

WORLD FAMOUS IN WELLINGTON:
'BLANKET MAN' AND CONTEMPORARY CELEBRITY

Mike Lloyd and Bronwyn McGovern

ABSTRACT

This article presents a case study of an iconic Wellington streetperson called 'Blanket Man' in order to engage with recent academic work on celebrity. Material presented comes from both detailed observational fieldwork, and media sources. We argue that Blanket Man is undoubtedly 'world famous in Wellington', and his fame may well reach slightly further. However, it is not clear what term best describes his situation, as the way he has become well-known certainly does not fit the existing models of celebrity creation. In contrast to the dominant emphasis on the 'media', we highlight the continued importance of the spatial routines and face-to-face interaction of everyday life in the construction of this locally identifiable character.

INTRODUCTION: CELEBRITY AND MEDIA POWER

In a classic work on contemporary American culture Boorstin remarks that 'Two centuries ago when a great man appeared, people looked for God's purpose in him; *today we look for his ... agent*' (1964: 55, emphasis added). The factors leading to this change have been well canvassed in the contemporary literature on 'celebrity', or the process Rojek (2001) has recently named 'celebrification'. Rojek suggests that there are three key processes responsible for the emergence of celebrity: the democratisation of society; the decline of organised religion; and the commodification of everyday life. A key mechanism of celebrity production is of course the mass media (TV, radio, print), it being suggested that greatness in deed or action has been superseded by the impact of mass media representation, something made clear in the definition of 'celebrity' as someone who is well known for being well known (Smart, 2005). The upshot is that celebrity is very much subject to production, in the sense of fabrication: with the right media production and distribution processes almost anyone can be made a star.

So called 'anti-heroes' are also caught up in this process. Early insight on this was made by Klapp in the 1950s: he describes heroes, villains, and other 'character types', including the anti-hero with his or her apathetic, cool and 'beat' rejection of lofty goals (Klapp, 1954, 1956, 1958). More recent work has moved on from Klapp's concern to distinguish between these categories and has made the important point that celebrity and the extraordinary is in a dialectical relationship with the ordinary (eg., Barcan, 2000; Holmes, 2005; Marshall, 1997). Gitlin, for example, has noted that, 'Obviously, celebrity need not be admirable, merely spectacular. Hitler made seven covers of *Time*; Stalin twelve. In the realm of celebrity, the fallen share center stage with the glorious, the evil with the good' (1998: 83). It appears that the medium of distributing attention is now far more important than any clear means of distinguishing between 'heroes' and 'anti-heroes'.

In similar manner, Rojek makes an interesting 'technical distinction': 'notoriety is akin to celebrity in operating through impact on public consciousness. However, whereas celebrity functions within a general moral framework that reaffirms paramount order, notoriety usually connotes transgression, deviance and immorality' (2001: 31). He goes on to argue that the contemporary culture of celebrity 'often involves transgressing ordinary moral rules by, for example, excessive conspicuous consumption, exhibitionist libidinous gratification, drug abuse, alcohol addiction, violence and so on' (2001: 31). In a more folklorist (and also slightly functionalist) manner, Cavaglione argues that 'every normal culture needs at least one outlaw hero whose transgression breaks through boundaries, to stand outside of the existing rules, regulations and rhythms of the social world, and to challenge and shock the existing social order' (2007: 256).

This reference to notoriety is particularly relevant here, for we present below a case study of a streetperson called 'Blanket Man' who exhibits some of the transgressive features listed by Rojek, and who seems at first glance to qualify as what Cavaglione calls, after others (e.g., Seal, 1996), an 'outlaw hero'. But our point below is to show that one needs to take great caution in the use of terms like celebrity, anti-hero, star, and so on. Blanket Man's life on the street exhibits many transgressive features, however, this should not lead to an overzealous attribution of the label 'anti-hero'. For one, Blanket Man's legendary status is relatively confined to the Wellington region where he lives on the street; his media and web presence does not justify anything approaching nationwide or global recognition, at least befitting either the 'hero' or 'anti-hero' label. Nevertheless, Rojek's point about the growing connection between the spectacular and notorious does seem useful. Ultimately, though, we argue that recent work

on celebrity culture needs to pay more attention to face-to-face interaction as opposed to the perhaps exaggerated power of the media. Our attempt to do this utilises a body of fieldwork data which due to space constraints is presented in condensed form.

