



Flinders
UNIVERSITY

ABORIGINAL HUMOUR

**An investigation into the nature and purposes of
Indigenous Australian performance humour and its
contributions to Australian culture**

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

| | |
|--|------|
| FOREWORD..... | viii |
| ABSTRACT..... | ix |
| DECLARATION..... | x |
| ACKNOWLEDGEMENT..... | xi |
| INTRODUCTION..... | 1 |
| A. INTRODUCTION..... | 1 |
| B. THESIS PURPOSE..... | 2 |
| C. CHAPTER OVERVIEW..... | 4 |
| C.1 Chapter One – Literature review..... | 4 |
| C.2 Chapter Two – The theoretical foundations of humour..... | 5 |
| C.3 Chapter Three – Humour in the historical records of Indigenous societies..... | 6 |
| C.4 Chapter Four – Colonial relationships and neglect of Indigenous humour..... | 7 |
| C.5 Chapter Five – Indigenous artistic agency of 1970-2000 and the use of humour..... | 8 |
| C.6 Chapter Six – The ongoing use of humour in Indigenous performance of the new Century..... | 9 |
| C.7 Chapter Seven – Stand-up comedy: The fresh face of Indigenous Australian humour..... | 10 |
| C.8 Conclusion..... | 12 |
| D. THESIS PROPOSITION..... | 12 |
| CHAPTER ONE..... | 14 |
| 1. INTRODUCTION..... | 14 |
| 2. CHAPTER OVERVIEW..... | 14 |
| 3. AUSTRALIAN HUMOUR LITERATURE REVIEW..... | 16 |
| 3.1 A Review of Colonial Australian humour literature..... | 16 |
| 3.2 Literature investigation parameters and research techniques..... | 26 |
| 3.3 Traditional Indigenous Australian humour literature..... | 27 |
| 3.4 ‘Urban’ Indigenous Australian humour literature..... | 39 |
| 3.5 Humour literature pertaining to Indigenous Australians as victims (butts)..... | 56 |
| 4. CONCLUSION..... | 65 |
| CHAPTER TWO..... | 67 |
| 1. INTRODUCTION..... | 67 |
| 2. CHAPTER OVERVIEW..... | 67 |
| | ii |

| | | |
|-------|---|-----|
| 3. | HUMOUR THEORIES..... | 68 |
| 3.1 | Superiority Theories..... | 68 |
| 3.1.1 | Plato..... | 69 |
| 3.1.2 | Aristophanes..... | 70 |
| 3.1.3 | Thomas Hobbes..... | 71 |
| 3.1.4 | Henri Bergson..... | 73 |
| 3.1.5 | Charles Gruner..... | 77 |
| 3.2 | Incongruity Theories..... | 80 |
| 3.2.1 | Arthur Schopenhauer..... | 80 |
| 3.2.2 | David Monro..... | 84 |
| 3.2.3 | More challenges to Incongruity Theories..... | 85 |
| 3.2.4 | Some contemporary trends in Incongruity research..... | 87 |
| 3.3 | Relief/Release Theories..... | 90 |
| 3.3.1 | Herbert Spencer..... | 90 |
| 3.3.2 | Sigmund Freud..... | 92 |
| 3.4 | An alternative proposal: Humour as an ‘Existential Reality’..... | 98 |
| 4. | CONCLUSION..... | 99 |
| | CHAPTER THREE..... | 101 |
| 1. | INTRODUCTION..... | 101 |
| 2. | CHAPTER OUTLINE..... | 101 |
| 3. | ETHNOLOGICAL EVIDENCE OF INDIGENOUS HUMOUR..... | 102 |
| 3.1 | The humour findings of Sir Walter Baldwin Spencer..... | 102 |
| 3.2 | The humour findings of Ronald and Catherine Berndt..... | 104 |
| 3.3 | The humour findings of William Edward Hanley Stanner..... | 108 |
| 3.4 | Humour in Dreaming Narratives..... | 109 |
| 3.4.1 | The narrative of Tiddalik the Frog..... | 111 |
| 3.4.2 | The narrative of the Night Owl..... | 113 |
| 3.5 | The important purposes of humour in Indigenous narrative & performance..... | 114 |
| 4. | CONCLUSION..... | 115 |
| | CHAPTER FOUR..... | 117 |
| 1. | INTRODUCTION..... | 117 |
| 2. | CHAPTER OUTLINE..... | 118 |
| 3. | EARLY COLONIAL EXAMPLES OF INDIGENOUS HUMOUR..... | 119 |
| 3.1 | European humorous images of Indigenous Australians..... | 119 |
| 3.2 | The foundation for colonial interpretation of Indigenous Australians..... | 123 |

| | | |
|--------|--|-----|
| 3.3 | Australian ‘Aboriginalism’ | 124 |
| 3.4 | Colonial misappropriation of Aboriginal Corroborees | 127 |
| 3.4.1 | Some notable Aboriginal Corroborees | 128 |
| 3.4.2 | The usurping of Aboriginal Corroborees | 129 |
| 3.5 | The Birth of Colonial Cartooning and its Images of Aboriginal People | 130 |
| 3.5.1 | Aboriginal Images in Punch Newspaper | 130 |
| 3.6 | Indigenous Humour in the Protectionist Era (1830s-1930s) | 134 |
| 3.7 | Cartoon images of Indigenous Australian in the news media | 137 |
| 3.8 | Aboriginal images in light of Australian nationalism | 138 |
| 3.9 | Heightened Indigenous political activism & protests from the 1930s | 142 |
| 3.10 | Indigenous humour in the Assimilationist Era (1930s-1960s) | 143 |
| 3.11 | Humour about Aboriginal Australians during World War Two (1939-1945) | 143 |
| 3.12 | Indigenous Artistic responses to injustice (1940s-1950s) | 145 |
| 3.13 | The political backdrop to Indigenous performance humour (1960s-1970s) | 146 |
| 3.14 | Humour as a key strategy of Gilbert’s play: ‘The Cherry Pickers’ (1968) | 149 |
| 3.15 | The emergence of Black Theatre and its significant use of humour | 152 |
| 3.15.1 | Basically Black’s ‘Boong’ skit | 152 |
| 3.15.2 | Basically Black’s ‘Super-Boong’ skit | 155 |
| 3.16 | The benefits of humour to modern Indigenous performances | 156 |
| 3.17 | Changing perceptions of Aboriginal images in media cartoons | 157 |
| 4. | CONCLUSION | 161 |
| | CHAPTER FIVE | 162 |
| 1. | INTRODUCTION | 162 |
| 2. | CHAPTER OUTLINE | 162 |
| 3. | INDIGENOUS ARTISTS’ HUMOROUS INTERVENTIONS INTO MAINSTREAM AUSTRALIA’S SOCIO-POLITICAL DISCOURSE (1970-2000) | 163 |
| 3.1 | Australia’s Changing socio-political order of the 1970s | 163 |
| 3.2 | Redfern’s Black Theatre Arts and Cultural Centre (1970s) | 164 |
| 3.3 | The benefits of Black Theatre | 165 |
| 3.4 | The humour of Jack Davis | 166 |
| 3.4.1 | The Dreamers (1971/1982) | 166 |
| 3.5 | Growing opportunities for Indigenous Australian performance of the 1970s | 170 |
| 3.6 | ‘Here Comes the Nigger’ (c.1977) | 171 |
| 3.7 | Strengthening directions for Indigenous Australian performance (1980s-1990s) | 174 |
| 3.8 | The 1988 Bicentennial celebrations and Indigenous Australian performances | 175 |
| 3.9 | Establishment of a National Black Playwrights Conference (1987) | 176 |

| | | |
|------|--|-----|
| 3.10 | A ‘Bran Nue Dae’ (1990)..... | 177 |
| 3.11 | ‘Corrugation Road’ (1996)..... | 181 |
| 3.12 | Nationally important imperatives for Aboriginal Theatre in the 1990s..... | 182 |
| 3.13 | Aboriginal artistic response to 1990s cultural challenges..... | 184 |
| 3.14 | Achievements in the 1990s – ‘The Seven Stages of Grieving’..... | 187 |
| 3.15 | Indigenous artists’ participation in ‘The Festival of Dreaming’ (1997)..... | 190 |
| 3.16 | ‘Box the Pony’ (1997)..... | 191 |
| 3.17 | ‘White Baptist Abba Fan’ (1997)..... | 194 |
| 3.18 | ‘Bindjareb Pinjarra’ (1994/1997)..... | 195 |
| 4. | CONCLUSION..... | 197 |
| | CHAPTER SIX..... | 200 |
| 1. | INTRODUCTION..... | 200 |
| 2. | CHAPTER OUTLINE..... | 200 |
| 3. | ‘CONTEMPORARY INDIGENOUS ARTISTS’ HUMOROUS INTERVENTIONS IN MAINSTREAM AUSTRALIA’S SOCIO-POLITICAL DISCOURSE..... | 201 |
| 3.1 | ‘Casting Doubts’ – An Aboriginal response to racism (2002)..... | 201 |
| 3.2 | The humour techniques used in ‘Casting Doubts’..... | 202 |
| 3.3 | The reality of Contemporary Australia’s socio-political environment in the new millennium..... | 208 |
| 3.4 | ‘Yanagai! Yanagai!’ (2002) – An Aboriginal response to land rights claims..... | 209 |
| 3.5 | The humour techniques used in ‘Yanagai! Yanagai!’..... | 210 |
| 3.6 | ‘Bitin’ Back’ (2005) – An Aboriginal response to identity challenges..... | 215 |
| 3.7 | The humour techniques used in ‘Bitin’ Back’..... | 216 |
| 3.8 | ‘Chopped Liver’ (2004) – An Aboriginal response to poor health challenges..... | 219 |
| 3.9 | The humour techniques used in ‘Chopped Liver’..... | 220 |
| 3.10 | The influence of stand-up and sketch comedy on contemporary Indigenous theatrical Performances..... | 221 |
| 3.11 | ‘Itchy Clacker’ (2007) – An Aboriginal response to injustice..... | 222 |
| 3.12 | The humour techniques used in ‘Itchy Clacker’..... | 222 |
| 3.13 | ‘A Black Sheep Walks into a Baa’ (2009) – Aboriginal responses to political and identity challenges..... | 225 |
| 3.14 | The humour techniques used in ‘A Black Sheep Walks into a Baa’..... | 226 |
| 3.15 | ‘Black Sheep: Glorious Baastards’ (2010) – A further response to political and identity Challenges..... | 228 |
| 3.16 | The humour techniques used in ‘Black Sheep: Glorious Baastards’..... | 228 |
| 3.17 | The benefits of political sketch comedy..... | 229 |
| 3.18 | The influence of sketch comedy on performance in Western Australia..... | 230 |
| 3.19 | ‘Black as Michael Jackson... and other Identity Monologues’ (2012) – A response to | 230 |

| | |
|--|-----|
| identity challenges and Stolen Generations issues..... | |
| 3.20 The humour techniques used in ‘Black as Michael Jackson’..... | 231 |
| 3.21 ‘Fifty Shades of Black’ (2013) – A sequel celebration of Aboriginal identity..... | 233 |
| 3.22 The humour techniques used in ‘Fifty Shades’..... | 233 |
| 3.23 ‘Waltzing the Wilarra’ (2011) – A response to the ‘Apology to the Stolen Generations’ | 235 |
| 3.24 The humour techniques used in ‘Waltzing the Wilarra’..... | 236 |
| 3.25 Indigenous theatre’s ongoing importance in responding to Australia’s socio-political Challenges..... | 239 |
| 3.26 ‘Blak Cabaret’ (2015) – A response to history and injustice..... | 240 |
| 3.27 The humour techniques used in ‘Blak Cabaret’..... | 241 |
| 4. CONCLUSION..... | 243 |
| CHAPTER SEVEN..... | 246 |
| 1. INTRODUCTION..... | 246 |
| 2. CHAPTER OUTLINE..... | 247 |
| 3. THE ORIGINS OF STAND-UP COMEDY..... | 249 |
| 3.1 Stand-up comedy in Australia..... | 249 |
| 4. MAINSTREAM AUSTRALIAN HUMOUR RELATING TO INDIGENOUS PEOPLE..... | 250 |
| 4.1 Rodney Rude..... | 252 |
| 4.2 Kevin Bloody Wilson..... | 253 |
| 4.3 King Billy Cokebottle..... | 255 |
| 5. POSSIBLE POSITIVE ASPECTS OF DISPARAGING ETHNIC HUMOUR..... | 255 |
| 6. POSSIBLE NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF DISPARAGING ETHNIC HUMOUR..... | 258 |
| 6.1 Political Correctness..... | 260 |
| 6.2 Modern racism..... | 262 |
| 7. THE SUPPORT OF CULTURAL FESTIVALS..... | 263 |
| 7.1 RAW Comedy Awards..... | 265 |
| 8. SEAN CHOOLBURRA..... | 265 |
| 8.1. The humour techniques used by Choolburra..... | 266 |
| 9. DEADLY FUNNY NATIONAL FINAL AND SHOWCASE..... | 272 |
| 10. MIA STANFORD..... | 273 |
| 10.1. The humour techniques used by Stanford..... | 275 |
| 11. KEVIN KROPINYERI..... | 278 |
| 11.1 The humour techniques used by Kropinyeri..... | 279 |
| 12. ANDREW SAUNDERS..... | 286 |
| 12.1 The humour techniques used by Saunders..... | 287 |
| 13. SUMMARY OF THE HUMOUR TECHNIQUES IN ABORIGINAL STAND-UP..... | 289 |

| | |
|---|-----|
| 14. ARE THERE UNDERLYING PURPOSES TO ABORIGINAL STAND-UP? | 290 |
| 15. CONCLUSION..... | 292 |
| | |
| OVERALL CONCLUSION..... | 293 |
| A. PROLOGUE..... | 293 |
| B. OVERVIEW AND FINDINGS REGARDING THE NATURE & PURPOSES OF INDIGENOUS HUMOUR..... | 293 |
| C. A FINAL NOTE..... | 297 |
| BIBLIOGRAPHY..... | 299 |

FOREWORD

Throughout this thesis the terms 'Indigenous', 'Indigenous Australians', 'Aboriginals', 'Aboriginal Australians' and 'First Nations People' have been used interchangeably. Each of these terms is used to describe Australia's original inhabitants and must be recognised as descriptive, referring to people rather than as objectifying nouns. I hope to represent the diversity of acceptable terminology in contrast to the long history of non-Indigenous labelling of Aboriginal Australians. Specific language-group names are used to describe specific people when these more respectful terms of address are known. What is most important is the fact that capitals have been used as a sign of respect to diverse Indigenous Australians.

ABSTRACT

In academic research discussing the nature of Australian humour little is written about Indigenous Australian humour. Humour has, and continues to play, a significant role in Indigenous Australian socio-political and artistic discourse. Why is it that so few have written about the nature and purposes of Indigenous humour when such an investigation might provide a counterbalance to more austere ‘black armband’ views of Indigenous people. This neglect could be the result of white Australia’s inability to properly appreciate the full significance of Indigenous cultures. I suggest that the indifference partially results from the prominence of more ‘serious’ issues of social injustice and disadvantage that obscure recognition of other aspects of Indigenous’ lifestyles, including a humorous side. This thesis responds to this lack of academic literature contributing critical investigation and greater appreciation of Indigenous performance humour.

This investigation contends that humour forms and functions discussed in western academic theories of superiority, incongruity and release can also be understood within the cultural practices of non-western people. These humour characteristics are recognisable in some early western records of Australian Indigenous communities and in traditional narratives, revealing the structure of some pre-colonial humour. Whilst government interventions and economic hardships obscured the existence of Indigenous humour in colonial Australian history, research shows how humour has emerged as a significant ‘weapon’ in the armoury of Indigenous fights for socio-political recognition. Theatrical and stand-up performances have become important avenues for Indigenous self-expression that often employ humour. Following a chronological progression, this thesis reviews the establishment of Aboriginal performance within the mainstream.¹ It critically analyses the humour used in this endeavour, exploring the links between traditional and current practices. It questions whether or not common humour forms and functions, particularly those recognised in 1970s Indigenous theatre, can still be found in contemporary performances. This question is often investigated by way of qualitative interviews with current Aboriginal humorists as well as personal attendances at comedy performances.

This thesis concludes that physical humour and mimicry remain techniques found in early and in more recent Indigenous performances. Humorous yarning techniques also continue to enable Indigenous performers to impart engaging stories, often about the inequalities and hardships they face, to non-Indigenous audiences in a less judgmental manner. Black humour and mickey-taking techniques that deprecate idiosyncrasies of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people are further commonly found humour forms, especially seen in stand-up comedy. But most significantly, Indigenous humour remains tied to an Indigenous political ‘voice’ in Australia’s cultural arena. By using humorous techniques, Indigenous artists raise issues of significance to their own people, providing their own perspectives. The political emphasis of much Indigenous performance humour is what sets it apart as a significant aspect of communication within the mainstream. Moreover, it provides Australia’s Arts culture with important elements of cultural diversity and complexity.

¹ The term ‘mainstream’ is used extensively throughout this thesis. It refers to the ideologies, attitudes and practices of the dominant colonial Australian population.

DECLARATION

I certify that this thesis does not incorporate without acknowledgment any material previously submitted for a degree or diploma in any university; and that to the best of my knowledge and belief it does not contain any material previously published or written by another person except where due reference is made in the text.



Karen Austin

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INTRODUCTION

*Comedy is the flip side to tragedy in which [I]ndigenous communities are often well experienced. What the white community doesn't realise is how much humour is part of our culture... We have been laughing at ourselves for generations.*²

Kevin Kropinyeri, Aboriginal Comedian.

A. INTRODUCTION

There is a propensity, in colonial Australian culture, for non-Indigenous people to focus attention (albeit often negatively) on the contributions that they have made to Indigenous Australian cultures and not on the contributions that Indigenous Australians have made to the dominant culture. Ray Lillis, Australian movie writer, producer and director has said that ... 'we white Australians continue to deny that Aboriginal culture has contributed or has anything to contribute to our society as a way of avoiding the unavoidable suspicion that ours has contributed nothing but tragedy to theirs.'³ Lillis goes on to say that Australians generally lack an interest in the value of the wit, wisdom and world view of their Indigenous Australian peers.⁴ His observations highlight a lack of respect for the important cultural contributions that Indigenous people have made, and continue to make, in the formation of this nation's identity.

Describing Australia's 'national identity' is a fruitless task because society is so diverse and is constantly changing.⁵ Nevertheless, Donald Horne recognises that historically Australians see themselves as 'pragmatic, sensible, trustworthy, simple, straightforward... 'fair dinkum'... people'.⁶ The Australian Federal Government recognises that humour is an important aspect of this account that Australians build of themselves in its production of a website that celebrates what it calls this 'distinctly Australian' phenomenon.⁷ However, this national humour website does not credit Indigenous Australians with contributing to this important aspect of our national identity. Therefore, a primary intention of this thesis is to help redress this gap by focusing on the cultural contributions Indigenous people have made, and are making, to our national identity via their humour practices. Working in chronological progression, it will point to particularly noteworthy forms of humour used by, and about, Indigenous Australian people. What these forms of humour are, coupled with when and

² Evans, K., 13/04/2012, 'Now, here's the word on race issues', *Sydney Morning Herald*, Fairfax Media, Sydney, NSW, viewed 01/08/2014, <<http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/comedy/now-heres-the-word-on-race-issues-20120412-1wwf4.html>>.

³ Lillis, R., 2007, 'Black Comedy, Indigenous Humour in Australia and New Zealand', *Metro*, no. 155(2007), pp. 76–77.

⁴ Lillis, R., 2007, p. 77.

⁵ Horne, D., 1994, 'How To Be Australia', *National Centre for Australian Studies*, Monash University, Melbourne, Victoria, p. 15.

⁶ Horne, D., & Beal, D., 1967, *Southern Exposure*, William Collins (Australia) Ltd., Sydney, Australia, p. 71.

⁷ Australian Government, 17/12/2007, 'Australian humour', viewed 24/11/2014, <<http://www.australia.gov.au/about-australia/australian-story/austn-humour>>.

how they are used, help us to comprehend the nature of Indigenous Australian humour. As a further consequence of these observations, how this humour impacts on Australia's socio-political discourse is also canvassed.

Ultimately this project intends to reveal how some Indigenous Australians have used humour, as Indigenous author Lillian Holt says, to navigate the 'thorny terrain of race relations' as a specific intervention into mainstream discourse.⁸ It will consider both the nature and purposes of humour used in some Aboriginal live performances that can be seen to parallel greater Aboriginal political and social participation in mainstream culture, which especially became more prolific from the late 1960s and early 1970s onwards. This is particularly significant given the fact that some Aboriginal Australians have suggested that humour is naturally woven into the fabric of their everyday vernacular.⁹ Humour can readily be found in Aboriginal narratives and yarns, in dance and song, and in their artistic expressions.

However, no research project can do all things and for the most part this thesis does not investigate classical forms of Indigenous humour. Moreover, Indigenous Australian cultures are 'broad churches' providing Australia with a diverse range of people and opinions. Therefore, this thesis is largely restricted to a narrow selection of 'live performances' in theatre and stand-up comedy in this very interesting arena. In this thesis these fields can be considered as representative of the humorous traits found in an array of other Indigenous artistic expressions. For as Aboriginal visual artist, Brenda L. Croft, has written: 'Aboriginal art is our expression, our culture, our living. An extension of our identity. Not just an item for a wall or living room.'¹⁰ In addition, I do not propose to get lost in the semantics of what constitutes humour. It is not the purpose of this thesis to make subtle distinctions between the various terminologies used to describe humour, such as comedy, wit, satire, jest etc.

B. THESIS PURPOSE

This dissertation also responds to the lack of scholarly literature written about the nature and purposes of Indigenous Australian humour. While some articles that specifically discuss Indigenous Australian humour do exist, they are frequently academically informal and/or not generally reflective of a critical investigation into its social forms and functions. Addressing this deficit is particularly pertinent given the significant amount of academic literature available on western humour generally.¹¹ This body of

⁸ Holt, L., 2009, 'Aboriginal humour: A conversational corroboree' in De Groen, F, & Kirkpatrick, P, (eds.), 2009, *Serious Frolic, Essays on Australian Humour*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, QLD, Australia, p. 84.

⁹ Holt, L., 2009, p. 82. Kennedy, G., 2009, 'What makes a Blackfulla Laugh?' *Australian Author*, 41/3, p. 14.

¹⁰ Croft, B., 2007, quoted in New South Wales Government Board of Studies Aboriginal Education website, 'Aboriginal Art', viewed 13/10/2014, <<http://ab-ed.boardofstudies.nsw.edu.au/go/aboriginal-art>>.

¹¹ In addition to the body of academic literature discussed on the nature and purposes of humour in chapter two herein, there exists an excellent source of interdisciplinary academic analysis of humour in the Society for Humor Studies official publication: *Humor, International Journal of Humor Research*. This journal has been published in Germany by Mouton De Gruyter since 1988. Viewed 14/10/2014, <<http://www.degruyter.com/view/j/humr>> and <<http://www.hnu.edu/ishs/JournalCenter.htm>>. In 2014 Sage Publications produced a two volume *Encyclopedia of Humor*

work does include some critical literature on the characteristics of Indigenous humour more broadly. This generally overlooks Aboriginal Australian humour contributions although it does, at times, discuss humour and jokes that have Aboriginal people as their subject of ridicule.

Critical analysis of Australian humour is not a vast field of enquiry in and of itself. In fact, back in 1995, with the launching of the inaugural *Australian Journal of Comedy*, editor Gerard Matte, argued that Australian comedy was missing a rigorous ‘critical forum’, with many pertinent social issues still yet to be explored and debated.¹² He suggested that perhaps this is because there is a traditional, almost superstitious belief, that any academic scrutiny of humour would ‘evaporate’ its funniness.¹³ However, Matte emphatically reiterated that (Australian) ‘comedy can be and should be, subjected to critical, social, political and psychological analysis, just like any other art form.’¹⁴ Although the *Australian Journal of Comedy* (which ceased publication in 2002),¹⁵ and some other investigations have attempted to rectify this shortfall, this criticism retains some validity, most significantly in relation to Indigenous Australian humour.

It must be noted that many humour scholars probably do not feel qualified to write about Aboriginal humour, given their lack of ‘insider’ knowledge about this topic and its people. I am not an Aboriginal Australian person. Therefore, my contributions in this thesis regarding Aboriginal theatrical and stand-up humour have, where possible, been gathered through first-hand interviews and from the words of Aboriginal performance artists and academics themselves in order to compensate for my lack of cultural authority.

Aboriginal writer and historian Jackie Huggins has addressed the ethics of non-Aboriginal people writing about Aboriginal people in her essay ‘Respect versus Political Correctness’.¹⁶ Huggins says, in part, that the best books written about Aboriginal people by non-Aboriginals are those that ‘[have a] respect for and knowledge of Aboriginal culture, history and social issues’.¹⁷ Aboriginal academic Dr Anita Heiss concurs with Huggins, noting that a lot of what has been written about Aboriginals by non-Aboriginals tends to be patronising and is often misconstrued.¹⁸

Studies, collection of academic writings by world humour scholars edited by eminent humour scholar Salvatore Attardo. Viewed 14/10/2014, <<http://www.sagepub.com/books/Book235990>>.

¹² Matte, G., 1995, ‘Editorial’, *Australian Journal of Comedy*, v. 1/95, Australian Catholic University, Christ Campus, Victoria, pp. 10–11.

¹³ Matte, G., 1995, p. 11.

¹⁴ Matte, G., 1995, p. 11.

¹⁵ The Visual and Performing Arts Department of Australian Catholic University, published the *Australian Journal of Comedy*, from 1995 (v.1) to 2002 (v.8). Viewed 14/10/2014, <<http://catalogue.nla.gov.au/Record/1378479>>.

¹⁶ Huggins, J., 1993, ‘Respect versus Political Correctness in Huggins’, J., 1998, *Sister Girl, The writings of Aboriginal Activist and Historian Jackie Huggins*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, Queensland, pp. 83–87.

¹⁷ Huggins, J., 1993, p. 83.

¹⁸ Huggins, J., 1993, p. 83.

Heiss says that ... '[t]he strongest argument against non-Aboriginal people writing in the area [of Aboriginal society and issues] stems from the history of negative representation of Aboriginal people in literature.'¹⁹ Writing that imbues respect and compassion for Aboriginal people, their cultural complexity, and their history, is in my opinion, the only suitable response to this very valid criticism. To acknowledge respectfully who you are writing about, why you are writing, and who you are writing for, is also essential.²⁰

This thesis intends to document a narrative of relationships between Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people, focusing on instances when humour has been used in these often fraught relationships. It will show that some significant events in Australia's colonial history have proven important motivators for the production of Aboriginal humour. Primarily, this dissertation is written for a non-Indigenous audience. It intends to reveal an Indigenous humour world, often well known to Indigenous people themselves, that will prove worthy of greater academic interest and respect. And, as Stanner has said some time ago: '[t]o understand and appreciate ... [Aboriginal] humour is one of the best ways of rounding out an estimate of him [sic] as a human personality.'²¹ In other words, this investigation into the presence, forms and functions of Aboriginal humour will provide entrée into greater appreciation of Aboriginal 'wit, wisdom and world-views'.²² However, ultimately, and unashamedly, this thesis is a celebration of Aboriginal artistic ingenuity and endeavour that is so frequently manifest in comic forms.

This thesis will provide an addition to academic analysis of Australian humour that is ripe for further critical exploration. In turn, it aspires to contribute further comprehension about our national identity, of which humour is so often colloquially noted as an intrinsic part. And finally, this topic simply provides an alternative to more sombre views of Australia's Indigenous people.

C. CHAPTER OVERVIEW

C.1 Chapter One –Literature Review

This dissertation provides an overview of current literature that deals with the subject matter 'Indigenous Australian humour'. It discusses the existence of the mostly journal, newspaper and magazine articles that specifically address this topic – including a notable essay entitled '*Aboriginal*

¹⁹ Heiss, A., 'Writing About Indigenous Australia– Some issues to consider and protocols to follow: A Discussion Paper', *Southerly*, 62/2, 2002, p. 198.

²⁰ Lucashenko, M., quoted in Heiss, A., 2002, 'Writing About Indigenous Australia– Some issues to consider and protocols to follow: A Discussion Paper', *Southerly*, 62/2, Halstead Press, Sydney, Australia, p. 203.

²¹ Stanner, W., [1956], 1982, 'Aboriginal Humour' in *Aboriginal History*, v.6, p.39.

²² Lillis, R., 2007, Op. Cit., p. 77.

humour: A conversational corroboree’ written in 2009 by Aboriginal Australian academic Lillian Holt.²³

Certainly, comic techniques and humorous anecdotes are frequently employed by Aboriginal writers, but their texts do not necessarily critically address the nature and functions of Indigenous humour. Rather, Aboriginal writers, like many other Aboriginal artists, can be seen employing humorous techniques as part of their overall armoury of literary strategies. Humour, for Aboriginal people is, as Holt says, ‘...a tool of everyday existence and narrative, and for survival.’²⁴

This chapter argues that a significant gap exists in the scholarly literature investigating the forms and functions of Aboriginal Australian humour. As previously noted, it is unfair to suggest that this omission is entirely due to racially-based neglect of Aboriginal cultural life in humour literature but rather suggests a lack of qualifications and therefore tentativeness on the part of non-Indigenous scholars. Regardless of such difficulties, this under-documented aspect of Aboriginal people’s lives is eminently worthy of greater research and record.

This work will predominantly review urban humour practices for this very reason. The sophisticated ethnological skills required to decode and analyse humour in more traditionally based Aboriginal societies that are less affected by western influences are best left to anthropological experts. This thesis will focus on investigating instances of Indigenous humour that can be considered an aspect of contemporary Australian humour.

Initially, it will discuss the critical literature written about mainstream Australian humour more broadly, albeit, to a less rigorous extent. It is important to document these non-Indigenous works in order to ultimately lay claim to the proposition that Aboriginal Australian humour *is* part and parcel, in fact an integral part of, Australia’s distinctive national identity, often serving likeminded social functions.

C.2 Chapter Two –The theoretical foundations of humour

Chapter two will review the three main philosophical traditions of humour studies in a western theoretical paradigm– ‘Superiority’, ‘Incongruity’ and ‘Release’. Investigations into each of these three broad theoretical categories tend to vacillate between questions about the nature and the purpose of humour. Broadly speaking, questions tend to be: ‘What is humour?’ and ‘Why does humour exist?’ Likewise, the complexities of laughter have also been explored in depth, but for the purposes of this thesis laughter is seen solely as the response to a funny incident. While answers to these questions are

²³ Holt, L., 2009, Op. Cit, pp. 81–94.

²⁴ Holt, L., 2009, p. 81.

not conclusive and never can be along this journey, theorists have pointed out some important characteristics and attributes of this rather elusive phenomenon.

Humour's topics and structures have cross-cultural significance and, therefore, inquiries into these 'western' humour theories reveal foundational aspects that can be understood within settings of non-western peoples. It is once theoretical inquiries move beyond recognisable structures and topics to a review of the 'social intent' motivating humour that we can acknowledge characteristics that might be considered typically Indigenous Australian. Reviewing the particularities of humorous events, via a prism of theoretical propositions, provides entrée into distinctively Indigenous Australian cultural ideas that lead to greater appreciation of their use of humour. This thesis will focus on the social forms and functions of Indigenous Australian humour that are specifically discussed in this chapter in order to answer the following questions–

- What are the specific forms that can be found in Indigenous performance humour?
- How do they serve various social and political functions within particular historical settings?

C.3 Chapter Three – Humour in the historical records of Indigenous societies

Chapter three will investigate the presence of pre-contact humour practices in Indigenous Australian cultures that reveal humour as more than just 'western' in origin. Aboriginal cultures have long traditions of song, dance, storytelling and visual arts that provide a window into their sophisticated cultural practices; and these artistic forms of expression often include humour. In this pre-contact investigation, sources will not be limited to live performance, given the limited recorded evidence of the humour located in oral Indigenous cultures.

Furthermore, Aboriginal artistic practices are collaborative in their primary aim of producing culturally imperative stories that reinforce the moral, religious and legal principles of the community. Oral stories and social expressions in music, song, dance and painting were frequently intertwined, enhancing and reinforcing each other, and contributing to sophisticated aesthetic lifestyles.²⁵

Larissa Behrendt has said that Aboriginal people tell stories as a way of keeping their law alive, to explain their world view and value systems, their rights and responsibilities, as well as their connection to land.²⁶ Evidence of humour can be found in some early non-Indigenous ethnographic records of Indigenous cultures as well as in the recording of some traditional story telling practices.

²⁵ Casey, M., 2012, *Telling Stories, Aboriginal Australian and Torres Strait Islander Performance*, Australian Scholarly Publishing Pty Ltd, North Melbourne, pp. 26-27.

²⁶ Behrendt, L., 2006, 'Indigenous writers', address to the 2 *Deadly ATSI LIRN Conference*, Jumbunna Indigenous House of Learning, University of Technology, Sydney, Australia. Viewed 15/10/2014, <<http://atsilirn.aiatsis.gov.au/conferences/conf06/papers/Larissa%20Behrendt.pdf>>.

These examples will be analysed via the theoretical propositions laid out in the preceding chapter in order to discover the types and functions of humour located in them. Generally, these instances point to a penchant for the use of mimicry; the telling of funny yarns and stories and wordplay puns; making fun of others and themselves in a humorous form known as ‘taking the mickey’; and elements of superiority-styled humour in mockery and incongruous acts. These conclusions form the foundations for investigation into forms and functions of humour found in later colonial examples of Indigenous performance humour.

C.4 Chapter Four –Colonial relationships and neglect of Indigenous Australian humour

Chapter four begins with a review of some of the early encounters between colonists and the Aboriginal inhabitants whom they found already living in Australia, from the 1700s onwards. Given the general neglect of Aboriginal cultures in Australia’s mainstream historical records, this chapter traverses the decades through to the gestation of greater Aboriginal social and political participation in mainstream in the late 1960s, early 1970s.

This chapter will show that humour is not always a positive experience. It can, and has, been used in Australia to belittle others. This is true of humour used against, and at times by, Indigenous Australian people. Generally, humour reflects the socio-political ethos of the community in which it exists; or as Bergson says: humour is a ‘social gesture’ that is widely understood and accepted by the whole of a social group.²⁷

Humour was, and still is, complicit in the reinforcement of some persistently negative Aboriginal stereotypes in colonial Australia. Like other forms of colonial literature, media and theatre, humour was often used to create caricatures of Aboriginal people that swung from generalisations of pity for a dying race to disgust for people who would not easily conform to newly imposed western lifestyles.

However, instances of humour can still be found in some circumstances that reveal the ongoing propensity for Aboriginal people to tell funny yarns, to engage in mocking mimicry and to take the mickey out of people around them. Aboriginal humour can be understood as a means of attempting a level of self-agency, and at times defiance, against the domination of a new colonial reality. Indigenous humour can often be seen, much like the humour credited to other beleaguered or minority groups, as a coping mechanism in the face of harsh reality. Often familiar forms of Aboriginal humour can be seen in dry witty language, mocking mimicry, funny yarns and mickey-taking to curb pretensions. Emerging in the 1970s is the more prevalent use of self-deprecating humour and a form of black, socially observational humour. These humour forms emerged to assist Aboriginal people to

²⁷ Bergson, H., 2005, [1911], (Trans. Brereton, C., & F. Rothwell) *Laughter: An Essay on the meaning of the Comic*, Dover Publications, Inc. Mineola, NY, pp. 1–2, p. 10.

cope with life's harsh realities and to soften their socio-political criticisms of mainstream Australia in order to get their messages across in a more palatable form. These humour devices became more established performance practices. The next few chapters explore whether or not they can be found in Aboriginal performances from this time onwards.

C.5 Chapter Five –Indigenous artistic agency of 1970–2000 and the use of humour

Chapter five investigates the growing artistic expressions of Aboriginal artists from the 1970s through to 2000– a noteworthy period of Aboriginal performance excellence. During these decades, Aboriginal people began to form collective political and artistic enterprises that better supported their united calls for social recognition and justice as Australia's first peoples.

I will show that during that period political and artistic expressions went hand-in-hand in these endeavours. Greater availability of educational resources assisted Aboriginal people, especially artists, to access the cultural tools necessary for more visible participation in mainstream cultural environs. Aboriginal artists strove to assert pride and validity in their distinctive cultural practices, and humour was one of the vital tools by which they achieved this aim.

By the close of this period some Indigenous artists were asserting a greater level of social confidence and expressed a desire to be treated as professional artists of worth who could hold their own on a global stage.²⁸ An important aspect of this for many Indigenous people included being able to create and control their own artistic expressions. Some innovative and strong theatre companies were formed during the 1990s that still exist today. Once again, Australia's socio-political climate can be seen as a motivating factor in the production of some Indigenous plays that specifically use humour to deal with such issues.

Especially from the 1990s onwards, an important motivator was the need for many Indigenous artists to tell a wider Australian (and world) audience about their personal experiences of living in this colonial country. Indigenous Australians often used artistic means through which to refute negative comprehension of their cultures and to humanise the face of their personal and shared struggles for a wider (Australian and global) community. Funny personable yarns often told directly to audiences, mocking mimicry and movement, mickey-taking and witty wordplay, along with greater use of black and self-deprecating humour techniques, softened the harsh realities of injustice and allowed audiences to more readily consider their potential culpability in helping to create and sustain system of injustice for many Indigenous Australians.

²⁸ Enoch, W., 2000, 'Performance: Essentialism and its aftermath' in *The Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture*, Kleinert, S & M. Neale, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, Australia, p. 353.

C.6 Chapter Six – The ongoing use of humour in Indigenous performance of the new century

Chapter six celebrates a selection of contemporary Indigenous dramatic performances from the turn of this century to the present that use humour as a significant theatrical device. Indigenous theatre continues to produce performances that gain recognition on a world stage. Indigenous performers have begun to receive greater acclaim in mainstream theatre, and several participants have created positions for themselves in socially authoritative artistic managerial roles and as recognisable television and movie producers and actors.

To suggest that this ‘success’ is merely due to an adoption of mainstream artistic practices is mistaken. Rather, many Indigenous artists have remained true to their cultural heritage while practising mainstream pursuits. ‘Success’ should be considered a marker of Indigenous artists’ ability to produce work that is able to convince mainstream audiences of the validity and uniqueness of their own perspectives.

It would also be wrong to suggest that Indigenous people have finally ‘made it’ in terms of popular recognition and acceptance in mainstream socio-political environments. Some significant social and economic inequalities remain persistent factors in the lives of the vast majority of Aboriginal Australians that continue to affect their ability to function as citizens of equal standing to other non-Indigenous Australians. The harsh realities of racial prejudice and the existence and persistence of negative stereotypes remain significantly detrimental factors for many Aboriginal people.

The past few decades have continued to produce some widely contested and controversial matters pertaining to Aboriginality in Australia.²⁹ Public discussions about the social positioning and authority of Indigenous people remain consistently hot topics in social debates. This chapter documents some of the important contributions that Indigenous performance artists make to current debates through specific humour means. These performances are reviewed in order to see whether or not the forms of humour noted in previous chapters can also be found in them. In addition, this chapter will show how humour is often currently expressed in sketch comedy characterisations and by use of stand-up comedy techniques. These two humour forms blur the lines of distinction between traditional theatrical performances and stand-up comedy, the subject of the next chapter.

²⁹ These controversies include ‘stolen generations’ issues and ongoing repercussions from the 1997 ‘Bringing them Home: Report of the National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families’, viewed 04/09/2014: <https://www.humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/content/pdf/social_justice/bringing_them_home_report.pdf>. The Federal Government’s ‘NT Emergency Response Intervention’ of June 2007, viewed 04/09/2014: <<http://www.humanrights.gov.au/publications/social-justice-report-2007-chapter-3-northern-territory-emergency-response-intervention>>. The 13/02/2008 Federal Government’s ‘Apology to Australia’s Indigenous peoples’, viewed 04/09/2014: <<http://www.australia.gov.au/about-australia/our-country/our-people/apology-to-australias-indigenous-peoples>>. And current discussions about the potential alterations to the Australian Constitution to include recognition of Indigenous occupation at the time of colonisation. see: Bolt, A., 29/01/2014, ‘I am, you are, we are Australians’ *Herald Sun*, News Corporation, Melbourne, viewed 04/09/2014: <<http://www.heraldsun.com.au/news/opinion/i-am-you-are-we-are-australian/story-fni0ffxg-1226813342744>>.

Much of this research is conducted via direct observations and by interviews with Indigenous Artists themselves. This first-hand knowledge provides this thesis with an innovative perspective on the current state of Aboriginal theatrical humour performances. It also allows for a more confident proposition that comedy performance remains of crucial importance to Indigenous Artists in its ability to provide public voice to these debates and to keep these matters alive in Australia's collective consciousness. In this way Indigenous humour continues to be used as an important tool that assists in carving out our national identity that Horne recognises as containing a distinctive mix of beliefs, values, lifestyles and socio-political systems in an ever changing world.³⁰

C.7 Chapter Seven– Stand-up comedy: The fresh face of Indigenous Australian humour

This chapter changes direction, if only slightly, to look at the existence of Indigenous stand-up comedy performance in Australia that, as suggested, has influenced more traditional performance genres too. This chapter is particularly significant given the scarcity of critical literature in Australian that specifically analyses the performances of Aboriginal stand-up comedians. This material is also frequently derived from face-to-face interviews with Aboriginal stand-up comedians, and attendance at live performances, giving its findings greater relevance and potency.

The history of stand-up has parallel roots in British and North American performance, and this history is briefly discussed in order to contextualise its significant role in many contemporary societies, including Australia. Given comedy's, and particularly stand-up's, current popular status in western countries, it is easy to see how it has become an important pastime for many Australian people too.

Moreover, the proliferation of comedians, some of whom currently hold positions of social authority in our media, is also a recognisable phenomenon.³¹ This is, I think, because comedians are often seen as public figures who are perceived as somehow telling the 'truth'; or rather, those who make social commentary without the vested interests of political or economic allegiances. Most certainly, stand-up comedy – often a sole performer on a stage divested of all props except a microphone – provides an example of the most stripped back form of public performance. Stand-up is often confronting. It can be controversial, irreverent, and satirical. But most of all, stand-up comedians are people to whom we turn when we wish to reflect and laugh at the complexities and contradictions of the world in which we live. And importantly, stand-up comedy provides (Indigenous) comedians with an art-form that

³⁰ Horne, D., 1994, Op. Cit, p. 15.

³¹ For example, comedian and tv presenter Shaun Micallef with shows like *Mad as Hell*, *The Micallef Project*, *Micallef Tonight*; comedian and tv presenter Adam Hills with *Spicks and Specks*, *Adam Hills Tonight*; comedian and tv presenter Josh Thomas with *Talking 'Bout Your Generation*, *Q&A*, and *Dirty Laundry Live*; or Golden Logie Award winning tv presenter and comedian Rove McManus with his *Rove McManus Live & The Project* among other shows.

increasingly reaches youthful audiences, who might not attend performances of a more traditional theatrical nature.³²

However, Australia's history of non-Indigenous stand-up comedians who persistently rely on negative Indigenous stereotyping and belittling remains an ongoing threat to Indigenous cultural positioning and validity. Ocker comedians such as Kevin Bloody Wilson, Rodney Rude and, to a lesser degree, Louis Beers (*aka* King Billy Coke-bottle), have long held popular positions in Australia's comedy industry located in hotels and clubs.³³ Their routines are premised on a defiance of the need for racial tolerance and a backlash to societal calls for so-called 'political correctness' that might insult or discriminate against various social groups. They strike a chord and continue in their popularity with a significant element of Australian (and world) audiences. The morality of their deleterious portrayal of Indigenous people is discussed in order to shed light on the complexities of what Australians find funny. This, in turn, points to what this type of humour says about our national identity and deep-seated lack of tolerance for alternative perspectives within the mainstream social discourse.

This is particularly important given statistics produced by *Beyond Blue* (Australia's leading national mental health organisation) in July 2014 that show the continued presence of racism in Australia against Indigenous people and its harmful links to high levels of depression and suicide among Indigenous youth.³⁴ Aboriginal comedian Nakita Lui also recognises the 'sense of worthlessness' and extensive mental health issues associated with being an Aboriginal person in Australia today.³⁵ She believes that humour is a key way for Aboriginal people to get non-Aboriginal Australians to understand and care about Aboriginal perspectives (that she calls their 'stories').³⁶

The creation of comedy festivals, such as *Melbourne's International Comedy Festival*, the *Sydney Annual Comedy Festival*, the *Raw Comedy Awards*, and many other state comedy events, have also helped to nurture and sustain this popular genre. Indigenous humour is steadily becoming a recognisable element of these events. In 2010, Indigenous comedian Sean Choolburra noted Indigenous stand-up comedians as the 'fresh kids on the block' of the comedy stage; yet he also pointed out that they have actually been telling their funny yarns for tens of thousands of years.³⁷

³² International Comedy Festival Rotterdam, 2015, 'Info: Why Stand-up Comedy?' *ICFR2015*, viewed 20/04/2016, <<http://icfr.eu/info>>.

³³ In particular these clubs include RSL Clubs. RSL Clubs are located around Australia and are an initiative of the Returned and Services League of Australia. The RSL was established in 1916 after WWI in order to support serving and ex-service defence force members. RSL Clubs mostly include lounges, bars and bistros and offer members entertainment, including stand-up comedy. See: RSL National, nd., 'RSL History', viewed 30/03/2016, <<http://rsl.org.au/About-Us/History>>.

³⁴ Wilson, L., 29/07/2014, 'Beyond Blue to launch a new campaign highlighting the link between racism and depression', *News.com.au*, viewed 04/09/2014, <<http://www.news.com.au/national/beyondblue-to-launch-a-new-campaign-highlighting-the-link-between-racism-and-depression/story-fncynjr2-1227004788393>>.

