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Radio Drama Takeover 2: Claybourne

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Abstract

By building a sense of community and creating a unique storyworld through imagination, *Claybourne* (1998) was also a harbinger of things to come. The "proudly New Zealand" serialized radio drama, broadcast on commercial radio, was designed as stealth drama for its radio station's demographic. Reborn as an audio drama in the digital age, *Claybourne* anticipated many of the qualities that have characterized some of the most popular podcast dramas of recent years.

Keywords

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A defining feature of radio drama is its appeal to the imagination, often[1] conceptualised as visualising unseen action or painting a picture in the mind, or indeed as "the theatre of the mind" (Verma, 2012, p. 1). The evocative nature of sound tapping into the imagination is not confined to the dramatic or fictional, of course, and is a quality also potentially ascribed to other forms of sound storytelling. But from a shared imaginative world can arise community, and thus much radio drama engenders community as its members develop their imaginative potential. While the most famous example would probably be *The Archers* (BBC, 1951-), few dramas before the development/popularisation of the podcast form could lay claim to both personifying a particular socio-geographic community and making it potentially accessible to a global audience, as *Claybourne* does with New Zealand.

  Claybourne (1998) was a radio drama series produced by Andrew Dubber and Belinda Todd, written by Jim McLarty and William Davis, and broadcast on Newstalk ZB. Set in the titular fictional town in a remote part of New Zealand's North Island, it featured mainly Kiwi characters, with stranded American, Thompson (McLarty) bemused by Māori kaumātua (elected tribal leader) Mata (Davis). Outsider Thompson also provided a stand-in for the audience. Genre hybridity highlights the fluidity of genre boundaries, and *Claybourne* excelled at this, absorbing within its 96 episodes genres of sci-fi, thriller, horror, comedy, romance and soap opera. "Deliberately and proudly" New Zealand in its "language, humour, and accent," (Dubber, 2006), *Claybourne* was the product of commercial radio (though it was funded by public-service broadcasting grants). Broadcast four times a week in a 3:00 pm slot, *Claybourne* did not follow the 'serious' tradition of appointment listening that historically characterised prestigious Anglophone dramas like those broadcast on BBC Radio 3's *Drama on 3*. Instead, it was designed to be stealth drama that was disguised as aural wallpaper for parents listening to the news and waiting in the car to pick up their children after school. As producer Dubber (2017) explains, its thematic centring of Māori culture was designed to be accessible to Newstalk ZB's traditionally white, male, middle-class, conservative audience:

> The relationship between Mata and Thompson meant that audiences were generally situated somewhere in between. The idea was that any pakeha[2] who lives in New Zealand is less ignorant of Māori culture than Thompson. As a kaumātua, very few Māori know as much about the culture as Mata.

  The appeal of *Claybourne* was predicated on its short episode length (around 5 minutes), its familiar setting, and its insistent seriality. Every episode began and ended in the same way, resulting in a litany-like bookending, which reinforced the feeling that it was part of a saga. While the seriality clearly linked it to its soap opera predecessors both in the Antipodes and across the US, UK and Europe, the genre slipperiness and Newstalk ZB's demographic suggested that it was designed to defy the traditionally-envisioned female audience for more

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[1] But not always, see Patterson 2016, Soltani 2018.
[2] European person

heterogenous family listening. Indeed, it seemed to pull more from then-current TV drama with its seemingly inexhaustible cliffhangers, slow-burning story arc and "endlessly deferred" narrative (Hills, 2002, p. 128).

Claybourne might have remained a curiosity of late-'90s Kiwi commercial radio, had it not been resurrected in 2006 as a podcast for the Podcast Network. In its podcast afterlife, it became one of the most popular spoken-word programmes in the history of mp3.com (Hopkinson 2007). Already a cult favourite before it surfaced on Archive.org and Bandcamp, *Claybourne's* brilliant success as a podcast is down to two factors: its stylistic and narrative features that made it a pre-digital harbinger of things to come, and that it is good, enduring, accessible audio drama. It stimulates the imagination, it tells good stories, and listeners— whether Kiwi or not—can become so absorbed within its world that they feel part of its community.