BLANKET MAN: INITIAL DESCRIPTION

To set the scene, consider figure 1.¹



Photograph: Belinda Brown

Figure 1

This is one among the many images available, but it serves the purpose of illustrating the character we are concerned with. This shows Blanket Man in his natural element – living on the streets of Wellington, the capital city of New Zealand. It shows why he is called *Blanket Man*; it shows him with a bottle of what appears to be alcohol on the street; it also seems to show him gaining some attention from passers-by.

Blanket Man's proper name is Bernard Hana. He is a Maori man who arrived in Wellington from the East Coast during the summer of 2001. At this time he wore a pair of shredded jeans as well as a blanket – it was some time after this that he was dubbed 'Blanket Man', due to the ever-present blanket that functions as clothing, cushion and bedding. He quickly became known for living

his life on the street, sunbathing at city intersections and traffic islands. Before long, the Wellington newspaper media reported on his arrests and subsequent court appearances for public law breaking: smoking marijuana, offensive behaviour, indecent exposure, and obscene language. Through this, the public were informed that he worships Ra – the Maori sun god – as some kind of explanation for public nakedness.

Over time this media attention brought out other aspects of Blanket Man's character. One important aspect is his ability to treat his situation as humorous. For example, once when appearing for sentencing, he asked for 'home detention'. By 2002, in media references to a group of 'hard core homeless' who centred on a small city park, Blanket Man was said to have a leadership role among this homeless group, going by the name 'Brother'. In November 2002, Blanket Man received a spate of media publicity when he was legally prohibited from entering Cuba Mall and went on to establish a 'village of peace' with other homeless individuals at the Cenotaph in Parliament grounds. This protest lasted five weeks, some of it being captured in a film documentary 'Te Whanau o Aotearoa: Caretakers of the Land', later aired at the Wellington Film Festival in 2003. Blanket Man is the key character in the film.

Periodically, he appears in other media. For example, during the Wellington round of the International Rugby Sevens tournament, where the crowd are encouraged to dress up, there were several groups dressed as Blanket Man. In our own university, an early issue of the 2007 student magazine introducing Wellington to new students included a map with a figure representing where Blanket Man could be found in the downtown area.

Today Blanket Man chooses to live alone in one or two favoured sites. This continues to be interspersed with time spent in jail. Over time, awareness of him has extended beyond physical presence on the street to the Internet. Google 'Blanket Man' and an endless source of e-knowledge and comment will emerge. Take your pick, from Wikipedia to You Tube, or choose between several fan sites in his name. One of these, My Space, claims to have in excess of 1500 Blanket Man 'fans'.

Quite apart from this ability of the media to pick up and amplify the nature of a person, we need to inquire about the everyday nature of Blanket Man's life and street interaction. To attempt to describe this, next we provide an illustrative account from observational fieldwork. This tries as much as possible to preserve the character of Blanket Man's streetlife, hence the sometimes colourful language. The account below is derived from observational fieldwork conduct-

ed by Bronwyn McGovern over a 3.5 hour period (11.00 PM – 2.30 AM) in June 2007. It is part of a broader PhD project, the fieldwork component of which has been granted ethics approval by the Victoria University of Wellington Human Ethics Committee. Blanket Man was aware of Bronwyn McGovern's role and presence on the night in question. The observation firstly involved Bronwyn sitting with him for twenty minutes, but the remainder was written up in a notebook from the position of a car parked in close proximity, thereby removing Bronwyn from direct involvement in the interaction that occurred. No effort was made to interact with or question passers-by, nor does the research involve direct interviewing of Blanket Man. None of the photographs reproduced in this article were taken on the night in question.

PUBLIC LIFE ON THE STREET: AN ILLUSTRATIVE ACCOUNT

It is a bitterly cold midweek night, and this part of Manners street is attracting little foot traffic. The otherwise desolate bleakness is broken by the comings and goings from two bars and a brightly lit 24 hour convenience store. A shrieking rendition of 'It's Raining Men' belts out in the karaoke bar overhead. Sheltering in an alcove, Blanket Man sits cross legged on the pavement, grooving to a beat from the wires snaking from a small FM radio into his dreadlocked hair. A blanket wraps his body, leaving one shoulder bare to the chilly night air. Head tilted slightly back, eyes shut, he moves his upper body, lost in his sounds.

Three police officers arrive and stand in front of him, one asking, 'Hey Benny what's up'. Removing one wire he grins and says: 'Gotta breathe, gotta keep breathing'. The police loiter, cracking a joke or two then move on. People enter and leave the bar upstairs. A group of three stop short of where he sits, talking quietly, before asking if they can take his photo. He simply yells 'Fuck off', and they hastily depart.