³⁵ Lui, N. in Schafter, M., 26/04/2016, 'Interview on 7.30 Report', *ABC Television*, Sydney, Australia.

³⁶ Lui, N. In Schafter, M., 26/04/2016.

³⁷ Miller, M., 09/04/2012, 'The Poster Boy of Fresh Comedy', *Herald Sun*, Melbourne, viewed 21/08/2014, <<http://www.heraldsun.com.au/news/special-features/the-poster-boy-of-fresh-comedy-sean-choolburra/story-fncv4qq2-1226321815699?nk=35b38f4e1351f1d0a471f32be0847af3>>.

In 2007 the *Melbourne International Comedy Festival*, in conjunction with Yorta Yorta man, Jason Tamiru, commenced a specific Indigenous Australian section known as the *Deadly Funny* Indigenous comedy competition.³⁸ The *Deadly Funnies* provide a national showcase and finals for those Aboriginal comedians who have been selected as winners from a series of state comedy workshops and heats.³⁹ They are held each year as part of *Melbourne's International Comedy Festival* and are the final showcase of state talent and a platform for the award of 'Deadly Funny National Champion' of the year.⁴⁰ Indigenous stand-up comedians Sean Choolburra, Mia Stanford, Kevin Kropinyeri and Andrew Saunders are all participants in this event. These people, and other Indigenous comedians, are forging their presence in a notoriously difficult, but popular, genre. The comedy styles of some Indigenous stand-ups are investigated in order to discover whether the humour forms and functions found in this style of Aboriginal performance parallel the forms and functions of humour found in other live Aboriginal performances.

Overall, this chapter looks at the purpose of Indigenous stand-up comedians in current Australian society. It questions how effective this medium is in terms of advancing Indigenous participation in mainstream Australian performance culture and assisting to forge Australia's humour identity.

C.8 Conclusion

The concluding chapter summarises this investigation into those forms and functions of humour noted as present in Indigenous performance. It makes some conclusions about those attributes that could be considered typical of Indigenous Australian humour, and suggests how Aboriginal humour influences Australia's socio-political discourse and contributes to its national identity. In addition, it discusses the current state of humour in Australia and contends that Indigenous voices and Indigenous perspectives are an important element of our nation and of our collective Australian sense of humour.

D. THESIS PROPOSITION

Humour is an important element of Australians' sense of themselves that is an ever-evolving process of understanding who we are, and who we want to be, as a nation. Humour scholars like America's Elliott Oring and the United Kingdom's Christie Davies both recognise Australian humour's distinctive nature and forms that result from our history.⁴¹ Indigenous performance comedies, entering

³⁸ Melbourne International Comedy Festival, 2014, 'Deadly Funny', viewed 4/09/2014, <<http://www.comedyfestival.com.au/2014/season/deadly-funny/>>; <<http://www.comedyfestival.com.au/outside-the-festival/deadly-funny/deadly-funny-2009/>>.

³⁹ Melbourne International Comedy Festival, 25/03/2015–19/04/2015, 'Events–Deadly Funny', viewed 4/09/2014, <<http://www.comedyfestival.com.au/2014/season/deadly-funny/>>.

⁴⁰ Melbourne International Comedy Festival held in Melbourne, Australia from March–April each year.

⁴¹ See Oring, E., 2003, 'Chapter 8, Colonizing Humor', that, in part, focuses on Australian humour, *Engaging Humor*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, USA, pp. 97–115; Davies, C., 2002, 'Chapter 4, Jokes about Jewish

mainstream, play significant roles in this shared history as social commentators, arbiters and measures of Australia's national identity. It continues to be a positive role model for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous people alike.

This dissertation will provide further knowledge to existing academic literature regarding Australian humour with new contributions regarding Indigenous Australian performance humour. Principally it contends that the Aboriginal tendency to various forms and functions of humour should be understood as 'Australian attributes', and not solely Aboriginal traits. This is not to say that Aboriginal people do not use their own forms of humour to address socio-political issues from their unique perspectives; but rather that the broad category known as Australian humour should better acknowledge this distinctive element and the influence Aboriginal humour has had on its mainstream humour characteristics. This thesis intends showing that Aboriginal humorists' frequent and distinctive use of mimicry, and the use of their native languages and colloquial phrases, give Australia's humour identity an Indigenous flavour and contributes to its distinctiveness; whereas leveling mickey-taking, dry witty wordplay and the telling of funny tall tales (yarns) can be noted (in part) as elements of Aboriginal humour that have, and continue to, influenced mainstream Australian humour. In fact, Australia's humour identity has been influenced by Aboriginal humour to an extent that allows Inga Clendenin to argue that:

we are now more like each other than we are like other people. We even share something of the same style of humour, which is a subtle but far-reaching affinity. Here, in this place, I think we are all Australians now.⁴²

Above all else, it is the way that some Australians use humour existentially as part of an irreverent and egalitarian loving tradition to moderate the (harsh) realities of everyday life that will be shown to be foundational to this affinity.⁴³ Aboriginal comedians are a voice for their own people within the mainstream's humour discourse and they contribute greater diversity to the wider Australian humour context. Our shared humour is cause for equal acknowledgement and recognition for its important contribution to our nation's socio-political identity and sense of self-worth.

Women and Australian Men', *The Mirth of Nations*, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, USA & London, UK, pp. 77–107.

⁴² Clendinnen, I., 2003, *Dancing with Strangers*, Text Publishing, Melbourne, Australia, p. 288.

⁴³ Milner Davis, J. 2009, 'Aussie humour and laughter' in De Groen, F. & Kirkpatrick, P. (eds.), 2009, *Serious Frolic, Essays on Australian Humour*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, QLD, Australia, pp. 33–35.

CHAPTER ONE

A LITERATURE REVIEW OF INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIAN HUMOUR & AUSTRALIAN HUMOUR MORE BROADLY.

1. INTRODUCTION

An evaluation and critical review of the literature available regarding Australian humour provides a telling appraisal of Australian social characteristics with emphasis on qualities that are often noted as integral to our national identity.⁴⁴ The standpoint, perspectives and omissions in this literature say a great deal about our society's prejudices and priorities. Indeed, the official Federal Government website that discusses Australian humour, principally for international visitors, notes that it owes its origins to our convict past.⁴⁵ Foundational Australian humour qualities are credited here solely as colonial traditions that exclude the contributions of First Nation people and those of other non-English immigrants. However, this article does provide a concise summary of those attributes noted in much of the literature regarding Australian humour. According to the website, Australian humour is generally dry and full of exaggerations.⁴⁶ It is putatively self-mocking, anti-authoritarian and derisive of 'wowers'— those of an overtly moralising or politically correct manner. Moreover, at times, it can be very 'black' and lacking in appropriate social taste.⁴⁷ This suggests that Australian humour references a 'brutal' past that enables Australians to find the lighter side of life in the face of difficult circumstances.⁴⁸ These comments suggest that Australian humour owes much of its classic style to difficult times such as the world wars (1914–1918, 1939–1945) and the economic Depression of the 1930s. Considerable literature supports this view too. The use of unique strine and slang vernacular that creates the image of an irreverent Aussie larrikin or uncouth ocker stereotype, is only briefly mentioned in this article.⁴⁹ Nevertheless, these techniques and stereotypes are also reoccurring themes of much Australian humour literature.

2. CHAPTER OVERVIEW

In order to support the proposition that very little critical literature exists concerning Indigenous Australian humour, a brief overview of the broader characteristics of 'Australian humour' literature will be made as a means of comparison. This investigation is not, however, an exhaustive review of Australian humour literature, but rather an entrée into the nature of the mode. This selective

⁴⁴ For example, the Australian Government humour website states: 'This unique sense of humour is recognised (although maybe not always understood) the world over as being distinctly Australian.' Australian Government, 17/12/2007, 'Australian humour', viewed 24/11/2014, <<http://www.australia.gov.au/about-australia/australian-story/austn-humour>>.

⁴⁵ Australian Government, 17/12/2007.

⁴⁶ Australian Government, 17/12/2007.

⁴⁷ Australian Government, 17/12/2007.

⁴⁸ Australian Government, 17/12/2007.

⁴⁹ Australian Government, 17/12/2007. 'Strine' is a word that refers to Australian modes of speech and 'ocker' is a colloquial Australian person.

commentary emphasises the humour qualities that are popularly considered ‘typically’ Australian in order to highlight the general omission of acknowledgement of those characteristics provided by first Australian inhabitants: the Indigenous peoples. Thus it provides a comparative platform to assess those elements that might be considered Indigenous Australian attributes and/or influences.

Following this synopsis, a more rigorous examination of the literature that discusses ‘Indigenous Australian humour’ will be made. Investigation parameters and research techniques used to locate this material are discussed at the beginning of this section. In attempting to ascertain the entirety of academic literature discussing Aboriginal humour, this review constitutes an informal annotated bibliography. In addition to its citations, it describes and evaluates this literature, noting the relevance of material that discusses the nature and functions of Indigenous humour.

Indigenous Australian humour literature can be divided into three groups – classical or historical, more contemporary or urban, or racist non-Indigenous stereotyping. The first category provides evidence of Aboriginal humour in a more traditional, non-western, sense. This includes work of both early colonial anthropological recordings, as well as contemporary works, that continue non-Indigenous investigations of Aboriginal societies that are less affected by western influences. Anthropology, for example, has played a significant documentary role in recording much of the information that we have about Indigenous Australian communities, their social structures, behaviours, customs, laws and values – albeit, coloured by a western filter. Although humour is not an intrinsic feature of these investigations, some of these recordings have, at times, also made mention of the uses of humour, and/or provided recognition of the propensity for community laughter. In addition, some texts reference the complex and highly regulated use of humour as part of the classificatory kinship social systems of pre-contact communities.⁵⁰

The second category of Indigenous humour literature relates to material of a more ‘urban’, less traditional nature. That is, literature that records the presence, nature and function of humour used by Indigenous people within mainstream Australian social environs. While much of this humour is a direct product of and/or response to the communities in which it is generated, references to more classical forms of Indigenous humour are sometimes noted. Some present-day Indigenous humour points to traditional practices; however, these attributes have become more generic, pan-Aboriginal solidarity markers rather than the practices of small, intimate communities. This review will also highlight where present-day Indigenous humour applications point to the traces of historical humour traditions in order to deduce those forms that could be considered typical Aboriginal humour traits.

⁵⁰ For example, Thomson, D., 1935, ‘The Joking Relationship and Organized Obscenity in North Queensland’, *American Anthropologist*, 37: 3(1), pp. 460–490.

The final category considers non-Indigenous humour that is either derisive of, or has Indigenous people as the joke target or butt. This category is included to show that a significant element of derisive and dismissive humour has existed, and continues to exist, in Australian communities, mocking Aboriginal people and devaluing their cultural contributions. Some of this material is located in early cartoon representations and is reflective of historical attitudes towards Aboriginal people, nonetheless, modern manifestations of such disparaging humour remain elements of Australia's social consciousness.

3. AUSTRALIAN HUMOUR LITERATURE REVIEW

3.1. *A Review of Colonial Australian humour literature*

De Groen and Kirkpatrick tell us that Australian humour authors have tended to write for popular audiences.⁵¹ Bill Wannan is one such author who has written extensively on Australian humour (1950s–mid-1980s). His works celebrate Australia's colonial traditions, recounting popular Euro-Australian yarns and bush ballads.⁵² These anthologies record the humour works of some well recognised, often humorous, Australian literary nationalists of the 1800s such as Henry Lawson, Banjo Paterson and CJ Dennis. His books often record the oral humour of 'ordinary' working-class Australians – although none of them provide much in the way of critical analysis.⁵³ However, in his introduction to *Fair Go, Spinner: A Treasury of Popular Australian Humour*, Wannan does state that Australia's humour characteristics are primarily derived from Irish (convict) immigrants, and influences from the United States of America.⁵⁴ Australia's convict humour is rough, deprecating, dry and sardonic.⁵⁵ Americans, who came to Australia in the 1800s in search of gold, brought with them a penchant for self-exaggeration and tall stories.⁵⁶ Australia's less boisterous manifestation of this humour is seen in its love for farfetched tales and jokes made at the expense of awkward 'new chum' settlers.⁵⁷ Hardships and adversities of war inspired contemporary humorists, and forged a collective, democratic quality to Australian humour.⁵⁸ Wannan's compilations generally provide a folklore-styled mainstream focus on the laconic camaraderie of Australian humour. His focus is squarely European

⁵¹ De Groen, F., & P. Kirkpatrick, (eds.), 2009, 'Introduction: A saucer of vinegar' in *Serious Frolic, Essays on Australian Humour*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, Queensland, p. xv.

⁵² There are parallels between the campfire humour yarns of these non-Indigenous literary nationalists and Indigenous yarning traditions. These connections point to the commonality of many aspects of humour and in particular the shared Australian humour traditions that are frequently acknowledged in this thesis.

⁵³ De Groen, F., & P. Kirkpatrick, (eds.) 2009, p. xv.

⁵⁴ Wannan, B., 1964, *Fair Go, Spinner: A Treasury of Popular Australian Humour*, Lansdowne Press, Melbourne, pp. ix– x.

⁵⁵ Wannan, B., 1964, p. ix.

⁵⁶ Wannan, B., 1964, p. x.

⁵⁷ Wannan, B., 1964, p. x.

⁵⁸ Wannan, B., 1964, p. xii. Wannan, B., (ed.), 1960, *Fair Go, Spinner. A Treasury of Australian humour*, Lansdowne Press, Melbourne, p. 27.

and male in nature, with little credit given to the contributions of other minority groups, including Aboriginal Australians.

Keith Willey's *You Might as Well Laugh, Mate: Australian Humour in Hard Times*, provides another sentimental critique that mostly references the influences of the Australian bush on the Depression-era humour that flourished in Australia from the 1930s.⁵⁹ The quotation used in the title of Willey's book sums up the qualities of sardonic pessimism and resilience in the face of hardships of the Australian humour character.⁶⁰ This title also parallels an iconic cartoon produced by the Australian cartoonist, Stan Cross, in 1933.⁶¹ Cross's black humour cartoon shows two Anglo-Australian men hanging perilously from a building works girder high above the ground. One builder clutches the legs, and slipping trousers, of the other. Death seems imminent, but nevertheless both men continue to laugh at their predicament. The cartoon is captioned with the words: *'For gor'sake stop laughing—this is serious!'*⁶²



Cross, S., 1933, print 37.4 x 27.2cm

⁵⁹ Willey, K., 1984, *You Might as Well Laugh, Mate. Australian Humour in Hard Times*, The Macmillan Company of Australia Pty Ltd, Melbourne, p. vii, p. xi.

⁶⁰ Willey, K., 1984, p. vii.

⁶¹ Willey, K., 1984, pp. 71–72.

⁶² Willey, K., 1984, p. 72. Cross, S, 1939, 'For gorsake, stop laughing: this is serious!' print, black and white, 37.4 x 27.2 cm. Online at: National Library of Australia, 'Trove Database', viewed 06/05/2016, <http://trove.nla.gov.au/work/35479894?q&sort=holdings+desc&_=1463283290060&versionId=44132253>.

This image typifies the putative ability of Australians to accept disaster, and to laugh at themselves in the face of hardships, a trait that was especially prevalent during the Great Depression of the 1930s.⁶³ The stoicism that it references has become a recognisable element of Australia's accepted national identity. At this time (1980s) Willey writes that Australian humour is self-deprecating; it is often used to deflate pretentiousness, to impose an egalitarian levelling that can be 'the small man's revenge against the mighty' and helps transform tragedy.⁶⁴ Willey suggests that Australian humour is the result of several influences. Like Wannan, he believes that its mockery and anti-authoritarianism are born of a convict heritage.⁶⁵ Australian humour loves tall tales, an adaption of American frontier yarns, minus their competitive big-noting. It is born of the harsh physical environment, and reactions to the difficulties faced by non-Indigenous people in their attempts to control a landscape so vastly different from Europe.⁶⁶

Willey also acknowledges the similarities between black and white Australian attitudes, where humour is seen as an essential life quality.⁶⁷ He believes that during early colonial period (1788–1901), Aboriginal people made a more lasting impression on the social mores of white Australians than is widely acknowledged.⁶⁸ He notes that Aboriginal people have an understated, yet 'exquisite sense of irony and absence of self-pity' which has enabled them to maintain dignity in the face of European dispossession and aggression.⁶⁹ To Aboriginal people, humour is a weapon of survival and resistance.⁷⁰ They are talented mimics copying any perceivable idiosyncrasies, speech impediments or character peculiarities.⁷¹ In particular, like bushman-diggers, Aboriginals share a lack of sentimentality in their humour.⁷² This, Willey suggests, is a quintessential Australian quality that hides deep emotion behind a mask of sardonic laughter.⁷³ Willey, however, is most concerned with the white bushman character. Beyond a few generic references to traditional Indigenous humour; the bulk of his humour work is dedicated to a celebration of non-Indigenous Aussie battler legends, manifest as male larrikins of an Australian 'mateship' social system.

Dorothy Jones and Barry Andrews contend that Australian humour is indefinable.⁷⁴ Australian humour, they suggest, is not located in character traits or literature content but rather, it is a 'special

⁶³ Willey, K., 1984, p. vii.

⁶⁴ Willey, K., 1984, p. viii.

⁶⁵ Willey, K., 1984, p. x.

⁶⁶ Willey, K., 1984, p. x.

⁶⁷ Willey, K., 1984, p. 3.

⁶⁸ Willey, K., 1984, p. 3.

⁶⁹ Willey, K., 1984, p. 6.

⁷⁰ Willey, K., 1984, p. 10.

⁷¹ Willey, K., 1984, p. 8.

⁷² Willey, K., 1984, p. 6.

⁷³ Willey, K., 1984, p. 9.

⁷⁴ Jones, D., & B. Andrews, 1988, 'Australian humour' in Hergenhan, L., (ed.), 1988, *The Penguin New literary History of Australia*, Penguin Books Australia, Ringwood, Victoria, p. 60.

configuration of attitudes.⁷⁵ Moreover, much Australian humour is rooted in doubts about the legitimacy of its colonial past.⁷⁶ Irony predominates and people are wryly resigned to their own powerlessness in light of their survival in a harsh environment.⁷⁷ It is a blend of initial protest, resignation and pride in survival, which sets the tone of much Australian humour.⁷⁸

Moreover, a profane vernacular has also become a telltale sign of much Australian humour.⁷⁹ Bawdry and vulgarities were crucial to the success of vaudevillian comic Roy (Mo) Rene (1891–1954) and are fundamental to current performances of comedians like Kevin Bloody Wilson.⁸⁰ Much humour, like Australian culture more broadly, is heavily male-orientated, with in-jokes and colloquialisms setting woman as domestic outsiders, or threats to male camaraderie and achievement.⁸¹ Alongside these reductive attributes is exuberance in tall stories and colourful idioms.⁸² Ultimately, attitudes of fatalism and sardonic irony prevail.⁸³

While this article neglects the role played by minority Australians, including Aboriginals, Jones's account of the more sinister nature of Australia's national identity, expressed through humour that excludes women, Asians and Indigenous Australians, is covered more specifically in her article, 'Setting Limits: Humour and Australian National Identity'.⁸⁴

Jones says that Australian humour as ridicule is used to limit and demarcate cultural boundaries of national identity reserved primarily for white Australian males.⁸⁵ Humour has historically been used to impose authority against perceived threats to Euro-Australian masculine dominance that responds to various periods of socio-political history. Much early colonial humour asserted egalitarian bushman defiance, mocking 'new chum' arrivals, mostly from Britain, especially those of the upper classes who might assume superiority toward colonials.⁸⁶ Women have been portrayed as adversaries, relegated to the domestic sphere.⁸⁷

⁷⁵ Jones, D., & B. Andrews, 1988, p. 60.

⁷⁶ Jones, D., & B. Andrews, 1988, p. 61.

⁷⁷ Jones, D., & B. Andrews, 1988, p. 60, p. 65.

⁷⁸ Jones, D., & B. Andrews, 1988, p. 65.

⁷⁹ Jones, D., & B. Andrews, 1988, p. 68.

⁸⁰ Jones, D., & B. Andrews, 1988, p. 68.

⁸¹ Jones, D., & B. Andrews, 1988, pp. 68–69.

⁸² Jones, D., & B. Andrews, 1988, p. 74.

⁸³ Jones, D., & B. Andrews, 1988, p. 74.

⁸⁴ Jones, D., 1997, 'Setting Limits: Humour and Australian National Identity' in *Special Issue of the Australian journal of Comedy*, pp. 33–42.

⁸⁵ Jones, D., 1997, p. 35.

⁸⁶ Jones, D., 1997, pp. 34–35.

⁸⁷ Jones, D., 1997, p.34.

Aboriginal people were initially perceived as a threat to colonial authority.⁸⁸ A proliferation of hostile media cartoons demonising them as grotesque and sub-human ensued. Chinese migrants who arrived in large numbers during the 1850s gold rush era were treated similarly. Humorous cartoons constructed them as a dangerous and alien invasion often threatening white female sexuality. However by the late 1800s, Aboriginal people appeared less dangerous and cartoons began to draw attention to their suffering.⁸⁹ But even these sympathetic images actually endorsed a dominant negative view that Aboriginal people were a dying race.⁹⁰

Jones notes that current-day attempts to celebrate multiculturalism and to include those historically excluded from the Australian legend have not been persuasive.⁹¹ Popular candidates in the 1996 Federal political elections show that cultural and racial differences remain a problem. Queensland National Party member Bob Katter, who won his seat convincingly in 1996, made contentious racial comments, referring to critics at one stage as ‘little slanty-eyed ideologues’.⁹² Pauline Hanson was elected in 1996 as an independent on a platform of representing what she called the ‘beleaguered’ white community: that is, all Australians except ‘privileged’ Aboriginals and Torres Strait Islanders.⁹³ Exclusionary attitudes are deeply encoded within the Australian psyche, and in much of its larrikin humour that purports to mock formality and express egalitarianism.⁹⁴ Humour continues to be used to police and to contest cultural boundaries.⁹⁵ Those it demarcates as social ‘outsiders’ might attempt to assert their rights via platforms of multicultural humour; however, when they object to being the butts of mainstream jokes, they are usually chided for lacking a sense of humour.⁹⁶

Conversely, John McCallum argues that since the mid-1950s Australian comedy has been a part of a de-colonisation process that has given us a wonderful multicultural society, ‘one of the most culturally heterogeneous in the world.’⁹⁷ However, this perceived multiculturalism is not a dominant theme of his article. McCallum suggests that much Australian performance comedy has been concerned with an

⁸⁸ Jones, D., 1997, p. 35.

⁸⁹ Jones, D., 1997, p. 35.

⁹⁰ Jones, D., 1997, p. 36.

⁹¹ Jones, D., 1997, p. 37.

⁹² Jones, D., 1997, p. 37.

⁹³ See Hanson’s maiden speech to the Australian House of Representatives, 10 September 1996, in which she expresses her distain for current government policies of favouring Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Speech text viewed 26/11/2014 at <<http://australianpolitics.com/1996/09/10/pauline-hanson-maiden-speech.html>>. In 2016 Hanson was again elected to Federal Parliament as a Queensland Senate representative. See: Elks, S., 03/07/2016, ‘Federal Election 2016: Pauline Hanson’s Political Resurrection’, *The Australian*, viewed 18/08/2016 online at: <<http://www.theaustralian.com.au/federal-election-2016/federal-election-2016-pauline-hansons-political-resurrection/news-story/325951d6a8008ed2f3cb3ea00a373c35>>.

⁹⁴ Jones, D., 1997, Op. Cit., p. 38.

⁹⁵ Jones, D., 1997, p. 41.

⁹⁶ Jones, D., 1997, p. 41.

⁹⁷ McCallum, J., 1998, ‘Cringe and Strut. Comedy and national identity in post-war Australia’, in Wagg, S., 1998, *Because I Tell a Joke or Two*, Routledge, London and New York, pp. 202–220, at p. 202.

ambivalent relation to authority and is a form of rebellious debunking.⁹⁸ Referencing performance comedy of the period covering the 1970s–1990s, McCallum suggests that Australian comedy has successfully exploited its traditional colonial feelings of national inadequacy, a sense of inferiority manifest in a ‘cultural cringe’ style of comedy.⁹⁹ Barry Humphries’ character Dame Edna Everage, Garry McDonald’s Norman Gunston, and Paul Hogan’s Crocodile Dundee are each comic personas fashioned around a combination of colonial naivety and ironic rebellion, appealing to Australian audiences in the context of their cringe-worthy confrontations with the outside world.¹⁰⁰ Unlike Jones who questions the motives of mainstream ‘aussie’ humour, McCallum relies on a recognisable larrikin trope that does little to advance any genuine critique of Australia’s humour identity so often premised on the status quo ante of white male domination.

From the late 1980s Australian comedy performance has also seen the rise of multicultural humour in the success of the *Wogs Out of Work* plays and the television spin off, *Acropolis Now!*¹⁰¹ Appropriating the use of characteristic mainstream Australian humour’s irony, self-deprecation and mickey-taking has enabled ethnic minority comedians to reach broader culturally mixed audiences and to make ethnic cultures more accessible to mainstream.¹⁰² While McCallum suggests that *Wog-arama* of the 1990s included more up-to-date multiculturalism, with its Vietnamese (Hung Le) and Aboriginal (Denise Kickett) characters trading predictable insults,¹⁰³ reference to Indigenous Australian humour is tokenistic. McCallum’s celebration of comedy as a heterogeneous and integral part of Australia’s post-war national identity fails to recognise the genuine influences of Indigenous comedy’s presence on the Australian comedy scene. Pointedly, at that time, Indigenous comedy actor Ernie Dingo had made noteworthy appearances in the globally successful movie *Crocodile Dundee II* (1988), and on the popular, high rating, television comedy show *Fast Forward* (1989–1992).

Moreover, while Jones acknowledges that employing of the word ‘wog’ is a form of reclaiming and neutralising mainstream Australian derogatory stereotypes, use of this word by latter generation European (Mediterranean) immigrants’ children has lost much of its pejorative sting.¹⁰⁴ By the 1980–90s, the bulk of migrants to Australia no longer came from Europe.¹⁰⁵ However, she suggests that if ‘gook’ or ‘slope’ (an Asian person), (or post-9/11 ‘raghead’– an Arab or Muslim person), is substituted for ‘wog’, something of the covert aggression of Australian humour might be better felt.¹⁰⁶

⁹⁸ McCallum, J., 1998, p. 202.

⁹⁹ McCallum, J., 1998, p. 218.

¹⁰⁰ McCallum, J., 1998, p. 210.

¹⁰¹ McCallum, J., 1998, p. 214, p. 216.

¹⁰² McCallum, J., 1998, p. 216.

¹⁰³ McCallum, J., 1998, p. 216.

¹⁰⁴ Jones, D., 1997, Op. Cit., p. 38.

¹⁰⁵ Jones, D., 1997, p. 38.

¹⁰⁶ Jones, D., 1997, p. 38.

The eight volumes that account for the *Australian Journal of Comedy* have been suggested as ‘significant exceptions’ to the rule that Australian humour is generally lacking in scholarly analysis.¹⁰⁷ Gerard Matte’s opening editorial to the inaugural volume of the journal notes the importance of comedy, not just to Australia, but as a contemporary global business that can sell anything from sports to films and music.¹⁰⁸ Matte believes that comedy is eminently worthy of serious academic consideration because of its connections with popular culture and contemporary consciousness.¹⁰⁹

However, Matte’s optimistic proposal that the journal could take up the mantle of critical evaluation rang as more of a challenge than a reality. In truth, the journal, which ran for seven years, presented Australian academia with a ‘hit and miss’ quality of articles. Its writings often read as expositions of western popular cultures, matters peripheral to Australian comedy. The special issue, volume 3 of 1997, that included Dorothy Jones’ article mentioned earlier, provided the only positive reference to the presence of Indigenous Australian humour in our national identity. However, the journal was relatively short-lived and folded in 2002.¹¹⁰

Some international humour scholars have also analysed the humour and jokes told by Australians, including Christie Davies (2002) and Elliott Oring (2008).¹¹¹ It is Davies’ comparative study of the jokes told about Jewish women and Australian men, based on rigorous empirical research, which is especially telling.¹¹² These sets of jokes provide opportunity to compare, contrast and to infer connections between two divergent groups of people.¹¹³ Davies says that Jewish women are ‘the key transmitters of Jewish identity’; conversely, one deduces that this is the case for Australian men.¹¹⁴

Davies suggests that the central contrast between Jewish and Australian jokes and humour is ‘control’.¹¹⁵ Jewish women are typified as over-controlling, whereas Australian men are displayed as uncontrolled in their ‘language, drinking and sexuality.’¹¹⁶ Davies says that the reason for this difference is related to social traditions, class and sexual roles.¹¹⁷ Nevertheless, for the purposes of

¹⁰⁷ De Groen, F., & P. Kirkpatrick, Op. Cit., p. xv, p. 239.

¹⁰⁸ Matte, G., 1995, ‘Editorial: How can we talk about comedy?’ in *Australian Journal of Comedy*, v.1/95, Visual and Performing Arts Department, Australian Catholic University, Victoria, p.6, pp. 7–8.

¹⁰⁹ Matte, G., 1995, pp. 9–10.

¹¹⁰ For reference to the extent of *Australian Journal of Comedy* editions see National Library of Australia Catalogue viewed 20/11/2014 online at <<http://catalogue.nla.gov.au/Record/1378479>>.

¹¹¹ Davies, C., 2002, *The Mirth of Nations*, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, USA and London, UK. Oring, E., 2008, *Engaging Humor*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, USA.

¹¹² Davies, C., 2002, pp. 77–107.

¹¹³ Davies, C., 2002, p. 3.

¹¹⁴ Davies, C., 2002, p. 78.

¹¹⁵ Davies, C., 2002, p. 103.

¹¹⁶ Davies, C., 2002, p. 103.

¹¹⁷ Davies, C., 2002, p. 104.

this review, this chapter provides confirmation of the dominant thesis that much Australian humour is generated by mainstream Australian men.¹¹⁸

In Australian jokes, women appear in peripheral, supporting roles.¹¹⁹ Male drinking and drunkenness is a central theme that stems from the strong development of a bachelor culture.¹²⁰ This, Davies says, is due to Australia's restricted migration that saw men greatly outnumber women during the mid-1800s.¹²¹ Australia's bachelor society developed a cult of 'mateship' where the central values were a tough male equality and solidarity, formed with regards to the harsh outback.¹²²

The central theme of male drinking is extended to include crudity, with much black humour and jokes about vomiting that celebrate disorder, confusion and social reversals.¹²³ Australian-English obscenities are strung together with a keen verbal skill of typically Australian colloquialisms.¹²⁴ Davies notes that while crude and inventive phrases for vomiting such as 'to drive the porcelain bus' or 'to cry Ralph' may exist as metaphors in other countries, nonetheless, Australians' ability to link vomiting and other bodily functions with humour in so many distinctive ways is unique.¹²⁵

Inventive and colourful language is extended to funny obscenities and crude phrases such as 'to chuck a brown eye' (flashing one's anus) or 'pushing shit uphill' (a useless task).¹²⁶ Australian humour's association with hard-drinking, vomiting, coarse language and an all-male group is a way of celebrating social disorder, reversal and confusion.¹²⁷ The propensity of these dark forms of humour is to appear deliberately shocking, defying 'others', such as women, wowsers, and upper-middle class English 'Pommie bastards' who stand for control, order and respectability.¹²⁸

However, Davies' primary proposition is that hostility and persecution are not necessary pre-conditions for the development of humour.¹²⁹ He says that humour is ambiguous; it merely plays with aggression rather than expressing it.¹³⁰ It is unlikely that jokes are 'a response to a threatening situation and an expression of hostility'.¹³¹ Those who belong to an established majority 'are enclosed

¹¹⁸ Davies, C., 2002, p. 77.

¹¹⁹ Davies, C., 2002, p. 89.

¹²⁰ Davies, C., 2002, pp. 89–90.

¹²¹ Davies, C., 2002, p. 90.

¹²² Davies, C., 2002, p. 90.

¹²³ Davies, C., 2002, p. 94.

¹²⁴ Davies, C., 2002, pp. 100–101.

¹²⁵ Davies, C., 2002, p. 93, p.101.

¹²⁶ Davies, C., 2002, p. 101.

¹²⁷ Davies, C., 2002, p. 94.

¹²⁸ Davies, C., 2002, p. 94.

¹²⁹ Davies, C., 2002, p. 2.

¹³⁰ Davies, C., 2002, p. 24.

¹³¹ Davies, C., 2002, p. 201.

in a bubble of their own “normality” and, therefore, merely see the behavior of minorities as comic deviations from their own taken-for-granted world’.¹³²

Davies seems rather quick to downplay the ugly aspects of Australian humour that he points out in such detail. Suggesting that hostility and aggression are merely forms of play denies the seriousness of the long history of male dominance, stereotypes, objectifications and omissions in Australian humour. Humour does not exist in and of itself; it depends on the broader social context in which it is created and received. It is mediated through the social lens of the various groups found in communities, and is supported by and reflects what they find funny. The ongoing existence of these male-dominated mainstream humour traits is more than just ‘comic deviations’ from a ‘taken-for-granted world’ view.¹³³ Australian humour says a lot about Australian social identity and ongoing priorities as a nation. These priorities have been shown time again to support invective and exclusionary attitudes, as indeed, supported by Davies’ findings. However, specifically in relation to the contributions to our humour identity by Aboriginal Australians, perhaps it is as Marcia Langton says, ‘[t]he easiest and most ‘natural’ form of racism in representation is the act of making the other invisible.’¹³⁴

Serious Frolic, Essays on Australian Humour that is a compilation of critical works analysing Australian humour that was published by Fran De Groen and Peter Kirkpatrick in 2009. While most of the articles follow the specialty interests of their authors, the essay by Jessica Milner Davis provides a general overview of ‘Aussie’ humour from the perspective of a former outsider (English migrant).¹³⁵ Milner Davis writes that it is the social functions and conventions surrounding Australian humour may provide a better definition than its topics and structures.¹³⁶ Following Davies (2002), she recognises the offensive nature of many Australian jokes that defy good taste and are more or less compulsory.¹³⁷ However, she, like other scholars, acknowledges that many jokes recycle common formats from one culture to another, inserting locally recognised characters and events.¹³⁸ Australian humour functions as part of a ‘democratic tradition of irreverence and anti-authoritarianism’ which relies on (mostly male) subversion and Strine as abuse.¹³⁹

¹³² Davies, C., 2002, p. 47.

¹³³ Davies, C., 2002, p. 47.

¹³⁴ Langton, M., 2003, ‘Aboriginal art and film: the politics of representation’, in Grossman, M., (ed.) *Blacklines: Contemporary critical writing by Indigenous Australians*, Melbourne University Press, Victoria, p. 113.

¹³⁵ Milner-Davis, J., 2009, ‘Aussie humour and laughter: Joking as an acculturating ritual’ in De Groen, F., & P.

Kirkpatrick, 2009, *Serious Frolic, Essays on Australian Humour*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, QLD, pp. 31–47.

¹³⁶ Milner-Davis, J., 2009, p. 31, p. 33.

¹³⁷ Milner-Davis, J., 2009, p. 32, p. 38.

¹³⁸ Milner-Davis, J., 2009, p. 33.

¹³⁹ Milner-Davis, J., 2009, pp. 33–34.

Australian humour can also serve as a survival technique in hard times in a harsh landscape.¹⁴⁰ Jokes may not be able to overcome problems, although they do offer a way of learning to live with them.¹⁴¹ Milner Davis suggests that Indigenous Australians have a rich tradition of using humour as a survival mechanism. She also recognises how they have used humour as a retaliatory form of ‘taking the mickey’.¹⁴² This, she says, can be seen in early colonial records, where this notable Australian form of humour is used by Indigenous people to mock and single out ‘new chum’ colonists struggling with an unfamiliar terrain.¹⁴³

Moreover, Australian humour can be ‘dangerous’, lacking many of the restrictions of contemporary political correctness.¹⁴⁴ This defiance of social restriction points to a xenophobia where jokes and colloquial speech label the ‘other’ in derisive terms.¹⁴⁵ Milner Davis herself, as a young English immigrant to Australia in the 1950s, survived constant schoolyard taunts of ‘Pommie bastard’ by learning to take and to incorporate such ‘attitudinal standards’ into her own practices.¹⁴⁶ In this sense, humour as mickey-taking is an Australian acculturating ritual, ensuring that no-one gives himself or herself ‘airs and graces’ above established norms of Australian social observances.¹⁴⁷

Some ‘ethnic’ comedians, often descendants of post-war immigrants, have developed comic scripts based on pride in their heritage and on the difficulties of growing up in Australia.¹⁴⁸ Many have also readily adopted a typically Australian use of humour.¹⁴⁹ The Greek-Australian ‘wog’ comic team,¹⁵⁰ Vietnamese-Australian comedian Hung Le, and Australian-Lebanese comic Tahir Bilgiç are all testimony to Australians’ love of the mickey-take.¹⁵¹ However, contemporary Australian audiences, Milner Davis suggests, demand an element of authenticity in the comic voice.¹⁵² A prerequisite for these ethnic comedians seems to be that they attack themselves and/or their own group first, before taking the mickey out of others. However, ultimately, the success of mickey-taking as an acculturating

¹⁴⁰ Milner-Davis, J., 2009, p. 34.

¹⁴¹ Milner-Davis, J., 2009, p. 35.

¹⁴² Milner-Davis, J., 2009, pp. 35–36.

¹⁴³ Milner-Davis, J., 2009, p.36.

¹⁴⁴ Milner-Davis, J., 2009, pp. 36–37.

¹⁴⁵ Milner-Davis, J., 2009, p. 37.

¹⁴⁶ Milner-Davis, J., 2009, p. 39.

¹⁴⁷ Milner-Davis, J., 2009, p. 39. Mickey taking is also often regarded as a practice of ‘cutting down tall poppies’. The ‘tall poppy syndrome’ refers to the propensity for egalitarian-loving Australians to cut successful people and/or issues down a peg or two for fear that they might be considered overly elevated and important. This concept was made popular by NSW Premier Jack Lang in his 1934 parliamentary speech in which he referred to making some deserving ‘tall poppies suffer’. See the newspaper article: ‘The Premier’s Plan: Signing by Mr Lang, admitted by party member’ *Canberra Times*, 19 July 1934. Viewed 20/05/2014

<<http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/2364407>>.

¹⁴⁸ Milner-Davis, J., 2009, pp. 42–43.

¹⁴⁹ Milner-Davis, J., 2009, pp. 41–42.

¹⁵⁰ The ‘Wogs Out of Work’ Comic original team members include: Nick Giannopoulos, George Kapiniaris and Simon Palomares.

¹⁵¹ Milner-Davis, J., 2009, Op. Cit., pp. 42–46. Today comedians Nazeem Hussain, Sri Lankan background, Aamer Rahman, Bangladeshi background and Waleed Aly, Egyptian heritage, could be considered inheritors of this Australian mickey-taking tradition.

¹⁵² Milner-Davis, J., 2009, p. 46.

ritual is driven by the fact that it is a pleasurable and inevitable part of living in Australia. While humour and laughter may constitute a double-edged sword, mostly they promote a common humanity and function as tools of Australian cultural integration.¹⁵³

Overall, this review suggests that the sardonic use of colourful language that perpetuates the mainstream (white male) status quo is characteristic of Australian humour.¹⁵⁴ Mickey-taking and the cutting down of tall poppies ensures an equalising lack of pretension. Australian humour tends to rely on well-versed clichés without acknowledging the elitism of the ‘humour club’ it creates that often excludes women, immigrants and Aboriginal Australians. Although some critics appear to soften the hostility of this elitist function in good-will terms, it is the exclusion of Indigenous Australian humour that is the concern of this chapter, and a critique of Australian humour literature more broadly. With this in mind, the next section of this review will investigate the material available that deals with the presence, nature and functions of Aboriginal humour.

3.2 Literature investigation parameters and research techniques

In order to locate the academic literature available on Indigenous Australian humour, a series of subject heading, ‘key-word’, searches were undertaken across various library databases and catalogues. These searches used authorised library subject headings, with the specific phrases:

- ‘Aboriginal Australian wit AND (humour OR humor)’
- (Australia* AND (aboriginal OR indigenous) AND (wit OR humour OR humor);

These searches were conducted in the extensive findit@Flinders, Trove and Libraries Australia databases for books and articles on this topic. In particular, findit@Flinders is linked into the Flinders University Library catalogue which includes books, journals, and ebooks. It also links to an array of external academic databases and the Flinders Academic Commons.¹⁵⁵ Further to these sites, text word searches were undertaken within specific ‘humanities’ databases, just in case items were missed in earlier ‘broader’ searches. These humanities databases include searches through the online catalogues of Informit, Expanded Academic ASAP International (Gale), ProQuest, Cambridge Journals online, Oxford Journals, SAGE Journals Online, Wiley Online Library, Auslit, AusStage: Gateway to the Australian Performing Arts, BlackWords, Columbia International Affairs Online, Factiva, and Google Scholar.¹⁵⁶

¹⁵³ Milner-Davis, J., 2009, p. 47.

¹⁵⁴ De Groen, F., & P. Kirkpatrick, 2009, ‘Introduction: A saucer of vinegar’ in De Groen, F., & P. Kirkpatrick, 2009, (eds.), *Op. Cit.*, p. xxv. Here the egalitarian, anti-authoritarian nature of much Australian humour is noted for its historically masculine character.

¹⁵⁵ ‘What is Findit@flinders’, viewed 23/10/2014 <http://flinders-primo.hosted.exlibrisgroup.com/primo_library/libweb/action/search.do?&vid=FUL>. The ‘Flinders Academic Commons’ refers to the Institutional Repository of publications written by Flinders University academics.

¹⁵⁶ Flinders University Links to these databases viewed 23/10/2014: <<http://flinders.libguides.com/content.php?pid=193049&sid=1618955>> and <<http://flinders.libguides.com/content.php?pid=88844&sid=661251>>.

And finally, a search through what is known in library terms as the ‘grey’ or non-academic archival indexes was also made. In particular, this grey material includes the important AIATSIS archive literature and a general Google search.¹⁵⁷ Given the daunting nature of reviewing such a large amount of material, these searches mainly consisted of heading and abstract readings. Only documents that appeared to be relevant were obtained for further investigation. The resulting reports uncovered a smattering of literature and articles that made reference to Indigenous Australian humour. However, most sources either did not fulfil the requirement of critically adding to debate on this topic, or they pointed to some Indigenous sources (books, poems, plays and articles) that actually *use* humour as a literary technique and are therefore not relevant to the purpose of this investigation.

Additionally, a substantial report of all of books and journals held at Flinders University Library on the broader topic of ‘Australian wit and humor’ was also undertaken. I wanted to physically check the indexes of these sources in order to see whether, if any, discuss the topic ‘Indigenous Australian humour’. This style of searching is referred to in the library world as a ‘hand search’, and it included all of the titles found on the Flinders University Library catalogue under the subject heading ‘Australian wit and/or humor’. Flinders University Library holds a significant number of works that discuss and celebrate the existence of mainstream Australian humour, but very little reference in these publications is made to Indigenous Australian humour. Some of the more notable Australian publications on humour have previously been discussed. Generally, they substantiate the proposition that very little of it gives credit to Indigenous Australian authors and originators.

While I have endeavoured to investigate this matter thoroughly, there may be some literature missed that relates to this topic. Nevertheless, this does not seriously diminish the proposition that there has been very little academic critique and engagement with this (arguably significant) element of Australia’s national humour identity. In light of the literature that has been located, the following section provides a brief synopsis, within the parameters set out in the introduction to this chapter above, of Australian Aboriginal humour. This review references when, where, and how relevant each of these publications is to the presence, nature and/or functions of Aboriginal humour.

3.3 Traditional Indigenous Australian humour literature

Baldwin Spencer’s early-1900s anthropological investigation into some of the Indigenous language groups of the Northern Territory makes brief, but pertinent, note of the Aboriginal partiality to fun and keen sense of humour.¹⁵⁸ Spencer records the frequency of the cheerfulness, laughter, play, dancing and performances that he witnessed in remote communities of the Northern Territory during

¹⁵⁷ AIATSIS is an acronym for the Australian Institute of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Studies. AIATSIS archive catalogue viewed 23/10/2014, <<http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/collections/library.html>>.

¹⁵⁸ Spencer, W.B., [1914], 05/03/2014, *Native Tribes of the Northern Territory of Australia*, MacMillan and Co., Limited, London, UK. Chapter One, np. Un-paginated electronic version viewed 15/10/2014 online at: <<https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/s/spencer/baldwin/s74na/contents.html>>.

his expedition of 1911–12.¹⁵⁹ He discusses the amusement generated when someone stumbled over a log, and how the unfortunate person was requested to re-enact the performance for the benefit of all new arrivals. Another funny incident relates to two Kakadu men who had to run for their lives to escape being mauled by charging buffaloes. Although this incident had occurred years before, the men were repeatedly mimicked to fresh howls of laughter whenever it was raised. The same is true of the mimicking of non-Indigenous Government officials and their dramatic reactions whether either treading on a snake, or acting out non-verbal requests for assistance.¹⁶⁰ Spencer's recordings reveal an early glimpse into the workings of Aboriginal communities who enjoy the imitation and mockery of various forms of physical humour located in particular events. His observations were limited to instances of physical humour mostly because of his inability to speak and understand Indigenous languages, required for comprehension of more cerebral or deictic humour.¹⁶¹ Nevertheless, other than noting the presence of this physical phenomenon, he neither extrapolates on the personal or social nature or purpose of this humour.