The strengths of *Claybourne* are those of any good audio drama: its characters, performances, music, sound design and writing—both in terms of dialogue and story plotting. The sound design speaks uniquely and convincingly to sense of place. The leitmotif-like usage of a limited musical palette helps reinforce character beats, such as the slow-burn relationship between Thompson and waitress Karen (Angela Bloomfield) and the inherent mystery known by Mata and his nephew Mike (Melwayne Edwards) and the sinister link between Māori World developer Frank Buchanan (Bruce Allpress) and missing Koestler employee Helen. While, as a fictional drama, *Claybourne* does not have to address things such as journalistic ethics that may clash with storytelling imperatives, it is also not hamstrung by a reliance on insistent narrative storytelling. Wider issues relevant to the Kiwi community including domestic abuse, globalisation and the commodification of Māori culture are explored in a far from dogmatic way. For example, a key point of contention in the narrative is Aussie Frank's Māori World, a proposed theme park that he insists will bring revenue and jobs to the area. As an outsider to the situation, Thompson quickly gathers from conversations between Claybourne's inhabitants that the theme park is considered sacrilegious by Mata because it commoditises Māori culture. Although a clueless Yank, Thompson's gradual immersion in Māori culture allows him and the audience—whether they are the original demographic of Kiwi pakehas or further afield—to understand Mata's point of view. The same issues could be presented journalistically, but *Claybourne* potentially allows for more nuance in its creation of characters, and the creators are free to present points of view less dogmatically. This can be contrasted with another Antipodean story told in sound, the true crime podcast *The Teacher's Pet,* whose presenter, Hedley Thomas, allows no room for doubt in reader's minds with regards to murder and guilt.

Rapt listeners to *Claybourne* may be bereft to discover that many more episodes were planned before funding ran out. Dubber has hinted at grand story arcs that will never see resolution. *Claybourne* has much in common with its digital podcast progeny *Welcome to Night Vale* (2012-), with which it shares seriality and short(ish) episodes; genre hybridity; bookending litany; compelling characters; and accessibility. *WTNV* has been praised for its inclusive approach to community but also manifests a brilliant transmedia strategy encompassing novels, branded merchandise, live shows and (perhaps soon), a TV series (Spinelli & Dann 2019). *WTNV,* as argued by Andrew Bottomley, also represents "a remediation" of older "radio forms, techniques, and styles" (2015: 183), much as *Claybourne* presages the podcast with its transitional use of radio drama techniques and styles. *Claybourne*'s storyworld is rich enough

to have a transmedia treatment and Dubber hints that this is now the only way fans will ever find out what happened to Thompson, Karen, Mata, Mike and Frank. Given the unlikely but evocative ties between audio drama and graphic novels, I for one would be in favour of a continuation of the *Claybourne* saga in this form.

      Claybourne pre-figured many aspects of digital-podcast-drama storytelling, not the least of which was giving diegetic (in-story) reasons for listeners having access to the story. In *Claybourne*'s case, Thompson's phone call and recordings to his estranged wife mirrors a now extremely common device heard in a plethora of podcast dramas, popularly supposed to have originated with *WTNV* (Watts, 2021). Overall, though, *Claybourne* posits an omniscient narrative voice. This is in keeping with the tradition of radio drama described above, such as soap opera, forms pioneered in the 1930s that are more novelistic than stage-derived. In many other ways, *Claybourne* seems to have broken all the rules for memorable, high-quality radio drama: it was not written by a 'canonised; stage writer; it was serialised rather than standalone; it featured no internationally-lionised performers; it did not even have an original score. Nevertheless, in its appeal to multiple genres, deeply absorbing story arcs and visceral sense of place, I would argue that it has clearly earned its place in the canon of audio drama.

      There are many reasons that we turn to media. One of them must surely be for a sense of community. Media can only be as effective as the sense of investment that we as the audience feel in the community presented. If we don't feel that we belong, if we don't care, then the emotional connection will be tenuous and the impact relatively slight. On the other hand, if a drama can present a community to which we'd return again and again, then we can argue that piece has been successful. *Claybourne,* like all good radio and podcast drama, has done that.

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