Another threesome descends from the club to smoke on the street. One male leaves the group and enquires: 'Ya right there Blanket?...ya want something to eat' and points across to the City Stop convenience store. Blanket Man emulates smoking marijuana by bringing his fingers to his mouth and making loud inhalation noises. The guy shrugs and rejoins the group. Blanket Man rummages under his blanket, extracting the empty can he uses as a pipe to smoke marijuana. He takes a bud, brings the can to his lips, lights and deeply

inhales, trying to hold in the smoke for as long as possible. His body writhes and twitches as he struggles to stifle a coughing fit. Mission accomplished, he takes a second toke.

Another man smoking a cigarette calls out 'Blanket Man', which gains no response. He walks over and reaches out to touch his arm. In response, Blanket Man leans back, trying to create some distance. The man counters by taking a further step into his space, undeterred by Blanket Man's obvious recoil, he pats his arm. At this, Blanket Man jumps, yelling: 'Fuck off ya queer cunt, ya always trying to touch me'. Still ignoring this, the man touches his shoulder. This time the response is physical: Blanket Man lashes out with his foot; his blanket flies open revealing his loin-clothed body, and in the ruckus his stash falls to the ground. The man swaggers back to his mates, one of whom comments, 'He's almost an icon you know'. A discussion ensues, the words 'Blanket Man' and 'icon' being audible. Cigarettes are stubbed out and a packet is thrown in Blanket Man's direction as the group returns to the bar. Once more moving and grooving, Blanket Man appears oblivious.

Several minutes later the smoker who had commented on Blanket Man's 'near-iconic' status reappears. He walks over, holding out a lump of tobacco. Blanket man ignores it, but the man keeps gesturing for him to take it, gaining the response, 'Nah can't roll the fuckin stuff, I'm a dumb cunt'. The man replies, 'Look, I just want to give something back, you're an icon'. This gains the final response, 'I don't want the fucker', to which the smoker pockets the tobacco and returns to the club.

Moments later a pedestrian asks Blanket man if he can sit next to him. Blanket man is oblivious, thrusting and waving his arms in the air, presumably in tune to his music. The pedestrian walks on. Two more men approach from the other direction and stop in front of him. Without speaking a word they simply stand staring at him. Eventually, one asks, 'You all right bro'? Blanket Man pauses to roll tobacco, then replies, 'I'm a dumb cunt, the last dumb cunt left in New Zealand'. They remain for what seems a very long time before silently walking off.

More people exit the karaoke bar. They huddle in the cold laughing, talking, and smoking. An attractive woman in her twenties looks

over, watching Blanket Man. Without saying anything, she walks to him, holding out a ten dollar note. He looks away without taking it, so she presses it into his hand, then returns to her friends. A few minutes pass and she stands in front of him again, telling him, 'Keep my money safe, buy yourself something nice'. She then gives him two cigarettes, adding, 'You're a Wellington icon'. He replies: 'Nah, I'm a dumb cunt' – followed by much raucous laughter. She says: 'You're like family, I care about you. I see you everyday on my way to work, you take care'. Picking up his can, he tells her, 'Time to send out the smoke signal', as he lights up and begins his impressive toking routine. She watches, then says: 'you take care you hear, look after yourself'. Pausing a moment, can held near to his mouth, he playfully shouts back, 'No'. She goes back to her friends in the doorway, only to return and give him two more cigarettes, explaining, 'Cos I like you so much'. Then with her friends they re-enter the club, its relentless songs pouring into the night.

Into the small hours and Blanket Man shows signs of slowing down. He has given up attending to what is going on around him. Moving in gentle rhythmic motions, he reaches under his blanket to pat the ground, as if checking for something. Twenty minutes pass and he wilts further, eventually falling into a trance-like state. The singing upstairs reaches a crescendo just as his head slumps to his chest, remaining for a second till he rouses upright. This cycle repeats itself several times, and before long the rest of his body follows suit, and he begins to fall sideways. The sound of the karaoke continues to pump as he appears to conquer the body's natural inclination to sleep lying down. He sits chin on chest, his body no longer tipping. Long minutes pass and he makes no movement. It is apparent that he has finally succumbed to sleep, as Prince's 'Purple Rain' bellows on around him.