In 1935 Donald Thomson set out the specific nature of joking relationships and organised obscenities he encountered in the Aboriginal tribes of Cape York Peninsula, North Queensland.¹⁶² As anthropologist Radcliffe-Brown also noted in relation to African communities, the phrase 'joking relationships' is used to explain the social relationship between two people where one person teases the other; and this other, in turn, must not take offense.¹⁶³ Although social etiquette and joking topics differ from kinship group to group, these relationships are well-organised behaviours between classificatory (not actual) relatives where it is customary, sometimes obligatory, to exchange specifically defined obscenities in a public arena.¹⁶⁴ Such exchanges particularly occur on stressful ceremonial occasions, and function to relieve tensions associated with the serious nature of the event.¹⁶⁵ These stylised public obscenities are departures from the customary norms of restrained behavior that function to induce happiness and well-being among the group.¹⁶⁶ Sometimes special one-sided language addressing third parties, like camp dogs or children, and vocal tonal intonations, are used to reinforce the joking nature of the exchange.¹⁶⁷ This occurs especially when relationships are of avoidance and etiquette rules could be easily broken.¹⁶⁸

¹⁵⁹ Spencer, W.B., [1914], 05/03/2014, Preface.

¹⁶⁰ Spencer, W.B., [1914], 05/03/2014, Chapter One, np.

¹⁶¹ Gill recognises that Spencer did attempt to incorporate Indigenous terms into his ethnographies, however 'he was no student of the language.' Gill, S.D., 1998, *Storytracking: Texts, Stories and Histories in Central Australia*, Oxford University Press, Oxford, UK, p. 114.

¹⁶² Thomson, D., 1935, 'The Joking Relationship and Organized Obscenity in North Queensland', *American Anthropologist*, 37: 3(1), pp. 460–490.

¹⁶³ Radcliffe-Brown, A.R., 1940, 'On Joking Relationships in Africa', *Journal of the International Institute of African Languages and Cultures*, Dawson & Sons Ltd., London, UK, pp. 195–210.

¹⁶⁴ Thomson, D., 1935, Op. Cit., p. 460.

¹⁶⁵ Thomson, D., 1935, p. 489.

¹⁶⁶ Thomson, D., 1935, p. 489.

¹⁶⁷ Thomson, D., 1935, pp. 466–467, p. 490.

¹⁶⁸ Thomson, D., 1935, pp. 466–467, p. 490.

From the 1940s, Ronald and Catherine Berndt recorded poetic verses and song cycles of Arnhem Land's Indigenous communities.¹⁶⁹ These narratives provide both instructions and entertainment to the community.¹⁷⁰ Among them are a series of songs that the Berndts term 'gossip songs'. Gossip songs generally deal with contemporary events from within the communities in which they were created.¹⁷¹ Their topics include new romances and/or local scandals, particularly of a sexual nature.¹⁷² The subjects of these verses are anonymous; however, they provide a fun guessing-game for the community, attempting to figure out who is being spoken of.¹⁷³ While the Berndts recount these, and some other humorous narratives, they provide little interpretation or explanation of the forms and functions of the humour located within. The songs are noted as transient, and the humour simply providing the community with entertainment in the scandalous nature of the gossip.¹⁷⁴ Any potentially more disciplinary, cautionary or corrective functions of this humour form are not discussed in detail.

W.E.H. Stanner originally wrote his essay on Indigenous Australian humour in 1956.¹⁷⁵ His article is of considerable historical importance as an early record, not only testifying to the existence of Indigenous humour, but also as an analysis of humour's forms and functions, within the context of more traditional communities. Stanner believed that comprehending and appreciating Aboriginal humour is the best way for non-Indigenous people to better understand the complexities and to estimate the validity of Indigenous cultures.¹⁷⁶ Aboriginal humour has a cultural context that only makes sense within the framework of the customs, ideologies and contexts of particular communities.¹⁷⁷ Stanner notes the Indigenous propensity to a dry sardonic laughter/humour in contemplation of their current lives faced within the realities of colonisation, its diseases, violence and the destruction of their traditional lifestyles. This style of joking is one that he says amounts to the concealment of grave issues behind humour.¹⁷⁸ His observations are that people laugh in a cathartic manner at unfortunate situations such as people tripping while being chased by crocodiles and buffalo. A significant humorous trait that he highlights is a capacity for spontaneous witty comments.¹⁷⁹ People are repeatedly reminded of their silly mistakes to the great delight of all.¹⁸⁰

¹⁶⁹ Berndt, R., 1976, *Love Songs of Arnhem Land*, Thomas Nelson (Australia) Ltd., Melbourne. Berndt, R., & C. Berndt, 1951, *Sexual Behavior in Western Arnhem Land*, Viking Fund Publications in Anthropology, No. 16, Viking Press, New York, USA.

¹⁷⁰ Berndt, R., 1976, p. xi.

¹⁷¹ Casey, M., 2012, *Telling Stories, Aboriginal Australian and Torres Strait Islander Performance*, Australian Scholarly Publishing Pty Ltd, North Melbourne, p. 38.

¹⁷² Casey, M., 2012, p. 38.

¹⁷³ Casey, M., 2012, p. 38.

¹⁷⁴ Berndt, R., 1951, Op. Cit., p. 211.

¹⁷⁵ Stanner, W.E.H., [1956] 1982, 'Aboriginal Humour' in *Aboriginal History Journal*, ANU Press, Canberra, Australia, 1982, v.6, pp. 39–48.

¹⁷⁶ Stanner, W.E.H., [1956] 1982, p. 39.

¹⁷⁷ Stanner, W.E.H., [1956] 1982, p. 40.

¹⁷⁸ Stanner, W.E.H., [1956] 1982, p. 41.

¹⁷⁹ Stanner, W.E.H., [1956] 1982, p. 42.

¹⁸⁰ Stanner, W.E.H., [1956] 1982, p. 50.

Stanner too notes the symbolic, kinship-based humour style of ‘joking relationships’.¹⁸¹ He records that when an Aboriginal man meets his brother-in-law he utters an expletive noise, and then lists outrageous obscenities about him. Stanner calls these ritualised insults ‘venomous endearments’ which are not meant to be taken offensively. Rather, they are ‘consciously stylised’ phrases provided for the appreciation of onlookers. These insults symbolically cover-up any embarrassment that might arise from the common interest that both men have in the one woman – as wife and sister. This mock hostility suggests to the community that two men who can joke with one another in such fashion, must be comfortable with their relationship.¹⁸²

However, one of Stanner’s most significant insights into Aboriginal social communications and structures that frequently utilise humour is his recognition that aesthetics are used to convey cultural understandings and attitudes. Dance, song, music and art, are used as expressions of events of great significance to the community.¹⁸³ Humour is often an integral part of these complex practices.¹⁸⁴

The following few articles included within this ‘traditional’ Aboriginal humour literature section comprise a series of contemporary ethnological/anthropological papers that have been included within this section because they relate to distinctive Aboriginal community groups, some of whom live in remote Australia. Although not examples from ‘traditional’ Aboriginal societies, they can be seen as distinct Indigenous communities as opposed to urban Indigenous people who might not live predominantly among other Aboriginal kin.

Christine Nicholls has documented the nicknaming practices of the Lajamanu community of the Western Tanami Desert, Northern Territory, where she worked as a linguist and school principal during the 1980s.¹⁸⁵ Her article points to the presence, forms and functions of the humour of traditional Indigenous societies. Nicholls says that non-Aboriginal teachers were prime targets for humorous nicknames that quickly spread across the wider Warlpiri settlements of Lajamanu, Yuendumu and Willowra.¹⁸⁶ Many nicknames were conferred on people because they had transgressed the laws of Warlpiri social mores and/or moral behaviour.¹⁸⁷ Although the majority of non-Indigenous people were not aware that they were the recipients of a humorous title, their

¹⁸¹ Stanner, W.E.H., [1956] 1982, pp. 43–45.

¹⁸² Stanner, W.E.H., [1956] 1982, p. 44.

¹⁸³ Stanner, W.E.H., [1956] 1982, p. 45.

¹⁸⁴ Stanner, W.E.H., [1956] 1982, p. 46.

¹⁸⁵ Nicholls, C., 1995, ‘Warlpiri nicknaming: a personal memoir’, in Fishman, J., and Garcia Otheguy, O., (eds.), *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, v.113/1, De Gruyter, Germany, pp. 137–146, at p. 137.

¹⁸⁶ Nicholls, C., 1995, p. 137.

¹⁸⁷ Nicholls, C., 1995, p. 139.

nicknames represent a form of ‘symbolic retaliation’ of the relatively powerless, socially speaking, against the powerful or against a collective form of authority.¹⁸⁸

Warlpiri people, from all walks of life, found nicknaming hugely entertaining, and would often laugh riotously in appreciation.¹⁸⁹ Some names were fairly benign, like the title of ‘Brolga’ given to a long-legged female teacher.¹⁹⁰ However, many of these names were critical, like the name given to a middle-aged white male schoolteacher, condemned for his judgmental attitudes towards Warlpiri cultural practices. The man’s nickname was ‘*Jinti-Lirra*’ which translates as ‘mouth like a vagina’, or more crudely put ‘cunt mouth’, a name that pointed to his thin, frequently sneering lips, but was ultimately reproachful of his moral behaviour.¹⁹¹

Nicknaming practices were also conferred on Warlpiri people themselves – most particularly on those community members deemed to have transgressed social boundaries.¹⁹² For example, an obsequious boy (to non-Indigenous people), who was considered a little too diligent at school, was awarded the nickname ‘Kardiya Brain’. ‘Kardiya’ is a white person and his behavior was seen as a form of kowtowing to non-Indigenous authority.¹⁹³ According to Nicholls, at first, such teasing would be met with tears of frustration, but eventually, it would have the desired effect of reshaping the recipient’s behavior into more acceptable social standards.¹⁹⁴

Not all nicknames were a form of criticism, with some highlighting desirable attributes or behaviours. One elderly Warlpiri man was awarded the name ‘*Wankanja-Muwurnpa*’, which translates colloquially as ‘*The Silent One*’. This name bestowed him with community respect for being a person able to keep his own counsel.¹⁹⁵ However, nicknames that express disapproval or mockery far outweigh approving nicknames. Nicknames that are conferred on non-Indigenous men are generally the most disapproving.¹⁹⁶

This is not surprising because of the nature of relationships forged in the colonisation of Warlpiri people.¹⁹⁷ In earlier generations, non-Indigenous people imposed many derisory names on Indigenous people, including calling them names like ‘Hitler’ or ‘Stalin’, casting Warlpiri as despised (war)

¹⁸⁸ Nicholls, C., 1995, p. 137, p. 144.

¹⁸⁹ Nicholls, C., 1995, pp. 138–139.

¹⁹⁰ Nicholls, C., 1995, p. 138.

¹⁹¹ Nicholls, C., 1995, p. 138.

¹⁹² Nicholls, C., 1995, p. 139.

¹⁹³ Nicholls, C., 1995, p. 139.

¹⁹⁴ Nicholls, C., 1995, pp. 139–140.

¹⁹⁵ Nicholls, C., 1995, p. 140.

¹⁹⁶ Nicholls, C., 1995, p. 142.

¹⁹⁷ Nicholls, C., 1995, p. 142.

enemies.¹⁹⁸ Nicholls argues that such names were even more offensive to Indigenous people who often confer names on people in an honourable manner according to their sophisticated religious practices.¹⁹⁹ Nicknames are verbal evidence of a Warlpiri consciousness of resistance against an ongoing history of colonial imposition.²⁰⁰ These practices are a form of ‘linguistic revenge’ that imply Warlpiri resistance to injustices and loss of control in important community areas such as economic and political independence. By contrast, nicknames assigned among their own people are mostly emptied of much of their aggressive intent through ordinary social codification channels of wit and humour.²⁰¹

In 2008, John Carty and Yasmine Musharbash produced a joint paper asserting the analytical value of humour and laughter on contemporary anthropology.²⁰² Sharing a sense of humour, they contend, is central to belonging within kinship relationships, and therefore crucial to classical anthropological cultural research.²⁰³ Furthermore, knowing how to make others laugh with you, rather than at you, is also a vital aspect of anthropological analysis.²⁰⁴

Musharbash was inspired to write on humour following an event she witnessed while undertaking field-work at the remote township of Yuendumu, Northern Territory.²⁰⁵ She recalls when one of the camp dogs, Barbie, ran into the midst of a group of women and children, who were taking a break during an initiation ceremony. Sight of the dog, covered in red ochre handprints, precipitated raucous laughter among the group. And later, as the story spread throughout the community, it produced much more laughter.²⁰⁶

To understand the humour of this event, there are several cultural elements that first need to be understood. Initially, there is the appearance of the ‘sausage dog’ with its short legs and long body, covered in red hand-prints. In addition, there is the fact that Neil, whom all knew had put the handprints on the dog, spent a great deal of time playing with the camp dogs, and this was his first time in ‘business camp’ following his own initiation. Moreover, one would also need to understand the spiritual symbolism of red ochre and its relationship to gendered initiation ceremonies. However, by the time all of these elements of the story are explained, ‘the joke is dead.’²⁰⁷ For jokes, removed

¹⁹⁸ Nicholls, C., 1995, p. 142.

¹⁹⁹ Nicholls, C., 1995, p. 143.

²⁰⁰ Nicholls, C., 1995, pp. 143–144.

²⁰¹ Nicholls, C., 1995, p. 144.

²⁰² Carty, J., & Y. Musharbash, 2008, ‘You’ve Got to be Joking: Asserting the Analytical Value of Humour and Laughter in Contemporary Anthropology’, in *Anthropology Forum*, v. 18/3, November 2008, pp. 209–217.

²⁰³ Carty, J., & Y. Musharbash, 2008, p. 209.

²⁰⁴ Carty, J., & Y. Musharbash, 2008, pp. 209–210.

²⁰⁵ Carty, J., & Y. Musharbash, 2008, p. 210.

²⁰⁶ Carty, J., & Y. Musharbash, 2008, p. 210.

²⁰⁷ Carty, J., & Y. Musharbash, 2008, p. 210.

from their nuanced social context, often seem crude, nonsensical or plain unfunny.²⁰⁸ Generally, anthropological study of humour relates to what jokes have to say about the people who make them, and also about the circumstances in which they are made – be they social, historical, gendered or colonial.²⁰⁹

Using specific examples from several Western Arnhem Land Indigenous language groups, Murray Garde shows that joking relationships pragmatically ‘index the absence of actual affinity within those communities.’²¹⁰ He suggests that the language and behaviour of joking relationships are generally the antithesis of the constrained, respectful speech of avoidance relationships between married kin (such as a husband with his wife’s brothers and sisters) that are a part of traditional kinship systems.²¹¹ Garde writes that social systems in which kinship extends to so many potential people/affines, makes avoidance behaviour a complex and tedious burden.²¹² Therefore, joking relationships mark those relationships where affinity is possible, although not actually realised.²¹³ This, he suggests, is especially the case where there is also a high degree of social familiarity and considerable genealogical distance.²¹⁴

Most of the topics of joking relationships deal with mock threats, request refusals, feigned aggression, bodily functions, sexual obscenity and/or boastful sexual exploits and misbehavior.²¹⁵ However, less obscene joking occurs between cross-gender joking partners such as a woman and her MMB (Maternal Mother’s Brother), or a man and his MM (Maternal Mother).²¹⁶ Joking among these relations mostly focus on bogus accusations of secret romances and nighttime antics.²¹⁷ Light-hearted swearing and teasing is considered by Indigenous participants to be ‘saying nothing’; rather it is just an expression of friendship.²¹⁸ Many joking partners hold each other in the highest esteem and affection. Primarily, joking relationships neutralise the onerous burden of socially acceptable behaviour expected between affine, and assuage potential ‘shame’ that may arise within that interaction.²¹⁹ Moreover, Garde says that while swearing nicknames and hack phrases might, at times,

²⁰⁸ Carty, J., & Y. Musharbash, 2008, p. 211.

²⁰⁹ Carty, J., & Y. Musharbash, 2008, p. 211.

²¹⁰ Garde, M., 2008, ‘The Pragmatics of Rude Jokes with Grandad: Joking Relationships in Aboriginal Australia’, in *Anthropology Forum*, v. 18/3, November 2008, pp. 235–253, see his ‘Abstract’, p. 235.

²¹¹ Garde, M., 2008, p. 237.

²¹² Garde, M., 2008, pp. 237–238.

²¹³ Garde, M., 2008, p. 238.

²¹⁴ Garde, M., 2008, p. 244.

²¹⁵ Garde, M., 2008, p. 244.

²¹⁶ Garde, M., 2008, p. 245.

²¹⁷ Garde, M., 2008, p. 245.

²¹⁸ Garde, M., 2008, pp. 247–248.

²¹⁹ Garde, M., 2008, p. 248.

appear to be a rigid form of humour, these utterances can often cleverly condense shared knowledge of cultural practices into concise one-liners.²²⁰

Anthony Redmond writes of a corroboree produced by the Ngarinyin people of north-western Australia that he argues is used by them to make new sense of the racial bigotry and power relationships they face within a colonised world.²²¹ Based on Freud's observation that jokes create new relationships that extend their original meaning, giving pleasure in rediscovering something familiar, Redmond suggests that jokes can be understood as innovative metaphors, transferring meaning while also referencing original symbols.²²² Redmond says that it is this kind of innovative 'spark' of humour that can be found in the Ngarinyin people's corroboree called the *Captain Cook Jurnba*.²²³

This corroboree is a dream-inspired performance first created by Alex Wirrijangu during World War II in 1942.²²⁴ The corroboree is still performed by the community using songs and dances in the local Kriol language, but each performance is a creative reworking of Wirrijangu's original dream revelations. Wirrijangu dreamt a set of songs that entwined three momentous social and psychological events in the community's life – the story of their first violent contact with Europeans (c.1821–1890), the world war (1940–1945), and the destruction of humans during *lalarn* (the cosmogenic epoch) by *Wanjina* rain spirits.²²⁵

In the performance, actors mimic Captain Cook and General Macarthur, two non-Indigenous military figures who are significant to these events and Wirrijangu's subsequent dreams.²²⁶ Both actors are dressed comically in loose shirts that have been stuffed with newspapers to imply big bellies, their trousers are rolled up to their knees, and their exposed skin, including faces, are painted white with ochre. They also wear their cowboy hats turned inside out to represent tricorne hats of nineteenth-century naval officers. Comically dressed, the figures blunder around the dance group. These buffoons wield rifles made from sticks and shout out phrases like '*si'down you lot... eat your tucker ... alright get up now, walk*' to a gang of neck-chained prisoners played by younger boys.²²⁷ These actors also conduct mock attacks on the audience, making children laugh with a mixture of delight

²²⁰ Garde, M., 2008, p. 248.

²²¹ Redmond, A., 2008, 'Captain Cook meets General Macarthur in the Northern Kimberley: Humour and Ritual in an Indigenous Australian Life-World', in *Anthropology Forum*, v. 18/3, November 2008, pp. 255–270.

Freud, S, 1960 [1923], *The ego and the id*, Norton, New York, USA, p. 120.

²²² Redmond, A., 2008, p. 255.

²²³ Redmond, A., 2008, p. 255.

²²⁴ Redmond, A., 2008, p. 256.

²²⁵ Redmond, A., 2008, p. 256.

²²⁶ Redmond, A., 2008, p. 256.

²²⁷ Redmond, A., 2008, p. 256.

and fear. Redmond says that the unpredictability of their playful attacks, and the merciless lampooning of these figures of white authority, have the audience in fits of laughter.²²⁸

Analysing the humour of this performance, Redmond suggests that a ‘diffident aggression’ that attempts to undercut the moral bases of non-Indigenous authority is present.²²⁹ This remains the case, even though recent performances rely on ‘whitefella’ funding to stage them.²³⁰ Redmond says that their jokes about perceived shortcomings of their ‘whitefella’ workers appear to be a way of deflecting their ambivalence about the reality of this dependency.²³¹ This, he believes, is like the aggressive intent that Freud says is a critical component of the comic.²³² Redmond also compares the formation of the *jurnba* with Freud’s suggestion that dreams and humour are cognitions that both use techniques such as condensation, substitution and displacement to avoid internal censorships by a guilty conscience or by what is deemed appropriate social etiquette.²³³

Furthermore, based on the work of psychologist Ernst Kris with regards to caricature,²³⁴ Redmond notes laughter as reproducing childlike experiences that may dissipate anxiety via the triumphant power of the ego which suggests to objects of ridicule that they can be overcome.²³⁵ Redmond discusses the important roles of caricature and mimicry.²³⁶ In the performance, whitefellas are mocked and parodied in a way that inflicts a disempowering ‘wound’ to their egos.²³⁷

Moreover, the ‘double imitations’ of Captain Cook doubled into General Macarthur, and senior male performers doubled as white fella bosses and then as *jilinya*, dangerously lustful female spirits, suggests that such disparate figures can be easily united into a single time and place.²³⁸ That is, the pairing suggests that these two archetypal figures of white threat and authority, who at different times have invoked terror, are similarly laughable, childlike figures.²³⁹ Moreover, they are also just like ‘blackfellas’ because they *are* blackfellas in disguise.²⁴⁰ In assuming the roles of subject positions of power in the *jurnba*, Indigenous performers and audiences are seduced into a communal position of

²²⁸ Redmond, A., 2008, p. 257.

²²⁹ Redmond, A., 2008, p. 258.

²³⁰ Redmond, A., 2008, p. 258.

²³¹ Redmond, A., 2008, p. 258.

²³² Redmond, A., 2008, p. 258. Freud, S., 2002, [1905], Crick, J., (trans.), *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, Penguin Books, London, England. See ‘The Tendencies of the Joke’, pp. 91–99.

²³³ Redmond, A., 2008, Op. Cit., p. 258.

²³⁴ Kris, E., 1936, ‘The psychology of caricature’ in *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, v.17, pp. 285–303. Kris, E., 1940, ‘Contributions to the psychoanalysis of expressive behaviour’ in *International Journal of Psychoanalysis*, v.21, pp. 314–341.

²³⁵ Redmond, A., 2008, Op. Cit., pp. 258–259.

²³⁶ Redmond, A., 2008, pp. 260–263.

²³⁷ Redmond, A., 2008, p. 260.

²³⁸ Redmond, A., 2008, pp. 260–261.

²³⁹ Redmond, A., 2008, p. 262.

²⁴⁰ Redmond, A., 2008, p. 262.

resilient mockery and defeat of whitefella bosses.²⁴¹ The performance engenders an imaginative play on reversals of power and powerlessness that helps to render the world a more meaningful place, while also producing an event that is considered very funny by the community.²⁴²

Musharbash presents an ethnographic case study on how, within the Yuendumu community, laughter can be associated both with a release of anxiety and with a ‘perilous’ cause of anxiety.²⁴³ While this article is somewhat of an aside to investigations into the ‘presence’ and ‘forms’ of Indigenous humour, it provides important information about the ‘functions’ and Indigenous attitudes towards the potential consequences of humour that are later considered within an urban Indigenous social context.²⁴⁴ Musharbash provides an example of how a senile Warlpiri woman’s midnight wanderings woke and alarmed several of the other women one night.²⁴⁵ On discovery that the intruder was ‘only Nora’, laughter erupted, dispelling the fear that her unknown presence has initially created.²⁴⁶ As so often emphasised by Freud, laughter is seen as a form of stress release.²⁴⁷

However, in addition to referencing laughter dissolving anxiety in this classical ‘western’ form, Musharbash notes that laughter can also sometimes be associated with weakness in people, and that anxiety about its consequences can disrupt social relations.²⁴⁸ Making others laugh at Yuendumu is often ‘rebuffed’ with remarks about how it causes weakness in a person— ‘*Stop making me laugh...it makes me weak*’ is something that Warlpiri people often say.²⁴⁹ This is because of laughter’s connection with a person’s stomach or abdomen which is considered by Indigenous people to be the seat of a person’s spirit, their consciousness and emotions. Excessive laughter produces feelings of physical discomfort in the stomach that parallel mental unease such as anxiety, distress, grief and sadness, weakening you spiritually.²⁵⁰ Hence, laughter can be a threat to the wellbeing of this significant region of the body that needs special care and protection.²⁵¹

²⁴¹ Redmond, A., 2008, p. 266.

²⁴² Redmond, A., 2008, p. 263, p. 267.

²⁴³ Musharbash, Y., 2008, ‘Perilous Laughter: Examples from Yuendumu, Central Australia’, in *Anthropology Forum*, v. 18/3, November 2008, pp. 271–277, p. 271.

²⁴⁴ For an urban Indigenous context see summary below of: McCullough, M., 2008, ‘Poor Black Bastard Can’t Shake-a-leg: Humour and Laughter in Urban Aboriginal North Queensland, Australia’, in *Anthropology Forum*, v. 18/3, November 2008, pp. 279–285.

²⁴⁵ Musharbash, Y., 2008, p. 272.

²⁴⁶ Musharbash, Y., 2008, p. 272.

²⁴⁷ Musharbash, Y., 2008, p. 271. Freud, S, [1905], 2005, *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, Penguin Books, England & New York.

²⁴⁸ Musharbash, Y., 2008, p. 272.

²⁴⁹ Musharbash, Y., 2008, p. 272.

²⁵⁰ Musharbash, Y., 2008, pp. 272–273.

²⁵¹ Musharbash, Y., 2008, p. 273.

Megan McCullough discusses how humour plays a complex role in the self-identification of a group of Murri Aboriginal people from North Queensland.²⁵² Humour can be seen as generative of stress relief, as well as a form of rebellion against perceived social positioning in Australia's non-Indigenous socio-political mainstream.²⁵³ McCullough suggests that Murri people's self-identity reflects the tensions they experience between mainstream cultural assumptions about them being destructive, unruly victims of colonisation, and a need to 'prove' their Aboriginal authenticity.²⁵⁴ Using the example of the uncoordinated performance of a Murri dancer, humour can be seen playing a role in complex social identity processes.

McCullough was present at a Murri group discussion about the failure of an Aboriginal dance troupe's inaugural performance to a group of white tourists.²⁵⁵ The group laughed heartily as one of the young boys, Donnie, imitated the clumsy and awkward dance steps of one of the performers, Robert. Donnie's father quipped: 'That poor black bastard can't shake-a-leg', referencing local Murri terminology for dancing, and again, eliciting more laughter.²⁵⁶ Here, McCullough says, Murri laughter contains an element of anxiety release. The group attempt to 'save face' via laughter that covers shame about potential feelings of being judged negatively and 'inauthentic' by a white audience.²⁵⁷

On one hand, McCullough says that laughter results from embarrassment at Robert's failure to meet the perceived expectations of authenticity.²⁵⁸ On the other, laughter signified a form of resistance, where urban Aboriginal people defy a need to meet such perceived expectations.²⁵⁹ This idea of defiance also refers to the fact that Aboriginal dance troupes, who perform for white tourist audiences, regularly push the boundaries of what those tourists will accept as 'authentic' Aboriginality.²⁶⁰ The group's laughter was also in part pleasure at the insider mischief of such occurrences and disdain for the ignorance of white audiences.²⁶¹

Moreover, Donnie's continual mimicking led to calls of 'don't make me weak' from Murri people that, McCullough notes, highlight the links between laughter and danger because of its ability to rupture close kinship relationships.²⁶² Laughter, to Aboriginal people, can be dangerous because of its

²⁵² Although this article discusses the humour of an 'urban' Murri community, it remains in the tradition humour section of this review in order to establish continuity with other anthropological literature.

²⁵³ McCullough, M., 2008, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 279–285 at p. 279.

²⁵⁴ McCullough, M., 2008, p. 283.

²⁵⁵ McCullough, M., 2008, p. 280.

²⁵⁶ McCullough, M., 2008, p. 280.

²⁵⁷ McCullough, M., 2008, p. 281.

²⁵⁸ McCullough, M., 2008, p. 283.

²⁵⁹ McCullough, M., 2008, p. 283.

²⁶⁰ McCullough, M., 2008, p. 281.

²⁶¹ McCullough, M., 2008, p. 281.

²⁶² McCullough, M., 2008, p. 282.

potential to create kinship divisions. Donnie's mimicking could only go so far, covering feelings of shame, but not so far as to weaken Robert's identity as a member of the group.²⁶³

In addition, resistance was also embodied in Donnie's repetition and caricature of the failed dance. Murri adults equip their children with an understanding that humour can assertively protect their Aboriginal identity in face of negative public perceptions.²⁶⁴ McCullough says that Donnie's father's comments can be interpreted as a way he taught his son that it is better to laugh than to show hurt in the face of mainstream stereotypes. Humour as resistance, McCullough says, is an accepted part of Murri children's socialisation that helps insulate them from hurt, reinforcing pride in their Aboriginal identity.²⁶⁵

Jeremy Beckett suggests that the making and negotiating of humour provides insights into experiences of being an Indigenous person in Australia.²⁶⁶ Great value is placed on joking and convivial relationships in the societies of the Torres Strait, but a lot of the mockery is hidden behind people's backs for fear of offending in such close knit communities.²⁶⁷ While much of Beckett's article is not particularly relevant to the mainstream, urban forms of Indigenous Australian humour investigated in this thesis, this article remains a contribution to the humour of Indigenous people in the face of western colonisation.

According to Beckett, young unmarried men are especially vulnerable when it comes to public dancing. Dance moves are often precisely prescribed so that any mistakes are very obvious. Dancing is also a form of sexual display where clumsiness or showing off often evokes a wave of female laughter. People with any physical defects are often advised to keep clear of dancing because of the fear of ridicule. A kin member will most probably take that person aside because on the one hand they will feel sorry for them, but on the other, they will feel a sense of 'shame' because of the kinship connection. Others, Beckett notes, are free to laugh, but protocol dictates that this is not direct to a person's face.²⁶⁸

Moreover, Beckett suggests that those holding public office are also fair game for ridicule. However, if individuals make a public spectacle of themselves by committing a blunder, or they are perceived as pretentious, laughter is not open.²⁶⁹ People put their heads down, out of shame if they are kin, or because they are laughing on the inside, if they are not. Much local humour is centered on laughing at

²⁶³ McCullough, M., 2008, p. 282.

²⁶⁴ McCullough, M., 2008, p. 283.

²⁶⁵ McCullough, M., 2008, p. 283.

²⁶⁶ Beckett, J., 2008, 'Laughing with, Laughing at, among Torres Strait Islanders', in *Anthropology Forum*, v. 18/3, November 2008, pp. 295–302, at p. 295.

²⁶⁷ Beckett, J., 2008, p. 295.

²⁶⁸ Beckett, J., 2008, p. 299.

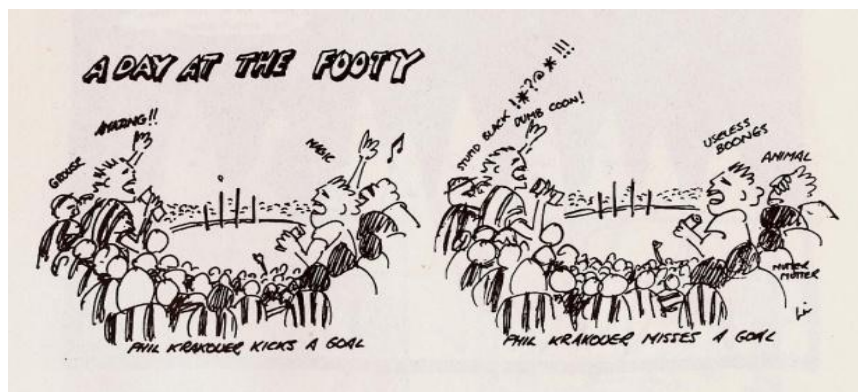
²⁶⁹ Beckett, J., 2008, p. 299.

attempts to adopt western ways, and Beckett notes that they can be seen as an ongoing projection of Islanders' insecurities in the face of imposing mainstream (white) Australia.²⁷⁰

Above all else, these mostly anthropological articles, point to the fact that laughter and humour have social purpose that serves a variety of functions within tight knit Aboriginal communities. Humour is used as a method of exclusivity, assisting to distinguish the particularities of a group, confirming group identity. Conversely it is used to censor those who stray from acceptable social standards. At times, humour is used by more traditional Aboriginal groups to ameliorate the injustices and hypocrisies of living in a colonised environment. Aboriginal humour is presented an important tool of communication and self-expression.

3.4 'Urban' Indigenous Australian humour literature

David Swain's collection of the cartoon images of Aboriginal Australians includes a short chapter addressing works produced by Aboriginal people themselves at the first Indigenous cartoon workshop held in 1988.²⁷¹ This workshop was run by Yorta Yorta visual artist Lin Onus with the assistance of non-Indigenous cartoonists Kaz Cooke, Les Tanner and Bruce Petty. Four cartoons produced from this project are reprinted in Swain's book,²⁷² including a cartoon drawn by Onus himself titled 'A Day at the Footy'.²⁷³



Onus, L., 1988, 'A Day at the Footy'

In this cartoon, Onus depicts a non-Indigenous crowd shouting accolades for Indigenous footballer Phil Krakouer when he scores a goal in one scene; and in the other, the same fickle crowd's aggressive and racist taunts when he misses.²⁷⁴

²⁷⁰ Beckett, J., 2008, p. 301.

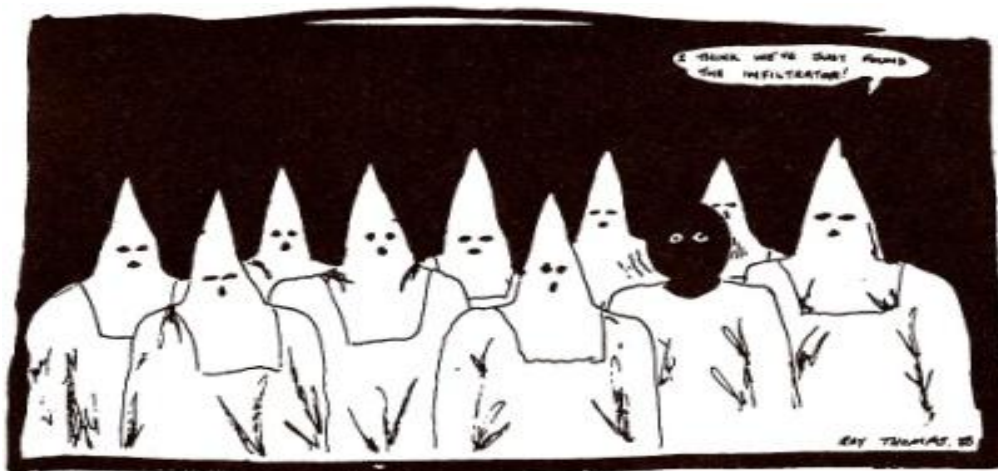
²⁷¹ Swain, D., [1988] 2000, 200 in *the Shade, An historical selection of cartoons about Aborigines*, Collins Publishers Australia, Sydney, NSW, pp. 187–192.

²⁷² Swain, D., [1988] 2000, pp. 187–192.

²⁷³ Onus, L. in Swain, D., [1988] 2000, p. 189.

²⁷⁴ Swain, D., [1988] 2000, p. 189.

Another cartoon, depicting the incongruous infiltration of a lone black person among hooded Ku Klux Klan figures, is the subject of Gunnai artist Ray Thomas' cartoon.²⁷⁵



Thomas, R., 1988, 'I think we've just found the infiltration!'

The final image is drawn by Yamatji man, Ernie Dingo.²⁷⁶ Dingo's cartoon is of an Aboriginal man facing a Japanese man.²⁷⁷ The Aboriginal man says in phoetically spelled Aboriginal English: "Afta you bin buy em land then we talk migrashun".²⁷⁸ Discussing his cartoon, Dingo said that Queensland is half owned by the Japanese and this gave him the inspiration for his cartoon.²⁷⁹



Dingo, E., 1988, 'Afta you bin buy em land then we talk migrashun'

²⁷⁵Thomas, R. in Swain, D., [1988] 2000, p. 190. 'Biography of Ray Thomas' viewed 29/10/2014 at <<http://www.daa0.org.au/bio/ray-thomas/>>.

²⁷⁶ Swain, D., [1988] 2000, p. 192.

²⁷⁷ Swain, D., [1988] 2000, p. 192.

²⁷⁸ Dingo, E. in Swain, D., [1988] 2000, p. 192.

²⁷⁹ Dingo cited in the June 1988 issue of *Cleo Magazine*, Swain, D., [1988] 2000, p. 192.

These images are Indigenous contributions to Australia's media cartooning that has played a significant role in negatively stereotyping them as unwanted social members. Aboriginal artists producing their own cartoons provide an avenue for expression of their own attitudes about current social issues that are relevant to all Australians.

1988 was colonial Australia's Bicentenary year, and it proved the impetus for further investigations into the history of cartoons produced about Aboriginal people. Fifty Australian cartoonists including Kaz Cooke, Bruce Petty, Bill Pryor and Michael Leunig countered Australia's birthday celebrations with a collection of satirical images that spoke of Indigenous Australia's perceptions of this period.²⁸⁰

Indigenous man Galarrwuy Yunupingu's *Foreword* notes the sense of irony that Indigenous people have necessarily acquired in order to process Governmental hyperbole in line with the realities of their daily lives.²⁸¹ Cooke's brief but insightful cartoons in each chapter humorously point to Australia's double standards with its lack of acknowledgement of Aboriginal Australia's much longer (40,000 year) history.²⁸²

A cartoon that displays a large signboard with the simple word 'sorry' on it ironically points to a contentious issue in Australia's socio-political environment by suggesting that this is all that is required in order to include Aboriginal people in the Bicentennial festivities.²⁸³ Further cartoons point to issues of first fleet re-enactments, land rights and Prime Minister Bob Hawke's attempts to create a 'compact' with Indigenous people in lieu of a contentious 'treaty'; issues of justice and black deaths in police custody; the history wars debates regarding Aboriginal treatment by early colonists; and parallels between Australia and South Africa's apartheid political system.

Nevertheless, while this collection reveals a growing unease about Australia's Eurocentrism, and provides an alternative view of Australia's recent history among non-Indigenous Australians, it generally ignores the *actual* voices of Indigenous Australian people on these issues. Swain's collection of the same period at least includes a small, but growing, number of Aboriginal artists who could participate with their own opinions and artwork within the cartoon genre.

²⁸⁰ Cooke, K., (ed.), 1988, *Beyond a Joke, An Anti-Bicentenary Cartoon Book*, McPhee Gribble Publishers Pty Ltd, Fitzroy, Victoria.

²⁸¹ Yunupingu, G., 1988, 'Foreword' in Cooke, K., (ed.), 1988, *Beyond a Joke, An Anti-Bicentenary Cartoon Book*, McPhee Gribble Publishers Pty Ltd, Fitzroy, Victoria, p. vii.

²⁸² Cooke, K., (ed.), 1988, Op. Cit., p. 1.

²⁸³ Cooke, K., (ed.), 1988, p. 17.

In 1989 Roberta Sykes produced an article acknowledging Aboriginal humour in literature.²⁸⁴ She argues that humour is a significant social device used by Indigenous writers to help convince mainstream publishers of the value of their work.²⁸⁵ However, Indigenous humour is often in need of explanation before being accepted by the broader Australian community. Consequently, Aboriginal humour is most appreciated within the domains of their own communities.²⁸⁶

Sykes suggests that Aboriginal writers like Kath Walker²⁸⁷ and Jack Davis embed wry humour in their work to express their ironic observations about Australian society, and to soften the harshness of their more critical dialogue.²⁸⁸ In more confrontational style, Bundjalung writer, Gerry Bostock, advised Sykes that Aboriginal writers had to use ‘sly’ means of getting their messages across to non-Indigenous audiences.²⁸⁹ He states that Aboriginal people must ‘[j]ump in first and call ourselves something, like “nigger” or “bastard,” because (then) it leaves them with nothing to call us.’²⁹⁰

Sykes observes that some Aboriginal humour is too ‘close to the bone’ to raise a laugh from non-Indigenous Australians. Indigenous writers are often reproached by critics who regard them as angry and confrontational, regardless of the humour contained in their works.²⁹¹ As Dorothy Jones also suggests, when the joke is on the other foot, those of the majority often find it incomprehensible or humorless.²⁹²

In 1989 Cliff Watego interviewed Indigenous playwright Richard Walley on the subject of humour noir in dramatic performances.²⁹³ This transcript is an important contribution, noting some of the techniques employed by Indigenous artists in modern performances. Walley believes that bleak comedy can be exploited by Aboriginal directors as a means of getting messages across in their writing.²⁹⁴ Humour in drama, he says, is important because people don’t want to see sad things all of the time.²⁹⁵ Walley suggests that what Aboriginal writers need to do is to mix the sadness in with comedy.²⁹⁶

²⁸⁴ Sykes, R., 1989, ‘Do caged kookaburras still laugh?’ in *Thalia: Studies in literary humour*, 10(2), Department of English, University of Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, pp. 45–48.

²⁸⁵ Sykes, R., 1989, p. 45, p. 47.

²⁸⁶ Sykes, R., 1989, p. 47.

²⁸⁷ Indigenous writer Kath Walker later changed her name to Oodgeroo Noonuccal in recognition of her traditional language group connections.

²⁸⁸ Sykes, R., 1989, Op. Cit., pp. 45–46.

²⁸⁹ Sykes, R., 1989, p. 46.

²⁹⁰ Sykes, R., 1989, p. 46.

²⁹¹ Sykes, R., 1989, p. 46.

²⁹² Jones, D., 1997, ‘Setting Limits: Humour and Australian National Identity’ in *Special Issue of the Australian Journal of Comedy*, p. 41.

²⁹³ Watego, C., 1990, ‘Extremely Funny ... utterly tragic: an interview with Richard Walley with notes on Black interviews/Black discourse’, *Australasian Drama Studies*, Oct. 1990, v.17, pp. 40–50.

²⁹⁴ Walley in Watego, C., 1990, p. 43.

²⁹⁵ Walley in Watego, C., 1990, p. 44.

²⁹⁶ Walley in Watego, C., 1990, p. 44.

Humour, Walley says, is a way of breaking down communication barriers.²⁹⁷ It is a healing ‘medicine’ that helps Aboriginal people to deal with bitterness – to laugh in lieu of taking matters too seriously. Comedy in his life allows him to laugh at himself. Additionally, with it he can say things to his audiences that he couldn’t ordinarily say and get away with.²⁹⁸ Walley observes that sometimes white audiences are afraid to laugh at incidents when Aboriginal people mock themselves for fear that their laughter might be construed as offensive.²⁹⁹ Black audiences he suggests, however, see comedy in ‘anything’.³⁰⁰ If, for example, a person runs into a truck on their bicycle, a black audience will ‘kill themselves laughing first, then they’ll say, ‘Oh, the poor bugger’.³⁰¹ Aboriginal people, Walley believes, enjoy life, whereas non-Aboriginal people are unable to relax until they are made to laugh. Even in tragedy you need to have light-hearted periods to offset tragedy. Drama is all about communication.³⁰² And successful communication, Walley suggests, keeps a play energetic, vibrant and entertaining, and ‘[y]ou have to make sure there’s the little bits of comedy there’ too.³⁰³

Carol Reid and Helen Velissaris undertook a 1990 investigation into the use and functions of ‘Aboriginal humour’ within a mainstream, urban, primary school classroom.³⁰⁴ Their report records the presence and uses of humour, within a predominantly Indigenous Australian classroom at Redfern Primary School, located within an inner suburb of Sydney.³⁰⁵ They pose questions about how, when, and why humour is used within the classroom environment by the Aboriginal students. In addition, the study discusses how using humour might facilitate better teacher–student relationships.³⁰⁶ This report provides a brief, but relevant piece of evidence of the existence, and an analysis of the forms and functions of humour, within an urban Indigenous context.

The pair observes the humour used by a year 5/6 reading group of predominantly (90%) Aboriginal students – many of whom they note as being ‘resistant’ to reading.³⁰⁷ In addition to the usual good-natured jostling of a group of young students, class discussions were noted as being a ‘joke-riddled commentary on the topic at hand.’³⁰⁸ A form of humour referred to as ‘cheeky assertiveness’ towards a perceived authority figure is noted when a student contradicts the teacher’s word choice in her

²⁹⁷ Walley in Watego, C., 1990, p. 45.

²⁹⁸ Walley in Watego, C., 1990, p. 45.

²⁹⁹ Walley in Watego, C., 1990, p. 47.

³⁰⁰ Walley in Watego, C., 1990, p. 48.

³⁰¹ Walley in Watego, C., 1990, p. 48.

³⁰² Walley in Watego, C., 1990, p. 49.

³⁰³ Walley in Watego, C., 1990, p. 50.

³⁰⁴ Reid, C., and H. Velissaris, 1991, ‘Yes, it isn’t – No, it is’ in *Aboriginal Children at School*, v.19/5, Oct/Nov 1991, pp. 12–17. Viewed 18/09/2014 at: <<http://search.informit.com.au/fullText.dn=567803514765149.res=IELIND>>.

³⁰⁵ Reid, C., and H. Velissaris, 1991, p. 12.

³⁰⁶ Reid, C., and H. Velissaris, 1991, p. 13.

³⁰⁷ Reid, C., and H. Velissaris, 1991, p. 14.

³⁰⁸ Reid, C., and H. Velissaris, 1991, p. 14.

communications with another child. This style of humour is a teasing skill that Indigenous parents teach their children as a coping mechanism of assertiveness to be used by them in the face of negative social stereotypes in mainstream Australian environments.³⁰⁹ Moreover, undermining perceived authority is an integral aspect of the skill-set used by Indigenous people to help maintain their distinct Aboriginal identity.³¹⁰ Humour is used here as a form of ‘give and take’ in communication that allows Indigenous children to participate in a less formal exchange with the teacher rather than to react in anger, silence or non-compliance.³¹¹

Aboriginal humour is used for the control of social relationships; to assist in keeping lines of group communications open; and to help to create a less formal, non-threatening environment.³¹² Humour can also be used to great effect by teachers in an Indigenous classroom environment; however, it requires a complete revision of the traditional teacher/pupil hierarchical relationship.³¹³ Cajoling humour can be used by teachers as a less formal disciplinary tool; used to help regain class control; it can help resolve conflicts; it enables the teacher to act less as a facilitator and more as a part of the group; and finally, teachers can use it to encourage the overall amenability of the classroom environment.³¹⁴

Referencing a Victorian cultural festival, Indigenous Kamilaroi/Uralarai woman Frances Peters-Little discusses the humorous content of several traditional Indigenous dance performances in order to exemplify the different perspectives of Aboriginal people towards humour.³¹⁵ The first dance dramatised a group of Indigenous honey gatherers being chased and stung by the bees in their endeavours to collect their bounty.³¹⁶ The second dance represented spirits of dead people who had come back in order to imitate and tease their living ancestors. This teasing was done by taunting them with tree branches and leaves. An accompanying didjeridu player narrated the dances, advising the audience of their significance and encouraging them to laugh at the humour.³¹⁷

Peters-Little says that the Aboriginal performers needed to specifically appeal to white audiences in order to get them to share in the humour of their performances. She states that: ‘[i]f there is one significant feature which distinguishes the way Aboriginal people perceive Aboriginal performances it

³⁰⁹ Carter, J., 1988, ‘Am I too black to go with you?’ in Keen, I. (ed.), 1988, *Being Black*, Aboriginal Studies Press for the Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, ACT, p. 71.

