–196. Harlow: Longman; van Dijk, T.A. (1991) *Racism in the press*. London: Routledge; Cottle, S. (2000) *Ethnic minorities and the media: Changing cultural boundaries*. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Open University Press. Hall, S. (1990) The white of their eyes: Racist ideologies and the media, in M. Alvarado and J.O. Thompson (eds.), *The media reader*, pp. 7–23. London: BFI Publishing. Knowledge into Wisdom: Holistic Approaches to Teaching and Learning, Curtin University of Technology,

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