REFLECTION

There is a lot more fieldwork detail that could be added here, but this is sufficient to see what is meant by our 'world famous in Wellington' title. As a homeless person Blanket Man is literally a 'man on the street', but he is certainly *not* the 'man on the street' of the opinion pollster or survey researcher in the sense of being representative of the ordinary, average and typical. Instead, he has a marked presence on the street and in the public imagination of many Wellingtonians. Make no mistake, he is 'tainted' by the common understand-

ing that homelessness is a social problem – the dominant way the social science literature deals with this topic – but what is so obvious in the fieldwork account is the ready identifiability of Blanket Man. Somehow or other, he has attained a street-level equivalent of the marketing ‘brand’: almost everyone in Wellington has heard of ‘Blanket Man’. Note though, that other names can be used to refer to him such as ‘Benny’, ‘Blanket’, and ‘bro’. This is further evidence of public recognisability in that it mirrors the common process of shortening names or constructing nicknames.

We also see that there is explicit talk of Blanket Man as a ‘Wellington icon’, or ‘near-icon’. Unacquainted people claim he is ‘like family’, some even going so far as to want to touch him. Gifts of cigarettes, food and money are frequently offered to him, although he does not openly beg for these offerings, in fact, more often than not he refuses them. He has a complex reaction to being offered things: frequently, he only accepts things if they are placed beside him or pressed into his hand without any fanfare. This way someone can give him something and he doesn’t necessarily have to acknowledge it, even though he is aware of it, perhaps illustrating a degree of reluctance and/or desired independence.

In this regard, it is also intriguing to note the character of Blanket Man’s reaction to the degree of public interest and identifiability that he undoubtedly experiences. Fieldwork observations (not shown here) do suggest some pursuit of recognition, but in the account above we see a range of reactions, from open insult, to friendly acknowledgement, *as he sees fit*. This is important: Blanket Man is his own man. He will tell people to ‘fuck off’, accept their offerings, humorously indulge them, or even label himself the ‘last dumb cunt in New Zealand’, if that is what he wishes to do. This is a significant departure from the traditional ‘begging relationship’, aptly summed up in the idiomatic expression ‘beggars can’t be choosers.’² Of course, here it can be suspected that his relatively frequent consumption of marijuana and/or alcohol may lead to variability in his reaction to the public. Insults, or even his very presence, may annoy some passers-by, but it may also contribute to his public fame. That is, some part of Blanket Man’s mana may stem from his open law-breaking, and the knowledge of such, particularly amongst a youthful generation for whom marijuana smoking is very common and ‘cool’.

WHERE DOES BLANKET MAN FIT IN CELEBRIFICATION CONCEPTUALISING?

So far we have established the case that Blanket Man is certainly not a ‘faceless’ homeless person; in fact he has become something of a legend, at least

in the Wellington environs. Given that there is now a substantial literature on celebrity culture the question needs to be asked, where does he fit within the categories and concepts of the work on celebrification? Below we provide a quick discussion of four aspects of celebrification, which we then use to think about the case of Blanket Man.

1. *Celebrity created by and in the media*

Here, reality television provides any number of examples. One is Sara-Marie Fedele (see entry in Wikipedia for fuller details) who gained fame as one of the loudest and most flamboyant housemates in *Big Brother Australia's* first season (2001). Prior to appearing on *Big Brother* she worked as a manager at a strip club in Perth. In *Big Brother* she became famous for the 'Bum Dance' she performed while in the house, as well as for her bunny ears, headband, and chubby physique. Based on this media exposure, she released a humorous book, a CD single, and a line of sleepwear, and later became a presenter on a children's television series. Her celebrity subsequently cooled although there were attempts at resuscitation.

Sara-Marie exemplifies Graeme Turner's (2006) useful point about 'the demotic turn' in celebrity culture, that is, a shift from the elite to the ordinary with the increasing visibility of the 'ordinary person' (also see Holmes, 2005 on reality TV shows). Turner notes how reality television shows and the like create a 'replaceable celebrity-commodity' (p.155), with this illustrating a growing ability of the media to produce celebrity almost entirely endogenously.