³¹⁰ Carter, J., 1988, p. 71.

³¹¹ Reid, C., and H. Velissaris, 1991, Op. Cit., p. 15.

³¹² Reid, C., and H. Velissaris, 1991, pp. 15–16.

³¹³ Reid, C., and H. Velissaris, 1991, p. 16.

³¹⁴ Reid, C., and H. Velissaris, 1991, p. 16.

³¹⁵ Peters-Little, F., 2000, ‘High art and the humour of the ordinary’ in *The Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture*, S. Kleinert and M. Neale, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, pp. 362–363.

³¹⁶ Peters-Little, F., 2000, p. 362.

³¹⁷ Peters-Little, F., 2000, p. 362.

is the relationship between audience and performer and the humour we share.’³¹⁸ White culture, she suggests, dissociates itself from actors and distances itself from performance humour on a pretext that it is ‘high art’ and worthy of more serious contemplation.³¹⁹ Peters-Little says that many attempts made by Indigenous people to produce humour for mainstream Australian audiences have been destined to failure for this very reason. This is in marked contrast to the way in which Aboriginal people themselves engage with their own cultural humour expressions as everyday occurrences.³²⁰

Using the example of the 1970s character ‘Superboong’ from Indigenous comedy television programme, *Basically Black*, McKee ponders how Aboriginal (media) comedy should be read.³²¹ Is *Superboong* an effective parody of racism, or does he reinforce pejorative stereotypes of Aboriginal people?³²² This is especially pertinent, McKee believes, given that the name of this superhero references a ‘weighty body of hatred’ with use of the term ‘boong’, a derogatory name for Aboriginal people in the mainstream.³²³ This article investigates the relationship between comic representations and Australian Aboriginality.³²⁴ McKee queries the structures that are necessary in order to contextualise work as humorous and not racially demeaning.³²⁵

McKee argues that because of Australia’s mostly negative colonial representations of Aboriginal people, the reversals and exaggerations of the Superboong skit are unlikely to be misread in a derogatory way.³²⁶ Comedy, he says, makes sense to the degree to which we recognise stereotypes.³²⁷ In the television comedy series *Full Frontal* an Aboriginal man walks up to a white couple who have just purchased a house at auction. The woman expresses common-held fears that he might make a land rights claim for the house. Her partner quips “Personally I’m all for Land Rights, but not here”. After a pause, the Aboriginal man calmly states: “I’m from the Real Estate Agents. I’ve brought your keys”.³²⁸ This sketch plays on well-known (white) assumptions about obsessive Aboriginal Land Rights claims. It touches on hypocrisies where non-Indigenous people feel that such rights might encroach on their own backyards. McKee notes that this segment produces an obvious white butt to the joke.³²⁹

³¹⁸ Peters-Little, F., 2000, p. 362.

³¹⁹ Peters-Little, F., 2000, p. 363.

³²⁰ Peters-Little, F., 2000, pp. 362–363.

³²¹ McKee, A., 1996, ‘Superboong!: The Ambivalence of Comedy and Differing Histories of Race’ in *Continuum Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, v.10/2 (1996), Perth, Western Australia.

³²² McKee, A., 1996, p. 44.

³²³ McKee, A., 1996, p. 44. Although the origins of this word are not entirely certain, online sources suggest that it is a derivative of an Eora or Cadigal (NSW) word, ‘boonga-boonga’, that means ‘bum’ or ‘arse’, viewed 18/02/2015 <<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Boong&defid=4114897>>.

³²⁴ McKee, A., 1996, p. 46.

³²⁵ McKee, A., 1996, p. 46.

³²⁶ McKee, A., 1996, p. 50.

³²⁷ McKee, A., 1996, p. 53.

³²⁸ McKee, A., 1996, p. 54.

³²⁹ McKee, A., 1996, p. 54.

Others do not. For example, in an episode from the television comedy show *Fast Forward*, McKee highlights the recognisable Indigenous comedy actor Ernie Dingo's parody of a detective show, 'White Collar Black Tracker'. In the skit Dingo is in the bush wearing a loin cloth and holding a boomerang. An electronic noise sounds and he extracts a facsimile from a nearby rock. He changes into a suit and heads into the city office. Here, using 'traditional tracking vocabulary' he mystically locates a bank account of stolen money typed into a computer.³³⁰

McKee says that the butt of this joke is difficult to discern. Is it a mockery of big businesses' fiscal obsession; white middle class interest in traditional Aboriginality; or does it mock Aboriginal unsuitability to urban lifestyles?³³¹ In this example, it is impossible to say that Dingo won't be read as just another 'Black tracker' trope.³³² However, in the end, McKee says that Dingo himself, an identifiable (Aboriginal) comedian, provides authorship to the reading of comedy.³³³ For it is authorship, within the context of a history of image representations, that matters.³³⁴ In the field of comedy, authorship and history help to stabilise meaning.³³⁵

The visual arts have generally become a significant avenue of expression for Indigenous Australian people. Through the arts they communicate with mainstream Australian and world audiences, providing them with images of matters that are important to themselves and their communities. Neale and Morrell's article documents the rise of photography as an aspect of this expression, particularly noting how integral humour is in this endeavor.³³⁶ Murri photojournalist, Mervyn Bishop's 1989 self-portrait that asks the question: *Is There an Aboriginal Photography?*³³⁷ is an ironic photograph showing an image of Bishop holding a tiny camera up to his over-enlarged right eye.³³⁸

³³⁰ McKee, A., 1996, p. 54.

³³¹ McKee, A., 1996, p. 54.

³³² McKee, A., 1996, p. 55.

³³³ McKee, A., 1996, p. 55. It's important to note that McKee also recognises that ultimately Dingo felt frustrated with the television show *Fast Forward* and left the programme because he felt that he had become the token black 'Jacky Jacky' stereotype, see Ibid., p. 56 and Goodall, H, Jakubowicz, A, et al, 1990, 'Racism, Cultural Pluralism and the Media', *Report for Office of Multicultural Affairs*, University of Technology, Sydney.

³³⁴ McKee, A., 1996, Op. Cit., p. 46.

³³⁵ McKee, A., 1996, p. 46.

³³⁶ Neale, M., & T. Morrell, 2004, 'Humour in Indigenous Australian Photography –Who's Laughing?' in *Photofile*, no. 72, Winter 2004, pp. 54–57. Viewed 18/09/2014 at:

<<http://search.informit.com.au.ezproxy.flinders.edu.au/documentSummary;dn=200408950>>.

³³⁷ Bishop, M., 1989, 'Is there an Aboriginal photography?' gelatin silver photograph, 40.3 x 59.7 w cm, National Gallery of Australia (Accession no. 98.174). Image viewed 9/11/2014:

<<http://artsearch.nga.gov.au/Detail.cfm?IRN=16514&PICTAUS=TRUE>>.

³³⁸ Bishop, M., 1989.



Bishop, M., 1980, 'Is There an Aboriginal Photography?' 6.4 x 23.6 cm

According to Neale and Morrell, this image suggests that the photograph's subject is immense; nevertheless, the representation of it is barely there.³³⁹ Up until that time, Aboriginal photography had mainly consisted of images taken of them by non-Indigenous anthropologists.³⁴⁰ In this photograph Bishop turns the camera on himself, indicating to his predominantly white audience that the joke might now be on them as Aboriginal photo-artists take control of the production of their own images.³⁴¹

Indigenous visual artist Tracey Moffatt's 1986 series *Some Lads* featured playful images of Aboriginal men taken by herself, an Aboriginal woman.³⁴² Neale and Morrell suggest that the fun and confidence of these young Aboriginal dancers is self-evident, and is almost certainly the product of Moffatt's own Aboriginality.³⁴³

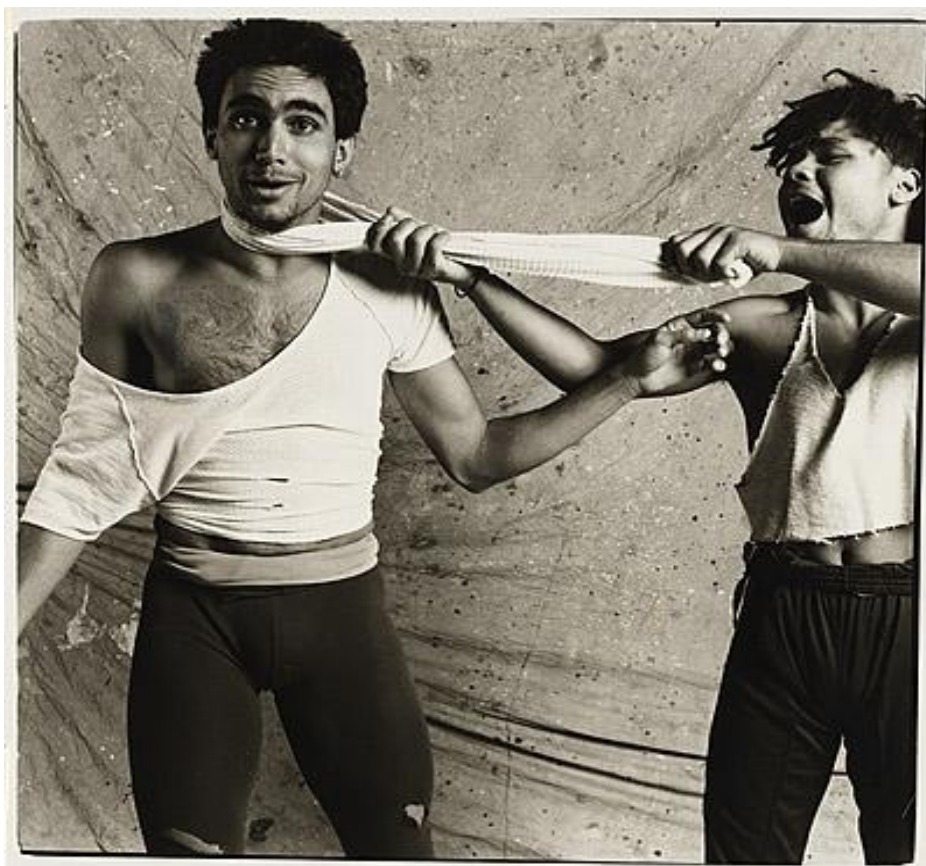
³³⁹ Neale, M., & T. Morrell, 2004, Op. Cit., p. 55.

³⁴⁰ Neale, M., & T. Morrell, 2004, p. 55.

³⁴¹ Neale, M., & T. Morrell, 2004, p. 55.

³⁴² Neale, M., & T. Morrell, 2004, p. 56. Artist proof of 'Some Lads #2', black and white photograph, 45.7 x 45.7 cm, viewed 9/11/2014 at: National Gallery of Australia Artsearch, <<http://artsearch.nga.gov.au/Detail.cfm?IRN=72746>>.

³⁴³ Neale, M., & T. Morrell, 2004, Op. Cit., p. 56.



Moffatt, T., 1986, 'Some Lads II',
photograph, 45.7 x 45.7cm

Destiny Deacon, a Murri photographic artist, frequently uses Polaroid photographs and simple bubble-jet prints in order to produce her 'rough and ready' artwork.³⁴⁴ These techniques heighten both the poignancy and the humour of her photographs.³⁴⁵ Deacon is a consistently ironic photographer, producing work that is playful, yet piercing in its reflection on Australian hypocrisies and racism.³⁴⁶

Deacon often uses kitsch items such as picaninny dolls, and other non-Indigenous items of 'Aboriginalia', in her photographs to represent and mock a style of benevolence and racism that she sees prevalent in Australian society.³⁴⁷ Neale and Morrell believe that while Deacon is the least overtly critical of Indigenous photographers attempting to dismantle racial stereotypes, her work is full of funny and ironic representations of white Australia's hypocrisy.³⁴⁸

³⁴⁴ Neale, M., & T. Morrell, 2004, p. 56. Deacon's 2007 Exhibition, *Whacked*, features many of her politically contentious photographs including this commentary on Australian patriotism following the Cronulla Riots in Sydney in 2005, Deacon, D., 2007, 'The Goodie Hoodie Family', Lightjet print from Polaroid, 80 x 100 cm, viewed 20/05/2016, Roslyn Oxley9 Gallery, online: <http://www.roslynoxley9.com.au/artists/2/Destiny_Deacon/561/40426/>.

³⁴⁵ Neale, M., & T. Morrell, 2004, p. 56.

³⁴⁶ Neale, M., & T. Morrell, 2004, p. 57.

³⁴⁷ Neale, M., & T. Morrell, 2004, p. 57.

³⁴⁸ Neale, M., & T. Morrell, 2004, p. 57.



Deacon, D., 2007, 'The Goodie Hoodie Family',
Polariod, 80x100cm

Ray Lillis compares the role of Indigenous Australian comedians with that of their Maori counterparts in New Zealand's mainstream media in 2007.³⁴⁹ He provides a history of Maori participation in mainstream comedy productions, including female comedian, Rima Te Wiata, who, in the early 1990s, performed her political satire in popular television comedy series, *Issues*.³⁵⁰ Lillis contends that the relative success and mainstream acceptance of Maori comedians is the result of 'the general acceptance by the New Zealand public that Maori culture is a valuable aspect of their overall society.'³⁵¹

This, he believes, contrasts pointedly to the number and acceptance of Aboriginal comedians in Australia.³⁵² Lillis says that Indigenous comedians Mark Bin Bakar (as his alter-ego *Mary G*) and Sean Choolburra are among the few Aboriginal comedians who have had limited success in mainstream Australia.³⁵³ He notes that there are those who argue that these statistics are fine, given

³⁴⁹ Lillis, R., 2007, 'Black Comedy, Indigenous Humour in Australia and New Zealand' *Metro Magazine*, no. 155, pp. 74–78 at p. 74.

³⁵⁰ Lillis, R., 2007, p. 76. For a review of Rima Te Wiata's work in the comedy series 'More Issues – A Compilation Television 1991' viewed 9/11/2014 at < <http://www.nzonscreen.com/title/more-issues-1991> >.

³⁵¹ Lillis, R., 2007, Op. Cit., p. 76.

³⁵² Lillis, R., 2007, pp. 76–77.

³⁵³ Lillis, R., 2007, p. 74.

the fact that Aboriginal people only make up 2.4% of Australia's population.³⁵⁴ However, he suggests this argument is only acceptable if people consider Indigenous cultures to have 'no intrinsic value in [their] own right'.³⁵⁵ Australians, Lillis says, are lacking 'a genuine curiosity about the wit, wisdom and world view of [their Aboriginal] peers.'³⁵⁶ Lillis lists six stages in the development of the comedy of minority peoples.³⁵⁷ The first stage relates to the dominant culture ridiculing the minority via exaggeration and mimicry. In the second stage the minority perform demeaning jokes about themselves; and stage three is where minorities tell in-jokes to their own community. Stage four is a form of 'reverse racism' where minorities mock the dominant culture. The fifth stage is conciliatory where minority comedians' jokes relate to common experiences with elements of recognising their own difference, and then pointing to the absurdity of it. And the final, sixth stage Lillis suggests is when minority comedians are free to face mainstream audiences with jokes and stories that are neither 'pro-black or anti-white – ...just funny.'³⁵⁸

Lillis believes that currently Aboriginal humour in mainstream Australia is caught between levels one and two of his hierarchy.³⁵⁹ While non-Indigenous comedians like Louis Beers, with his derisive *King Billy Cokebottle* imitation of an Aboriginal person, still exist, and maintain a level of public acceptance, Lillis says that Australia will not progress from these early stages.³⁶⁰ Ultimately, a nation that continues to suppress the history of poor treatment of its Indigenous people and supports derisive representations of them will remain in a state of poor (social) health.³⁶¹ He argues that Australian public television has a moral responsibility to incorporate a percentage of Indigenous representation in all aspects of their comedy productions.³⁶²

Certainly Lillis' call for greater Indigenous participation in mainstream comedy productions ties in with McKee's belief that recognisable authorship helps to stabilise meaning in comedy, in turn, assisting to produce and sustain Aboriginal comedy celebrities.³⁶³ However, Maori and Indigenous Australian experiences of British colonialism are not entirely comparable. The more cohesive and recognisably 'western' socio-economic structures of Maori cultures have led to their different

³⁵⁴ Lillis, R., 2007, p. 74. The Australian census of 30/06/2011 reveals that Aboriginal people make up 3% of the national population or 669,000 people. Australian Bureau of Statistics, 30/06/2011, 'Estimates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians', viewed 01/08/2016 at

< www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/3238.0.55.001>.

³⁵⁵ Lillis, R., 2007, p. 74.

³⁵⁶ Lillis, R., 2007, p. 77.

³⁵⁷ Lillis, R., 2007, p. 77.

³⁵⁸ Lillis, R., 2007, p. 77.

³⁵⁹ Lillis, R., 2007, p. 77.

³⁶⁰ Lillis, R., 2007, pp. 77–78. Lillis' endnote states that the Cokebottle website has thirteen cassettes for sale as well as various best-of compilations that have been illustrated with Sambo-styled cartoons and have titles such as *Black Label*, *Six Pack*, *Gibbit Five*, *Black Magic* and *Free and Fully Grunted*. The Cokebottle website is still in existence and viewed 7 November 2014 at: <<http://billycokebottle.com/>>.

³⁶¹ Lillis, R., 2007, p. 78.

³⁶² Lillis, R., 2007, p. 78.

³⁶³ McKee, A., 1996, Op. Cit., p. 46.

experiences and outcomes.³⁶⁴ The language and socio-political complexities of Aboriginal Australian communities have meant that their colonisers more readily dismissed the value of their cultures that were so different than their own. The lack of recognition of Indigenous Australian cultures' 'intrinsic value' can be put down to what Stanner calls 'The great Australian silence'.³⁶⁵ Stanner suggests that mainstream Australia has intentionally engaged in a 'cult of forgetfulness' concerning many aspects of Indigenous and non-Indigenous relationships in this country.³⁶⁶ A most insidious form of racism in Australia can be seen in the act of rendering Aboriginal people politically, socially and indeed culturally 'invisible' for much of our joint history.³⁶⁷

Furthermore, Lillis' joke telling progression where ultimately minority comedians ideally produce jokes and stories that are neither anti-white nor pro-black but 'just funny' is unrealistically utopian.³⁶⁸ Comedians are always going to push boundaries of social acceptability in attempts to shock audiences with their words, and this invariably includes racial stereotyping. This is the nature of humour and, like salt without its saltiness, rather worthless without this risky edge. Perhaps the ideal public environment for comedy is just one that gives recognition and credit to a variety of social voices that share an equal playing field.

Indigenous author Gayle Kennedy makes some suggestions about what it is that Aboriginal people find funny.³⁶⁹ She states, as Adams and Newell also contend,³⁷⁰ that jokes were not the way that she, and her extended Aboriginal family, got their laughs.³⁷¹ Their laughs mainly came from the spoonerisms, malapropisms, slips and stumbles, and mockery of any big noting perceived in those around them.³⁷² These 'stuff-ups' were readily incorporated into funny yarns that would leave Aboriginal listeners in fits of laughter.³⁷³ Many of these stories were richly embellished 'piss-takes'

³⁶⁴ Maori economic trading occurred with European whalers, traders and farmers from the late 1700s. The British signed the *Treaty of Waitangi* with Maori chiefs in 1840 recognising their sovereignty and prior ownership of New Zealand before colonisation. See: Government of New Zealand, 27/01/2015, 'Europeans to 1840' in *Teara, Encyclopaedia of New Zealand History*, viewed at: <http://www.teara.govt.nz/en/history/> p. 2. Gathercole & Lowenthal suggest that Maori cultural autonomy is now implicitly accepted through New Zealand and is reflected in its legislation and cultural practices. See: Gathercole, P., & D. Lowenthal, *Politics of the Past*, Routledge, New York, 2004, pp. 95–96.

³⁶⁵ Stanner, W.E.H., 1969, 'After the Dreaming', *The Boyer Lectures 1968*, Australian Broadcasting Commission, Sydney, NSW, p. 25.

³⁶⁶ Lillis, R., 2007, p. 74.

³⁶⁷ Langton, M., 2003, Op. Cit., p. 113.

³⁶⁸ Lillis, R., 2007, p. 77.

³⁶⁹ Kennedy, G., 2009, 'What Makes a Blackfulla laugh' *Australian Author*, no. 41/3, December 2009, pp. 12–14. Gayle Kenney is an Indigenous Australian writer who won the 2006 David Unaipon Award for her 2007 novel *me, Antman, Fleabag*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, QLD, viewed 7 November 2014, <<http://australian-author.org/single/413-what-makes-a-blackfulla-laugh>>.

³⁷⁰ Adams, P., & P. Newell, 1994 (1994–2001), Op. Cit., p. 14.

³⁷¹ Kennedy, G., 2009, Op. Cit., p. 12.

³⁷² Kennedy, G., 2009, p. 12.

³⁷³ Kennedy, G., 2009, p. 12. According to Dawn Bessarab & Bridget Ng'andu, 'yarning' is an informal cultural communication traditionally used by Indigenous people in storytelling and conversations. See Bessarab, D and Ng'andu, B., 2010, 'Yarning about Yarning as a Legitimate Method in Indigenous Research', in *International Journal of Critical Indigenous Studies*, v. 3/1.

that even left the stories' victims with a sense of humorous pride.³⁷⁴ Stories about 'monumental' stuff ups were retold over and over, each ending with a triumphant declaration of 'Blackfullas, eh!'³⁷⁵

Kennedy says that Aboriginals are quick, pouncing on any verbal blunders they hear, and not readily letting them go.³⁷⁶ She says that she is still paying 25 years later for a spoonerism when she told some of her mob that they could be 'spined on the fot' for littering!³⁷⁷ Kennedy states that: '[t]hese and other stories are dragged up at every opportunity we get to sit around with a beer or a mug of tea, and we laugh our guts out for hours.'³⁷⁸

Aboriginal people not only laugh at funny yarns, verbal and physical slips, pranks and pomposity, but at jokes about other ethnic groups too.³⁷⁹ That is, as Stanner has also noted, Aboriginal people laugh at what most other Australians laugh at too. Moreover, as Gayle Kennedy's relatives often say in the face of adversity, 'if you didn't laugh, you'd bloody well have to cry.'³⁸⁰

Indigenous academic Lillian Holt provides a contribution to the collection of Australian humour essays in *Serious Frolic* with her work on Aboriginal humour.³⁸¹ Holt believes that having a sense of humour is extremely important to Aboriginal people, although it is one of the less documented aspects of their lives.³⁸² Humour is integrated into the everyday existence of Aboriginal people's survival, and a spontaneous part of their ordinary lives.³⁸³ Aboriginal humour and laughter are spontaneous, free-flowing expressions of their dry, wry wit.³⁸⁴

Holt provides the story of when she and a group of fellow Aboriginal workers at the College of Aboriginal Education organised a bus field trip.³⁸⁵ An old tattered bus turned up hours late, to the horror and indignation of most of the waiting passengers. One of the waiting group said to Holt, without hesitation, 'Look at that old battered bus, Lillian. You'd think those whitefellas would give us blackfellas at least a new bus to wreck'.³⁸⁶ Holt notes that this joking comment cut through the shame of the situation and the unstated tension between the truth and stereotypes of black and white people. The man's humour bought 'perspective and relief' to the situation; and the group laughed and got

³⁷⁴ Kennedy, G., 2009, Op. Cit., p. 12.

³⁷⁵ Kennedy, G., 2009, p. 12.

³⁷⁶ Kennedy, G., 2009, p. 12.

³⁷⁷ Kennedy, G., 2009, p. 12.

³⁷⁸ Kennedy, G., 2009, p. 12.

³⁷⁹ Kennedy, G., 2009, p. 14.

³⁸⁰ Kennedy, G., 2009, p. 14.

³⁸¹ Holt, L., 2009, 'Aboriginal humour: A conversational corroboree' in De Groen, F and P. Kirkpatrick (eds.), 2009, *Serious Frolic, Essays on Australian Humour*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, QLD, pp. 81–94.

³⁸² Holt, L., 2009, p. 81.

³⁸³ Holt, L., 2009, p. 82.

³⁸⁴ Holt, L., 2009, p. 82.

³⁸⁵ Holt, L., 2009, pp. 82–83.

³⁸⁶ Holt, L., 2009, p. 83.

onto the bus. This, Holt believes, is good example of a situation where Aboriginal people are able to laugh at themselves and others, and then to let go of contentious matters.³⁸⁷

In Holt's opinion 'humour is an essential lubricant of life', one that is often taken for granted in dominant Aboriginal environments.³⁸⁸ Whenever Holt tells jokes in her speeches about the way in which Indigenous people are continually studied and labelled by white people, audiences laugh because humour is a great vehicle for conveying unpalatable truths that we would prefer not to confront.³⁸⁹ Humour assists to relieve racism and helps Indigenous people to handle their anger in the face of it.³⁹⁰

According to Holt, Aboriginal humour is infectious and accessible to everyone.³⁹¹ She suggests that Aboriginal people around the country both appreciate and honour its presence.³⁹² The interviews she conducted with Aboriginal people on the topic of humour reveal that, the humour of beleaguered people is often self-deprecating and used to help ease that oppression by mocking adversity or making fun of the oppressor.³⁹³ Contemporary Aboriginal humour can be distinguished from other forms of Australian humour because Aboriginal people have been affected by the oppression that they have suffered in this country. Humour is often used by them to counter, subvert and defuse these experiences and has assisted them to survive living through the greater part of the twentieth century.³⁹⁴

Ultimately Holt believes that Aboriginal humour evades definition and control. It is one of the few things that non-Indigenous people have been unable to 'steal' from them because they keep it safe and living in their hearts.³⁹⁵

Gumbainggir man Gary Foley suggests that the most important quality required by Indigenous political activists is 'a healthy sense of the absurd'.³⁹⁶ Activists readily refute and challenge the irrationality of mainstream beliefs and falsification of Aboriginal history with the use of their subversive sense of humour. Some members of Australia's 1970s *Black Power* movement believed that humour was an important and powerful weapon in their struggles against the social oppression Aboriginal people faced. The use of satire and ridicule, Foley suggests, was entirely consistent with

³⁸⁷ Holt, L., 2009, p. 83.

³⁸⁸ Holt, L., 2009, p. 84.

³⁸⁹ Holt, L., 2009, pp. 85–86.

³⁹⁰ Holt, L., 2009, p. 86.

³⁹¹ Holt, L., 2009, p. 87.

³⁹² Holt, L., 2009, pp. 86–87.

³⁹³ Holt, L., 2009, p. 87.

³⁹⁴ Holt, L., 2009, p. 88.

³⁹⁵ Holt, L., 2009, p. 93.

³⁹⁶ Foley, G., 2012, 'The Contrarian: Black Power, Black Theatre and Black Humour' in *Tracker*, 05/10/2012, viewed 16/10/2012 at: <tracker.org.au/2012/10>.

traditional Aboriginal cultural values that has always used these styles of humour as both offensive and defensive weapons in the fight for social justice.³⁹⁷

Foley recognises the employment of these styles of humour in the National Black Theatre production of *Basically Black*. This production was a political comedy review show that provided satirical commentary about Australian society and its bigoted attitudes to Aboriginal people.³⁹⁸ Foley says of this production that it ‘won over its predominantly white audiences at the Nimrod (theatre) through its ability to make them laugh at themselves.’³⁹⁹ Satire and ridicule were used in a clever way to get the (white) audience to imagine what it must be like to be black and living in a racist nation. This style of humour, Foley suggests, enabled the Aboriginal actors to get mainstream audiences to think seriously about some of the issues of injustice that were important to their people.

Birri-Gubba/Yugambah woman Nicole Watson contends that mainstream Australians rarely celebrate Aboriginal peoples’ ‘positive attributes’.⁴⁰⁰ She believes that there are at least three positive attributes which Aboriginal people have in abundance: resilience, generosity of spirit and humour.⁴⁰¹ Of these, most valuable, is their sense of humour. Watson says that Aboriginal humour is defined by a great sense of timing, an ability to take the mickey out of others without being ‘cruel’, and ingenuity.⁴⁰²

Watson suggests that an example of the Indigenous sense of humour can be seen in the way that, soon after the dramatic Northern Territory Emergency Response was announced, photographs of prescribed areas were circulated on the internet.⁴⁰³ Her favourite was from Willowra where a sign anticipating military presence in the community read ‘Tank Angle Parking’ and a warning about the presence of ‘Pointy Land Mines’ right next to a large ant mound!⁴⁰⁴ Watson says that Aboriginal humour is rarely celebrated in mainstream. She suggests that it is about time that fellow Australians opened their eyes to see Aboriginal resilience, generosity and humour because these are the things that make their cultures so ‘deadly’.⁴⁰⁵ However, this has historically been difficult and obscured by significant

³⁹⁷ Foley, G., 2012.

³⁹⁸ Foley, G., 2012.

³⁹⁹ Foley, G., 2012.

⁴⁰⁰ Watson, N., 2012, ‘Little Black Duck: What defines Aboriginal Australia?’ in *Tracker*, 30/07/2012, viewed 16/10/2012 at: <tracker.org.au/2012/07>.

⁴⁰¹ Watson, N., 2012, np.

⁴⁰² Watson, N., 2012, np.

⁴⁰³ Watson, N., 2012, np. In June 2007 the Federal Government announced that it would evoke a national emergency response in order to protect Northern Territory Aboriginal children from abuse and neglect. See ‘Australian Human Rights Commission Social Justice Report 2007’ that provides details of the Intervention, viewed 8/11/2014 at: <<https://www.humanrights.gov.au/publications/social-justice-report-2007-chapter-3-northern-territory-emergency-response-intervention>>.

⁴⁰⁴ Watson, N., 2012, np. Images of these funny signs can be seen on the independent journalist *Crikey.com* website viewed 8/11/2014 at: <http://blogs.crikey.com.au/northern/2011/08/04/intervention-sign-wars-in-the-tanami-desert-part-1045/?wpmp_switcher=mobile&wpmp_tp=2>.

⁴⁰⁵ Watson, N., 2012, np. The term ‘deadly’ is frequently used in Aboriginal English to refer to people or things that are really good or excellent. See Vinson, T., 2008, ‘Some Lexical Variations of Australian Aboriginal English’, viewed

examples of humour that mocks Aboriginal people in mainstream popular culture.⁴⁰⁶ The long history of this derisiveness is recorded in the negative humour that exists in Australia about Indigenous people.⁴⁰⁷

In December 2014 Bribie Island Elder, Pearl Duncan, was awarded a Cultural Studies Ph.D for her contribution to the documentation of the presence of Aboriginal humour within Aboriginal communities, like the one in which she was raised.⁴⁰⁸ Duncan says that her thesis investigates how humour functions in the survival process of Australia's Indigenous people in the face of British colonialism. She recognises that her Aboriginal kin: 'could laugh when there was no apparent reason.' and in the face of dispossession, powerlessness and oppression. Like Holt, Duncan suggests that humour is a central weapon used by Aboriginal people in the maintenance of their resilient identity and has always prevailed in the 'daily discourse' that surrounds her.⁴⁰⁹

Duncan's insider knowledge of Aboriginal humour is central to her methodology as she primarily uses her own knowledge as background for her findings of ... 'how humour works in practice as well as in theory.'⁴¹⁰ She argues that there is a strong relationship between humour and social structures and early ethnological records documented how Aboriginal communities used humour to relieve tensions, allay community conflicts and in the promotion of social order.⁴¹¹

Chapter three of my current thesis supports Duncan's findings on the ways that humour has been used in close-knit Aboriginal communities to reinforce the social status quo; however, my findings have been more closely tied to the academic theories of humour that have their traditions within western literature. Duncan's thesis discusses the history of relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, with her own personal perspective on the way that humour has been used as a strategy of resistance to colonialism and as a tool of social empowerment.⁴¹² Chapters four to six of Duncan's investigation cover a wide range of Indigenous artistic practices, including literature, theatre, film and visual arts, that show how all of these mediums have been used by Aboriginal people

9/11/2014 at: <https://www.griffith.edu.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0004/72904/Issue1-troy-vinson-some-lexical-variations-of-australian-aboriginal-english.pdf>.

⁴⁰⁶ Watson, N., 2012, np.

⁴⁰⁷ Watson, N., 2012, np.

⁴⁰⁸ University of Queensland, 15/12/2014, np., 'Love of Laughter turns to Ph.D for Pearl', *UQ News*, viewed 17/04/2015: <<http://www.uq.edu.au/news/article/2014/12/love-of-laughter-leads-phd-pearl>>.

⁴⁰⁹ University of Queensland, 15/12/2014, np.

⁴¹⁰ Duncan, P, 30/11/2014, 'Abstract' to *The role of Aboriginal humour in cultural survival and resistance*, University of Queensland, Australia, viewed 12/05/2016: <<http://espace.library.uq.edu.au/view/UQ:345997>>.

⁴¹¹ Duncan, P, 30/11/2014, 'Abstract'.

⁴¹² Duncan, P, 30/11/2014, 'Abstract'.

to make protest statements and to develop skills of ‘self-awareness’.⁴¹³ Duncan concludes that parody, irony, and satire are dominant tools in these endeavours.⁴¹⁴

My own thesis focuses specifically on Indigenous artistic endeavours in live performance. This includes Indigenous theatre and stand-up comedy, as opposed to the array of other art forms discussed more broadly by Duncan. This more focused review allows me to make more specific conclusions about Aboriginal humour forms that are discussed within the context of academic humour literature. This includes how contemporary Aboriginal performers have continued to incorporate some of the traditional forms of mimicry, witty yarning and mickey-taking in their performances. Since the 1970s Aboriginal humour performances will be shown making greater use of black humour techniques, and peppering their performances with native words and distinctive colloquial phrases. Additionally, contemporary Aboriginal stand-up routines’ use of self-deprecation ties their performances to the stand-up comedy of other world minority groups.⁴¹⁵ These findings allow me to assert, as Duncan also suggests, that humour is a significant tool of Aboriginal self-identity. And beyond that, I propose that Aboriginal humour must be acknowledged for its important contributions to Australia’s national humour identity.

The material discussed in this more urban focused section of my literature review has gone some way to recognising the existence and value of humour within Indigenous Australian cultural pursuits. Although, in particular, Duncan’s thesis contributes to this scholarly literature, the lack of critical engagement with theoretical humour forms and functions remains discernible. Much Indigenous literature celebrates the use of humour as a tool of cultural survival; while non-Indigenous literature laments the lack of its presence with Australia’s mainstream humour culture. My thesis proposes to bridge the gap between Indigenous emotional connections to humour and a theoretical analysis of the forms and function used by them within this pursuit.

3.5 Humour literature pertaining to Indigenous Australians as victims (butts)

Australia has a significant history of Indigenous representation by non-Indigenous writers and artists who have produced some particularly derogatory images and negative stereotypes of them within Australia’s mainstream humour discourse. Much of this material is visual and located in popular cartoons. Indigenous people have been the subject of non-Indigenous humorous images and jibes that have metaphorically strip them of their subjectivity and right to represent themselves within

⁴¹³ Duncan, P, 30/11/2014, Chapters 4, 5 & 6, viewed 12/10/2015:

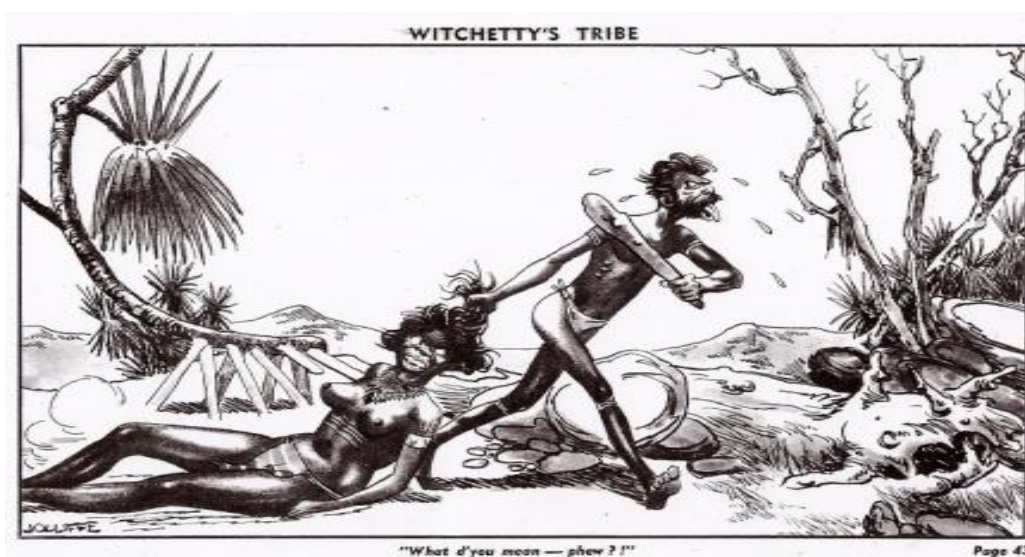
<http://espace.library.uq.edu.au/view/UQ:345997/s33652117_phd_submission_final.pdf>.

⁴¹⁴ Duncan, P, 30/11/2014, ‘Abstract’.

⁴¹⁵ For example Ellithorpe et al. recognize self-deprecation as an important element of Indigenous comedians’ repertoires. See: Ellithorpe, M., Esralew, S., & L. Holbert, 2014, *Putting the “self” in self-deprecation: when deprecating humor about minorities is acceptable*, *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, 27(3), Walter de Gruyter, Berlin, Germany.

Australia's mainstream media, continually relegating them to positions of inferior 'other' in contrast to an Anglo-mainstream normalcy.

Eric Jolliffe produced his *Witchetty's Tribe* comic books of Aboriginal tribal life during the 1940s.⁴¹⁶ In reviewing a sample of his cartoons, (vols. 4–9), a series of regular themes are clear. The dominant style of his images relate to Aboriginal violence, predominantly against women (23); next are cartoons that mock (albeit mildly) 'traditional' customs (22); then comes a high percentage of gender stereotypes portraying 'noble savage' men and voluptuous, sexy women (11);⁴¹⁷ next is cynicism against 'whites' (13); then dangerous chasing animals (buffalo & crocodiles) (5); lazy (male) Aboriginals (5); the (Witch) Doctor Witchetty (4); and finally, some serious (affectionate) Aboriginal sketches (4).⁴¹⁸



Jolliffe, E., 194?, 'What d'ya mean phew?' *Witchetty's Tribe*, Series No. 8, p. 43

Jolliffe's cartoons of farcical tribal situations created many humorous images of 'traditional' Aboriginal life that evoked racial stereotypes; predominantly portraying Aboriginal men as violent and lazy; Aboriginal women as hardworking, sexual objects; and traditional customs as ripe for mockery. However, Jolliffe's images were not all negative portrayals of Aboriginality.⁴¹⁹ His critical images that mocked non-Indigenous greed and environmental destruction were also common themes, with issues of dangerous uranium mining frequenting several cartoons. Coupled with affectionately

⁴¹⁶ Jolliffe, E., 1940–?, *Witchetty's Tribe, Aboriginal Cartoon Fun, A Pix Series*, Associated Newspapers Ltd., Sydney. None of these cartoon booklets include date information, their publication during the 1940s is referenced in AIATSIS Media Release, 14/02/2011, 'Nothing Comical About New Display', viewed 20/11/2014 at: <http://www.aiatsis.gov.au/_files/news/ComicsExhibition_140211.pdf>.

⁴¹⁷ The number of cartoons displaying 'gender stereotypes' could be considered much greater, given the fact that many images categorised within other topics also show these idealised images.

⁴¹⁸ Jolliffe, E., 1940–?, *Witchetty's Tribe, Aboriginal Cartoon Fun, A Pix Series*, Associated Newspapers Ltd., Sydney, vols. 4–9.

⁴¹⁹ As with any cartoons, interpretation of their intent is complex. Recognising them as simple put-downs of Aboriginal people denies the fact that jokes cut both ways, and this image could also be laughing at western notions of hygiene in the face of bigger issues.

whimsical images of Aboriginal characters, Jolliffe's cartoons suggest a benevolence that perpetuates ideas of the demise of traditional Aboriginal lifestyles in the face of white progress.



Jolliffe, E., 194?, *Witchetty's Tribe*,
Series No. 8, p. 24

Jolliffe's cartoons have now become controversial. Following publication of one of his cartoons in the May 1980 *Corroborree* journal, the Redfern Aboriginal Legal Services complained to the NSW Anti-discrimination Board saying that the cartoon was detrimental to all Aboriginals, perpetuating racist stereotypes. Jolliffe responded to the ensuing controversy in his 1980 *The Best of Witchetty's Tribe* publication. Here he said that he, and many Aboriginal people, found his cartoons amusing.⁴²⁰ Jolliffe defended his work's attempts to bring the interests of Aboriginal cultures to 'grass roots Australia' and was heartened by public support he had received following this attack on his work.⁴²¹ While the popularity of his work among Aboriginal people points to the ambiguities of humour reception, Jolliffe's lack of cultural authority as a non-Indigenous person calls his work into question as a form of cultural racism that helps to maintain the status quo of mainstream Australia by reproducing well versed negative tropes of Aboriginal behaviours.⁴²²

Coleman and Tanner's record of Australian political cartoons mostly covers cartooning from early colonial sources; however some later (mid-1960s) images are also included.⁴²³ These images are mostly 'unfair' stereotypes of groups of people found in Australian society.⁴²⁴ However, it is suggested that their 'value' lies within this very injustice and crudeness. With such portrayals cartoonists caught the attitudes and prejudices of the Australian people at the time, and they often give

⁴²⁰ Swain, D., [1988] 2000, p. 50.

⁴²¹ Swain, D., [1988] 2000, p. 51.

⁴²² Mark Rainbird recognises the existence of cultural racism that supports non-Indigenous supremacy in the contemporary comedy of non-Indigenous stand-up comedian Kevin Bloody Wilson. Rainbird's findings are discussed in more depth in chapter 7 herein. Rainbird, M., 'Humour Multiculturalism and Political Correctness'. *Refereed paper presented to the Australasian Political Studies Association Conference*, University of Adelaide 29/09/2004 – 01/10/2004, Adelaide, South Australia, pp. 16-17.

⁴²³ Coleman, P., and L. Tanner, 1967, *Cartoons of Australian History*, Thomas Nelson (Australia) Ltd. Melbourne and Sydney, Australia.

⁴²⁴ Coleman, P., and L. Tanner, 1967, p. 8.

better clues to the popular feelings of a period than some more serious historical records.⁴²⁵ The final chapter of this book is dedicated to Aboriginal, Chinese and Kanaka people.⁴²⁶ However, this only includes nine images from the 1800s, one from 1941, and three from 1965, of Aboriginals.⁴²⁷ These cartoons expose mainstream injustices and inhumanity towards Aboriginal people, displaying Indigenous people on a spectrum from noble oddity to dejected outcast, with elements of irony at mainstream attitudes becoming more prevalent themes of later cartoons.

The book also includes a 1902 *Bulletin* cartoon by Norman Lindsay entitled: *'To Gain Cohen's Blessing'*, showing British opposition to Australia's 'White Australia' policy.⁴²⁸ This cartoon includes the exaggerated caricatures of an Aboriginal and a Chinese man watching over the scuffle of English personification 'John Bull' and Australia's Prime Minister Barton.⁴²⁹

The top caption reads:

John Bull – Now Toby old man try to forget that stupid vision and let me introduce these solid facts.

Toby – It's no use tempting me, I simply dare not.

The bottom caption reads:

To Gain Cohen's Blessing

The Times, in a leading article, advises Premier Barton to take a larger view of Australian politics, and instances of the growth of discontent in Queensland with the policy and the conduct of the Federal Government. – Cable.

The Bulletin 1902. Britain opposes the White Australia Policy.

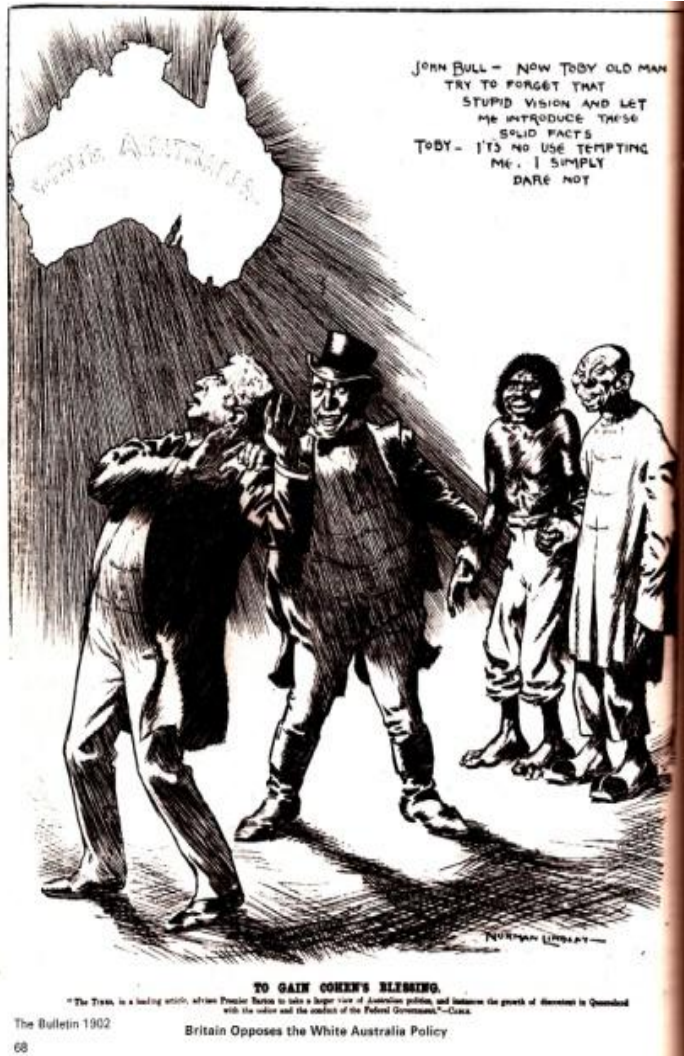
⁴²⁵ Coleman, P., and L. Tanner, 1967, p. 8.

⁴²⁶ Coleman, P., and L. Tanner, 1967, pp. 175–192.

⁴²⁷ Coleman, P., and L. Tanner, 1967, pp. 176–185.

⁴²⁸ Coleman, P., and L. Tanner, 1967, p. 68. Australia's 'White Australia' policy is the colloquial name for the 1901 Immigration Restriction Act and the Federal Government's active pursuit of restricting immigration to people of European descent. See: NSW Government, 2007, '1901 Immigration Restriction Act' *Objections through Time Exhibition*, viewed 01/08/2016 online at: <<http://www.migrationheritage.nsw.gov.au/exhibition/objectsthroughtime/immigration-restriction-act/>>.

⁴²⁹ Coleman, P., and L. Tanner, 1967, p. 68.



Lindsay, N., 1902 'To Gain Cohen's Blessing'. *The Bulletin Newspaper*.

This cartoon could be a representation of the existence of an alternative perspective, and the element of social disapproval that existed at this time regarding Australia's quasi-apartheid laws. On the other hand, it might speak of the frustrations of a newly independent Australian Federal Government facing the need to appease British (Jewish) financial power brokers in creating its own laws.

Jonathan King says that '[t]he picture one gets of Australian history through the eyes of cartoonists is vastly different from any other version...[b]ecause they enjoy more freedom than those tied to the printed word'.⁴³⁰ However, he fails to properly acknowledge that these same cartoonists often also reflect the social ethos, including the racism and sexism, of the decades in which they drew. These two significant collections of cartoons document Australia's colonial history from its earliest days with pictures taken from a wide source of Australian media including local colonial *Punch*

⁴³⁰ King, J., 1976, *The Other Side of the Coin, a Cartoon History of Australia*, Cassell Australia Ltd., Stanmore, NSW, at p. 10. King, J., 1978, *Stop Laughing this is Serious: A Social History of Australia in Cartoons*, Cassell Australia Ltd., Stanmore, NSW.

Magazines, newspapers and magazines such as *The Bulletin*, *The Australian*, the *Adelaide Advertiser*, and *The Melbourne Herald*.⁴³¹ They provide a glimpse at the way that Aboriginal people have been viewed and portrayed in colonial media by some highly esteemed non-Indigenous political cartoonists.⁴³²

Images range from a superiority styled mockery of early colonial Aboriginal peoples' 'un-conventional' manners, dress and behaviour, to images of dejection and degradation. However, following the period of economic depression in the 1930s, some of these images began to reflect a level of sympathy and recognition of the hypocrisy of mainstream Australian societies in their treatment of the first Australians.⁴³³ King notes that '[t]he depression brought many Australians closer to the life-style of the Aborigines. For years missionaries had been feeding displaced Aborigines on hand-outs...[and] ... [t]he ill-effects of living on rations [was] well-known to [them]'.⁴³⁴

Later cartoons of the 1960–70s, although still not authored by Indigenous artists themselves, began at times to portray a much more sympathetic view of Aboriginal people.⁴³⁵ However, these cartoons continue to play on recognisable (negative) stereotypes of Aboriginal people as dysfunctional social outsiders. While providing greater recognition of the social and political injustices that Aboriginal people continue to face, they perpetuate suppositions that Aboriginals have a fatal destiny.⁴³⁶

David Swain provides an important collection of Australian cartoons solely of Aboriginal people.⁴³⁷ It again reveals the long history of humour created in mainstream *about* Aboriginal people, and it has some specific things to say about what those forms and function are. Swain notes that there have been three non-Indigenous male cartoonists who have specialised in the cartooning of Aboriginal people: B.E. Minns (1866–1937) provided his cartoons to the *Bulletin* for over forty years, Stan Cross (1888–1977) drew cartoons for *Smith's Weekly* for twenty years; and Eric Jolliffe (1907–2001),⁴³⁸ mostly a freelance artist, contributed his work to the *Bulletin*, *Smith's Weekly*, *ABC Weekly*, *Sun-Herald* and *Pix Magazine* (which later became *People Magazine*).⁴³⁹

⁴³¹ King, J., 1976, Op. Cit., p. 11. King's 'Preface' provides a brief history of cartooning in Australia from early *Punch* journals from 1855, to the national *Bulletin* established in 1880, *Smith's Weekly* established after WWI in 1919, the *Australian Newspaper* in 1964.

⁴³² King, J., 1976, pp. 10–11. King's 'Preface' also highlights well known Australian political cartoonists including William Lushington Goodwin, Livingston (Hop) Hopkins, Phil May, Norman Lindsay, David Low, Stan Cross, Bill Mahony, George Molnar, Paul Rigby, Les Tanner and Bruce Petty, amongst others.

⁴³³ King, J., 1976, pp. 132–133.

⁴³⁴ King, J., 1976, p. 132.

⁴³⁵ King, J., 1976, pp. 214–215.

⁴³⁶ King, J., 1976, pp. 214–215.

⁴³⁷ Swain, D., [1988] 2000, Op. Cit.

⁴³⁸ Eric Jolliffe Biography details, nd. viewed 27/10/2014 at: <<http://www.daa0.org.au/bio/eric-ernest-jolliffe/biography/>>.

⁴³⁹ Jolliffe Biography, nd.; Swain, D., [1988], 2000, p. 2.

Cartoonists, Swain says, are people who exercise their power of superiority by making fun of people with both kindness and cruelty.⁴⁴⁰ This power to mock differences in Aboriginal people has been underpinned by Australia's self-conscious history as a colonial country that has pursued a 'White Australia' policy. Therefore, the proliferation of racism in cartooning is not surprising – he suggests – as cartoonists, like other people of their era, absorb and reflect society's common-held assumptions about Aboriginal people.⁴⁴¹

Certainly, former magistrate and Kunjandji woman Pat O'Shane, who contributes a perceptive foreword to the publication, says that although this is a book of cartoons of Aboriginal people, it is really about Anglo-Australian people.⁴⁴² The cartoons created by non-Indigenous artists depicting Aboriginal people reflect the history of resentment, hostility, racism, sympathy, guilt and humour of the majority of non-Indigenous Australians in their attitudes towards Aboriginal people. Humour, she says, is perceived as funny because it resonates and confirms audiences' points of view. They consider that what cartoonists have to say about the subject of their graphics is fundamentally true. O'Shane perceptively recognises that although Swain has said that cartoons are not accurate accounts of reality, nevertheless, audience ratification provides them with an element of truth.⁴⁴³

Yet this cartoon collection does reflect changing attitudes towards Aboriginal people in relation to their more recent political emergence. Cartoons from the 1960s onwards have moved beyond merely making fun of Aboriginal people to portraying more complex images of the social and political attitudes of whites towards blacks, and at times blacks towards whites.⁴⁴⁴ Nevertheless, an Indigenous artistic input is notably missing from this compilation.

Philip Adams and Patrice Newell contend that while jokes help us deal with the absurdity of life, they can also expose bigotry and unpleasantness.⁴⁴⁵ Almost all jokes collected for their series (1994–2001) of 'Australian jokes' deal in ageism, bigotry, racism, sexism and all other possible 'isms'.⁴⁴⁶ Adams and Newell justify inclusion of slanderous 'jokes' (sic) about Aboriginal people because they are expressions of the antagonism against them located in Australian cities and towns.⁴⁴⁷ These anti-Aboriginal jokes demonstrate that Australians laugh at material that expresses entrenched hostilities because jokes are indicators of genuine feelings.⁴⁴⁸

⁴⁴⁰ Swain, D., [1988], 2000, p. 2.

⁴⁴¹ Swain, D., [1988], 2000, p. 2.

⁴⁴² O'Shane, P., 1988, 'Foreword' to Swain, D., [1988], 2000, np.

⁴⁴³ O'Shane, P., 1988, np.

⁴⁴⁴ Swain, D., [1988], 2000, pp. 2–3.

⁴⁴⁵ Adams, P., & P. Newell, 1994 (1994–2001), *The Penguin Book of Australian Jokes*, Penguin Books Australia Ltd., Victoria, p. 12.

⁴⁴⁶ Adams, P., & P. Newell, 1994 (1994–2001), p. 12.

⁴⁴⁷ Adams, P., & P. Newell, 1994 (1994–2001), p. 13.

⁴⁴⁸ Adams, P., & P. Newell, 1994 (1994–2001), p. 16.

In attempting to offset this racism, the authors hoped to collect jokes told by Indigenous people about non-Indigenous people.⁴⁴⁹ However, such jokes, they say, were ‘elusive’ as Aboriginal people’s sense of humour is not encoded in the joke format.⁴⁵⁰ While some have suggested that racist jokes can be turned against bigots, if the beleaguered butt tells the offensive joke, this argument is not entirely convincing. They believe that reclaiming and censorship regulations are well meaning, but unlikely to succeed in winning over bigots.⁴⁵¹ They claim that there are few distinctively Australian jokes.⁴⁵² Even anti-Aboriginal jokes are recycled jokes told against African-American and Native-American people.⁴⁵³ Jokes are a ... ‘global, floating currency reworked for local conditions and consumption.’⁴⁵⁴ While definition of Australian humour is elusive, our national character is expressed in our humour that, at its best, meets disaster with defiance.⁴⁵⁵

Although the title of Gerard Matte’s article *Where are the Aboriginal Jokes?* suggests that it relates to the lack of Indigenous Australian humour in Australian comedy, in reality, it discusses a lack of ‘controversial’ comedy, satire and send-up that is specifically aimed at ‘The Arts’ and ‘Multiculturalism’.⁴⁵⁶ This article does, however, include references to Aboriginal people as members of those socially ‘untouchable’ groups that he challenges. Using a metaphor of apartheid South Africa’s ‘No blacks allowed’ motto, Matte demands more biting comedy in mainstream– comedy that ‘shellacks’ ethnic and Arts issues.⁴⁵⁷

Matte argues that Australian comedy is currently narrowly focused on taking the mickey out of politicians, the media and celebrities.⁴⁵⁸ Anglo-Australians should be able to take the mickey out of culturally sacred issues that include The Arts, Women, and other nationalities.⁴⁵⁹ Comedy, Matte says is broad; it makes large wave-like sweeps that sometimes dump people, but never actually drown them. No issue should be so sacrosanct that it is excluded from humorous piss-taking by comedians if we are truly an egalitarian, democratic nation.⁴⁶⁰ Sending up a black person or an artist, however, is not saying that they are worthless.⁴⁶¹ Matte contends that ‘[a] cartoonist or stand up performer is not a legislator, he is just cracking jokes; he is just trying to remind us of the silliness in all of us.

⁴⁴⁹ Adams, P., & P. Newell, 1994 (1994–2001), pp. 13–14.

⁴⁵⁰ Adams, P., & P. Newell, 1994 (1994–2001), p. 14.

⁴⁵¹ Adams, P., & P. Newell, 1994 (1994–2001), p. 17.

⁴⁵² Adams, P., & P. Newell, 1994 (1994–2001), p. 21.

⁴⁵³ Adams, P., & P. Newell, 1994 (1994–2001), p. 21.

⁴⁵⁴ Adams, P., & P. Newell, 1994 (1994–2001), pp. 21–22, p. 24.

⁴⁵⁵ Adams, P., & P. Newell, 1994 (1994–2001), p. 25, p. 27.

⁴⁵⁶ Matte, G., 1996, ‘Where are the Aboriginal Jokes? The Apartheid in Australian Comedy’, *Australian Journal of Comedy*, v.1/2, Melbourne, pp. 7–29, at pp. 7–8.

⁴⁵⁷ Matte, G., 1996, pp. 7–8.

⁴⁵⁸ Matte, G., 1996, p. 8.

⁴⁵⁹ Matte, G., 1996, p. 8, p. 11, p. 21.

⁴⁶⁰ Matte, G., 1996, p. 18.

⁴⁶¹ Matte, G., 1996, p. 29.

[Moreover]... joking reminds us that we shouldn't be too up ourselves'. Comedy is 'over the top' in its endeavour to find falsity, 'the loose thread' and even the bizarre, in social issues.⁴⁶²

Matte's underlying assumption is that we have a situation in Australia akin to South African apartheid because (non-Indigenous) comedians are not generally 'free' to openly deride Indigenous cultures, among other socially-tabooed subjects. Humour academic Jerry Palmer contends that the appeal of tendentious humour is that it is cathartic; it 'speaks the (socially) unspeakable'.⁴⁶³ However, if we find something humorous that is because we accept (or at least understand) the implications of what is being said.⁴⁶⁴ If we find racist jokes funny, we are implicitly accepting what the joker says about what is 'normal', and jokes either support or reject this understanding.⁴⁶⁵ However, recent studies have questioned complicated relationships between disparaging jokes and the hostility of people with no pre-existing prejudices, challenging such assumptions and revealing that the science regarding such issues is complex.⁴⁶⁶ Ferguson and Ford argue that people who find disparaging humour the most amusing do so because it allows them to more freely express their existing negative ideas in an environment in which they feel that it is acceptable, thereby enhancing their 'social identity'.⁴⁶⁷ Resulting laughter therefore could be implicated in that racism, especially if the audience already holds bigoted views.⁴⁶⁸ Alternatively, laughter might only imply the perception of the situation's implausibility, its 'absurdity', if such views are not held.⁴⁶⁹ So the identity (the subject-position) of the speaker, and the listeners, are essential to the success/failure of the joke.⁴⁷⁰ We may all laugh for different reasons, but laughter is 'authoritative'.⁴⁷¹ It is difficult to tell if bigoted jokes contribute to racial prejudice, but, under certain circumstances, this may occur.⁴⁷² This might be especially true if those circumstances transpire within a history of negative social stereotypes such as those perpetuated about Aboriginal people in Australian socio-political environs.

Therefore, public comedians could assume that they have an obligation to consider the rights of others, and matters such as unequal social positioning. Comedy, while being the social tool of accountability that Matte hypothesises, is also a product of the society in which it is created. Most

⁴⁶² Matte, G., 1996, p. 29.

⁴⁶³ Palmer, J., 1987, *The Logic of the Absurd. On film and television comedy*, British Film Institute, London, UK, p. 12.

⁴⁶⁴ Palmer, J., 1987, pp. 13–14.

⁴⁶⁵ Palmer, J., 1987, p. 14.

⁴⁶⁶ Romero-Sanchez, M., Duran M., Carretero-Dios, H., Megias, J., & Moya, M., 2010, 'Exposure to sexist humor and rape proclivity: The moderator effect of aversiveness ratings', *Journal of Interpersonal Violence*, vol. 25, pp. 2339-2350, at p. 2347. Ferguson, M., & Ford, T., 2008, 'Disparagement humor: A theoretical and empirical review of psychoanalytic, superiority, and social identity theories', *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research* vol. 21, pp. 283-312.

⁴⁶⁷ Ferguson, M., & Ford, T., 2008, 'Disparagement humor: A theoretical and empirical review of psychoanalytic, superiority, and social identity theories', *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research* vol. 21, p. 306.

⁴⁶⁸ Palmer, J., 1987, Op. Cit., p. 18. Romero-Sanchez, M., et al., Op. Cit., p. 2347.

⁴⁶⁹ Palmer, J., 1987, p. 18.

⁴⁷⁰ Palmer, J., 1987, p. 184.

⁴⁷¹ Palmer, J., 1987, p. 185.

⁴⁷² Palmer, J., 1987, p. 186.

people who attend comedy shows go with certain expectations about the type of comedy they will hear, so it is reasonable to assume that racial comedy will be supported by those people. Comedians have an obligation to recognise their own social positions, and that of others, before making jokes about those with a history of social powerlessness. It appears that Matte's underlying proposition is that 'jokes are just jokes'; however, they cannot be extracted from the historical context in which they are told. Perhaps Australia's apartheid situation results more from the fact that we do not actively acknowledge and support our Aboriginal comedians well enough? Such moral issues regarding the appropriateness of humour about Aboriginal Australians are considered in more depth in chapter seven of this thesis.

In his collection of ethnic 'jokes' 'Bob Wiener'⁴⁷³ bemoans the existence of contemporary 'political correctness' that curtails the open license of humorists.⁴⁷⁴ His book derides Jewish, Scottish, Irish, Polish, Greek, Italian, Asian, Japanese, Chinese, Vietnamese, Ethiopian, West Indian, Puerto Rican, Mexican, 'Gay', Black *and* Indigenous Australian peoples.⁴⁷⁵ Interestingly, its ethnic diversity does not include jokes about people from dominant western nations. Although it contains many blatantly offensive 'jokes', it's representative of the fact that racist jokes about ethnic minorities are alive and well, and can be readily sourced on the internet and in print.

Tasteless 'Abo' or 'boong' jokes make up an entire chapter of the book, regardless of the fact that Indigenous Australians comprise such a relatively minor world group.⁴⁷⁶ This inclusion points to an abundance of bigoted humour about Aboriginal people. The 'jokes' nearly all use Australian Slang and portray Aboriginal people as unattractive, dirty, lazy, stupid and dishonest. As Adams and Newell found, such anti-Aboriginal jokes expose bigotry and unpleasantness.⁴⁷⁷ Additionally, the existence of such a collection reinforces Lillis' suggested 'comedy production hierarchy' that takes Australia back to the very first stage in its development of the comedy of minority peoples.⁴⁷⁸ That is, back to a period where the dominant culture ridicules the minority via exaggerations and mimicry.⁴⁷⁹

4. CONCLUSION

This discussion of humour literature about Indigenous people is revealing. The Jolliffe controversy, and existence of much derogatory stereotyping humour about Aboriginal people, shows how complex

⁴⁷³ 'Bob Wiener' is surely an author hiding behind a pseudonym. Wiener is the German name for a sausage and this is also a colloquial name for a penis.

⁴⁷⁴ Wiener, B., 2001, 'Introduction', *The politically Incorrect Ethnic Joke Book*, no publisher noted, USA, np.

⁴⁷⁵ Wiener, B., 2001.

⁴⁷⁶ As at 30/06/2006, Australia's population includes only 2.5% of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. viewed 16/02/2015 online at:

<<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Lookup/by%20Subject/1370.0~2010~Chapter~Aboriginal%20and%20Torres%20Strait%20Islander%20peoples%20%283.5%29>>.

⁴⁷⁷ Adams, P., & P. Newell, 1994 (1994–2001), Op. Cit., p. 12.

⁴⁷⁸ Lillis, R., 2007, Op. Cit., p. 77.

⁴⁷⁹ Lillis, R., 2007, p. 77.

it is to interpret joking material; and it also reveals just how much non-Indigenous humour produced about Indigenous people is disparagingly homogenising. As O'Shane notes, (cartoon) humour says a lot about the Anglo-Australian environment in which it is produced.⁴⁸⁰ These findings will be further developed and confirmed within the specific historical contexts discussed in upcoming chapters.

In addition, the literature that discusses humour produced by Indigenous people themselves points to some common attributes. It suggests that Aboriginal humour relies on forms such as a mickey-taking, belittling mockery, a dry sardonic wit and mimicry. Humour is often used as a form of resistance or defensive bravado, striking out in anticipation of a negative reception in the non-Indigenous mainstream. Humour can be a tool of survival in difficult times, providing perspective and respite. It has been shown that these same humour forms and functions operate in a wider Australian context too pointing to the commonality of humour forms and functions that can be considered characteristic of Australia's broader national identity. The humour attributes noted within this literature review will be highlighted and discussed in more depth in the course of the historical progression traced in this thesis. This will enable me to highlight commonly occurring Indigenous humour forms, and to discuss how these forms adapt to current circumstances of Australia's socio-political environment.

This literature review has revealed that there is relatively little genuine critical analysis of Indigenous humour with which to consider deeper complexities and humour functions. The presence of humour in so many contemporary Indigenous performances is significant. A study of it helps us to understand and appreciate the Indigenous humour identity alleded to in this literature review. Nevertheless, as noted, Aboriginal humour is largely lacking from Australia's popular comedy arenas. This thesis will acknowledge these contributions, commenting on the forms and functions of Indigenous Australian humour contained within them. However, before this exploration is undertaken, the following chapter will explore the main theoretical understandings of the nature of humour in order to contextualise this review within a wider humour theoretical context.

⁴⁸⁰ O'Shane, P., 1988, 'Foreword' to Swain, D., [1988], 2000, Op. Cit., np.

CHAPTER 2

THE THEORETICAL FOUNDATIONS OF HUMOUR

*There is nothing so practical as a good theory.*⁴⁸¹

Social Psychologist, Kurt Lewin (1890-1947)

1. INTRODUCTION

Humour theories can challenge researchers to develop a better comprehension of humour's forms and structures leading to greater understanding of its purposes and intent as a tool of social interaction. Historically though, humour research, founded in philosophy, has focused on investigating of humour's essential nature located in such things as aggression, conflict, superiority, surprise, taboo, ambiguity, incongruity or release/relief.⁴⁸² Philosophers have speculated about what it is that is both 'necessary' and 'sufficient' to produce humour and its accompanying laughter. Yet humour has eluded a singular, narrow definition; even though each theoretical pursuit has developed a better comprehension of humour's purpose and functions. In fact, the elusive nature of humour research has enabled it to become a multi-disciplinary pursuit, nowadays located in such diverse fields as ethology, psychology, neuroscience, cognitive science, sociology, mathematics, philosophy, linguistics, anthropology, and media studies.

2. CHAPTER OVERVIEW

This chapter will investigate the classical western theories of humour that are conventionally divided into three main categories – superiority, incongruity, and relief/release.⁴⁸³ There will be no distinction made between the various manifestations of humour - wit, jest, satire, irony, pun, comedy etc. that have as a general objective to arouse amusement and laughter.⁴⁸⁴ Some of the major contributions to each of these theories will be noted. Each will also be briefly critiqued to support the claim that no one theory is the absolute explanation of the essence of humour; each offers insight into humour's enduring nature. Moreover, while each of these theories has a western origin, the topics and structures investigated are of widely trans-cultural significance and reveal characteristics of humour that can be

⁴⁸¹ Lewin, K., 1951, *Field Theory in Social Science, Selected Theoretical Papers*, Harper & Row, Publishers, Inc., New York, p. 169.

⁴⁸² Ritchie, G., 2013, 'An Overview of Humour Research', paper given at the 13th International Summer School on Humour and Laughter, Otto-von-Guericke-Universitat, Magdeburg, Germany, 22-27 July 2013.

⁴⁸³ Morreall, J., (ed.), 1987, *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, University of New York Press, Albany, NY.

⁴⁸⁴ I follow the same reasoning as David Monro in my lack of distinction between any of these terms. See: Monro, D., 1988, 'Theories of Humor' in Behrens, L., & L. Rosen, (eds.), 1988, *Writing and Reading Across the Curriculum* (3rd ed.), pp. 349–355, <<https://www.msu.edu/~jdowell/monro.html>>, viewed 11/06/2012.

understood within settings of ‘non-western’ peoples. Review of the particularities of humour theories thus provides *entrée* into distinctively Indigenous Australian cultural uses of humour that enable greater appreciation of an Indigenous perspective of Australia’s colonial environs.

3. HUMOUR THEORIES

3.1. Superiority Theories

One of the most influential theoretical comprehensions of the meaning and purpose of humour is that of superiority.⁴⁸⁵ While humour is generally viewed as a positive phenomenon, superiority theories broadly contend that humour is often used in more hostile ways.⁴⁸⁶ Humorous amusement is the enjoyment of a feeling of superiority over others, or to a past state of ourselves.⁴⁸⁷ Humour is employed by people to boost their self-esteem to the detriment of others.⁴⁸⁸ It can also be used to either curb or encourage social behaviour.⁴⁸⁹ In this sense, humour is a morally corrective social tool. It can reconfirm the status quo of acceptable community standards and stamp out any deviations from those norms from the fear of embarrassment that it inspires.⁴⁹⁰ Alternatively, it can encourage rejection of that same status quo. In each instance, humour is an instrument of moral judgement, albeit often with the intention of improvement.⁴⁹¹ Nevertheless, a wariness of its potential to produce the polar opposite of ‘improvement’ has informed much western social thought and conduct.⁴⁹²

Morreall questions the dominance of such a negative humour theory in western ideology, stating:

The answer, I think, is historical. In Greek thought a theory of laughter became entrenched that made humor ethically suspect. This was the so-called Superiority Theory, held by Plato and Aristotle, according to which, laughter is always directed at someone as a kind of scorn. Even wit, Aristotle said, is “educated insolence.”⁴⁹³

Critchley too notes that a superiority theory of humour dominated western philosophical thinking until the eighteenth century, and it originated with the Greeks.⁴⁹⁴

⁴⁸⁵ Critchley, S., [2002], 2010, *On Humour*, Routledge, Oxon, UK, New York, USA and Canada, p. 3.

⁴⁸⁶ Lippitt, J., 1995, ‘Humour and Superiority’, *Cogito*: Spring 1995, p. 54.

⁴⁸⁷ Morreall, J., 2014, ‘Philosophy of Humor—The Superiority Theory’ in Attardo, S (ed.), 2014, *Encyclopedia of Humor Studies*, v.1, Sage Publications Inc., LA, USA, p. 567.

⁴⁸⁸ Lippitt, J., 1995, Op. Cit., p. 56.

⁴⁸⁹ Bergson, H., [1911], 2005, Breerton, C & Rothwell, F (trans.), *Laughter – An essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, Dover Publications Inc., Mineola, New York, USA, pp. 8-9.

⁴⁹⁰ Bergson, H., [1911], 2005, p. 10.

⁴⁹¹ De Sousa, R., 1987, ‘When is it wrong to laugh?’ In Morreall, J (ed.) *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, University of New York Press, Albany, NY, p. 227.

⁴⁹² De Sousa, R., 1987, p. 228.

⁴⁹³ Morreall, J., (ed.) 1987, ‘Introduction’ *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, University of New York Press, Albany, NY, p. 3.

⁴⁹⁴ Critchley, S., [2002], 2010. Op. Cit., pp. 2–3.

3.1.1 Plato

Plato was born in Athens in 427 BCE, amidst a long and devastating war with Sparta which ultimately led to an Athenian defeat.⁴⁹⁵ His early life and subsequent philosophies were particularly coloured by this war, Athenian military decline, political corruption and volatility more broadly.⁴⁹⁶ In addition, as a young man Plato became a devotee of the philosopher Socrates. He was highly influenced by Socrates' methods of questioning, his critical reasoning and deductions regarding complacent socio-political assumptions and ethical dilemmas.⁴⁹⁷ After Athenian rulers put Socrates to death in 399 BCE on (in Plato's opinion) scurrilous charges of corruption and impiety, Plato became disillusioned and frustrated with a society that he felt had abandoned its moral code.⁴⁹⁸ In response, his essay *Republic* set out his guidelines for a just social structure, heavily influenced by Sparta's severe military discipline.⁴⁹⁹ Plato's philosophies reveal his mistrust of the arts that he felt were frivolous and encouraged moral weakness – especially inappropriate for his ideal city rulers whom he called 'guardians'.⁵⁰⁰ Plato's distrust included humorous plays and verse that made mocking representations of deities and leading citizens.⁵⁰¹ His suspicions included the act of laughing:

And surely we don't want our guardians to be too fond of laughter either. A disposition to violent laughter commonly means instability; and we must not therefore allow descriptions of reputable characters being overcome by laughter.⁵⁰²

Generally, Plato believed that moral weakness, instability and questionable piety could result from humorous expression if left unchecked.⁵⁰³ Morreall says that Plato objected to the way that laughter made people lose control of their bodies and their mental capabilities which could lead to violence.⁵⁰⁴ Although not a precise parallel, this points to Musharbash's recognition of the rejection of laughter in Yuendumu because it makes people 'weak' as they experience discomfort in their stomach, the seat of their consciousness and emotions.⁵⁰⁵ Shelley suggests that Plato believed that humour, when enjoyed moderately, could actually benefit people.⁵⁰⁶ Because of Plato's concern for the ethical side of life, humour can be seen as an indicator of a person's moral health.⁵⁰⁷ Plato believed that those of good intellect are able to curb their base appetites, and humour is a kind of 'alarm bell' indicator of the

⁴⁹⁵ Lee, H., (trans.), [380 b.c.] 1968, 'Introduction' *Plato's Republic*, p. 9.

⁴⁹⁶ Lee, H., (trans.), 1968, pp. 9–12.

⁴⁹⁷ Lee, H., (trans.), 1968, pp. 12–13.

⁴⁹⁸ Lee, H., (trans.), 1968, p. 14.

⁴⁹⁹ Lee, H., (trans.), 1968, p. 14.

⁵⁰⁰ Lee, H., (trans.), 1968, p. 37.

⁵⁰¹ Lee, H., (trans.), 1968, p. 122.

⁵⁰² Lee, H., (trans.), 1968, pp. 125–126.

⁵⁰³ Lee, H., (trans.), 1968, pp. 125–126.

⁵⁰⁴ Morreall, J., 2014 in Attardo, S., (ed.), 2014, *Op. Cit.*, p.567.

⁵⁰⁵ Musharbash, Y., 2008, "Perilous Laughter: Examples from Yuendumu, Central Australia", in *Anthropology Forum*, 18/3, pp. 217–277.

⁵⁰⁶ Shelley, C., 2003, 'Plato on the psychology of humor', *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, 16(4) (2003), p. 351.

⁵⁰⁷ Shelley, C., 2003, p. 364.

presence of a ‘conceptual difficulty’ in their orderly lives that needs corrective attention.⁵⁰⁸ It is this concern for the ethical and balanced side of humour that Shelley says is worthy of highlighting in Plato’s view of humour.⁵⁰⁹

Other contemporaries of Plato held different views on the benefits of superiority humour and ridicule, as can be seen in the comedic plays that thrived in Ancient Greece.⁵¹⁰ Phiddian argues that at times Greek theatrical comedy could use invective bias and be totally audacious.⁵¹¹ The theatre was a forum for public debates, where current issues could be raised frankly and openly ridiculed, to the obvious delight of the audience.⁵¹² These comedies also contained their fair share of ‘lowbrow’ (frequently obscene) humour – drunkard fools snoring, diarrhoea and farts obscuring serious dialogue, causing riotous laughter in the audience.⁵¹³

3.1.2 Aristophanes

Aristophanes wrote more than forty comedies between 427 and 380 BCE.⁵¹⁴ On the evidence of his eleven surviving plays, his work has been judged exuberant and comically formidable— plays that allowed both actors and audiences to display extreme humorous emotions at the presentation of sexual, scatological and sacred issues.⁵¹⁵ Aristophanes satirised many key and influential public figures, such as politicians, war leaders, jurors, women and philosophers, including Socrates.⁵¹⁶

In *The Clouds* (423 BCE) Aristophanes used a parody of Socrates (as the sophist movement’s spokesman) to play on community fears that this new style of philosophy (‘sophistry’) destabilised customary beliefs.⁵¹⁷ Significant members of Athenian society felt that the movement’s ‘modern’ scientific and philosophical investigations, combined with clever rhetoric, equipped ‘wealthy young men’ with the skills required to escape legal prosecution and avoid their moral/social responsibilities.⁵¹⁸ In the play Socrates and his students are portrayed as absurd, nonsensical ‘purveyors of intellectual corruption’— encouraging teaching of the wrongful worship of minor gods

⁵⁰⁸ Shelley, C., 2003, p. 364.

⁵⁰⁹ Shelley, C., 2003, p. 364.

⁵¹⁰ Ewans, M., 2011, ‘Introduction’, *Aristophanes— Lysistrata, The Women’s Festival and Frogs*, University of Oklahoma Press, Oklahoma, USA, p. 5.

⁵¹¹ Phiddian, R., 2005, ‘Aristophanes’ in O’Grady, P. (ed.), 2005, *Meet the Philosophers of Ancient Greece— Everything you always wanted to know about Ancient Greek philosophy but didn’t know who to ask*, Ashgate, Aldershot, England, p. 124.

⁵¹² Phiddian, R., 2005, p. 124.

⁵¹³ Phiddian, R., 2005, p. 124.

⁵¹⁴ Ewans, M., 2011, Op. Cit., p. 5.

⁵¹⁵ Ewans, M., 2014, ‘Aristophanes’ in Attardo, S (ed.), 2014, *Encyclopedia of Humor Studies*, v.1, Sage Publications Inc., LA, USA, p. 59.

⁵¹⁶ Ewans, M., 2014, pp. 5–6.

⁵¹⁷ Dover, K., 1972, *Aristophanic Comedy*, BT Batsford Ltd., London, UK, pp. 110–111.

⁵¹⁸ Dover, K., 1972, pp. 110–111.

and unethical behaviour.⁵¹⁹ Aristophanes ridicules this teaching in his play. For example, pointing to several sophistry students, the main protagonist, Strepsiades, questions their behaviour:

Strepsiades: Hey, look there: what are those fellow doing bent over like that?

Student: Those are graduate students doing research on Hades.

Strepsiades: On Hades? Then why are their asses scanning the skies?

Student: Taking a minor in Astronomy.⁵²⁰

Aristophanes' play provided a mocking, witty, cautionary paradigm of the dangers of unorthodox philosophies by suggesting that only disaster results from accepting sophistry's 'modern' logic. In addition, he ridicules Athenian politics, its penchant for war and empire building, legal perjury, religious impiety, immorality and greed. No topic seems too sacred to escape his mockery. Aristophanes' audience laughed, ratifying his ridicule, and reconfirming in their own minds a sense of socio-political harmony and purpose in Athenian life.⁵²¹ Here humour is again used as a morally purposeful tool. It questions and ratifies the social status quo, just as Nicholl's has pointed out in relation to nicknaming practices in Lajamanu where humorous names are often conferred on community members who have transgressed Warlpiri social customs and morality.⁵²²

3.1.3 Thomas Hobbes

Plato's philosophies were consistent with his personal world view; so too is the case of English philosopher, Thomas Hobbes. The humour philosophies of Hobbes, a seventeenth century philosopher, have become the best-known superiority theories.⁵²³ His ideas continued to point to a harsh comprehension of humour and laughter in western humour ideology. Hobbes' disparaging view of human nature and his ideas about the necessity for absolute state authority were a result of his life in England during the tumultuous 1600s when Parliament and Royalists fought for political supremacy.⁵²⁴ His pro-royalist political writing exposed him to church and public criticisms that forced his exile on several occasions.⁵²⁵ As Billig notes, Hobbes' humour theory ... 'was part of a fearful vision of society that emerged from the cruel times' and expresses the political, moral and aesthetic ethos of his times.⁵²⁶

⁵¹⁹ Arrowsmith, W., 1962, 'Introduction' to *Aristophanes, The Clouds*, Mentor Books, NY, USA and Scarborough, Ontario, p. 1.

⁵²⁰ Arrowsmith, W., 1962, p. 30.

⁵²¹ Phiddian, R., 2005, Op. Cit., p. 123.

⁵²² Nicholls, C., 1995, 'Warlpiri nicknaming: a personal memoir' in Fishman, J., & Garcia Otheguy, O., (eds.), *International Journal of the Sociology of Language*, 113/1, De Gruyter, Germany, pp. 137-146.

⁵²³ Lippitt, J., 1995, Op. Cit., p. 55.

⁵²⁴ Hampton, J., 1986, *Hobbes and the Social Contract Tradition*, Press Syndicate of the University of Cambridge, England, UK, pp. 110-111.

⁵²⁵ Tuck, R., (ed.), [1651] 1991, 'Introduction' to *Leviathan*, p. ix, p. xxv.

⁵²⁶ Billig, M., 2005, *Laughter and Ridicule, Towards a Social Critique of Humour*, Sage Publications, London, UK, p. 6, p. 38.

Hobbes believed that, in a state of nature, humans were unpredictable and aggressive towards one another in their individual fight for survival.⁵²⁷ The ‘state of nature’ was a place where humans lived in constant war with, and fear of, one another. Consequently, a man’s life was ... ‘solitary, poore, nasty, brutish, and short.’⁵²⁸ Given the fact that mankind naturally has a negative (brutish) character, it is hardly surprising that when Hobbes wrote about human emotions and expressions, including humour, he viewed them poorly:

Sudden Glory, is the passion which maketh those **Grimaces** called Laughter; and is caused either by some sudden act of their own, that pleaseth them; or by the apprehension of some deformed thing in another, by comparison whereof they suddenly applaud themselves. And it is incident most to them, that are conscious of the fewest abilities in themselves, who are forced to keep themselves in their own favour, by observing the imperfections of other men. And therefore much Laughter at the defects of others, is a signe of Pusillanimity.⁵²⁹

Humour is the result of a cognitive comprehension. It is both surprising and self-motivated. People suddenly recognise some cleverness in their own behavior, or something of detriment in a fellow human-being. They are immediately bolstered by the knowledge of their own superior character in comparison to another. By laughing at others, people justify their aptitude and appearance by offsetting any of their own failings against another person’s worse traits or ‘deformities’. We sometimes laugh in a ‘schadenfreude’ manner at their misfortune, grateful that it is not our own.

It appears that Hobbes believed that we do this mostly because we are loyal to ourselves. Yet Hobbes doesn’t suggest that this is a good thing. He says that those people who recognise the biggest failings in themselves, those who are the most insecure, are most likely to ridicule and laugh at others. Laughter at defects in others is actually a sign of ‘pusillanimity’ or weakness in one’s own character. Hobbes’ view of laughter conformed to his views of human nature (ie. ‘nasty, brutish, and short’).⁵³⁰ He believed that people are selfish, aggressive, competitive, and motivated by vanity and self-preservation.⁵³¹ Consequently, laughter is mostly used for self-promotion. We laugh at those whom we perceive as inferior to ourselves to bolster our own self-esteem.⁵³² Concepts of fun or kindness for purely altruistic means are simply not considered.

Hobbes did not entertain the idea that laughter could be directed at others without malicious intent; humour is not always motivated by such conscious comparison or by feelings of superiority.⁵³³ We can actually feel a wide range of emotions when we consider others. We can feel pride in another’s achievements, or sympathy in response to their hardships, or happiness for their good fortunes. Self-

⁵²⁷ Billig, M., 2005, pp. xv-xvi.

⁵²⁸ Hobbes *Leviathan* in Tuck, R., (ed.), [1651] 1991, Op. Cit., p. 89.

⁵²⁹ Hobbes in Tuck, R., (ed.), 1991, p. 43.

⁵³⁰ Lippitt, J., 1995, Op. Cit., p. 56.

⁵³¹ Hobbes in Hampton, J, 1986, Op. Cit., p. 105.

⁵³² Lippitt, J., 1995, Op. Cit., p. 56.

⁵³³ Lippitt, J., 1995, p. 56.

worth appears to be the only basis for reasoning suggested by Hobbes and his thinking was limited in this respect. His binary position of ‘us against them’ in humour is often the basis of racist or sexist jokes.⁵³⁴ Indeed, a credible argument could be made to suggest that humour of this nature is essentially reflective of insecurity, which, of course, was ultimately Hobbes’ point.

However, we can also simply enjoy a joke for its own sake.⁵³⁵ Hobbes relegated enjoyment of a joke’s content to a lesser significance than the superiority resulting from it. Hobbes failed to give any credence to the fact that humour can exist *in* the object of our amusement. Instead he placed his entire emphasis on the *reaction to* this object.⁵³⁶ If we consider wordplay or nonsense, humour is contained within the verse; enjoyment is felt at the sheer absurdity of it.⁵³⁷ Both elements of humour – ‘content’ and ‘outcome’ need to be considered within any contemplation of the nature and purpose of humour.

Nonetheless, superiority theories, like Hobbes’, are valuable.⁵³⁸ Billig says that such views can provide a critical mirror for contemporary attitudes.⁵³⁹ Certainly humour based on superiority reflects social power structures, values and priorities, in addition to discouraging an often unquestioned ‘acceptance of laughter’s goodness.’⁵⁴⁰ Moreover, superiority theories have paved the way for current humour understandings.⁵⁴¹ Hobbes’ severe view of humour provoked a reaction that led to succeeding humour theorists producing more optimistic views of humour.⁵⁴² Finally, Hobbes’ observations about the fear and exaggeration located in humour led to Freudian views of humour that posit self-deceit at the core of humour motivation.⁵⁴³ This superiority interpretation of humour is important to understanding the use of humour in Australia with regards to Indigenous Australians. This thesis will show how much of the humour generated within the non-Indigenous mainstream about Aboriginal people is a superiority-styled deprecation of their characters and cultures. It will also show how, in return, Indigenous people also often use superiority humour to validate their own existence and to censor non-Indigenous Australians in a similar manner to that which they have experienced themselves.

3.1.4 Henri Bergson

In 1911 French philosopher Henri Bergson wrote his influential dissertation on comedy.⁵⁴⁴ While Bergson is not solely recognised as a superiority theorist, his ideas support concepts of humour that

⁵³⁴ Lippitt, J., 1995, p. 56.

⁵³⁵ Lippitt, J., 1995, p. 57.

⁵³⁶ Lippitt, J., 1995, p. 57.

⁵³⁷ Lippitt, J., 1995, p. 57.

⁵³⁸ Billig, M., 2005, Op. Cit., p. 37.

⁵³⁹ Billig, M., 2005, p. 37.

⁵⁴⁰ Billig, M., 2005, p. 39.

⁵⁴¹ Billig, M., 2005, p. 38.

⁵⁴² Billig, M., 2005, p. 38.

⁵⁴³ Billig, M., 2005, p. 38.

⁵⁴⁴ Bergson, H., [1911] 2005, (trans. Brereton, C & F. Rothwell), *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, Dover Publications, Inc. Mineola, New York.

can be understood in this light. Bergson's premise explaining why people laugh was based on the scientific and technological reasoning of his emerging industrial world, and a mechanical inelasticity analogy. He said that habitual practices or narrow-mindedness manifests themselves in (mechanical or automated) rigidity of physical movements and inflexibility of the mind – and comedy results from these things. That is, as Critchley says, we laugh when a person gives us the impression of being a 'thing'.⁵⁴⁵ Bergson gives the example of a man hurrying along a street, tripping and falling. Onlookers laugh because of its involuntary nature. The man should have changed his pace to avoid the obstacle but didn't; resulting in his fall:

Instead of that, through a lack of elasticity, through absentmindedness or a kind of physical obstinacy, *as a result, in fact, of rigidity or of momentum*, the muscles continued to perform the same movement when the circumstances called for something else. That is the reason for the man's fall, and also of the people's laughter.⁵⁴⁶

Unthinking, habitual responses to situations lead people to physical slips and stumbles as well as to automatic mental responses that Bergson says are comical. Moreover, a rigid and unadaptable society can lead to higher crime rates, mental illness and general community misery.⁵⁴⁷ The primary purpose of laughter is to place a check or control on unthinking, inflexible practices, shocking or shaming people into changing their ways. Like other superiority theorists, Bergson generally saw humour in a rather sober light. Its ultimate purpose is to humiliate people into conformity or to behave more adaptively in social situations.⁵⁴⁸ While Bergson did not recognise laughter as a character flaw like Hobbes, he does recognise a similar morally superior position as noted in many superiority theories.

Bergson also applies an analogy of 'inflexibility' to internal thought process that result in ... 'a certain inborn lack of elasticity of both senses and intelligence'.⁵⁴⁹ He suggests that sometimes people have an inability to adapt themselves to present realities. They fall into patterns of habitual responses to situations that do not correlate with current realities; as seen in those with idealistic mind-sets:⁵⁵⁰

...these whimsical wild enthusiasts, these madmen who are yet so strangely reasonable, excite us to laughter by playing on the same chords within ourselves...the same inner mechanisms...They, too, are runners who fall and simple souls who are being hoaxed – runners after the ideal who stumble over realities.⁵⁵¹

However it is not only overly utopian characters who are comic. Bergson notes that human vices have a similar inflexible relationship to a person's moral character: 'Might not certain vices have the same

⁵⁴⁵ Critchley, S., [2002] 2010, Op. Cit., p. 56.

⁵⁴⁶ Bergson, H., [1911] 2005, Op. Cit., p. 5.

⁵⁴⁷ Hurley, M., Dennett, D., and R. Adams, 2011, 'A Brief History of Humor Theories' in *Inside Jokes– Using Humor to Reverse-Engineer the Mind*, The MIT Press, Cambridge, Massachusetts, London, England, p. 54.

⁵⁴⁸ Hurley, M., et al., 2011, p. 54.

⁵⁴⁹ Bergson, H., [1911] 2005, Op. Cit. p. 6.

⁵⁵⁰ Bergson, H., [1911] 2005, pp. 6-7.