2. *Celetoids*

A good New Zealand example occurred with a woman called Lisa Lewis, whom we will call 'Bikini Girl'. She appeared on the pitch towards the end of an All Blacks versus Ireland rugby test, clad in a skimpy bikini carrying a handbag. She claimed that she wished to gather the All Blacks' signatures so she could auction off the handbag. Details subsequently emerged that she was a former stripper, and while her actions did not gain the signatures on the handbag, quickly after being removed she was able to post her bikini on the Trade Me website – within hours bidding had climbed to over \$500. 'Bikini Girl' is a perfect example of a 'celetoid', another term coined by Rojek referring to 'the accessories of cultures organised around mass communications and staged authenticity. Examples include lottery winners, one-hit wonders, stalkers, whistle-blowers, *sports' arena streakers* ... who command media attention one day, and are forgotten the next' (2001: 20–21, emphasis added). Indeed, 'Bikini

Girl' gained about three weeks of attention, including a trip to South Africa.

3. *Celebrated Failures*

Good examples here are 'Eddie the Eagle' and 'Eric the Eel', both being 'famously unsuccessful Olympians'. Eddie was a plasterer but qualified as the sole British applicant for the 1988 Winter Olympics in the ski-jump. Relative to other competitors, he was overweight, and was also not helped by being short sighted; hence, it was no surprise that he came last in the competition. But his lack of success endeared him to the public; he became a media celebrity, subsequently releasing a book, song and a video. He went on to become a sports agent and has a forthcoming movie about him, simply titled *Eddie the Eagle*. Eric the Eel, or Eric Moussambani, from Equatorial Guinea, gained similar fame at the 2000 Summer Olympics in Sydney when he swam the 100m freestyle in a time over twice as slow as the winner. He had taken up swimming only 8 months before the Olympics and had practiced only in a 20 metre pool.

These two show that 'failure', if it is framed in an appropriate manner, can be a case for building celebrity. They are different from celestoids in that there has to be some kind of 'honest' effort, or some type of authenticity in their endeavour. For example, Eddie the Eagle was at one time ranked 55th in the world; Eric the Eel did the best he could given the resources available to him (eventually he got his 100m personal best down to a much improved 57 seconds, but in contrast to Eddie the Eagle this was still far outside world class time).

4. *Profiled Protestor*

Here, Couldry (2001) provides the term and the best example. His example is 'Umbrella Man', a working class man in his 60s who lives in London and who participates in many campaigns spanning the range of activism in Britain. He is notable because of his attire – he wears 'umbrella hats' appropriate to what he is protesting about. Couldry calls him a 'profiled protestor', drawing attention to the fact that he is not a celebrity as such, but has high public recognition – the choice of 'profiled' is a good one. As he says, 'It is clear both that he is fascinated by celebrity and that he sees a tactical advantage in associating himself with it. ... his causes are precariously poised between a temporary promise of speaking and a long-term condition of silence' (2001: 148).

No doubt many other types or categories of celebrity could be suggested, however, this is sufficient for our purposes, that is, to reflect upon the case of

Blanket Man. We wish to make four main points. First, it is clear that he is certainly of the common people – he is not elite or elevated – so, there is indeed a connection with the ‘demotic turn’ in celebrity culture. However, we need to be cautious in calling Blanket Man an ‘ordinary person’, or in suggesting that his fame is entirely dependent on media activity and amplification. Here, the term ‘man on the street’ is useful to think with. Blanket Man literally lives on the street, but he is not the average man on the street in the sense of being representative of typical life or opinions; nor is he representative of ‘typical’ homelessness. Instead, periodically, he can become a foreground figure on the Wellington streets and in the public imaginary.

Second, thinking about ‘celetoids’, there appears to be very little ‘staged authenticity’ or ‘fabricated spectacle’ about Blanket Man. Yes, he is distinct – the Blanket, the dreds, being naked except for the loin cloth – but this does not appear ‘put on’ in order to profit either financially or symbolically. Further, unlike Bikini Girl and other celetoids, he has not disappeared. He did not begin in the media, thus has not been conjoined to its powers of image creation and dissemination.

Third, there does seem some comparability with Eddie the Eagle and Eric the Eel, that is, the ‘famously unsuccessful’ or what could be called ‘celebrated failures’. Blanket Man’s utterance, ‘I’m the last dumb cunt in New Zealand’ resonates here. That is, a commonsense understanding about homelessness is that it represents, or is, a failure. Being homeless is destitution, the end of the road, abject failure. However, as some of the literature on the topic makes clear, this is a gross simplification of the variety in the life of homeless people (see Duneier, 1999; Lankenau, 1999). Blanket Man is a case in point. How can this man be labelled a ‘failure’ when much about his lifestyle is self-chosen, and speaks strongly of independence? He does not openly beg; he is not starving; and he maintains a healthy sense of humour. Additionally, there is no doubt that he engenders something approaching a sense of fascination in some passers-by. In his very appearance there is something shamanic or ascetic, something in tune with Christian thinking that material wealth and possessions are not all there is to life. Adding to this is possible intrigue about his ability to continue living so long on the street. Blanket Man has been on the street for years, and people are well aware of his presence through time, through the rain and shine, not to forget the wind, of Wellington’s challenging environment. It is a hard life, thus perhaps leading passers-by to reflect on their own relative privilege.