⁵⁵¹ Bergson, H., [1911] 2005, p. 7.

relation to character that rigidity of a fixed idea has to intellect?’⁵⁵² Comedy provides awareness of cognitive rigidity and assists us to alter our responses to situations because of its very nature which frequently produces laughter. When we recognise a trait in ourselves that is foolish (because people laugh at it/us), we feel compelled to modify our behaviour (or at least appear to) because we do not like being laughed at. Bergson states: ‘A character in a tragedy will make no change in his conduct because he will know how it is judged by us; ... But a defect that is ridiculous, as soon as it feels itself to be so, endeavours to modify itself, or at least appear as though it did.’⁵⁵³

Fundamentally, Bergson saw laughter as a tool to correct our (im)moral behaviour with a utilitarian aim of social improvement. That is, as soon as we detect our conduct as unreasonable, or at least socially unacceptable, we are embarrassed into attempting to modify it:

... laughter “corrects men’s manners.” It makes us at once endeavour to appear what we ought to be.⁵⁵⁴

For Bergson, what makes something laughable is that ‘thing’ that is offensive to social norms and ideals.⁵⁵⁵ Laughter is a powerful social tool that requires a clinical absence of emotion (Bergson says a temporary ‘anesthesia of the heart’).⁵⁵⁶ Nobody likes to look foolish and the comic is a communal means of controlling people’s unacceptable behaviour, whether physical, emotional or intellectual.

Nonetheless, the idea that it does not matter *who* laughs at you/us needs further consideration. Whether or not those with low social status can mock successfully is a point to be considered. Certainly you can laugh at anyone, but if they are going to feel enough shame in order to feel the need to correct their own behaviour, they will need to respect your opinion in the first place. For people on the periphery of the mainstream to use laughter as a corrective tool against the majority is questionable – social ‘positioning’ and ‘recognition’ also need to be considered. This matter of the subject position of Indigenous Australians will be considered in more detail in following chapters in relation to Australian humour practices.

The idea of cultural relevance and/or understanding is also important. How much of what we find funny or what we find embarrassing is culturally directed? – Someone may laugh at your behaviour, but if what you are doing is socially acceptable in your own eyes, or in the eyes of your community, will that be enough to cause an alteration to your behaviour? Cultural norms and practices dictate

⁵⁵² Bergson, H., [1911] 2005, p. 7.

⁵⁵³ Bergson, H., [1911] 2005, pp. 8-9.

⁵⁵⁴ Bergson, H., [1911] 2005, p. 9.

⁵⁵⁵ Prusak, B., 28/09/2004, ‘Le rire à nouveau: Rereading Bergson’, *The Journal of Aesthetics and Art Criticism*, V.62/4, p. 378.

⁵⁵⁶ Bergson, H., [1911] 2005, Op. Cit. pp. 2–3.

what we think of as acceptable and their relationship to humour will also be discussed herein in relation to both Aboriginal and Australian humour practices.

The principles of Bergson's theory which sees laughter as a 'social gesture' are significant elements of humour's function and purpose.⁵⁵⁷ Moreover, his explanations of the humour in physical movement – rigidity, repetition and mimicry – make significant contributions to understandings of Indigenous Australian humour. Canadian comedian Mike Myers says: 'Comedy characters tend to be a... machine; i.e., Clouseau was a smug machine, Pepe Le Pew was a love machine, Felix Unger was a clean machine, and Austin Powers is a sex machine'.⁵⁵⁸ Hurley et al believe that this is a good example of Bergson's humour theory.⁵⁵⁹ Comedy media producers choose to exaggerate and mechanise a dominant aspect of their character's personality.⁵⁶⁰ These characters perform actions in ways that are not the social norms, but are entirely regular and automatic according to the established nature of their characters. We laugh at their repetitive, inflexible and predictable behaviours. Critchley also notes a compulsion to repetition in comedy.⁵⁶¹ He says that this repetition is endemic to machines like photocopiers or dispenser units, and humour frequently blends with machines to become an inhuman, transcendent 'thing'.⁵⁶² This is why when we experience humour it is not solely pleasure that we experience, but sometimes also 'uncanniness'.⁵⁶³ For example, in gallows humour we might laugh at something deeply disturbing and feel unsettled, even shocked by our (inappropriate) reaction.⁵⁶⁴ Yet, as Critchley also cautions, if mechanical repetitiveness in behaviour were all that is required to create the comic, we would also laugh at a person having a heart attack or a fit.⁵⁶⁵ Yet (generally) we do not. Humour and laughter are also predicated on other factors that include social etiquette, situational reality and emotional responses.⁵⁶⁶ Certainly laughter and humour that challenges the social status quo will be shown as an important aspect of modern Aboriginal performance humour. Yet conversely, just as human actions that mimic the mechanical might be laughable, the opposite is also true.⁵⁶⁷ When things give the impression of being human-like we also find this funny.⁵⁶⁸ There is something essentially absurd about being a human being and we often laugh when a person acts just like we think that they should act! The recognition and predictability of actions are just as funny as any automated actions.⁵⁶⁹

⁵⁵⁷ Bergson, H., [1911] 2005, p. 10.

⁵⁵⁸ Myers, M., 2002, e-mail to *The New Yorker* magazine as quoted in Hurley, M, et al, 2011, Op. Cit., p. 54.

⁵⁵⁹ Hurley, M., et al, 2011, p. 54.

⁵⁶⁰ Hurley, M., et al, 2011, p. 54.

⁵⁶¹ Critchley, S., [2002] 2010, Op. Cit., p. 56.

⁵⁶² Critchley, S., [2002] 2010, p. 56.

⁵⁶³ Critchley, S., [2002] 2010, p. 56.

⁵⁶⁴ Critchley, S., [2002] 2010, p. 56.

⁵⁶⁵ Critchley, S., [2002] 2010, p. 56.

⁵⁶⁶ Critchley, S., [2002] 2010, p. 56.

⁵⁶⁷ Critchley, S., [2002] 2010, p. 58.

⁵⁶⁸ Critchley, S., [2002] 2010, p. 58.

⁵⁶⁹ Critchley, S., [2002] 2010, p. 59.

3.1.5 Charles Gruner

While modern humour research has displaced superiority as the leading explanation of humour, some contemporary theorists, like Charles Gruner, have made current arguments for its significance in humour.⁵⁷⁰ Based on Hobbes' philosophies, Gruner's central analogy for humour equates it to sport:

The very idea of a game implies fun, leisure, entertainment, recreation, affable human interaction; but it also implies competition, keeping "score" and a winner and a loser.⁵⁷¹

According to Gruner, games are a contest, and if they weren't a competition they wouldn't be interesting.⁵⁷² When the element of competition is removed from a game (ie by one side thrashing the other, or a rain-soaked 'washout', unfair or biased umpiring, inept competitors etc) then the game becomes uninteresting. Conversely, there is nothing more exciting than a 'close match' or even a 'come back' where one side comes from a seemingly losing position to take victory. Spectators watch such games in an emotional mixture of anticipation, excitement, or horror – all depending on their personal team allegiances. Furthermore, to evoke excitement a game must be close, involve conflict and result in victory for the winner and defeat for the loser, as a tied game is frustrating.⁵⁷³ Gruner says that the same formula that operates in games and sport – the build-up of tension and sudden release – also consistently occurs in humour.⁵⁷⁴ Our laughter at something funny is the same as our reaction to victory in games or obtaining what we want – an act of superiority.⁵⁷⁵

Billig proposes that both Hobbes and Gruner provide motivational theories of humour where we are provoked to act by our awareness.⁵⁷⁶ In addition, Gruner relies on Hobbes' emphasis on the 'suddenness' of perception within his own theory to explain how immediacy is also a vital ingredient of humour.⁵⁷⁷ It is the sudden perception of winning that enhances our enjoyment (or the 'success') of humour. If elements of what is 'won' and what is 'lost' are missing from a humorous situation, then that situation is rendered 'humourless'.⁵⁷⁸

Gruner believes that people engage in humour in a superiority-style because life has historically been a fight for survival. Based on Darwinian-styled evolutionary processes, humans have succeeded in controlling the planet because they have been the most successful at combining hostilities, competitiveness and ingenuity.⁵⁷⁹ Progressively humans have adapted their aggressive natures to more

⁵⁷⁰ Gruner, C., 1997, *The Game of Humor – A Comprehensive Theory of Why We Laugh*, Transaction Publishers, New Jersey, USA.

⁵⁷¹ Gruner, C., 1997, p. 2.

⁵⁷² Gruner, C., 1997, p. 5.

⁵⁷³ Gruner, C., 1997, p. 6.

⁵⁷⁴ Gruner, C., 1997, p. 6.

⁵⁷⁵ Gruner, C., 1997, p. 8.

⁵⁷⁶ Billig, M., 2005, Op. Cit., p. 51.

⁵⁷⁷ Gruner, C., 1997, Op. Cit., pp. 8-9.

⁵⁷⁸ Gruner, C., 1997, p.9.

⁵⁷⁹ Gruner, C., 1997, p. 16.

socially acceptable behaviours so that they might live semi-peacefully with one another.⁵⁸⁰ As they became more civilised they learnt to substitute less violent activities, including the use of humour, into their interactions. Ridiculing laughter evolved in order to satisfy a fundamental desire for a victorious thrill.⁵⁸¹

People have become successful at obscuring expressions of violence within a ‘play-frame’ using tools such as humour. Often implied put-downs aren’t even recognised. Because jokes’ recognisable structures obscure ill-will, people have learnt not to take offense at obscene or aggressive jokes.⁵⁸² Humans use joke ‘cues’ such as ‘knock, knock’ or ‘did you hear the one about ...’ – as an introduction into this joke framework, instinctively recognising that it is not serious and just a joke.⁵⁸³ Gruner believes that although we laugh at victims, these victims do not actually suffer any real loss or pain.⁵⁸⁴ Moreover, because of social etiquette, we can’t speak openly about socially sensitive issues such as death or disability, thus suffering a level of internal repression and resentment. We use humour to deal with such frustrations. It is only within such a play-frame that we can openly deal with unspeakable subjects or laugh at ‘unfunny’ matters.⁵⁸⁵ ‘Sick’ jokes (an example Gruner gives: ‘What does GAY stand for? – Got AIDS Yet’)⁵⁸⁶ show how humans use the joke structure to re-invent issues within a more socially acceptable context.⁵⁸⁷ Gruner says that in using this play-frame we indulge in a primitive, innate enjoyment of destruction and violence within a safe environment.⁵⁸⁸

Nonetheless, even as Gruner recognises that laughing at jokes is a ‘pleasant activity’ that bonds people together, he also notes that ‘occasionally’ listeners are insulted.⁵⁸⁹ Gruner says that joke tellers can’t really hate all members of a group.⁵⁹⁰ For example, making fun of particular racial characteristics comes from the psyche’s natural aggressiveness and competitiveness and is a reinforcement of in-group membership.⁵⁹¹ Apte argues that Gruner believes that the comic script’s exaggeration in derogatory jokes is so outlandish that most people can easily recognise that it is not to be taken seriously.⁵⁹² Moreover, even if hate is felt, a joke causes only minor damage to its victims.⁵⁹³ Humour is purely a ‘symbolic’ form of play that remains largely ‘unconscious’.⁵⁹⁴ Racialised humour

⁵⁸⁰ Gruner, C., 1997, p. 25.

⁵⁸¹ Gruner, C., 1997, p. 18.

⁵⁸² Gruner, C., 1997, p. 15.

⁵⁸³ Gruner, C., 1997, p. 15.

⁵⁸⁴ Gruner, C., 1997, p. 14.

⁵⁸⁵ Gruner, C., 1997, p. 46.

⁵⁸⁶ Gruner, C., 1997, p. 59.

⁵⁸⁷ Gruner, C., 1997, p. 68.

⁵⁸⁸ Gruner, C., 1997, p. 68.

⁵⁸⁹ Gruner, C., 1997, p. 75.

⁵⁹⁰ Gruner, C., 1997, p. 75.

⁵⁹¹ Gruner, C., 1997, p. 79.

⁵⁹² Gruner, C., 1997, p. 65. Apte, M., 1999, ‘Book Review Humor’, in *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, De Gruyter Mouton, 12(2), p. 223.

⁵⁹³ Gruner, C., 1997, Op. Cit., pp. 77-78.

⁵⁹⁴ Gruner, C., 1997, pp.79-80.

is popular because of its evocation of the common knowledge of social stereotypes. The joke's structure prepares us for 'fun' and 'symbolism' assists us to recognise familiar social scripts.⁵⁹⁵ Gruner believes that modern-day political correctness (pc) critique is overstated and fuelled by media attention. Everyone should be able to accept a certain amount of teasing about their mistakes and faults, and this is the purpose of humour and jokes.⁵⁹⁶ Chapter seven of this thesis will show how this 'justification' for the use of derogatory humour is sometimes used by contemporary non-Indigenous stand-up comedians to rationalise their ongoing mockery of Aboriginal Australians.

Like Gruner, Christie Davies also notes jokes as a form of playful aggression. He believes that hate and bigotry are more clearly expressed by less indirect means than racist jokes:

Those who seek to use ethnic jokes as a predictor of conflict would be better advised to study more immediate indices of political tension, for there is no point in delving for covert resentments in a world where so much direct evidence is available.⁵⁹⁷

While recognising that social norms exist which are understood 'intuitively' in communities because of shared social knowledge, Gruner does not challenge the fact that such jokes actually perpetuate those existing stereotypes and injustices that are representative of unequal power relations within societies. By shrouding stereotypes in a more socially acceptable 'joke format' beliefs are continually repeated with updated scenarios that reflect current events. Certainly the ongoing use of superiority-styled humour in ethnic jokes remains a significant element of humour used within the mainstream against minority people, including Indigenous Australians.

In dismissing the hurtful and aggressive intent of superiority jokes as merely playful, and preferable to physical violence, Gruner dismisses the validity of emotional responses to them. Recipients' feelings of shame, humiliation, degradation or self-doubt from continually finding themselves the butt of such humour are overlooked. Suggesting that people need to learn to take ridicule does not acknowledge the validity of the pain felt when they can't. Moreover, people (especially those with low self-esteem or those relatively powerless in social status by comparison with the joker) can internalise beliefs about themselves. Charles Taylor says that identity is partly shaped by recognition, even the misrecognition of others.⁵⁹⁸ People, especially those of a minority status, can suffer emotional damage, internalising their own inferiority, if those around mirror demeaning or contemptible images of themselves back to them.⁵⁹⁹ Jokes are perhaps even more insidious because often society tells us that we must be able to laugh at them or else we do not have a good sense of humour. Important issues of

⁵⁹⁵ Gruner, C., 1997, p. 81.

⁵⁹⁶ Gruner, C., 1997, pp. 89-91.

⁵⁹⁷ Davies, C., 1990, *Ethnic Humor Around the World, A Comparative Analysis*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis, USA, p. 323.

⁵⁹⁸ Taylor, C., 1994, 'The Politics of Recognition', in C. Taylor, A. Gutmann (eds.) *Multiculturalism*, 1994, Princeton University Press, New Jersey, USA, pp. 25-26.

⁵⁹⁹ Taylor, C., 1994, pp. 25-26.

social status and identity with regards to humour are discussed throughout this thesis; and particularly in chapter seven with regard to Australian humour that has Aboriginal people as the butts of jokes.

That a superiority style of humour exists and is prevalent in much humour is indisputable. Other theorists, like Billig, also argue that superiority ridicule plays a ‘central, but often overlooked, disciplinary role in social life’⁶⁰⁰ and should not be dismissed. Nonetheless, it is doubtful whether a comprehensive explanation of all humour is possible. Billig also notes that laughter and humour do not stand alone, outside of everyday processes of communication.⁶⁰¹ Humour is motivated by social and emotional factors other than competition. It contains complex elements of style that make it fairly elusive to typecasting into any single theory and, like other forms of communication and expression, it has diverse purposes and forms.

3.2 Incongruity Humour Theories

Arguably, the most significant speculations concerning humour’s essential nature are known as incongruity theories that originally developed as a reaction to superiority views.⁶⁰² The essential qualities of incongruity humour are structural elements rather than the motivation/response of the person laughing or making the joke.⁶⁰³ Incongruity theories recognise that it is something ‘out of place’, inappropriate, or just plain absurd, in words or actions which can make us laugh. Humour in these instances arises from disjointed or un-matching ideas or situations or from the presentation of ideas or situations that differ from social norms and/or customs.⁶⁰⁴

3.2.1 Arthur Schopenhauer

In the early nineteenth century, Arthur Schopenhauer’s ideas about humour provide one the best known incongruity theories:

In every case, laughter results from nothing but the suddenly perceived incongruity between a concept and the real object that had been thought through it in some relation; and laughter itself is just the expression of this incongruity. It often occurs through two or more real objects being thought through one concept, and the identity of the concept being transferred to the objects. But then a complete difference of the objects in other respects makes it strikingly clear that the concept fitted them only from a one-sided point of view. It occurs just as often, however, that the incongruity between a single real object and the concept under which, on the one hand, it has been rightly subsumed, is suddenly felt. Now the more correct the subsumption of such actualities under the concept from one standpoint, and the greater and more glaring their incongruity with it from the other, the more powerful is the effect of the ludicrous which springs from this contrast. All laughter therefore is occasioned by a paradoxical, and hence unexpected, subsumption, it matters not whether this is expressed in words or in deeds. This in brief is the correct explanation of the ludicrous.⁶⁰⁵

⁶⁰⁰ Billig, M., 2005, Op. Cit., p. 5.

⁶⁰¹ Billig, M., 2005, p. 179.

⁶⁰² Billig, M., 2005, p. 57.

⁶⁰³ Billig, M., 2005, p. 57.

⁶⁰⁴ Keith-Spiegel, P., 1972, ‘Early Conceptions of Humor: Varieties and Issues in The Psychology of Humor’, in Goldstein, J., P., McGhee, (eds.), *The Psychology of Humor*, Academic Press Inc., New York, USA, p. 7.

⁶⁰⁵ Schopenhauer, A., [1818] n.d. a., *The World as Will and Representation*, p. 59.

Principally Schopenhauer's theory relates to the perception of an incongruity or paradox between the 'conceptual' and the 'actual' elements of humour. As Billig says, Schopenhauer's understanding of humour is 'bloodlessly cognitive' regardless of other emotional forces at work in human nature.⁶⁰⁶ Schopenhauer suggests that when some perceived (real) object is 'subsumed' or incorporated under an abstract thought or concept (idea) a 'witticism' is produced; conversely, when a general concept or idea is 'subsumed' by a real perception, the result is an 'absurdity'.⁶⁰⁷ He states:

According as we pass, when discovering such an incongruity, from the real, i.e., the perceptive, to the concept, or conversely from the concept to the real, the ludicrous that thus results is either a witticism or an absurdity.⁶⁰⁸

When the humorous context of words or actions is fully stated it becomes apparent that one account is more relevant than the others which are dismissed or 'subsumed' by this more correct explanation. In addition, the more obviously 'correct' one point of view is, the funnier the situation.⁶⁰⁹ Laughter results from the sudden revelation of the correct path through the maze of multiple interpretations of circumstances. Schopenhauer provided examples to help explain his theory, including an explanation of the movement from a perception to a concept that produces a witticism:

...the couplet on a tedious preacher:-
Bav is the true shepherd of whom the Bible spake'
Though his flock be all asleep, he alone remains awake.⁶¹⁰

Here the Biblical analogy of a watchful shepherd carefully guarding his sleeping flock is subsumed under the reality of a boring preacher wafting on in his sermon and sending his congregation to sleep. A further example includes the epitaph of a physician:

Here like a hero he lies, and those he has slain lie around him.⁶¹¹

The concept of an honourable warrior hero surrounded by the justly slain is subsumed under the actual knowledge that the man was a doctor, and doctors are meant to save lives, not take them.

As an example of Schopenhauer's concept of absurdity that goes in the opposite direction, from the abstract concept to the real thing of perception,⁶¹² he notes the following:

⁶⁰⁶ Billig, M., 2005, Op. Cit., p. 83.

⁶⁰⁷ Schopenhauer, A., [1818] n.d. b, *The World as Will and Representation*, p. 96.

⁶⁰⁸ Schopenhauer, A., [1818] n.d. b, p. 92.

⁶⁰⁹ Schopenhauer, A., [1818] n.d. a., Op. Cit., p. 59.

⁶¹⁰ Schopenhauer, A., [1818] n.d. b., p. 92.

⁶¹¹ Schopenhauer, A., [1818] n.d. b., p. 92.

⁶¹² Schopenhauer, A., [1818] n.d. b., p. 96.

When someone had stated that he was fond of walking alone, an Austrian said to him: “You like to walk alone; so do I; then we can walk together.”⁶¹³

This example starts with the concept/fact of two people who both enjoy an activity and then it subsumes a case that denies such companionship.⁶¹⁴ Schopenhauer says that this type of scenario results in a humorous ‘absurdity of the assumption’ relating to reason.⁶¹⁵

Nonetheless, Schopenhauer’s theories failed to acknowledge criticisms (and other emotional reactions) located in his examples.⁶¹⁶ It is not only the incongruity but also the mockery of protagonists in his examples that contributes to the humour of the situation. Schopenhauer doesn’t acknowledge that an insult is being ‘subsumed’ under flattering words.⁶¹⁷ That is, we do not just laugh at the subsumption of a biblical truism in the face of the preacher’s dull character, we also laugh at the fact that an insult is given, veiled by complimentary words. Additionally, the physician is touted as a dead hero when a criticism of his abilities as a doctor is actually being made. Likewise, the absurdity about the Austrian’s suggestion also plays on common-held stereotypes that Austrians are dim-witted.

However, nor do we only laugh at the insult; we laugh because of the twist of the complimentary words to convey an insult.⁶¹⁸ Monro suggests that the insult enhances the humour by appealing to our malice, but it is the word-play combination of the insult revealed in the incongruity of the scenario that results in laughter.⁶¹⁹ Billig also notes the inadequacies of many of Schopenhauer’s incongruity examples.⁶²⁰ In one example Schopenhauer points to the ‘incongruity’ of a grieving African–American father using the epitaph of a ‘white’ lily to commemorate the death of his ‘dark’ skinned child.⁶²¹ Billig says: ‘Schopenhauer assumed that everyone would have found this example funny – he implicitly excluded the grieving father in his imagined everybody.’⁶²² It seems that in his eagerness to provide the correct explanation of humour, Schopenhauer failed to consider that humour is a social action. It can wound with ‘bigoted cruelty’– including and excluding those in its circle of intimacy.⁶²³ Narrow-minded and negative stereotypes of Aboriginal people are readily found in the proliferation of cartoons and jokes made about them in the Australian mainstream, and these attitudes will be reviewed in detail in upcoming chapters of this thesis.

⁶¹³ Schopenhauer, A., [1818] n.d. b., p. 96.

⁶¹⁴ Monro, D., 1951, *Argument of Laughter*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, Victoria, p. 150.

⁶¹⁵ Schopenhauer, A., [1818] n.d. b., p. 97.

⁶¹⁶ Monro, D., 1951, p. 151.

⁶¹⁷ Monro, D., 1951, p. 151.

⁶¹⁸ Monro, D., 1951, p. 152.

⁶¹⁹ Monro, D., 1951, p. 152.

⁶²⁰ Billig, M., 2005, Op. Cit., pp. 84–85.

⁶²¹ Schopenhauer, A., [1818] n.d. b., p. 57.

⁶²² Billig, M., 2005, Op. Cit., pp. 84–85.

⁶²³ Billig, M., 2005, p. 85.

Objections to Schopenhauer's humour theory generally note that his formula stressed the structural side of a joke to the exclusion of its content and social context.⁶²⁴ His theory about 'frustrated expectation' is only meaningful if consideration is also given to the dissolution of an attitude too. For Schopenhauer, humour is all about finding and making connections in mental cognitions; yet peoples' attitudes and beliefs play a significant role in the success of a joke too.⁶²⁵ Just because people might not laugh, it does not mean that they also failed to perceive the incongruity in a joke.⁶²⁶ Background history and social beliefs play an important role in humour.⁶²⁷ For example, in relation to sexual jokes, Schopenhauer would suggest that the percept 'sex' could be subsumed under an innocent concept. The 'success' of a dirty joke can't be measured without taking into account the complexities of beliefs, ideas, and repressions surrounding the sex subject. Conversely, a scenario about sex by itself would not be funny without some sort of mind trickery embedded within the humour.⁶²⁸

One of the biggest problems facing incongruity theories is the idea of what 'incongruity' actually means.⁶²⁹ Collins-Swabey has posed this very question.⁶³⁰ She provides multiple definitions of incongruity:

- Disagreement in character or qualities;
- Want of accordance or harmony;
- Discrepancy;
- Inconsistency;
- Want of accordance with what is reasonable or fitting;
- Inappropriateness;
- Absurdity;
- Want of harmony of parts or elements;
- Want of self-consistency;
- Incoherence.⁶³¹

At times, incongruity theorists have intended each of these interpretations;⁶³² but 'inappropriate' (unsuitable) concepts are markedly different from 'contradictory' (opposite) ones. While jokes often contain 'logical contradictions', sometimes their incongruity actually means that objects are very

⁶²⁴ Monro, D., 1951, Op. Cit, p. 155.

⁶²⁵ Monro, D., 1951, Op. Cit, p. 155.

⁶²⁶ Billig, M., 2005, Op. Cit., p. 85.

⁶²⁷ Monro, D., 1951, Op. Cit, p. 155.

⁶²⁸ Monro, D., 1951, p. 156.

⁶²⁹ Collins-Swabey, M., 1970, *Comic Laughter: A Philosophical Essay*, Archon Books, USA, pp. 110-111.

⁶³⁰ Collins-Swabey, M., 1970, pp. 110-111.

⁶³¹ Collins-Swabey, M., 1970, pp. 110-111.

⁶³² Lippitt, J., 1994, Op. Cit., p. 148.

different from one another; or sometimes they are inappropriate to a situation or they just lack relevance.⁶³³

3.2.2 *David Monro*

While Monro faults Schopenhauer's theory because it does not give credit to important elements of criticism, he still believes that incongruity's collision of different mental spheres and odd connections provides explanation for humour's essence. His own theory is based on an understanding of incongruity as 'inappropriate'.⁶³⁴ Monro says that from childhood, all humans delight in innovative ideas that they consider novel, often unusual, and humour feeds into this fundamental enjoyment.⁶³⁵ Past experiences and beliefs shape ideas about what these novelties are, and humour relies on these assumptions in conjunction with its ability to surprise, sometime even shock us.⁶³⁶

For example, sexual jokes rely on our recognition of inappropriate sentiment and challenge to social etiquette. Moreover, our moral attitudes, shaped by these social conventions and stereotypes, are continually reaffirmed in popular media such as newspapers, books and movies.⁶³⁷ It is easiest for us to follow the path of least resistance and conjure up stereotypes rather than describing complex reality.⁶³⁸

Humour, Monro says, relies on our ability to imagine and comprehend generalisations or cliché phrases that support and enhance common-held social attitudes.⁶³⁹ Monro uses a witty phrase from Oscar Wilde to explain his point about the short-cuts taken in humour:

The youth of to-day... are quite monstrous. They have absolutely no respect for dyed hair.⁶⁴⁰

Wilde's expression is funny because it relies on an old fashioned, and yet familiar lament for the young to respect their elders because of their apparent superior wisdom and greater life experiences. Wilde alters just one word from this familiar line— 'grey' to 'dyed', and in doing, exposes the whole concept as ludicrous. Humour, Monro says, depends on a background of conventional attitudes, behaviours and beliefs. It upsets well-known patterns by abruptly introducing something that is inappropriate that also references a hidden propriety.⁶⁴¹ This thesis will show that many of the modern forms of humour used by Aboriginal Australians include incongruous uses. This incongruity humour is revealed in the ability of many Aboriginal humorists to laugh at themselves and at some of the more

⁶³³ Collins-Swabey, M., 1970, Op. Cit., p. 110.

⁶³⁴ Monro, D., 1951, Op. Cit., p. 235.

⁶³⁵ Monro, D., 1951, p. 236.

⁶³⁶ Monro, D., 1951, p. 238.

⁶³⁷ Monro, D., 1951, p. 239.

⁶³⁸ Monro, D., 1951, p. 240.

⁶³⁹ Monro, D., 1951, p. 241.

⁶⁴⁰ Wilde, O., unreferenced quote in Monro, D, 1951, p. 241.

⁶⁴¹ Monro, D., 1951, pp. 241-242.

socially disdained aspects of their cultures. This disarming humour provides a powerful source of in-group camaraderie as well as a form of pre-emptive defense against some of the negative criticisms made about their cultures within the mainstream. Nevertheless, inappropriateness is also an incomplete and ambiguous explanation for humour's essence as it doesn't account for logical transgressions or illogical contradictions.⁶⁴² These things are more than just 'unsuitable'; as they can be either completely appropriate or exactly opposite in meaning, yet still funny.⁶⁴³

3.2.3 *More challenges to Incongruity Theories*

Roger Scruton also challenges incongruity theories, questioning: '[i]s it the incongruity or the actual congruity of a situation that makes it funny?'⁶⁴⁴ He uses a cartoon caricature of the 1980s British Prime Minister, Margaret Thatcher to exemplify his question:

The caricature amuses, not because it does not fit Mrs Thatcher, but because it does fit her, all too well. It is true that it must also contain an exaggeration: but the exaggeration is amusing because it draws attention to some feature of her. If one wishes to describe the humour of a caricature in terms of incongruity it must be added that it is an incongruity which illustrates a deeper congruity between an object and itself.⁶⁴⁵

Scruton said that what is funny about this caricature is the accuracy of the portrayal of the PM. We laugh because of the very recognisable traits that capture their subject. Here we are amused when people act in a way that is typical of existing behaviours. Scruton also believes that the term incongruity is too vague.⁶⁴⁶ If we are to truly comprehend its meaning we must refer to a pre-existing set of objects that cause laughter.⁶⁴⁷ In fact, satire works on this principle of referencing equivalents in ordinary life. When characters act in ways that are true to themselves, we are amused by the absolute congruence between the subject and their actions.⁶⁴⁸ The exasperating and amusing anecdotes of Basil Fawlty from the sitcom *Fawlty Towers* exemplify this proposal. Fawlty's behaviours, fawning on and/or upsetting his guests, are repetitious. Character predictability is often a central feature of situation comedy, and we delight in the display of regular behavioural patterns.⁶⁴⁹

The counter-objection to 'congruity' is the observation that we are still recognising an incongruity in characters when we compare them with 'ordinary people' and how we expect people to behave. Basil Fawlty's long suffering wife, Sybil, although an exaggerated disciplinarian, provides reference to

⁶⁴² Collins-Swabey, M., 1970, Op. Cit, pp. 111–112.

⁶⁴³ Collins-Swabey, M., 1970, pp. 111–112.

⁶⁴⁴ Scruton, R., 1986., 'Laughter' in Morreall, J. (ed.), 1987, *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, University of New York Press, Albany, NY, pp. 161–162.

⁶⁴⁵ Scruton, R., 1986, p. 161.

⁶⁴⁶ Scruton, R., 1986, pp. 161-2.

⁶⁴⁷ Scruton, R., 1986, pp. 161-2.

⁶⁴⁸ Scruton, R., 1986, p. 162.

⁶⁴⁹ Willis, K., 2002, *Making Sense of Humour: Some Pragmatic and Political Aspects*, Ph.D Thesis, London Metropolitan University, np. at: <http://www.pragmaticshumour.net/makingsenseofhumour/1.3incongruity_theories.htm> viewed 07/05/2012.

‘normality’ that highlights Basil’s eccentricities. Furthermore, in relation to the Thatcher caricature, isn’t it actually ‘incongruous’ for a person/caricature who is *not* Margaret Thatcher to look and to act just like her?⁶⁵⁰

Therefore, on this point, Michael Mulkay states:

I suggest that jokes are designed to display congruity and incongruity at the same time; and that recipients presumably respond to them accordingly. Jokes do have to make sense. They have to furnish an understandable connection between the punch line and the rest of the text, and thereby between the frames of reference juxtaposed within the joke.⁶⁵¹

It is the contrast between the congruity and the incongruity that makes a joke funny. Mulkay suggests that jokes need certain logic in order to make sense; when a person ‘gets’ the meaning of a joke they are not establishing the type of congruity that is necessary for serious discourse.⁶⁵² Rather, the joke’s interpretative connections are broader and register more unexpected and unspecified connections.⁶⁵³ In this context, the idea that a joke must ‘make sense’ can be seen as relevant to a particular social system. In referencing widely understood concepts, the joke provides a socially congruent ‘reference point’ of contrast for its incongruity.

Ragnar Johnson argues that jokes contain ‘form’, ‘content’ and a social ‘classificatory system’ that produces their particular content and style. Therefore, all joke theories are actually theories about society and reflect the conceptual ideologies of its members.⁶⁵⁴ He notes:

There are many layers of thought and their actualization in form. These combine to provide the entire meaning of the joke, and all this originates from the perception of a given social context. Obviously the joke must be treated as some kind of social form... [All]... theories ... either explicitly or implicitly... [define]... both the society to which the particular theory applies and the way in which the joke is contained by this society. By classifying phenomena as jokes, the joke is defined as part of a domain which constitutes society.⁶⁵⁵

Johnson and Mulkay, recognise that social concepts and social conditioning are important components of humour. Flexible and current social assumptions provide jokes with fresh relevance to specific societies at particular points in time. Much of what is funny about humour does depend on deceptive incongruity and the intellectual pleasure it provides. Values, emotional attitudes and intent give humour context, contributing to the ‘funniness’ of humour, and can’t be disregarded. The diverse questions about what incongruity humour really is, what makes it funny, and how it is used, have led contemporary research of incongruity-based theories to explore a myriad of different humour issues

⁶⁵⁰ Willis, K., 2002, np.

⁶⁵¹ Mulkay, M., 1988, *On Humour – Its Nature and Place in Modern Society*, Polity Press, Oxford, UK, p. 33.

⁶⁵² Mulkay, M., 1988, p. 33.

⁶⁵³ Mulkay, M., 1988, pp. 33-34.

⁶⁵⁴ Johnson, R., 1976, ‘Two Realms and a Joke: Bisociation Theories of Joking’, *Semiotica* v.16/3, p. 196.

⁶⁵⁵ Johnson, R., 1976, p. 219.

via means such as Semantic Script Theory,⁶⁵⁶ Appropriate Incongruity,⁶⁵⁷ Incongruity plus resolution,⁶⁵⁸ Incongruity and then resolution,⁶⁵⁹ and 3WD.⁶⁶⁰ Such diversity continues to make this theory the most respected foundation for comprehension of the essential qualities of humour and can often be seen in Indigenous humour practices.

3.2.4 Some contemporary trends in Incongruity research

In the 1960s Arthur Koestler advanced a theory of creative thought processes that he termed ‘bisociation’ which focused on the collision of ‘two self-consistent but habitually incompatible frames of reference’ that cause a sudden mental jump or switch from one to the other.⁶⁶¹ Koestler believed that creativity consists of three broad areas— art, discovery and humour.⁶⁶² His theory recognised the incongruous clash of two previously unrelated sets of conditions or scripts that come together to create greater human creativity.⁶⁶³ Koestler suggests that this theory is the foundation of *all* potentially creative processes including ability, habit, logic, and, of course, humour— basically any structured behaviours governed by ‘codes’ (scripts) of fixed rules.⁶⁶⁴ For Koestler, as other theorists have also noted, humour involves a paradox because laughter can result from a variety of complex intellectual and emotional stimuli.⁶⁶⁵ Yet it is his recognition that intersections between different realms of experience play important roles in human thinking and communication that has become the foundation for contemporary humour investigations.⁶⁶⁶

Applied to humour research, Koestler’s ideas about the clash of two frames of reference have been further refined by some notable linguists. This includes the 1991 modifications and clarifications by Salvatore Attardo and Victor Raskin that attempt to answer the question of what verbal humour actually is, as opposed to theories that question why humour exists.⁶⁶⁷ Attardo and Raskin’s joint

⁶⁵⁶ **SSTH** recognises a script as a structure of knowledge about an accepted topic. Jokes are interpreted by associating two opposite script concepts with the jokes’ text – see Raskin, V., 1985, *Semantic Mechanisms of Humor*, D. Reidel Publishing Co., Dordrecht, Holland.

⁶⁵⁷ **Appropriate Incongruity** relates to the appropriate relationship between categories ordinarily regarded as incongruous. This is not a complete resolution of the incongruity – see Oring, E., 2003, *Engaging Humor*, University of Illinois Press, Illinois, USA.

⁶⁵⁸ **Incongruity plus resolution** theories suggest that the conceptual clash has to make at least partial sense, see Hempelmann, C. & S. Attardo, 2011, ‘Resolutions and Their Incongruities: Further Thoughts on Logical Mechanisms’ in *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, 24/2, pp. 125-149.

⁶⁵⁹ **Incongruity then resolution** theories recognise the sequencing of a set-up and then the punch line, see Hempelmann, C. & S. Attardo, 2011, Op. Cit., pp. 125-149.

⁶⁶⁰ **3WD** theories look at the statistical patterns in peoples’ judgments about humour, noting 3 variants – sex, resolved incongruity, and not fully resolved incongruity, see Ruch, W., 1983, ‘Humor-Test 3 WD (Form A, B and K)’, unpublished manuscript, University of Dusseldorf, Dusseldorf, Germany.

⁶⁶¹ Koestler, A., 1969 [1964], *The Act of Creation*, Hutchinson & Co. Ltd, London, UK, p. 35.

⁶⁶² Krikmann, A., 2006, ‘Contemporary Linguistic Theories of Humour’, *Folklore: Electronic Journal of Folklore*, 33/2006, pp. 27–58, at p. 28.

⁶⁶³ Koestler, A., 1969 [1964], Op. Cit., p. 38.

⁶⁶⁴ Koestler, A., 1969 [1964], p. 38.

⁶⁶⁵ Krikmann, A., 2006, Op. Cit., p. 29.

⁶⁶⁶ Krikmann, A., 2006, p. 29.

⁶⁶⁷ Attardo, S., & V. Raskin, 1991, ‘Script theory revis(it)ed: joke similarity and joke representation model’, *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research* 4/3–4, pp. 293–347, at p. 330.

paper postulated a general theory of verbal humour, known as ‘GTVH’.⁶⁶⁸ GTVH is an extension of Raskin’s script-based semantic humour theory (SSTH, 1985),⁶⁶⁹ integrated with Attardo’s five-level joke representation model (1989).⁶⁷⁰ GTVH recognises six knowledge resources that inform jokes, namely: language, narrative strategies, targets, situations, logical mechanisms, and script oppositions.⁶⁷¹ On a premise that many jokes are variants of existing jokes, the pair analyse a series of 30 jokes in order to propose a set of principles about joke creation.⁶⁷² GTVH explains six ‘bodies of knowledge’ or knowledge resources that inform all verbal jokes in the following way:

***Language:** Differences in things such as word choices & meaning, phonetics, sound, sentence constructions, pragmatics and a variety of paraphrases are all responsible for providing language parameters to the content of jokes.⁶⁷³

***Narrative strategies:** Refer to the joke’s genre or style; be it a riddle, a question/answer sequence, explanatory text, etc.⁶⁷⁴ Joke strategies often use implicit text where the hearer must, and can, reconstruct the full text from these inferences.⁶⁷⁵

***Target:** Targets are those individuals or groups to whom various behaviours are attributed, and they are the object of the joke.⁶⁷⁶ They are chosen on ethnic, social or political grounds; and are generally based on things like competition, jealousy or xenophobia.⁶⁷⁷

***Situation:** All jokes contain ‘props’ like activities, participants and objects that constitute the situation of a joke.⁶⁷⁸ Joke situations are simple and obvious activities with widely understood ways of doing these activities.⁶⁷⁹

***Logical mechanisms:** Are the ordinarily recognised processes used to accomplish a particular deed. In jokes, rational thoughts or steps are often accompanied by faulty or cheating inferential processes.⁶⁸⁰ Humour permits, and often relies on, the use of fallacious reasoning— especially

⁶⁶⁸ Attardo, S., & V. Raskin, 1991, p. 330.

⁶⁶⁹ Raskin, V., 1985, Op. Cit.

⁶⁷⁰ Attardo, S., 1989, ‘A multiple-level analysis of jokes’, *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, 2(4), pp. 438–439.

⁶⁷¹ Attardo, S., & V. Raskin, 1991, p. 293; see also pp. 312–313.

⁶⁷² Attardo, S., & V. Raskin, 1991, p. 296.

⁶⁷³ Attardo, S. & V. Raskin, 1991, pp. 297–298.

⁶⁷⁴ Attardo, S. & V. Raskin, 1991, p. 300.

⁶⁷⁵ Attardo, S. & V. Raskin, 1991, p. 301.

⁶⁷⁶ Krikmann, A., 2006, p. 37. Attardo, S., & V. Raskin, 1991, Op. Cit., p. 301.

⁶⁷⁷ Krikmann, A., 2006, p. 37. Attardo, S., & V. Raskin, 1991, p. 301.

⁶⁷⁸ Attardo, S. & V. Raskin, 1991, p. 303.

⁶⁷⁹ Attardo, S. & V. Raskin, 1991, pp. 302–303.

⁶⁸⁰ Attardo, S. & V. Raskin, 1991, p. 304.

illogical reasoning that superficially appears to be logical, used in conjunction with recognisable, yet untrue stereotypes.⁶⁸¹

***Script opposition:** Claims that the interpreted text of a joke is either fully or partially compatible with two distinct scripts, and these scripts are in some way contrary to each other.⁶⁸²

The text of a joke is deliberately ambiguous and the punchline of the joke triggers the switch from one to the other script/interpretation in the mind of the listener.⁶⁸³

Finally, Attardo and Raskin propose a hierarchy of the choices that need to be made from their joke knowledge resources in an attempt to capture all bilateral and multilateral relations among the various components of jokes.⁶⁸⁴ This hierarchy consists of: script oppositions, logical mechanisms, situations, targets, narrative strategies and finally, language.⁶⁸⁵ The authors note their ordering as an ‘abstract model’ that assists to represent jokes as a process in which choices and decisions between various traits and elements are made in a justifiably logical order.⁶⁸⁶ Krikmann suggests that this linear hierarchy was probably selected in hope of creating a knowledge resource sequence ladder to assist with measuring the ‘psychological distance’ or cognitive alternatives between different joke texts choices.⁶⁸⁷ Since this ground-breaking work was published many humour theorists, including Attardo and Raskin themselves, have re-analysed various aspects of the knowledge resources postulated in this theory providing further insights into issues such as the full or partial resolution of incongruities in humour. Although this thesis will not be considering Aboriginal jokes per se, some of the knowledge resources required to understand humour scripts are important aspects of comprehension of Indigenous humour within an Australian cultural environment that will be highlighted and considered in greater depth. In particular, Indigenous language use, narrative inferences and specific targets, including self-mockery, all play significant roles in Indigenous performance humour and will be shown throughout the coming chapters.

⁶⁸¹ Attardo, S. & V. Raskin, 1991, p. 304.

⁶⁸² Attardo, S. & V. Raskin, 1991, p. 308.

⁶⁸³ Attardo, S. & V. Raskin, 1991, p. 308.

⁶⁸⁴ Attardo, S. & V. Raskin, 1991, pp. 313–321.

⁶⁸⁵ Attardo, S. & V. Raskin, 1991, p. 325.

⁶⁸⁶ Attardo, S. & V. Raskin, 1991, p. 314.

⁶⁸⁷ Krikmann, A., 2006, Op. Cit., p. 38.

3.3 Relief/Release Theories

The final significant humour theories discussed are known as either ‘relief’ or ‘release’ theories. In the ongoing endeavour to provide an all-encompassing explanation of the essential nature of humour, towards the turn of the Twentieth Century, relief theories emerged based on physiological understandings in conjunction with developments in psychoanalytical studies.⁶⁸⁸ The foundation of relief theories lies in laughter’s functions in the nervous system, acting as a ‘pressure-relief valve’ that releases superfluous built-up energy in the body.⁶⁸⁹ Humour’s essential ability is to provide people with a form of therapeutic release from the cognitive constraints imposed on them as members of (restrictive) social structures. Humour is seen to provide personal relief from the restraints of conforming to fixed morality and socially dictated systems of behaviour.⁶⁹⁰

3.3.1 Herbert Spencer

In his essay: ‘The Physiology of Laughter’⁶⁹¹ originally published in 1860,⁶⁹² Herbert Spencer’s theory of laughter centred on a physiological explanation of the body’s release of mental tension:

... ‘nervous excitement at any moment present to consciousness as feeling, must expend itself in some way or other’.⁶⁹³

Spencer based his explanation of humour on the physical response *to*, rather than the conditions necessary *for*, humour.⁶⁹⁴ The nervous system functions to receive and transmit energy.⁶⁹⁵ Nervous energy must expel itself from the body through three interconnected ‘channels’.⁶⁹⁶ It is released into muscular actions or ‘bodily movements’ (ie. facial expressions, flailing limbs); it enters into the organs producing physical changes to the body (ie. tightening of the stomach, quickening of the pulse); and it flows through the nervous system, manifesting in thoughts and feelings.⁶⁹⁷ While all three channels receive this energy there is only so much of it to be expelled.⁶⁹⁸ Therefore, when one of the channels has a strong discharge, the other two channels are less affected. That’s why weeping and wailing assuages grief. By using up our energy on physical action, less is left for sad thoughts.⁶⁹⁹

⁶⁸⁸ Behrens, L., & L. Rosen, (eds.), 1988, ‘Theories of Humor’ in *Writing and Reading Across the Curriculum* (3rd ed.) Scott, Foresman & Co., Illinois, USA, pp. 349–355.

⁶⁸⁹ Morreall, J., 2014 in Attardo, S., (ed.), 2014, p. 567.

⁶⁹⁰ Behrens, L. & L., Rosen, (eds.), Op. Cit.

⁶⁹¹ Spencer, H., 1891, ‘The Physiology of Laughter’ in *Essays: Scientific, Political, & Speculative*, v.I, Williams & Norgate, London, UK, pp. 452-466.

⁶⁹² Spencer, H., 1891, p. 452.

⁶⁹³ Spencer, H., 1891, p. 457. Billig, M., 2005, Op. Cit., p. 91.

⁶⁹⁴ Spencer, H., 1891, p. 452.