Fourth, is Blanket Man something akin to the ‘profiled protestor’, Umbrella Man? Several years ago he did gain some fame as a kind of protestor against

the city council's treatment of the homeless (see *Caretakers of the Land* for more details). There is some attraction in the idea of Blanket Man being a protestor, however, it is difficult to gauge the level of his involvement in any organised protest. Moreover, from about 2003 he moved himself off from identified connections with the broader group of homeless, in effect, becoming the sole individual 'Blanket Man'. Clearly, at times this public persona dogs him as he does not wish to be treated as some kind of 'freak show'; at other times he seems to lap up the attention. Regardless, it does not seem true to say that he is using this public identifiability to push any kind of protest, or for any kind of attention, to homeless or other issues.

DISCUSSION

Inevitably, when working from what is effectively a case study, one must speculate. Our overall speculative point is this: perhaps the passers-by, the strangers, some of whom wish to sit with Blanket Man, are interested not because he is a 'somebody' in the sense of a quasi-celebrity, but because he is some *body*. That is, he is an embodied flesh and blood person, visibly living in difficult terrain, and the public's interest stems from this interactive base, not mass-mediated fabrications. As some commentators have realised, so called 'micro-sociology' is remarkably insightful when considering the interaction of homeless people with others, and we wish to finish with a brief discussion of such material.

In an ethnographic study of homeless 'panhandlers' in Washington DC, Lankenau (1999) makes good use of Goffman's work on stigma and the interaction order. Panhandlers are street-beggars, but it is important to note that 'the great majority of homeless persons across the United States are not regular panhandlers' – it is estimated that only '17 percent of all homeless persons [in the US] receive most of their income through panhandling' (Lankenau, 1999: 295). Lankenau makes a good case for the utility of Goffman for his study, suggesting that 'the contact between panhandler and stranger represents a "primal scene" in sociology' (1999: 316), that is, a situation of face-to-face co-presence where the labels of 'normal' or 'stigmatised' are given life, are made real (see Duneier, 1999, for a similar argument). Despite the normative power of the stigmatising process, Lankenau details how some panhandlers are able to enhance their self-regard and status by developing relationships with some passers-by who become regular givers, thus entering into an interesting form of social relationship with the panhandler.

To relate this to our case, we first have to note a clear difference in that Blanket Man does not openly 'panhandle', and even if he did it would be difficult to

make direct comparison with homelessness in the United States, as the scale and visibility is clearly different. Nevertheless, what is useful in Lankenau's analysis is this notion of the 'primal scene' of sociology, that is, spatially situated instances of interaction between strangers and intimates.

This point about strangers and intimates is extended by Ferris' work (2004) on celebrity sightings. These can occur anywhere, but Ferris focuses on Los Angeles and New York, conducting interviews there, because in these cities sightings of movie stars, rock stars, and other media figures in places like cafes, supermarkets, walking the street, and so on, can occur relatively frequently. She is interested in these sightings, following Goffman, as a kind of moral order, in particular because they can constitute 'micropolitical trouble': 'there are different types and categories of stranger and ... they can therefore interact in different ways when they encounter one another in public places, spontaneously modifying rules and imperatives in patterned ways. So what are the rules and imperatives governing that rare but exhilarating public-place encounter, the celebrity sighting?' (2004: 239). She picks up from Klapp's much earlier work (1949) the 'paradox of hero worship', that is, even though audience members, the public, feel they 'know' celebrities, these media-dependent figures are still technically *strangers* to their audience. Some people may feel that their 'knowledge' of the celebrity equates to some entitlement to interact with them, but this is countered by a kind of celebrity etiquette that operates whereby celebrities gain shelter from trespass. But, as Ferris notes, this is nowhere near all-powerful 'because of the paradox of familiarity ... celebrities are also "open" persons and hence cannot guarantee that they will remain unmolested while navigating public space' (2004: 239).

There is more to Ferris' work, but these seem like useful insights. We have been at pains to avoid coining a celebrity neologism to fit Blanket Man, but we can see the dynamics of stranger/intimate relations playing out, and certainly the 'paradox of hero worship' seems applicable. That is, while not a 'celebrity', there is no doubt that Blanket Man is known and publicly identifiable, thus he is an 'open' person. And, don't forget, he lives on the street, making him doubly open. Consequently, the scenes where strangers take on the entitlement to touch and interact with him might be of a similar order to those where celebrity sightings turn into interactions which breach celebrity etiquette and stranger-distance rules. Where we differ from Ferris is in her emphasis on the media. As she says, 'Celebrity sightings highlight a more and more common type of social relationship: weak ties based on mass-mediated interactions' (2004: 242). While Blanket Man's identifiability was bolstered by the local media, in no sense was it created by it. It is truer to say that his public recognition factor still depends

on his day to day presence on the street, wonderfully captured in the street scene of figure 2.



Figure 2.

What we do believe is directly applicable from Ferris' work is her emphasis on 'micro-troubles', or what we would call a situation of anomaly:

[*Celebrity sightings*] feature a unique tension between stranger (for whom approach is prohibited) and intimate (for whom approach is required). They are also marked by major status differentials as fame meets obscurity and the extraordinary and ordinary collide. ... The celebrity sighting creates a distinctive kind of trouble in everyday interaction: how should participants treat this encounter? Continue to treat the encounter within an ordinary frame? Or to shift out of that frame and into another frame that acknowledges the extraor-

dinary status of the celebrity? To act as a stranger or as an intimate? To abide by the rules or to violate them (with an account)? (Ferris, 2004: 242–243).

As noted above, we would like to avoid the ordinary versus extraordinary binary, however there is much in this notion of frame disjuncture that appeals.

For one, there are all kinds of ways in which the case of Blanket Man features incongruity and anomaly, thus rendering it ‘interesting’ to laypeople. He is literally a man living on the street, but he is not the ordinary, typical, man on the street. As a homeless, street-dweller, he is easily categorisable as being of low status, perhaps stigmatisable; nevertheless, in the public imagination he has taken on considerable notoriety, and to some extent, adulation. He can be seen to engage the interest of the police, frequently being taken to court, but to see this on the street is indeed incongruous, provoking natural questions such as, ‘what harm is Blanket Man doing?’, this being all the more highlighted by the occasional *bon mot* from the man himself (‘can I have home detention’).

Secondly, as the work of Duneier exemplifies, homeless ‘panhandlers’ are frequently taken to be categories of people for whom ‘civil inattention’ definitely applies. That is, in situations where there are many beggars on the street, despite the best intentions, aid cannot be given to all, consequently the pragmatic response is to avoid eye-contact. Blanket Man’s situation breaches this strongly normative interactive environment: he is still a homeless person, thus being connectable to natural reactions of risk, dirt, and deviance; nevertheless at the same time he is a ‘known’ person, a local character. It would be a mistake to call him a celebrity, but we definitely see features of the structures of ‘celebrity sightings’, as identified by Ferris. That is, he is a non-intimate who nonetheless is *open* to interaction by strangers as they pass by on the street.

We do not have an answer to the problem of whether we need a new celebrity term to fit this phenomenon. Our suspicion is that there are more than enough neologisms being coined around such issues, but in close we would note how nicely this takes us back to the work of Goffman on the interaction order. For as he noted many years ago (Goffman, 1963), there have always been situations in which strangers can be approached. There are people in an ‘exposed position’ like receptionists, shopkeepers, and policeman. There are people in an ‘opening position’, like salespeople, street vendors, and petition-signature gatherers. And there are sites where people are mutually open to each other, like bars, clubs, carnivals and so on. Again, Blanket Man’s case is incongruous: he does not neatly slot into any of these positions. Of course, what the recent literature

on celebrity has drawn attention to is the new way in which the Internet and online public domains mean you no longer have to be copresent to strike up acquaintance with strangers (see Zhao, 2006). It is clear that some of the processes of celebrification are occurring predominantly in the online world. However, we hope that our case study of Blanket Man adds yet more complexity to discussion of the mediated work, whether online or offline, that helps create celebrity, and its relation to the dynamic realm that Goffman (1983) called 'the interaction order'. To media and cultural studies work on these issues, we need to add that most basic of sociological questions (see Hacking, 2004): how do we conceptualise and realise who we are and what we may be, in particular moments and spaces.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This article was first presented at the 'New Horizons' New Zealand Folklore Symposium, December 1, 2007. Thanks to symposium participants for their feedback, and also to an anonymous referee for some useful comments on an earlier version of this article. Thanks to Belinda Brown for permission to use two of her photographs, and of course many thanks to Bernard Hana for his willingness to be involved in Bronwyn McGovern's PhD research.