⁶⁹⁵ Spencer, H., 1881, *The Principles of Psychology* (3rd ed.) v.1, Williams & Norgate, London, UK, p. 46.

⁶⁹⁶ Spencer, H., 1891, Op. Cit., pp. 457–458.

⁶⁹⁷ Spencer, H., 1891, pp. 454–455, Monroe, D., 1951, Op. Cit., p. 158.

⁶⁹⁸ Monroe, D., 1951, Op. Cit., p. 158.

⁶⁹⁹ Monroe, D., 1951, p. 158.

In particular, Spencer says that laughter is a form of muscular action used for expulsion of such energy build-up in the body:

That laughter is a form of muscular excitement, and so illustrates the general law that feeling passing a certain pitch habitually vents itself in bodily action scarcely needs pointing out.⁷⁰⁰

Spencer believed that laughter was an end in itself and did not serve the body with any other purpose.⁷⁰¹ That is, when we laugh the bodily motions produced do not have an ulterior motive as they would have for instance when stemming from an emotion like ‘fear’ or ‘pain’ (where we may run away in fear, or we may psychically clench a hurt area of the body that is in pain).⁷⁰² Laughter is purely an ‘overflow’ response to built-up nervous energy caused by extreme pleasure or pain:

... mirth is caused by the gush of agreeable feeling which follows the cessation of unpleasant mental strain.⁷⁰³

Emotion builds up in the body and then quite suddenly it seems inappropriate and is released in laughter. An example of this expression of laughter can be seen in an account of a dinner party incident told to me by a friend. Included among her guests was a baby left sleeping in her pram by the window. During the course of the evening, without warning, the heavy curtain and rod came crashing down onto the pram. After the startled rush to check on the baby’s health (and she was fine), one guest spontaneously stated: “It was nearly curtains for that baby,” and everyone laughed heartily. This laughter was not a malicious and inappropriate expression of glee at the accident, rather an emotional release of the anxiety that all felt at the near miss for the defenseless child.

Billig suggests that Spencer’s humour theory formed part of his wider project, joining scientific knowledge with evolution ideologies.⁷⁰⁴ In his 1851 *Social Statics*, Spencer argues that human nature can improve by following evolutionary principles in which weaker members die out and the stronger survive.⁷⁰⁵ (Billig notes, in fact, that it was Spencer, and not Darwin, who coined the phrase ‘survival of the fittest’ in his philosophies).⁷⁰⁶ Laughter generally provided Spencer with an example of the principles of evolution because he believed that the physical mechanisms of smiling and laughing were inherited inter-generationally as part of the species evolving biological make-up.⁷⁰⁷

⁷⁰⁰ Spencer, H., 1891, Op. Cit., p. 458.

⁷⁰¹ Spencer, H., 1891, p. 458.

⁷⁰² Spencer, H., 1891, p. 458.

⁷⁰³ Spencer, H., 1891, p. 460.

⁷⁰⁴ Billig, M., 2005, Op. Cit., p. 93.

⁷⁰⁵ Billig, M., 2005, p. 90. Spencer, H., 1851, *Social Statics*, John Chapman, London, UK, p. 323.

⁷⁰⁶ Billig, M., 2005, p. 90.

⁷⁰⁷ Billig, M., 2005, pp. 101–2.

Hence Spencer aimed to reformulate the 'intellectual' incongruity theory to include a physiological theory about bodily nervous energy.⁷⁰⁸ Nonetheless, he, like other critics, recognised that not all incongruities are funny, nor do they provoke excess nervous energy.⁷⁰⁹ Therefore, he proposed that only 'descending incongruities'— when the consciousness shifts from thinking about great to lesser things— produce the humour/laughter required to generate this excess energy.⁷¹⁰

Like other incongruity theorists, Spencer believed that puns could be made without mocking or degradation.⁷¹¹ His rejection of superiority humour is easily refuted by those who point to its presence in so many jokes.⁷¹² Spencer's theory of descending incongruity and release, like other humour theories, neglects the social nature of humour and laughter.⁷¹³ Nonetheless, seeing his philosophies as part of the intellectual milieu of the 1800s with its scientific challenges to existing theological beliefs gives understanding about the reasons why such theories were considered. Billig says:

A philosophy will express, either implicitly or explicitly, the hopes and fears of the age in which it was formulated. Its vocabulary and style of expression will bear further imprints of its times.⁷¹⁴

So too the theories of the best known relief/release proponent, Sigmund Freud, must also be considered in light of the psychoanalytical discoveries of the turn of the Twentieth Century.⁷¹⁵

3.3.2 *Sigmund Freud*

Freud's humour theories grew out of his dream theories.⁷¹⁶ The same techniques of condensation, displacement and double meaning used in his 'dream-work' theories were also explanation of his 'joke-work' theories.⁷¹⁷ Freud believed dreams express a person's unconscious wishes that are, more often than not, illicit.⁷¹⁸ Additionally, the unconscious includes a type of psychological censorship. This apparatus controls and filters inappropriate thoughts and desires in order to prevent distressing emotions arising in the dreamer such as anger or anxiety resulting from their un-fulfillment.⁷¹⁹ The unconscious uses dreams as a sort of 'disguise' to veil prohibited wishes and to trick the internal censor into allowing a manifestation of prohibited thoughts into the dream world.

⁷⁰⁸ Billig, M., 2005, p. 99.

⁷⁰⁹ Billig, M., 2005, p. 99.

⁷¹⁰ Billig, M., 2005, pp. 99–100. Spencer, H., 1891, Op. Cit., p. 463.

⁷¹¹ Billig, M., 2005, Op. Cit., p. 100.

⁷¹² Billig, M., 2005, pp. 100–101.

⁷¹³ Billig, M., 2005, p. 100.

⁷¹⁴ Billig, M., 2005, p. 87.

⁷¹⁵ Critchley, S., [2002] 2010, Op. Cit., p. 3.

⁷¹⁶ Carey, J., 2001, 'Introduction' in *Sigmund Freud: The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, Crick, J., (trans.), [1905] 2002, Penguin Books, London, UK, p. vii.

⁷¹⁷ Oring, E., 2003, Op. Cit., p. 28. Freud, S., [1905], 2002, Op. Cit., p. 156.

⁷¹⁸ Carey, J., 2001, Op. Cit., p. vii.

⁷¹⁹ Carey, J., 2001, p. vii.

Dreams frequently rely on jokes in their attempts to fool this internal inhibitor.⁷²⁰ As Oring says, jokes confront inhibitions and their censored thoughts far more openly than dreams can.⁷²¹ Moreover, as Freud believed that the most commonly repressed emotions are either aggressive and/or sexual, jokes are a way that we can publically vent our true feelings on these and other repressed topics.⁷²²

Nonetheless, the relationship between Freud's dream and joke theories is tenuous. The condensation of his patients' specific dream contents into symbols that were then decoded as representations of illicit desires is incomparable with jokes whose originator is generally unknown and unknowable.⁷²³ Even if connections between 'joke-work' and 'dream-work' structures might be untenable, certainly psychologically un-testable, and perhaps more of an excuse for Freud to record some of the almost two hundred jokes and humorous anecdotes that he had collected,⁷²⁴ his discussion about the *purpose* of various jokes is enlightening. Freud believed that jokes have the purpose of arousing pleasure in the listener. He states:

If we are not actually using our psychical apparatus to realise one of our indispensable satisfactions, we let it work towards pleasure ... of joking I can say ... that it is an activity whose aim it is to obtain pleasure from psychical processes...⁷²⁵

Freud also believed that a purpose of jokes was to circumvent inner impulses.⁷²⁶ Jokes assist a person to avoid internal inhibitions or suppressions.⁷²⁷ Such restrictions have resulted from the social stifling of childhood pleasures in adulthood.⁷²⁸ Western systems of education, coupled with the critical judgement of its social mores, have created inhibitions by forcing people to focus on issues of 'logic' and 'reality' above the less restrictive world of childhood play and nonsense.⁷²⁹ Billig notes that Freud believed that we have an internal voice – a moral conscience – that tells us what, and what not, to do.⁷³⁰ Jokes, Freud suggests, provide people with relief from these imposed restrictions by unburdening them from intellectual education and restoring childish psychological freedoms.⁷³¹

Moreover, jokes aim to silence internal critical objections that prohibit experiences of pleasure.⁷³² In their ability to assist us to overcome such powerful internal inhibitions, jokes go beyond their original

⁷²⁰ Freud, S., [1905] 2002, Op. Cit., p. 162.

⁷²¹ Oring, E., 1984, 'Jokes and Their Relation to Sigmund Freud' in *Western Folklore*, v.43, no. 1, p. 39.

⁷²² Morreall, J., 2014 in Attardo, S., (ed.), 2014, Op. Cit., p.568.

⁷²³ Carey, J., 2001, Op. Cit, p. xii.

⁷²⁴ Oring, E., 1984, Op. Cit., p. 37.

⁷²⁵ Freud, S., [1905], 2002, Op. Cit., p. 93.

⁷²⁶ Freud, S., [1905], 2002, p. 116.

⁷²⁷ Freud, S., [1905], 2002, p. 116.

⁷²⁸ Freud, S., [1905], 2002, pp. 122–123.

⁷²⁹ Freud, S., [1905], 2002, p. 123.

⁷³⁰ Billig, M., 2005, Op. Cit., p. 147.

⁷³¹ Freud, S., [1905] 2002, Op. Cit., p. 124.

⁷³² Freud, S., [1905], 2002, p. 126.

function as ‘pleasure producers’ and provide an important stress release for the psyche.⁷³³ In this sense, Freud sees the utility of the joke-work in classical relief/release, cathartic terms; assisting the body to deal with repressed emotions and relieving inner tensions.

This concept of ‘relief from internal obstacles’ provided by jokes ties in well with Freud’s theories about controversial jokes. These styles of jokes fall into two categories, either innocent or salacious:

Where a joke is not an end in itself, i.e., innocuous, it puts itself at the service of two tendencies only, which can themselves be merged into a single viewpoint [i.e. tendentious]; it is either a *hostile* joke (used for aggression, satire, defence) or it is an *obscene* joke (used to strip someone naked).⁷³⁴

Unlike innocuous jokes whose pleasure Freud attributes predominantly to their technique, tendentious jokes have a further source of pleasure at their disposal in their tendency that, more often than not, can produce a hearty laughter response even if the technique is feeble.⁷³⁵ While sexual jokes give vent to sexually repressed desires, hostile jokes are a more socially acceptable way of dealing with repressions of violence.⁷³⁶ Freud suggests that feelings of anger, indignation and injustice remain significant psychological ‘obstacles’ for people. Salacious jokes replace socially unacceptable behaviour with the use of insulting jokes, in environs where physical violence is disdained or even forbidden by law; he says:

The joke will allow us to turn to good account those ridiculous features in our enemy that the presence of opposing obstacles would not let us utter aloud ... [it will] ... get around restrictions and open up sources of pleasure that have become inaccessible ... [as well as] ... bribe the listener with his own gain in pleasure in taking our side ...⁷³⁷

Hostile jokes assist us to control our anger towards others even as they allow for its expression. Tendentious jokes are particularly effective at helping deal with feelings of hostility towards people in positions of high cultural standing who claim social authority over us.⁷³⁸ This proposition is especially relevant to the way that minority people, like Aboriginal people, have used humour as a metaphorical weapon of the powerless against the powerful.

Moreover, Freud says that the best type of humour is either ‘cynical’ or ‘sceptical’ as it is particularly good at allowing for veiled criticism and/or aggression. Here jokes represent a form of rebellion against authority and inner freedom from the oppression it imposes.⁷³⁹ Tendentious jokes help us to satisfy instincts, be they sexual or aggressive, and to circumvent their social taboos that form

⁷³³ Freud, S., [1905], 2002, p. 129.

⁷³⁴ Freud, S., [1905], 2002, p. 94.

⁷³⁵ Freud, S., [1905], 2002, p. 99.

⁷³⁶ Freud, S., [1905], 2002, p. 99.

⁷³⁷ Freud, S., [1905], 2002, p. 100.

⁷³⁸ Freud, S., [1905], 2002, p. 102.

⁷³⁹ Freud, S., [1905], 2002, pp. 101–102. Billig, M., 2005, Op. Cit., p. 164.

obstacles to our pleasure.⁷⁴⁰ Alan Dundes says that culturally sacred or taboo topics provide the bulk of the material for humour and such humour especially abounds in places where they are prohibited.⁷⁴¹ This thesis will show how humour as a form of rebellion against the mainstream social status quo is a significant aspect of its use by Indigenous Australians in their performance humour.

Freud's theories on tendentious jokes do not give much credit to the idea that the joke teller gains another kind of internal pleasure from such jokes. That is, they receive a feeling of superior eminence – enjoyment in their own clever comprehension, timing and implementation of the joke. This point, of course, also relates to innocuous ones (such as cognitively sophisticated jokes) where pleasure is gained in the intellectual ability of creating or comprehending a joke's meaning.

Principally, Freud's joke humour disguises hostility to allow for expression of repressed feelings. Yet, in relation to much aggressive (hate) humour, Oring believes that it is often just another articulation of those people who do not feel a need to repress their hostilities anyway.⁷⁴² There is no inherent connection between humour and aggression – generally humour disguises nothing.⁷⁴³ Jokes serve a social function. Looking deeper to see *who* is telling the joke, and *why* they tell it, provides us with information about why that particular joke genre is being used in a given time and by a particular person/people.⁷⁴⁴

Nonetheless, Oring concurs with Freud's understanding that humour can allow expression of sentiment in a disguised manner.⁷⁴⁵ For example, the public 'roasting' of a person is an aggressive display of affection, masking any vulnerability or embarrassment that might come with expressing emotion in public.⁷⁴⁶ The Australian form of humour known as 'taking-the-mickey' might also at times be considered in this light of 'humorous insult in the communication of sentiment'.⁷⁴⁷ Oring suggests that jokes provide a specific perspective for their audience, 'setting the scene' and raising topics set by the joke teller. Jokes and humour, Oring says, are an important and meaningful commutative force that can have serious textual and interactive meaning.⁷⁴⁸ What can generally be deduced from Freud's work is the fact that a joke is rarely just a joke; it has unconscious motivations and social cues that need to be explored in order to understand its purposes and use.⁷⁴⁹ This thesis contends that comprehending the socio-political history of colonised Australia, and the roles played

⁷⁴⁰ Billig, M., 2005, Op. Cit., p. 154.

⁷⁴¹ Billig, M., 2005, p. 154. Dundes, A., 1987, *Cracking Jokes: Studies of Sick Humour Cycles and Stereotypes*, Ten Speed Press, California, USA, p. vii, p. 16.

⁷⁴² Oring, E., 2003, Op. Cit., p. 57.

⁷⁴³ Oring, E., 2003, p. 57.

⁷⁴⁴ Norrick, N., 2004, 'Review of Engaging Humor' in *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, 17(3), p. 333.

⁷⁴⁵ Oring E., 2003, Op. Cit., p. 82.

⁷⁴⁶ Oring E., 2003, p. 82. Norrick, N., 2004, p. 333.

⁷⁴⁷ Oring E., 2003, p. 82.

⁷⁴⁸ Oring, E., 2003, ix-x.

⁷⁴⁹ Billig, M., 2005, Op, Cit., p. 139.

by Indigenous people in this country, is vital to understanding the significance of certain forms of humour that continue to dominate Indigenous/Non-Indigenous relationships.

Freud's example jokes in his humour book are telling. The jokes he used for analysis contained content that clearly reflects the capitalist, patriarchal, misogynistic, and anti-Semitic social milieu of his European world of the early 1900s.⁷⁵⁰ Initially, anti-Semitism seems odd given the fact that Freud himself was Jewish in a difficult location (Vienna, Austria) and at a time of heightened persecution of Jewish people. Oring proposes that, Freud's Jewish jokes are actually reflective of his own subject position given his penchant for their use in his writing; however he also cautions about attributing jokes to a particular personality type, especially those who are not the original joke's author.⁷⁵¹ Billig says outright that: 'The man himself – his preferences, his fears and his jokes – are all present in his book on humour.'⁷⁵² Regardless, Freud's collection and use of this genre of Jewish jokes particularly provides a helpful parallel with the use of humour by other disenfranchised groups in western socio-political structures. Freud's personal empathy for the plight of those in minority social situations, often the butt of brutal stereotypical jokes, gives his discussion of humour that has a 'social barb' (tendentious jokes) more authority. Freud considers that well recognised Jewish social stereotyping and denigration has actually led to their formation of a particularly clever Jewish joke genre:

A situation particularly favourable to the tendentious joke is set up when the intended criticism of protest is directed against one's self, or, put more circumspcctly, against a person in whom that self has a share, a collective person, that is, one's own people, for example. This determinant of self-criticism may explain to us how it is that a number of the most telling jokes – of which we have given plenty of examples – have grown from the soil of Jewish popular life. They are stories invented by Jews and aimed at Jewish characteristics. The jokes made about Jews by outsiders [*Fremden*] are mostly brutal comic anecdotes, in which [the effort of making] a proper joke is saved by the fact that to the outsider the Jew counts as a comical figure. The Jewish jokes originating with Jews admit this too, but they know their real faults and how they are related to their good points; and the share the raconteur's own person has in what is being criticized creates the subjective conditions for the joke-work that are otherwise difficult to set up.⁷⁵³

It would seem that what Freud is alluding to is the fact that the joke's authorship – its subject position – is very important in the formation of the best kinds of jokes. Billig says that Freud writes his Jewish jokes from the position of an 'insider' who empathises with poor Yiddish joke-tellers, even given his more privileged academic social circumstances.⁷⁵⁴ Freud suggests that there is a level of empowerment that comes with self-deprecating humour and ownership of situations and words that have previously been used to insult and denigrate. Jewish humour was seen to allow expression of frustrations in a way that was not so easily raised in a non-Jewish majority public.⁷⁵⁵ The benefits of

⁷⁵⁰ Carey, J., 2001, Op. Cit., p. xxviii.

⁷⁵¹ Oring, E., 1984, Op. Cit., p. 41.

⁷⁵² Billig, M., 2005, Op. Cit., p. 139.

⁷⁵³ Freud, S., [1905] 2002, Op. Cit., pp. 108-9.

⁷⁵⁴ Billig, M., 2005, Op. Cit., pp. 166-7.

⁷⁵⁵ Billig, M., 2005, p. 167.

insider humour are significant to much contemporary Indigenous performance humour that can generate camaraderie and a release from restrictive social expectations in Indigenous audiences.

Although Freud dismisses the alternative style of aggressive (racist) jokes in his work as mere ‘brutal comic anecdotes’ – those made by ‘outsiders’ about Jews – this style of tendentious humour is a significant element of the experiences of many minority groups, including Indigenous Australians. Notably, Freud kept this type of humour out of his joke book, although he would have been all too aware of its existence in the growing anti-Semitic environs of pre-war Europe.⁷⁵⁶ Billig suggests that this omission enabled Freud to emphasise his theme that humour, above all else, is rebellious.⁷⁵⁷ More specifically though, Freud failed to give credence to humour’s disciplinary tendencies that, as Bergson notes, either reconfirm or reject the social status quo.⁷⁵⁸ To Freud, humour’s use is limited to the side of the powerless.⁷⁵⁹ Freud’s humour is a form of ‘accommodating rebellion’ against those in power, rather than a ‘tool’ used by the powerful to instill discipline and fulfil their social demands.⁷⁶⁰ Freud’s rebellious humour is a way for the jokers to receive temporary relief, distance themselves from those social demands.⁷⁶¹ Especially in relation to distinction between his examples of innocent and tendentious jokes, Freud abstracted his joke/anecdote analysis away from the realities of the social context in which they occurred.⁷⁶² Freud’s emphasis on their intellectual analysis ignored the social position of both the joke teller and its audience, all with unspoken social knowledge about stereotypes, the limits and acceptability of certain topics and events.⁷⁶³ Again, this issue points to the fact that humour must be seen within a specific social and historical setting. This finding is relevant to Aboriginal Australia’s use of humour that parallels their changing socio-political circumstances, and is most recognisable in public performances from the 1970s onwards.

Generally though, critics say that Freud stretched his theories too thinly in order to find examples of unconscious motivation in human behavior.⁷⁶⁴ Not all dreams and memory lapses are actually expressions of unfulfilled desires.⁷⁶⁵ Morreall says that in contemporary scholarship, almost no one uses relief/release theories to explain humour.⁷⁶⁶ While most agree that there are some humorous events and things that can evoke emotions, many do not. Even when emotions are evoked most

⁷⁵⁶ Billig, M., 2005, p. 163, pp. 167–8.

⁷⁵⁷ Billig, M., 2005, p. 168.

⁷⁵⁸ Billig, M., 2005, p. 168. Bergson, H, [1911] 2005, Op. Cit. p. 9.

⁷⁵⁹ Billig, M., 2005, p. 168.

⁷⁶⁰ Billig, M., 2005, p. 168.

⁷⁶¹ Billig, M., 2005, p. 156 & p. 168.

⁷⁶² Billig, M., 2005, p. 164.

⁷⁶³ Billig, M., 2005, p. 165.

⁷⁶⁴ Billig, M., 2005, p. 155.

⁷⁶⁵ Billig, M., 2005, p. 155.

⁷⁶⁶ Morreall, J., 2014 in Attardo, S., (ed.), 2014, Op. Cit., p. 568.

humour specialists do not attribute laughter as a release of superfluous energy; this model is a mere reflection of the outdated (industrialised) thinking of its time.⁷⁶⁷

3.4 An alternative proposal: Humour as an 'Existential Reality'

Humour's ability to allay suffering by means of its escape from reality is also notable in the works of some existentialist writers. The concept of humour as a foundational necessity to life is an alternative explanation for the purpose of humour.⁷⁶⁸ Existentialism is a doctrine that proposes that an individual's responses to their experiences are what give meaning and purpose to life. Albert Camus' *The Myth of Sisyphus*⁷⁶⁹ provides example of the way in which positive attitudes, including the incorporation of a humorous attitude, towards suffering may be understood as providing greater fulfilment in life by acknowledging and accepting life's absurdities.⁷⁷⁰ *The Myth of Sisyphus* is based on an ancient Greek fable that tells of Sisyphus having been condemned by the gods to continually push a heavy rock to the top of a mountain, from whence it would quickly roll back down and then he would have to begin the gruelling labour over again.⁷⁷¹ Camus uses this futile act as a metaphor for life and how our attitude towards our actions can either be taken as the punishment of the defeated, or it can actually be a liberating, self-defining experience. Camus suggests that Sisyphus is able to stare boldly into the face of his torment with his own self-actualising scorn, which could be described as a form of laughing in the face of suffering. While Sisyphus' descent to begin the torture over again could have been performed in bitterness, it was actually performed with a happy attitude.⁷⁷² In fully acknowledging the truth about the absurdity of his situation, Sisyphus endured and defined his own purpose and joy in his fate. Camus' rock is as a metaphor for the heavy burdens that we all bear in life that can be borne in negativity or with an 'absurd victory'.⁷⁷³ Camus suggests that constructing our own purpose in life gives meaning to existence. Humour and laughter can be seen as expressions of a profound realisation of the absurdity of human experience and condition. Noonan says that this myth can be construed as a form of defensive humour in the face of meaninglessness where Sisyphus attains happiness by accepting the absurdity of his never-ending task.⁷⁷⁴ Berger says that our laughter in difficult circumstances implies that those circumstances are not final and will be overcome.⁷⁷⁵ Such

⁷⁶⁷ Morreall, J., 2014 in Attardo, S (ed.), 2014, p. 568.

⁷⁶⁸ Lippitt, J., 1996, 'Existential Laughter', *Cogito*: Spring 1996, p. 63.

⁷⁶⁹ Camus, A., [1942], 1971, O'Brian, J., (trans.), *The Myth of Sisyphus and other essays*, Hamish Hamilton Ltd., London, London, UK.

⁷⁷⁰ Noonan, W., 2014, 'Existentialism and the Theatre of the Absurd' in Attardo, S., (ed.), 2014, *Encyclopedia of Humor Studies*, v.1, Sage Publications Inc., LA, USA, p. 3.

⁷⁷¹ Camus, A., [1955], 1971, Op. Cit., p. 96.

⁷⁷² Camus, A., [1955], 1971, p. 98.

⁷⁷³ Camus, A., [1955], 1971, p. 98.

⁷⁷⁴ Noonan, W., 2014, Op. Cit., p. 3.

⁷⁷⁵ Berger, P., 1971, *A Rumour of Angels—Modern Society and the Rediscovery of the Supernatural*, Penguin Books, Harmondsworth, UK, p. 90.

self-realising and empowering concepts are foundational to a colonial understanding of the use of humour within contemporary Australia by the frequently beleaguered minority Indigenous people.

Oring notes that in many colonised countries around the world, including Australia, the cultivation of a sense of humour became not just an admirable quality, but a core value and a necessity in a changing country and emerging nation.⁷⁷⁶ Humour seen as the ‘life attitude’ proposed by existentialist philosophers like Camus might provide a more helpful understanding of the function and purpose of humour, especially with regards to Aboriginal uses, rather than some of the more restrictive and readily refutable humour theories that have been reviewed in this chapter.

4 CONCLUSION

It is generally assumed that concepts that fall under an umbrella term, like humour, must at least have some properties in common.⁷⁷⁷ Additionally, humour theories proposing insight into its essential qualities are multitudinous and pre-suppose that its fundamental nature should, indeed can, be found. Yet perhaps it is better to approach the nature and purpose of humour in a less emphatic manner. Wittgenstein proposes that entities do not need to have properties or features in common in order to fall under a unifying banner (like humour). A ‘family of resemblances’ or intertwining relationships provides their necessary commonality.⁷⁷⁸

A less categorical approach to the nature and purpose of humour suggests that the multifarious relationships discussed in this chapter are all qualities that can, at various times, all be found in humour. Humour is a form of communication that uses each of the techniques discussed in this chapter in various ways and at different times. The overlapping ideas and criticism reviewed reveal some of the important cognitive and physiological functions and purposes of humour that can be discussed in relation to any group of people; and so specifically with regards to an investigation into Indigenous Australian humour, each of these theories provides some useful insights. Humour often contains immediacy of recognition that can at times be noticeably shocking. Humour is often a pertinent ‘social tool’ of superiority and discipline supporting or rejecting the status quo that must be understood within specific historical and social contexts. Humour can provide a releasing escape from the reason and reality of everyday existence. Humour can provide us with either physical or mental exercise that allows for greater development of thoughts, actions and relationships. And humour can be an existential, life-giving reality in the face of life’s difficulties and injustices. It is the forms and functions of humour discussed within this chapter that will be seen at work in the Indigenous

⁷⁷⁶ Oring, E., 2003, Op. Cit., pp. 114–115.

⁷⁷⁷ Wittgenstein, L., [1945], 1967, Anscombe, G.E.M, (trans.), *Philosophical Investigations I*, Basil Blackwell, Oxford, UK, (item 65), p. 31e.

⁷⁷⁸ Wittgenstein, L., [1945], 1967, pp. 31e–34e.

Australian humour examples discussed within following chapters. Each of the main humour propositions – superiority, incongruity and relief – will be noted and tied back to the interpretations of humour set out within this chapter in order to better understand what the main forms and functions of Aboriginal humour are.

Another important function of joking that underpins these theories relates to the joke teller and the butt of the joke. Within a colonial Australian context, the following chapters will show how jokes and humour have been used by non-Indigenous Australians to curb and control Indigenous subjectivities. Final chapters will show how Indigenous comedians have turned the tables on this subjection, using humour in a self-empowering manner to laugh at themselves and to laugh at the dominant culture. Humour is used by Aboriginal Australians to superiorly challenge colonial power structures, to explore the incongruities of languages and social relationships and as a release from the stresses of colonial rule.

In particular, chapter three will look at examples of humour found in the artistic endeavours of some pre and early colonial Indigenous Australian communities. This investigation will help to ascertain some of the more prevalent forms and functions of humour used by Indigenous Australians that will, in part, be shown as present, and playing similar roles, in more modern manifestations of Aboriginal humorous performances.

In the light of the call for recognition of the ‘family resemblances’ located in all humour theories proposed by Wittgenstein, it is worth finishing this chapter on a rephrased excerpt found in Billig’s work:

What can they know of humour, who only humour knows⁷⁷⁹

An expert who focuses only on one subject area does not really know that area fully. To really understand humour, we need to understand the social and psychological significance of it over and above mere theoretical knowledge. We must look at Indigenous humour in light of the socio-political climate and events of Australia during different periods of colonial history. The various periods of government rule and policies really dictated relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians in a colonial setting. These historical events will be discussed in order to assist comprehension of why Indigenous humour manifested in certain ways, and to suggest how and why it impacted on Australia’s socio-political discourse in various ways.

⁷⁷⁹ Billig, M., 2005, Op. Cit., p. 4.

CHAPTER 3

HUMOUR IN THE HISTORICAL RECORDS OF INDIGENOUS SOCIETIES

Indigenous narrative memory is held in stories and life experiences. The old ones remember stories, songs, [and] dances and live out their stories to try to live good lives. Thus Indigenous narrative memory is an organic process, which is a collective activity, and is essentially a map for possibilities of existence upon which people can draw to make sense of experience.

Jackie Huggins⁷⁸⁰

1. INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter discussed western theories that have attempted to explain the nature and purpose of humour. If these theories are considered ‘as a whole’ they provide relevant insights into humour’s purposes and functions within cross-cultural settings, even though western in origin. It follows that these humour characteristics can provide insights into forms and functions found in some traditional Indigenous Australian communities too. Indigenous academic Jackie Huggins notes that Indigenous historical records are a “lived” experience. Their narratives are transmitted orally via kinship relationships, language and humorous means.⁷⁸¹ This process is organic and ongoing and provides a dialect between Indigenous cultural frameworks and individuals.⁷⁸² In this sense humour is, as Ragnar Johnson has said, a ‘social form’ that is part of the classificatory system of a community, originating from, and reflecting, the perceptions of that society.⁷⁸³

2. CHAPTER OUTLINE

Given this oral literary system, and the dominance of the non-Indigenous colonial narrative,⁷⁸⁴ it is difficult to investigate pre-contact humour practices, yet not altogether impossible. Traditions of some of the language groups, particularly those located in the less hospitable desert regions of Australia were, at least during the early to mid-twentieth century, less affected by invasive English colonisation; and early western ethnological records which have played significant (although frequently parochial) roles in Indigenous Australian communities, provide us with evidence of aspects of pre-colonial

⁷⁸⁰ Huggins, J., 2005, ‘Keynote address’ *Deadly Directions: current and emerging trends in Libraries, Archives and Information Services for Indigenous Knowledge*, online
<www.aiatsis.gov.au/atsilrn/conferences/conf05/papers/Huggins_paper> viewed 04/09/2012.

⁷⁸¹ Huggins, J., 2005.

⁷⁸² Huggins, J., 2005.

⁷⁸³ Johnson, R., 1976, ‘Two Realms and a Joke: Biosciation Theories of Joking’, *Semiotica*, 16/3, p. 219.

⁷⁸⁴ Ravenscroft recognises the failure of the colonists to consult Indigenous sources in their historical records in Ravenscroft, A., 2013, ‘The Strangeness of the Dance: Kate Grenville, Rohan Wilson, Inga Clendinnen and Kim Scott’, *Meanjin*, vol. 72, no. 4, Summer 2013, online
<<http://search.informit.com.au/documentSummary:dn=852013799301668:res=IEALAPA>>ISSN:0025-6293> viewed 21/12/2-015.

lifestyles. These records reveal poetic narratives that are often lengthy and sophisticated passed on through the generations via a complex system of inter-generational custodianship.⁷⁸⁵

In addition, humour can also be found in some English transcriptions of traditional Indigenous Australian stories. Several of these stories, which have frequently been translated into an English fable for children, are noted. Regardless of the unethical nature of the cultural pilfering and oversimplified inadequacies of many of these translations at times by non-Indigenous writers, they also point to humour traditions in pre-colonial societies. As Wesley Enoch, has said: ... 'before 1788... art and culture were inseparable; hunting, family structures, genealogy, Law, geography were reflected in the art...'⁷⁸⁶ More specifically, Indigenous performance practices have traditionally incorporated a broad context of artistic endeavours, including dance, song, storytelling and visual art in body and ground paintings. Maryrose Casey notes:

In performance, the songs about Dreaming stories and the people are generally associated with equally important dance, mime and visual arts interpretations. Equally, when dance is used, it too refers to performances that include song, music and visual art.⁷⁸⁷

Along with other social communicative means, humour is embodied within these holistic artistic practices. This chapter will investigate some of these early/pre-colonial humour practices and provide analysis of their various forms and functions via western humour concepts discussed in the previous chapter.

3. ETHNOLOGICAL EVIDENCE OF INDIGENOUS HUMOUR

3.1. The humour findings of Sir Walter Baldwin Spencer

Spencer (1860–1929) undertook some of the first archaeological expeditions to Central Australia during the 1890s, documenting ethnological insights (particularly art and ceremonial performances) of Indigenous communities.⁷⁸⁸ He later produced several books based on his Darwinian evolutionary theories.⁷⁸⁹ Specifically in relation to humour however, his 1899 book on Central Australian communities recognises:

... the aboriginal's fondness for fun and his sense of humour. Under normal conditions they are always cheerful and are constantly either corroboreeing [*sic*], or playing and laughing with one another.⁷⁹⁰

⁷⁸⁵ Nicholls provides a succinct explanation of 'The Dreaming' that discusses the hereditary rights to cultural knowledge and necessary ability to retain this knowledge and appropriate cultural respect in Nicholls, C., 2003, *Art, Land, Story*, Working Title Press, Kingswood, South Australia, pp. 10–14.

⁷⁸⁶ Enoch, W., 2000, 'Performance' in *The Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture*, Kleinert, S. & M. Neale, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, p. 349.

⁷⁸⁷ Casey, M., 2012, *Telling Stories, Aboriginal Australian and Torres Strait Islander Performance*, Australian Scholarly Publishing Pty Ltd, North Melbourne, pp. 26-27.

⁷⁸⁸ Mulvaney, D., 1990, 'Biography of Sir Walter Baldwin Spencer', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*, v.12, <<http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/spencer-sir-walter-baldwin-86-6>> viewed 21/11/2013.

⁷⁸⁹ Mulvaney, D., 1990.

⁷⁹⁰ Spencer, WB., & FJ. Gillen, [1899] 2014, *The Native Tribes of Central Australia*, MacMillan & Co. Ltd, London, UK, online at: <<https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/s/spencer/baldwin/s74n/>> viewed 20/01/2015. Spencer, WB., [1914] 2014, *Native*

Spencer recounts a humorous event where two Kakadu men had to ‘run for their lives’ being chased by charging buffaloes.⁷⁹¹ Although, this scenario might usually be recollected with a level of gravity at the dangerous situation, Spencer says that this story has been humorously retold in the community for years after the event, each time with newly embellished mimicry.⁷⁹² Moreover, it never fails to elicit ‘roars of laughter’ and great entertainment around the camp fire.⁷⁹³

The incongruity of this situation as the two men lose the upper hand when hunting this animal, becoming the hunted themselves, provokes an initial humour of surprise. Yet Bergson, who discusses such physical humour, says that imitation and repetition of human gestures is intrinsically funny because we recognise the involuntary ‘automatism’ of real life in the scenario.⁷⁹⁴ Bergson said that in a comic situation we laugh when we see ... ‘something mechanical encrusted upon the living’.⁷⁹⁵ To imitate another person’s actions or anecdotes is amusing because it can reveal and mock a recognised element of their physical inflexibility or even their cognitive inadaptability in a superiority interpretation of humour.⁷⁹⁶ Bergson says that averting a potentially dangerous situation (like being chased by buffalo) is funny because laughter is society’s way of teaching the community to avoid any ‘disturbing elements’, in this case, physically life threatening situations.⁷⁹⁷ Humour can assist communities to improve in stability and conformity to the status quo by intimidating and humiliating its members.⁷⁹⁸

Release theorists might add comment about how laughter at potentially dangerous situations also helps to alleviate any distress we might feel about the situation in a manner that is safe for our psychological and emotional well-being. Freud has noted that ‘humour is a means of obtaining pleasure in spite of the distressing affects that disturb it; it acts as a substitute for this emergence of affect, it takes its place.’⁷⁹⁹ Humour can act as a substitute for more negative responses and potential anxiety. Moreover, as Richard Walley has suggested of Aboriginal people, they will laugh first, and then express sympathy with the victim because they are able to see light-hearted aspects of tragedy.⁸⁰⁰ Black audiences, he believes, often see comedy in anything.⁸⁰¹

Tribes of the Northern Territory of Australia, MacMillan & Co., London, UK, online at: <<https://ebooks.adelaide.edu.au/s/spencer/baldwin/s74na/contents.html>> viewed 20/01/2015.

⁷⁹¹ Spencer, WB., & FJ. Gillen, [1899] 2014, pp. 40-1.

⁷⁹² Spencer, WB., & FJ. Gillen, [1899] 2014, [1899] 1914, p. 41.

⁷⁹³ Spencer, WB., & FJ. Gillen, [1899] 2014, p. 41.

⁷⁹⁴ Bergson, H., [1911] 2005, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, Dover Publications, Inc., Mineola, NY, pp. 1-32, at p. 16.

⁷⁹⁵ Bergson, H., [1911] 2005, p. 28.

⁷⁹⁶ Bergson, H., [1911] 2005, p. 16.

⁷⁹⁷ Bergson, H., [1911] 2005, p. 98.

⁷⁹⁸ Bergson, H., [1911] 2005, p. 98.

⁷⁹⁹ Freud, S., [1905] 2002, *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, Penguin Books, London, UK, p. 222.

⁸⁰⁰ Walley, R., in Watego, C., 1990, ‘Extremely Funny ... utterly tragic: an interview with Richard Walley with notes on Black interviews/Black discourse’, *Australasian Drama Studies*, Oct. 1990, v.17, p. 48.

⁸⁰¹ Walley, R., in Watego, C., 1990, p. 48.

In relation to the Indigenous peoples of Central Australia studied by Spencer in the 1890s, a propensity to use of physical tomfoolery, quick wit and humorous mimicry is noted. Additionally, an ability to see the humour of a rather grim situation is also recognised. These anecdotes show humour being used by the community as a form of camaraderie, to provide a cautionary exemplar as well as a way of dealing with the stress associated with dangerous situations.

3.2 The humour findings of Ronald and Catherine Berndt

The Berndts originally transcribed a collection of ‘love songs’ from North Eastern Arnhem Land in the 1940s, although this was not published until the mid-1970s due to the openly erotic content that may not have been appreciated by non-Indigenous readers.⁸⁰² The book contains three song cycles commonly sung at Yirrkala in 1946-7.⁸⁰³ They were songs mainly translated from the Riradjingu⁸⁰⁴ and Gumaidj⁸⁰⁵ languages from men who, at that time, spoke little English.⁸⁰⁶ Presumably this means that these informants held more traditional knowledge, being less influenced by western perspectives than their younger, English speaking, counterparts.

The witty songs provide insights into ongoing social practices and local customs regarding sexual relationships.⁸⁰⁷ In addition, because of the inaccessibility of the region generally, Berndt suggests that it has been less affected by western influences and therefore traditional ideas and practices had continued to shape the community.⁸⁰⁸ The songs are based both on actual sexual behaviour as well as historical myths and legends and are encased in ‘symbolic allusions, expressed through the beauty of traditional poetry’.⁸⁰⁹ Berndt also recognises that many of the erotic songs and stories were ‘hilariously funny’ entertainment enjoyed by both adults and children alike, especially those songs that he calls ‘Gossip Songs’ (discussed later).⁸¹⁰ Generally, each song is complete in itself and refers to a specific event in the community, yet the actual people concerned are not named. This anonymity allowed the audience to speculate in salacious delight about who the participants actually were; however, because the community was relatively small and tight-knit, guessing identities was not a difficult task.⁸¹¹

⁸⁰² Berndt, R., 1976, *Love Songs of Arnhem Land*, Thomas Nelson (Australia) Ltd, Melbourne, p. xi & xviii.

⁸⁰³ Berndt, R., 1976, p. xi.

⁸⁰⁴ Austlang, 2013, Alternative spellings: Rirratjingu, Rirradjingu, Riraidjano, Riraidjangu, Riraidjingu, Rirattyingu, Rirradjinu, Riraidjingo - <<http://austlang.aiatsis.gov.au/main.php>> viewed 25/11/2013.

⁸⁰⁵ Austlang, 2013, Alternative spellings: Gumatji, Gumaitj, Gumadj - <<http://austlang.aiatsis.gov.au/main.php>> viewed 25/11/2013.

⁸⁰⁶ Berndt, R., 1976, Op. Cit., p. xi.

⁸⁰⁷ Berndt, R., 1976, p. xi.

⁸⁰⁸ Berndt, R., 1976, pp. xiii-xxiv.

⁸⁰⁹ Berndt, R., 1976, pp. xiii-xxiv.

⁸¹⁰ Berndt, R., 1976, p. xiv.

⁸¹¹ Berndt, R., 1976, p. xiv.

In a manner foreign to western behaviours, sexual topics were freely and openly discussed in front of children.⁸¹² Nonetheless, regulations were imposed on material discussed in the presence of certain kinship relationships, and greater restraint regarding sexualised public activities was expected as children became young adults.⁸¹³ Berndt says that traditional communities allowed young children freedoms to express themselves in erotic play, and their actions frequently caused amusement amongst the adults, especially in the mimicking of their elders' actions and conversations.⁸¹⁴ For example, a common childhood expression is 'Dagu wiin!' (long vagina or vulva) and 'Gurga wiin!' (long penis).⁸¹⁵ These terms were often used amongst the children in teasing play and sometimes even in anger.⁸¹⁶ Additionally, Berndt notes that it was not uncommon to hear someone call out mockingly: 'Here comes a penis, a vulva and their semen!' when a parent and their children walked past.⁸¹⁷ Erotic expressions are common in many of the stories told for both children and adults that added stimulation to community relationships and spice to the sexual act.⁸¹⁸

The song cycles are generally 'owned' by the main singer, who is the most competent person to provide the narrative and an interpretation.⁸¹⁹ Most especially, 'gossip songs' are flexible and open to the storytellers' personal embellishments and creativity; this enables them to contain current, socially relevant, materials that enhance their moral value.⁸²⁰ Moreover, many of them were accompanied by dramatised dancing and actions that provided even great amusement and pleasure for the audience.⁸²¹

Physical differences between men and women were frequently noted in the songs, just as physiographical features of the landscape, analogous with human genitalia and Creator Beings' sexual exploits, were evoked.⁸²² Often north-eastern Arnhem Land people directly substituted the word 'gurga' or 'penis' for 'man' and 'diramu' (or 'daramu') and 'dagu' (vulva or vagina) for woman.⁸²³ The scandalous enjoyment of using sexually explicit terms and imagery in everyday public vernacular extended to song cycles.

For example, Berndt documents a song cycle from Goulburn Island that emphasises the physical differences between the circumcised men of the east/ south-east and those from the west of Arnhem Land who were not:

⁸¹² Berndt, R., 1976, pp. 5–6.

⁸¹³ Berndt, R., 1976, pp. 5–6.

⁸¹⁴ Berndt, R., 1976, p. 6.

⁸¹⁵ Berndt, R., 1976, p. 6.

⁸¹⁶ Berndt, R., 1976, p. 6.

⁸¹⁷ Berndt, R., 1976, p. 6.

⁸¹⁸ Berndt, R., 1976, p. xiv.

⁸¹⁹ Berndt, R., 1976, pp. 44–45.

⁸²⁰ Berndt, R., 1976, p. 47.

⁸²¹ Berndt, R., 1976, p. 47.

⁸²² Berndt, R., 1976, p. 7.

⁸²³ Berndt, R., 1976, p. 6.

We dance, swaying branches from side to side, like the cold west wind...
We saw their chests, people short like new paperbark saplings:
Goulburn Island people, clans from the Woolen River, men with
Uncircumcised penes, [sic]
Clans of the long foreskins.⁸²⁴

The term ‘long foreskins’ or long penis relates to the fact that people believed uncircumcised men to have longer penises before the foreskin was removed in circumcision.⁸²⁵ The poetic tree-imagery of this explicit derision adds a level of erotic appeal and teasing to the song.⁸²⁶ Berndt says that women especially like to speculate about the differences that such features might make to sex and found those differences very amusing.⁸²⁷ Additionally, the reference to ‘new paperback saplings’ notes the characteristically smaller stature of these ‘other’ men with longer penises.⁸²⁸ Perhaps a level of ‘big noting’ in reference to the short stature was a form of ‘one up man-ship’ due to the fact that men of the community felt that the women did not appreciate their circumcised appendages as much as those of rival (uncircumcised) clans!

Non-sacred stories about the trickster and ‘funny’ character ‘Bomaboma’ also provided humorous anecdotes.⁸²⁹ Stories generally portrayed Bomaboma as a promiscuous man, driven by inappropriate lust and incestuous desires.⁸³⁰ In one narrative, Bomaboma attempts to seduce the white duck ‘Yii’, his ‘cousin’, and who is of the same moiety as himself.⁸³¹ Social regulations forbid such exogamous liaisons between people of the same moiety classification, a regulatory restriction that would assist in the genetic health of the community.⁸³² In doing this illicit thing, Bomaboma is breaking social conventions and is seen as a deviant trickster who is mocked in a superiority-styled humour and condemned by the community for flouting its conventions.⁸³³

Berndt also recognises that whilst the trickster is an anti-social figure of ill repute for breaking community laws and acting in an unpredictable manner, he is also appreciated as a funny man, highlighting social traditions of mildly scandalous humour.⁸³⁴ Mintz also recognises that trickster characters can provide audiences with pleasure in the ‘sanctioned deviance... related to the ritual violation of taboos, inversion of ritual, and public iconoclasm frequently encountered in cultural

⁸²⁴ Berndt, R., 1976, p. 54.

⁸²⁵ Berndt, R., 1976, p. 54.