NOTES

- 1 Figures 1 and 2 in this article are sourced from Belinda Brown, a professional photographer. Belinda has Blanket Man's permission to take photographs of him and has kindly made these available to Bronwyn McGovern. Whereas there is no way to avoid a 'framing effect' in photography, and Blanket Man does appear to enjoy being photographed, the two we have chosen to reproduce here have been carefully selected to present more prosaic aspects of Blanket Man's streetlife, that is, they appear to depict relatively ordinary scenes.
- 2 As an aside it is fascinating to note that in fact 'beggars can be choosers', or at least somewhat less compliant than their low social status would suggest. In his ethnographic work on New York panhandlers, Duneier (1999; Duneier and Molotch 1999) coins the term 'interactional vandalism' which is a wonderful example of the complexity of the begging relationship. Despite the fact that a panhandler has to get some minimal, and one would assume polite, contact in order to successfully beg, Duneier shows street men making trouble in the street, being openly rude to passers-by. He calls this 'interactional vandalism' and it is frequently seen in cases involving male panhandlers and female passers-by. Briefly, his explanation is that when women disregard their gaze and walk past

them as if they were not there 'the women appear to men as beyond human empathy and, in their coldness and lack of respect, [*are therefore*] appropriate as men's interactional toys' (Duneier & Molotch 1999: 1291).

REFERENCES

- Barcan, R. 2000 'Home on the rage: Nudity, celebrity, and ordinariness in the Home Girls/Blokes pages', *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, 14 (2): 145–158.
- Boorstin, D.J. 1964 *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-events in America*, New York: Harper & Row.
- Cavaglioni, G. 2007 'The societal construction of a criminal as cultural hero: The case of "the Brinks truck theft"', *Folklore*, 118: 245–260.
- Couldry, N. 2001 'The umbrella man: Crossing a landscape of speech and silence', *European Journal of Cultural Studies*, 4 (2): 131–152.
- Duneier, M., & Molotch, H. 1999 'Talking city trouble: Interactional vandalism, social inequality, and the "urban interaction problem"', *American Journal of Sociology*, 104 (5): 1263–1295.
- Duneier, M. 1999 *Sidewalk*, New York: Farrar, Straus & Giroux.
- Ferris, K.O. 2004 'Seeing and being seen: The moral order of celebrity sightings', *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 33 (3): 236–264.
- Gitlin, T. 1998 'The culture of celebrity', *Dissent*, 45(3): 81–83.
- Goffman, E. 1963 *Behavior in Public Places*, New York: Free Press.
- Goffman, E. 1983 'The interaction order', *American Sociological Review*, 48: 1–17.
- Hacking, I. 2004 'Between Michel Foucault and Erving Goffman', *Economy and Society*, 33 (3): 277–302.
- Holmes, S. 2005 'Off-guard, unkempt, unready?': Deconstructing contemporary celebrity in *heat* magazine', *Continuum: Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, 9 (1): 21–38.

- Klapp, O. E. 1949 'Hero worship in America', *American Sociological Review*, 14(1): 53–62.
- Klapp, O. E. 1954 'The clever hero', *The Journal of American Folklore*, 67: 21–34.
- Klapp, O. E. 1956 'American villain types', *American Sociological Review*, 21(3): 337–340.
- Klapp, O. E. 1958 'Social types: Process and structure', *American Sociological Review*, 23(6) 674–678.
- Lankenau, S.E. 1999 'Stronger than dirt: Public humiliation and status enhancement among panhandlers', *Journal of Contemporary Ethnography*, 28(3): 288–318.
- Marshall, D. P. 1997 *Celebrity and Power: Fame in contemporary culture*, Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press.
- Rojek, C. 2001 *Celebrity*, London: Reaktion.
- Seal, G. 1996 *The Outlaw Legend: A cultural tradition in Britain, America and Australia*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Smart, B. 2005 *The Sport Star*, London: Sage.
- Turner, G. 2006 'The mass production of celebrity: 'Celestoids', reality TV and the 'demotic turn', *International Journal of Cultural Studies*, 9(2): 153–165.
- Zhao, S. 2006 'The internet and the transformation of the reality of everyday life', *Sociological Inquiry*, 76(4): 458–474.