⁸²⁶ Berndt, R., 1976, p. 54.

⁸²⁷ Berndt, R., 1976, p. 54.

⁸²⁸ Berndt, R., 1976, p. 54.

⁸²⁹ Berndt, R., 1976, p. 29.

⁸³⁰ Berndt, R., 1976, p. 29.

⁸³¹ Berndt, R., 1976, pp. 29–30. (Moieties are clan groups recognised in Arnhem Land. Here, all peoples and objects fall into one of two classificatory categories or moieties known either as ‘Dhuwa’ or ‘Yirritja’ classifications, see: Morphy, H., 2007, *Aboriginal Art*, Phaidon Press Limited, London, UK, pp. 152–3).

⁸³² Berndt, R., 1976, pp. 29–30.

⁸³³ Berndt, R., 1976, pp. 29–30.

⁸³⁴ Berndt, R., & C. Berndt, 1964, *The World of the First Australians*, Angus & Robertson Ltd, Sydney & London, p. 346.

traditions.’⁸³⁵ Berndt suggests that one of the very worst taunts a woman can make towards a sexually inappropriate man is: “Are you Bomaboma?” cutting down any unwarranted advances with sarcastic wit.⁸³⁶ Freud in fact suggests that verbal abuse is a powerful way in which we can make our ‘enemies’ seem small and contemptible by making them appear comical and laughable.⁸³⁷ In this way, acts of verbal retaliation, rather than physical abuse, provide a ‘vanquishing’, or a level superiority over potential (sexual) aggressors.⁸³⁸ Additionally, humour is used here as Bergson has said, as a superiority tool to ‘correct men’s manners’ via the laughter that it inspires.⁸³⁹ Humour assists to quell any socially abnormal tendencies and bring matters back to the ‘common centre round which society gravitates’ restraining any deviations from its norms and morality.⁸⁴⁰

Gossip songs are generally those songs that relate to incidents that occur within local communities.⁸⁴¹ They are individually composed by the various songmen and have no mythic connections, other than having been inspired by traditional spirit beings.⁸⁴² These popular songs provide great entertainment in communities as they deal with current events both within and outside of societies, including scandals and new romances.⁸⁴³ Everyone in the community delights in guessing who is being spoken of in the words of the song, and, as Berndt suggests, often this isn’t too hard to guess.⁸⁴⁴ The appeal of these songs is to both arouse those of younger generations and to give enjoyment to all ages in the delights of a new composition and fresh juicy gossip.⁸⁴⁵

If now considered out of context, the songs that relate to specific incidents and specific people do not seem funny, yet like other humorous activities, their overall purpose as scandal-mongering is what makes this genre of songs such pleasurable entertainment for the community. As Bergson says, humour creates ... ‘visions that are at once accepted and understood by the whole of a social group.’⁸⁴⁶ For example, the following song has been translated and classified by Berndt as one relating to ‘sweetheart’ behaviour:

the people
from Oenpelli
when I see smoke signal

⁸³⁵ Mintz, L., 1985, ‘Standup Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation’, *American Quarterly*, vol. 37, no. 1, Special Issue: American Humor (Spring 1985), The John Hopkins University Press, Maryland, USA, p. 77.

⁸³⁶ Berndt, R., & C. Berndt, 1964, Op. Cit., p. 346 & Berndt, R., 1976, Op. Cit., p. 30.

⁸³⁷ Freud, S., [1905], 2005, Op. Cit., p. 100.

⁸³⁸ Freud, S., [1905], 2005, p. 100.

⁸³⁹ Bergson, H., [1911], 2005, Op. Cit., p. 9.

⁸⁴⁰ Bergson, H., [1911], 2005, p. 10.

⁸⁴¹ Berndt, R., & C. Berndt, 1951, *Sexual Behaviour in Western Arnhem Land*, Viking Fund Publications in Anthropology, No. 16, NY, p. 211.

⁸⁴² Berndt, R., 1976, Op. Cit., p. 12.

⁸⁴³ Casey, M., 2012, *Telling Stories, Aboriginal Australian and Torres Strait Islander Performance*, Australian Scholarly Publishing Pty Ltd, North Melbourne, p. 38.

⁸⁴⁴ Casey, M., 2012, p. 38. Berndt, R., 1976, Op. Cit, p. xiv and Berndt, R., & C. Berndt, 1951, Op. Cit., p. 212.

⁸⁴⁵ Berndt, R., 1951, p. 211.

⁸⁴⁶ Bergson, H., [1911], 2005, Op. Cit., pp. 1-2.

I'll go over
get it
canoe
I'll bring him over
we'll cross over
I'll bring him back
to the camp
I'm going to come out with him and stand outside the camp.⁸⁴⁷

In explanation of this song, Berndt says that the protagonist girl is on Goulbourn Island and she sees the smoke signals of the Oenpelli people across the waters and so decides to go by canoe to Barclay Point to collect her boyfriend.⁸⁴⁸ She then takes him back to her camp so that all there will know that he is her sweetheart.⁸⁴⁹ The song describes and mocks the young woman who is obviously showing off her boyfriend to the community. People found great delight in laughing at her attempts to impress them, and the song is their way of teasing her for her big-noting behaviour.⁸⁵⁰

Berndt suggests that 'sweetheart' relationships were those encounters that could be ongoing (as opposed to brief encounters) and disruptive to formalised patterns of betrothal and marriage; arousing anger in wives or husbands who believed that their marital rights had been violated.⁸⁵¹ Therefore, such relationships were ripe subjects for community gossip and scandal; mockery again being used in a form that Bergson suggests, to reinforce appropriate social regulations and the status quo.⁸⁵²

In summary, the Berndts recorded how humour is used to express community attitudes and police values associated with sexual pursuits and gendered relationships. Furthermore, the public expression of gossip songs provided mocking discipline to those acting against community norms, assisting to keep people's practices in line with existing values and morality.

3.3 The humour findings of William Edward Hanley Stanner

In the 1950s Stanner recognised that Aboriginal people have a 'very marked sense of humour' that he says exists as part of their complex metaphysical conception of the world and their rich aesthetic life.⁸⁵³ In addition to the formalised use of humour in kinship relationships discussed in chapter one, Stanner suggests that the widespread use of inventive wit is another significant aspect of Aboriginal Australian humour.⁸⁵⁴ With this concept, Stanner is, in part, referring to the recognisably Australian form of humour, known colloquially as 'taking-the-mickey', where a person is mocked or teased, often mercilessly, for some socially perceived ridiculous behaviour.

⁸⁴⁷ Berndt, R., 1951, Op. Cit., p. 220.

⁸⁴⁸ Berndt, R., 1951, p. 220.

⁸⁴⁹ Berndt, R., 1951, p. 220.

⁸⁵⁰ Berndt, R., 1951, p. 220.

⁸⁵¹ Berndt, R., 1976, Op. Cit., p. 14.

⁸⁵² Bergson, H., [1911], 2005, Op. Cit., p. 9.

⁸⁵³ Stanner, W.E.H., [1956] 1982, 'Aboriginal Humour' in *Aboriginal History Journal*, ANU Press, Canberra, Australia, 1982, v.6, pp. 39-48, at p. 39.

⁸⁵⁴ Stanner, W.E.H., 1982, p. 42.

Stanner gives the example of the time that he and his Indigenous friend, Charlie, decided to go barramundi fishing with a gun.⁸⁵⁵ They spotted a large fish conveniently moving slowly near the surface of the water and they shot it easily. This action met with a loud cry from a nearby bush where another Indigenous man accused the two of shooting the fish that he had already caught and tied up to the bank by a string! Word of their foolishness spread quickly throughout the community. From that time onwards, whenever Stanner went fishing with any of the local Indigenous men he was sure to be asked in apparently innocent tone: “You got plenty bullet?”⁸⁵⁶

Humour can be seen here as Milner Davis has written, as a form of social acculturation.⁸⁵⁷ Milner Davis proposes that, in Australia, humour is often a compulsory acculturating ritual of social assimilation, where people are incorporated into society’s cultural norms and attitudes via means of mickey-taking.⁸⁵⁸ People are expected to accept the teasing and then to use it against others.⁸⁵⁹ At its best, this acculturation can be seen as a form of mild mockery that enables one to feel welcomed and accepted as an intimate member of the community. Given and received in good humour, this ongoing mocking of Stanner acknowledges his history as part of the local Indigenous community in a warm, funny, even nostalgic manner. Additionally, this trait, so often credited as a particularity of mainstream non-Indigenous Australian cultural identity, is noted as an element of Indigenous humorous discourse too.

Stanner has himself recognised that humour is not only antagonistic; it can also ameliorate relationships, healing rifts and inducing a form of camaraderie and unity.⁸⁶⁰ Stanner provides an example of how he has been incorporated into an Indigenous community by means of the good-natured teasing he receives following a fateful fishing trip. Moreover, he suggests that it is ultimately via such humorous practices that non-Indigenous Australians are better able to comprehend and appreciate an Indigenous world view.⁸⁶¹

3.4 Humour in Dreaming Narratives

Dreaming stories, like song and performance practices, were another oral form of remembering and perpetuating Indigenous spiritual belief-systems. Yet these stories were far more than fairy-stories told predominantly for the amusement of children like many post-19th century western fables; they

⁸⁵⁵ Stanner, W.E.H., 1982, pp. 42–3.

⁸⁵⁶ Stanner, W.E.H., 1982, p. 43.

⁸⁵⁷ Milner-Davis, J., 2009, Op. Cit., pp. 31–47.

⁸⁵⁸ Milner-Davis, J., 2009, p. 39.

⁸⁵⁹ Milner-Davis, J., 2009, pp. 39–40.

⁸⁶⁰ Stanner, W.E.H., 1982, p. 48.

⁸⁶¹ Stanner, W.E.H., 1982, p. 39.

were complex multi-layered narratives that are essential for passing on valuable information and knowledge about care for land, laws and religion.⁸⁶²

‘The Dreaming’ was a term coined by non-Indigenous anthropologists in the early 1900s in attempts to explain Indigenous religious practices.⁸⁶³ This word does little to cover the intricate belief system of cultural laws, spiritual, custodial responsibilities and relationships associated with traditional Aboriginal lives and spirituality.⁸⁶⁴ Morphy says that the Dreaming is a two-way relationship between the spiritual domain and humans whereby people are products of and sustained by the Dreamtime and therefore they have sacred obligations to care for the land and all other manifestations of the Dreaming.⁸⁶⁵

In the Dreaming time of creation, Ancestor Beings moved over and through the landscape creating all natural things such as land formations, plants, animals and people.⁸⁶⁶ Complex rituals, art iconography, songs, stories and ceremonies were also created in this time.⁸⁶⁷ Indigenous artistic practices are expressions of these rights and responsibilities that stem from the Dreaming.⁸⁶⁸ Generally, they can be seen as manifestations of the covenant between people and immortal Ancestor Beings, reflecting the ongoing maintenance of all things within the environment. Dreamtime oral storytelling constitutes a part of this expression. These stories conventionally taught Aboriginal people, giving instructions about living in community and caring for the land.⁸⁶⁹ Lessons were learnt via story repetition and deep consideration of the narrative⁸⁷⁰ – unlike fairytales that mostly contain more direct and explicit moral teachings.

Stories could cover several different topics and provided multilayered and ongoing understandings to all age groups.⁸⁷¹ Stories could be both secular and sacred and generally related to an event/events rather than a specific point in time,⁸⁷² giving them a level of omniscience. These stories could be told on different levels of sophistication too, tailored to the aptitude and suitability of listeners.⁸⁷³ On one level Dreaming stories could be considered creation stories.⁸⁷⁴ On another level, they give moral directions about how people ought to conduct themselves with other human beings and with their environment. On yet another level, they provide practical information about their surroundings, or the

⁸⁶² Nicholls, C., 2009, *Art, History, Place*, Working Title Press, Kingswood, South Australia, p. 12.

⁸⁶³ McKay, H., nd., ‘The Dreaming’, in *Gadimirrabooka Aboriginal Stories* at: <<http://www.gadimirrabooka.com/dreamtime>> viewed 27/11/2013.

⁸⁶⁴ Nicholls, C., 2009, Op. Cit., p. 9.

⁸⁶⁵ Morphy, H., 2007, Op. Cit., p. 145.

⁸⁶⁶ Nicholls, C., 2009, Op. Cit., pp. 9–10.

⁸⁶⁷ Nicholls, C., 2009, pp. 9–10.

⁸⁶⁸ Morphy, H., 2007, Op. Cit., p. 145.

⁸⁶⁹ McKay, H., nd., Op. Cit.

⁸⁷⁰ McKay, H., nd.

⁸⁷¹ McKay, H., nd.

⁸⁷² McKay, H., nd.

⁸⁷³ Nicholls, C., 2009, Op. Cit., p. 11.

⁸⁷⁴ Nicholls, C., 2009, p. 12.

properties of various plant and animal species and how they should be used.⁸⁷⁵ For example, stories could tell of food dissection and eating taboos, or even marriage rules, explaining the communities' socio-legal regulations.⁸⁷⁶

Therefore, as these stories did not have singular, explicit interpretations, they could be considered complex, even omnipresent, exemplars, told with a fresh angle to suit current audiences. It follows therefore that laughter and humour could come in anticipation of a familiar narrative outline; or perhaps even as a wry delayed response on later contemplation of the stories' meaning. Additionally, many of these stories referred to local flora and fauna species, imbuing them with life and personality, and often providing explanation for their noted characteristics. In particular, animals were frequently credited with human qualities such as speech, having the ability to communicate and interact with one another and humans; thereby acting as less threatening, humorous exemplars of human behaviours. Whilst Bergson has said that the comic is strictly a human phenomenon, he also suggests that people laugh at situations and objects (such as animals) that are not human when they have discernibly human qualities.⁸⁷⁷

3.4.1 *The narrative of Tiddalik the Frog*

One of the most familiar Indigenous Australian humorous tales to be retold in English is that of *Tidalik [also spelt Tiddalick] the (greedy) frog*, traditionally a story from the Indigenous peoples of the Murray River region in New South Wales.⁸⁷⁸ Children's non-fiction sections of many local Australian libraries reveal many re-interpretations of this story, including *Tiddalick the Frog* by Susan Nunes published in 1990.⁸⁷⁹ This book, (like others that appropriated traditional Indigenous stories) contains no reference to the original Indigenous Australian owners of this narrative; nor does it even recognise the fact that it is an Australian Aboriginal story at all. Nonetheless, this 'children's tale' is still able to point to elements of Indigenous humour located in this particular Indigenous community's' historical discourse.

Monaro-Ngarrinjjeri-YortaYorta storyteller, Pauline McLeod,⁸⁸⁰ has also retold this Dreaming story herself with the appropriate permission from traditional owners in an anthology of Aboriginal Dreaming tales in 2001.⁸⁸¹

⁸⁷⁵ Nicholls, C., 2009, p. 12.

⁸⁷⁶ Nicholls, C., 2009, p. 12.

⁸⁷⁷ Bergson, H., [1911], 2005, Op. Cit., p. 2.

⁸⁷⁸ McKay, H., (ed.), 2001, *Gadi Mirrabooka – Australian Aboriginal Tales from the Dreaming*, Libraries Unlimited (A Division of Greenwood Publishing Group, Inc.), Englewood, CO., USA, p. 86.

⁸⁷⁹ Nunes, S., 1990, *Tiddalick the Frog*, Hodder and Stroughton, London, UK.

⁸⁸⁰ The Black Book Online, 2008, 'A Tribute to storyteller Pauline McLeod, 1960–2003 Monaro–Ngarrindjeri–Yorta Yorta', at: <http://www.theblackbook.com.au/inspiration_detail.asp?id=9> viewed 11/12/2013.

⁸⁸¹ McLeod, P., 2001, 'Tidalik – A Giant Frog Story from the Murray River Region of New South Wales/Victoria', in McKay, H., (ed.), 2001, Op. Cit., pp. 86–88.

Paraphrasing McLeod's narrative, Tidalik is noted as a very thirsty, ill-tempered frog who drank all of the water in the land, which he held in his enormous belly. His greed led to widespread thirst amongst all other animals and severe drought across the land. In desperation, all of the other animals gathered to consider ways in which they might implore Tidalik to return the water. Tidalik refused their begging, so it was agreed that they would try to make him laugh in order for the water to escape from his open mouth. Many animals tried to get the frog to laugh, but in the end, it was the small eel and his elaborate dance, tying himself in knots, that did the trick. Water gushed from a bloated Tidalik, once again filling all of the streams, rivers, lakes, and billabongs, quenching the land and its occupants.⁸⁸²

On one level this traditional narrative speaks of the importance of knowing and preserving precious water for all in Australia's dry, harsh environment. Droughts plague many parts of the country; therefore knowledge of fresh drinking water sites, underground rivers and springs, was vital to many communities.⁸⁸³ Rainmaking ceremonies and stories like this one cautioning of the dire consequences of the lack of water and disdaining overuse and greed for necessary resources arose as a specific need within many Indigenous communities.⁸⁸⁴

In addition, lessons about not underestimating even the smallest and perhaps least significant animal/person are provided in the fact that it was the little eel who accomplished this difficult task. Yet, much of the humour of this story lies in the animals mimicking human behaviours, as well as their funny physical antics attempting to get Tidalik to laugh. The eel's fast twisting and turning could easily be acted out by the storyteller, leading to physical humour and further delight for the audience. Furthermore, the incongruity of a storyteller pretending to be an animal who, in-turn displays human qualities, provides just the type of physical comedy of disguise valorised by Bergson.⁸⁸⁵

Moreover, the story celebrates the joys of dance and the fact that laughter can help people forget about difficult circumstances, like thirst! We see laughter as a significant element of people's repertoires, used to counter life's harshness. This concept parallels the alternative 'existentialist' understanding of the significance and function of humour to human beings noted in the previous chapter. As for Camus' Sisyphus, life can be monotonous; however, with laughter people can triumph over its difficulties, in a self-empowering manner.⁸⁸⁶ In addition, Bergson's idea of rigidity in physical movement can be seen in the eel's behaviour.⁸⁸⁷ Bergson has said that involuntary momentum, as in the excessive dancing of the eel, leads the muscles to continue to perform movements beyond what

⁸⁸² McLeod, P., in McKay, H. (ed.), 2001, Op. Cit. pp. 86–88.

⁸⁸³ McKay, H., (ed.), 2001, Op. Cit., p. 7.

⁸⁸⁴ McKay, H., (ed.), 2001, p. 7.

⁸⁸⁵ Bergson, H., [1911], 2005, Op. Cit., pp. 19–21.

⁸⁸⁶ Camus, A., [1955], 1971, O'Brian, J., (trans.), *The Myth of Sisyphus*, Hamish Hamilton Ltd., London, UK.

⁸⁸⁷ Bergson, H., [1911], 2005, Op. Cit., p. 5.

the circumstances of the situation require, and this exaggeration of movement is what leads to a comedic effect.⁸⁸⁸

3.4.2 *The narrative of the Night Owl*

A further Dreaming story is *How the Night Owl Came to Be*, a narrative from Northwest New South Wales, that has been retold by local Indigenous storyteller June Barker with permission from traditional owners.⁸⁸⁹ Some typical elements of humour can be seen in this narrative, again tied into cautionary ‘negative’ behaviours of a perceived funny trickster character.

Paraphrasing Barker’s narrative, in the Dreaming when the world was young, all local tribes had a ‘Wirrigan’, a trickster man who could do many clever things, like taking on other forms. The Ngemba tribe’s Wirrigan was a wicked old man. Whilst the Ngemba men and women were off hunting and gathering food, their children were faced with a fierce whirling wind – a boolie boolie. The children all ran back to the safety of their camp, although one young boy was too slow and he was caught up by the boolie boolie. When the parents returned to find all in the camp crying over the lost boy, they realised that it was their cunning Wirrigan who had turned himself into a boolie boolie and snatched the child. They decided that they would punish Wirrigan. Later that night, in front of the warm camp fire, the parents rubbed Wirrigan’s aching back with emu fat until he relaxed and closed his eyes. Then the adults quickly placed two large hot balls of tree gum onto both of his eye lids. Wirrigan screeched and jumped around in pain, disappearing off into the night. Later they heard a strange sound: “Mooke Pooke! Mooke Pooke!” coming out from the darkness. All they could see were two bulbous eyes looking down at them from the trees where the sound had come. The Wirrigan had turned himself into a night owl. To this day night owls still have those hot balls of gum glowing around their eyes.⁸⁹⁰

On one level this story is a cautionary tale, noting the dangers associated with strong ‘boolie boolie’ winds. Young children are reminded to remain close to the safety of their camps, and to avoid being caught up in dangerous natural phenomena like whirlwinds. On a further level the story provides pragmatic advice about the benefits of warmth and emu oil, used for relief of bodily aches and pains. In addition, the story also notes the potentially dangerous powers and cunning trickery of local Wirrigan men, recognising their unpredictability and spiritual authority. It also provides a word of caution to people of unpredictable behaviour; noting that if they step out of line they will be punished for their ill deeds too.

⁸⁸⁸ Bergson, H., [1911], 2005, p. 5.

⁸⁸⁹ Barker, J., 2001, ‘How the Night Owl Came to be – from Northwestern New South Wales’, in McKay, H., (ed.), 2001 Op. Cit., p. 75 and p. 125.

⁸⁹⁰ Barker, J., pp. 75–77.

Here again we see that although this is an admonitory tale, the story allows for mild humour and mockery of the Wirrigans' social positioning by comparing him to the night owl, with its comic and exaggerated bulging eyes. Once more it is worth noting that Berndt has said that whilst the trickster is an anti-social figure who breaks community laws and acts in a fickle manner; he is also appreciated as a funny man given Indigenous traditions of delight in outrageous behaviour.⁸⁹¹ Again, humour is seen here being used as a utilitarian tool for social correction as Bergson has noted; highlighting eccentric or antisocial behaviours by inviting social laughter and mockery at such extreme traits.⁸⁹²

Finally, it is easy to imagine how this story could be told to dramatic and comical effect by an expert storyteller. A comedic effect could be found, as Freud has noted, in the pleasure we receive in watching another's exaggerated imitation of movement, form and actions; including the imitation of animals and inanimate objects.⁸⁹³ Freud says that things are made comical when they have either been put into a comical situation, imitated, disguised, unmasked, parodied or caricatured.⁸⁹⁴ A master storyteller's personal embellishments and mimicry, coupled with the vivid pictures created in the minds' of listeners in their words, could easily evoke great pleasure in an audience.

3.5 The important purposes of humour in Indigenous narrative & performance

Verse was, and remains, an essential part of Indigenous Australian community life. The strong links between narrative, music, dancing and visual arts assist to incorporate these art-forms into everyday life. Some anthropologists have stressed the rich poetic quality of native Aboriginal verse and its ability to stir up emotional responses in performers and their viewers that sheds 'further light on the appeal it makes to its native audience'.⁸⁹⁵ In fact, Strehlow's admiration for the sacred songs of Central Australia led him to suggest prophetically that this ancient material should prove inspiration for (all) future Australian poets as it contains imagery that 'harmonises with the outward shape and the inward spirit of our continent'.⁸⁹⁶

Indigenous performances were carried out on many occasions: at times of initiation, to evoke love and sex in relationships, in worship of creator beings, to assist in sickness, childbirth and death, in conflict situations with rival clans and in desire to sustain and increase the provision of food supplies.⁸⁹⁷ In short, they were, and remain, significant expressions of cultural identity. Emotional responses in and to these rituals, that included humour, were often public and collaborative expressions that enabled both personal and communal articulation of feelings, resulting in the 'essential' social function of

⁸⁹¹ Berndt, R., & C. Berndt, 1964, *The World of the First Australians*, Angus & Robertson Ltd, Sydney & London, p. 346.

⁸⁹² Bergson, H., [1911], 2005, Op. Cit, p. 10.

⁸⁹³ Freud, S., [1905], 2002, Op. Cit., pp. 184-5.

⁸⁹⁴ Freud, S., [1905], 2002, p. 185.

⁸⁹⁵ Strehlow, T.G.H., 1971, *Songs of Central Australia*, Angus & Robertson Ltd, Sydney, Australia p. 677. See also Berndt, R., 1976, Op. Cit. pp. xiii-xiv.

⁸⁹⁶ Strehlow, T.G.H., 1971, p. 728.

⁸⁹⁷ Strehlow, T.G.H., 1971, p. 679.

uniting performers and audience psychologically.⁸⁹⁸ The examples provided show humour being used as an important element of these expressions to help teach the community about its laws and moral standards; as a mickey-taking device used to quell pretentious big-noting; and as a stress release that assists in the face of harsh and/or unpalatable circumstances.

Mary Douglas has called humour a form of rite,⁸⁹⁹ or a socially meaningful symbolic act in itself.⁹⁰⁰ Cultural symbols are those objects or acts that are used by societies to express ‘eternal truths’, often of a religious nature.⁹⁰¹ In the examples provided, humour can be seen as an important cultural process, expressing and reinforcing communal understandings and morality foundational to society’s identity.

Aboriginal verse’s appeal was to the whole community as music, dancing, singing and religious practices enabled them to break free from the shackles of social constraints. This is unlike much European artistic expression that is often relegated to elite realms of more sophisticated classes.⁹⁰² Peters-Little believes that white Australians ‘are incapable of applauding and revering anything that smacks of everyday life and much prefer to invent art as a way of distancing themselves from the humour of the ordinary’.⁹⁰³ Artistic expression was everyday behaviour for Indigenous communities, and this expression frequently incorporated the use of humour. Therefore, we can clearly see that humour was, as both Holt and Kennedy have suggested, incorporated into the very fabric of everyday Indigenous vernacular.⁹⁰⁴

4 CONCLUSION

As proposed in the introduction, this chapter has shown how western humour theories can provide relevant insights into humour forms and functions found in some traditional Indigenous Australian communities. As Bergson has said in relation to the social significance and functions of humour – it is a superior-styled instrument used for the collective purposes of a community, an instrument for social guidance and direction.⁹⁰⁵ Humour has been principally shown being used as a tool of discipline, instilling social values and boundaries. Humour also assists, as part of Aboriginal artistic endeavours, in confirming group identity and providing group cohesion and release in shared experiences and as a way of coping with life’s difficulties.

⁸⁹⁸ Strehlow, T.G.H., 1971, p. 679.

⁸⁹⁹ Douglas, M., 1975, ‘Chapter 7– Jokes as Rites’, *Implicit Meanings, Essays in Anthropology*, Routledge, London, UK, pp. 101–107.

⁹⁰⁰ Douglas, M., 1975, p. 103. Critchley, S., 2002, *On Humour*, Routledge, London, UK, p. 5.

⁹⁰¹ For example, the cross is a significant ‘cultural symbol’ within western Christian religion. See: Jung, C., 1964, *Man and His Symbols*, Aldus Books Ltd., London, UK, p. 20.

⁹⁰² Strehlow, T.G.H., 1971, *Op. Cit.*, p. 678. Peters-Little, F., 2000, ‘High art and the humour of the ordinary’ in S. Kleinert and M. Neale, (eds.), 2000, *The Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, pp. 362–363.

⁹⁰³ Peters-Little, F., 2000, p. 363.

⁹⁰⁴ Holt, L., 2009, ‘Aboriginal humour: A conversational corroborree’ in De Groen, F., & P. Kirkpatrick, (eds.), 2009, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 81–94. Kennedy, G., 2009, ‘What makes a Blackfella Laugh?’ *Australian Author*, 41/3, p. 14.

⁹⁰⁵ Bergson, H., [1911], 2005, *Op. Cit.* pp. 3-4, p. 10.

However, the question remains; can engaging in certain types of humour seen in these examples – the telling of funny yarns, mimicry, mickey-taking, elements of superiority in mockery, and humour as a form of stress-reducing relief – still be seen in modern practices? The next few chapters will investigate this proposition.

CHAPTER 4

THE NEGLECT OF INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIAN HUMOUR IN COLONIAL DISCOURSE

*It is a real pity that so much of the history of European–Aboriginal relations can be characterised by conflict and denigration. The initial Aboriginal response to settlement was one of cooperation. It would have been a much richer country in terms of culture—and conscience—if that cooperation had been reciprocal.*⁹⁰⁶

Jack Davis, Indigenous Playwright

1. INTRODUCTION

The previous chapter revealed the humour forms and functions that can be found in records relating to pre-colonial Indigenous Australian narrative and performance traditions, although it is challenging to prove them definitively due to the nature of ‘oral’ literary traditions.⁹⁰⁷

Focusing mostly on visual and performing arts, this chapter provides examples from early colonial times of socio-political matters that have played significant roles in affecting Aboriginal humorous expression. These matters range from initial encounters until the beginnings of contemporary Aboriginal expressions in mainstream discourse of the late 1960–70s. Indigenous performance practices responded to western influences that invaded every aspect of their lives. However, humorous caricatures of Aboriginal people abounded in colonial media and literature, creating binary stereotypes that oscillated between a benevolent need to comfort the last vestiges of a dying, once noble race, and an abhorrence for people who could not embrace European civilisation. These images supported mainstream beliefs and policies. Nonetheless, forms of retaliatory Indigenous humour can still be seen in some instances, revealing a level of agency in the face of colonial domination. Aboriginal humour epitomises resilience and resistance to western colonial hegemony. Holt particularly suggests that humour has helped Aboriginal people to survive living in a racialised country of ‘white supremacy’.⁹⁰⁸ Most certainly, humour has, and continues to play, a vital role in Indigenous fights for greater autonomy and self-expression in their dealings with their colonial invaders.

⁹⁰⁶ Davis in Chesson, K., 1988, *Jack Davis a Life Story*, Dent Australia, p. 210.

⁹⁰⁷ Auger argues that ‘oral’ literature is founded in ballad, epic, fairy tale, legend, and saga traditions that were traditionally conveyed by word of mouth. Auger, P., 2010, *The Anthem Dictionary of Literary Terms & Theory*, Anthem Press, London and NY, p. 31, p. 98, p. 108, p. 165 & p. 271.

⁹⁰⁸ Holt, L., 2009, ‘Aboriginal Humour: A conversational corroborree’, De Groen, F., & Kirkpatrick, P., (eds.), 2009, *Serious Frolic, Essays on Australian Humour*, Uni of QLD Press, St Lucia, Queensland, p. 86.

2. CHAPTER OUTLINE

This chapter provides examples of first contact incidents through to the early 1970s that will contribute to this investigation of the characteristics of Indigenous Australian humour. The socio-political issues discussed in this chapter provide a context to understanding how and why Aboriginal humour has evolved in certain ways in contemporary times. Initially the chapter documents some of the early colonial understandings of Aboriginal people that found their way into Australian socio-political discourse and were often reflected disparagingly in mainstream comedy. These views can be seen as attempts by westerners to reconcile vastly alien Indigenous cultures to their own (narrow) world-views. They are most readily seen in early artworks, written records and media cartoons produced by the colonists about Indigenous people. These examples show how humour about Aboriginal people contributed to the negative stereotypical views held by many in the mainstream.

In addition, the chapter provides some early colonial examples of the humour of Aboriginal people themselves in response to European invasion and hegemony. Some of the humour forms that were noted in the previous (pre-colonial) chapter can be seen in this early colonial chapter too. They include the use of mimicry, humorous dancing and singing and quick witted funny yarns. Mickey-taking mockery is used to reinforce community standards and to dispel pretensions; while humor also provides a stress release associated with injustice. Combined, these humour forms functioned to assert an Indigenous cultural validity and served as a way to help Aboriginal people deal with colonial subjugation and the imposition of a western world-view.

Nonetheless, colonial domination meant that such examples of Aboriginal humorous self-agency came to be overshadowed by the limiting stereotypes and frequently derisive humour of their colonisers. Lippmann says that stereotypes are '[t]he subtlest and most pervasive of all influences' that tell us about the world even before we have experienced it for ourselves.⁹⁰⁹ Moreover, he suggests that it is the preconceptions which we form from stereotypes that govern our whole process of perception.⁹¹⁰ In particular, stereotyped generalisations formed the basis of many mainstream cartoons about Aboriginal people that served to reinforce these beliefs about and understandings of all Aboriginal people. Cartoons provide good example of how such stereotyped images have been perpetuated and remain recognisable tropes today; since they often dismissively homogenise all Aboriginal people under the one, negative banner.

⁹⁰⁹ Lippman, W., 1922, *Public Opinion*, Macmillan Co., New York, USA, pp. 89–90.

⁹¹⁰ Lippman, W., 1922, p. 90.

Following World War Two, a mainstream awareness of the unjust plight of Aboriginal Australians gained greater momentum. This better acknowledgement, coupled with growing Aboriginal public activism, culminated in political changes in the late 1960s that finally began to give Aboriginal Australians better socio-political access and rights. Furthermore, Aboriginal public protests and artistic expressions of the 1970s continued to enhance this process, in turn giving Aboriginal people greater socio-political power. Most importantly for this investigation, this activism was often manifested in artistic expressions of Indigenous live performances that used humour to raise issues that might ordinarily meet with hostility and rejection by mainstream audiences. Again, the familiar forms of humour in witty language, mimicry, funny yarns and mickey-taking to defray pretensions can be seen. However, by the 1970s, the use of self-deprecation that subverted the delivery of mainstream criticism, and the greater use of humour noir for socio-political release, emerged as important forms in Indigenous performances.

3. EARLY COLONIAL EXAMPLES OF ABORIGINAL HUMOUR

3.1 *European humorous images of Indigenous Australians*

Western interpretations and generalisations about ‘Australian Aboriginals’ have been consistently created since the earliest times of European naval explorations to Australia.⁹¹¹ Dutch Explorer William Dampier’s expeditions to Australia in 1688–89 recorded the local inhabitants as ‘the miserablest people in the world’ who ‘differ but little from brutes’.⁹¹² Englishman Captain James Cook’s summation of Aboriginal people in 1770 also suggests a European cultural superiority. However, additionally, it provides reference to dominant ‘noble savage’ ideologies of uncivilised people uncorrupted by sophisticated influences of civilisation:

They may appear to some to be the most wretched people upon the earth: but in reality they are far more happier than we Europeans: being wholly unacquainted not only with the superfluous but the necessary Conveniences so much sought after in Europe, they are happy in not knowing the use of them. They live in a Tranquillity which is not disturbed by the Inequality of Condition...⁹¹³

Such contrasting responses to Indigenous Australians (encompassing abhorrence at their living conditions on the one hand, and melancholy benevolence on the other) dominated colonial attitudes towards them that have formed indelible impressions in the mainstream and have become entrenched in Australia’s subconscious and reflected in humour.

On the 26th of January 1788 the British Flag was flown in Sydney Cove, officially annexing the eastern seaboard of Australia for the Crown and establishing the first convict settlement in

⁹¹¹ Clark, M., 1995, *A Short History of Australia*, Penguin Group, Victoria, Australia, pp. 4–9.

⁹¹² Clark, M., 1995, p. 7.

⁹¹³ Clark, M., 1995, p. 8.

Australia.⁹¹⁴ Many of the early colonisers' accounts located in their reports, journals and letters provide insights into initial encounters with the original Australian inhabitants.⁹¹⁵ Some characteristic signs of Aboriginal humour can be seen in these records of the encounters and public performances of these two groups.

Lieutenant William Bradley encountered Aboriginal people for the first time on January 29, 1788, and later reported on their friendliness.⁹¹⁶ He notes being met by unarmed Australians who pointed out a good place to land and welcomed them ashore ... 'in the most cheerful manner, shouting and dancing'.⁹¹⁷ Again, the next day, he notes that the native inhabitants showed signs of friendliness and were found ... 'dancing and otherwise amusing themselves'.⁹¹⁸ Bradley's reports suggest meetings with people who displayed a natural propensity to laughter and amusement, even despite the hesitancy that would have stemmed from the initial shock of first encounters between two such alien groups.

In a show of British might, Surgeon-General, John White, fired a shot through a native shield that spread surprise and fear through their group.⁹¹⁹ To abate tensions, White began to whistle the tune '*Marlbrooke has Gone to the Wars*' (sung to the same tune as '*For he's a Jolly Good Fellow*').⁹²⁰ He records that his tune succeeded in calming the situation and quickly led to the locals imitating it to perfection.⁹²¹ White subsequently noted that the Indigenous people readily adopted this tune and incorporated it within their everyday discourse – so providing an example of the astute readymade tendency for mimicry that is a recognisable attribute of Aboriginal humour, noted in the previous chapter.

In a letter back home, colonist George Worgan provided his thoughts on the Indigenous Australians, stating:

... they appear to be an Active, Volatile, Unoffending, Happy, Merry, Funny, Laughing, Good-natured, Nasty, Dirty, race of human Creatures as ever lived in a state of Savageness.⁹²²

Amongst his array of colourful descriptors can be seen the picture of a people with a natural proclivity to quick wit and laughter in Australia's hot, harsh conditions. Indeed, Kennedy and Holt both believe

⁹¹⁴ Clark, M., 1995, p. 16.

⁹¹⁵ Clendinnen, I., 2003, *Dancing with Strangers*, Text Publishing, Melbourne, p. 3.

⁹¹⁶ Clendinnen, I., 2003, p. 8.

⁹¹⁷ Clendinnen, I., 2003, p. 8.

⁹¹⁸ Clendinnen, I., 2003, p. 8.

⁹¹⁹ Clendinnen, I., 2003, p. 9.

⁹²⁰ Clendinnen, I., 2003, pp. 9–10.

⁹²¹ Clendinnen, I., 2003, p. 10.

⁹²² Clendinnen, I., 2003, p. 28.

that humour is naturally woven into the very fabric of their everyday Indigenous vernacular,⁹²³ and that Aboriginal people have always loved to laugh at the ‘humour of the ordinary’ in everyday life.⁹²⁴ It appears that some initial colonial records concur with these suggestions.

Clendinnen believes that many of the colonists’ activities probably generated great amusement amongst Indigenous Australians in conjunction with much anxiety and irritation.⁹²⁵ For example, in 1791, a British expedition set out along the Hawkesbury River to find new food sources as the fledgling colony faced serious shortages.⁹²⁶ Indigenous Australians Boladeree and Colbee went along as local guides and hunters.⁹²⁷ However, in a short time, the party was hot, exhausted, and lost, and the British felt very frustrated with their unhelpful guides.⁹²⁸ First Officer William Tench noted that whilst each of the colonists carried heavy loads, the Indigenous Australians ... ‘skipped merrily along with their little knapsacks... ‘laughing to excess’ when one of the colonists stumbled or fell, as they often did.’⁹²⁹ Tench stated: “Our perplexities afforded them an endless fund of merriment and derision.”⁹³⁰ Then to make matters worse, on the third day, the Indigenous Australians:

...on no grounds whatever exploded into a wild fit of high spirits, eating hugely, staging imaginary fights, hunting imaginary kangaroos, dancing and leaping about, and taking special delight in miming the more spectacular British slips and stumbles of the day with inimitable drollery.⁹³¹

This style of spontaneous humorous imitation can be seen as a form of mickey-taking that Milner Davis suggests has become a ‘socially protected’ acculturating experience in Australia.⁹³² Taking-the-mickey helps locals ensure that new arrivals to Australian shores don’t over-inflate their own importance but rather more humbly submit themselves to the established norms and practices of those more accustomed to this country’s harsh conditions.⁹³³ Moreover, mickey-taking, she believes, is an inevitable part of living in Australia, and is a form of humour that recipients must learn to take, (and use) with good grace in order to be accepted into Australian social societies.⁹³⁴

Frequently the British must have felt like they were being taken for fools by the Indigenous people.⁹³⁵ No amount of bribing with their wares and food or other acts of good will made them loyal to the

⁹²³ Kennedy, G., 2009, ‘What makes a Blackfulla Laugh?’ *Australian Author*, vol. 41/3, p. 14. Holt, L., 2009, ‘Aboriginal Humour: A Conversational Corroborree’ in De Groen, F., & P. Kirkpatrick, 2009, *Serious Frolic: Essays on Australian Humour*, University of QLD Press, St Lucia, QLD, pp. 81–94.

⁹²⁴ Peters-Little, F., 2000, ‘High art and the humour of the ordinary’, in S. Kleinert and M. Neale, (eds.), 2000, *The Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, pp. 362–363.

⁹²⁵ Clendinnen, I., 2003, Op. Cit., p. 92.

⁹²⁶ Clendinnen, I., 2003, pp. 201–202.

⁹²⁷ Clendinnen, I., 2003, p. 202.

⁹²⁸ Clendinnen, I., 2003, p. 202.

⁹²⁹ Clendinnen, I., 2003, p. 202.

⁹³⁰ Clendinnen, I., 2003, p. 202.

⁹³¹ Clendinnen, I., 2003, p. 203.

⁹³² Milner-Davis, J., 2009, ‘Aussie humour and laughter’ in De Groen, F. & P. Kirkpatrick, (eds.), 2009, Op. Cit., p. 47.

⁹³³ Milner-Davis, J., 2009, p. 39.

⁹³⁴ Milner-Davis, J., 2009, Op. Cit., p. 47.

⁹³⁵ Clendinnen, I., 2003, Op. Cit., p. 215.

colonisers.⁹³⁶ Clendinnen speculates about Aboriginal Australians, suggesting that ... 'given their passion for mimicry and their rapturous imitations of European absurdities, might not the strutting and preening have functioned as an impromptu secular corroboree, a running Australian joke on the British, invisible to its victims, radiantly clear to its perpetrators?'.⁹³⁷ Certainly the examples provided suggest a level of Indigenous agency in the face of British invasion of their homeland.

However, Ravenscroft suggests that Clendinnen is in fact promoting the colonial narrative in her interpretations of these early colonial records.⁹³⁸ Her speculations actually point to the vast gaps in colonial records that failed to consult other sources, most particularly Indigenous ones, in relation to their early relationships.⁹³⁹ Ravenscroft believes that Clendinnen creates a series of passive and childlike Indigenous knowledges and practices that reduce Aboriginal responses to British invasion ... 'to the naïve and irrational...[and actually perpetuate]...a lesser version of our own (western) knowledges and beliefs.'⁹⁴⁰

Regardless, cross-cultural miscommunications set the tone for race relations that persisted in Australia, solidifying into binary positions of 'us' and 'them'.⁹⁴¹ The colonists generally believed that Indigenous Australians lacked proper social structures and codes of law; they failed to recognise their sophisticated and complex social practices, discussed in the previous chapter.⁹⁴² Stanner also recognises this gulf in ... 'racial relations that had come about between us and the aborigines in the early days and had stayed more or less unchanged'.⁹⁴³ Sadly, alcohol consumption and the introduction of western diseases decimated Indigenous populations.⁹⁴⁴ Compounded with this, the loss of their lands and destruction of traditional lifestyles resulted in growing numbers of Indigenous people living lives that reflected dependency and poverty.⁹⁴⁵ To many early British colonists, Indigenous people were viewed as pathetic drunks, poor reflections of a glorious past existence.⁹⁴⁶

Therefore, although acknowledged as western interpretations, these examples do suggest a level of early cross-cultural communications that highlight the possibility of Indigenous resistance to colonial incursion in humorous forms. These incidents suggest that Aboriginal self-determination and resilience remained present, despite British oppression. Whilst Aboriginal people were not able to

⁹³⁶ Clendinnen, I., 2003, p. 215.

⁹³⁷ Clendinnen, I., 2003, p. 277.

⁹³⁸ Ravenscroft, A., 2013, 'The Strangeness of the Dance: Kate Grenville, Rohan Wilson, Inga Clendinnen and Kim Scott', *Meanjin*, vol. 72, no. 4, Summer 2013, p. 72.

⁹³⁹ Ravenscroft, A., 2013, p. 72.

⁹⁴⁰ Ravenscroft, A., 2013, p. 72.

⁹⁴¹ Clendinnen, I., 2003, pp. 58-59. Stanner, W.E.H., 1969, *The Boyer Lectures, 1968, After the Dreaming. Black and White Australians—An Anthropologist's view*, Australian Broadcasting Commission, Sydney, N.S.W.

⁹⁴² Clendinnen, I., 2003, pp. 35-36.

⁹⁴³ Stanner, W.E.H., 1969, p. 18.

⁹⁴⁴ Clendinnen, I., 2003, p. 276.

⁹⁴⁵ Clendinnen, I., 2003, p. 276.

⁹⁴⁶ Clendinnen, I., 2003, p. 277.

halt, or even greatly alter colonial invasion, their defiance was sometimes channeled into acts of violent reprisal and, at other times, it seems feasible to suggest, was manifest in mimicry as mockery and derision.

The personal validation and emotional liberation gained from this humour could have also played a significant role in engendering Aboriginal self-respect and in providing relief from oppressive racial assumptions imposed upon them by a new hegemonic presence. Such humour resembles a form of release from racial tensions and reaction to social censorship suggested by Freud in relation to the jokes created by Jewish people within the anti-Semitic environs of early twentieth century Germany.⁹⁴⁷ Freud states:

... humour has something liberating about it; but it also has something of grandeur and elevation... The grandeur in it clearly lies in the triumph of narcissism, the victorious assertion of the ego's invulnerability. The ego refuses to be distressed by the provocations of reality, to let itself be compelled to suffer... Humour is not resigned; it is rebellious. It signifies not only the triumph of the ego but also of the pleasure principle, which is able here to assert itself against the unkindness of the real circumstances.⁹⁴⁸

This use of humour as a form of cathartic relief and as an assertion of cultural authority in oppressive circumstances can often be seen being used by Aboriginal people in colonial Australia. Humour's validating and liberating purposes can particularly be seen functioning in Indigenous performances of the early 1970s, which are discussed at the end of this chapter and into the next.

3.2 The foundation for colonial interpretation of Indigenous Australians

The dominating practices of Anglo-Australian culture that asserted its authority via imperialist rule had profound ramifications for Indigenous Australian societies and their humour practices. Following Gramsci's ideas about capitalist hegemonic rule,⁹⁴⁹ Edward Said labelled such cultural dominance in eastern colonised countries 'Orientalism'.⁹⁵⁰ While Said's theories relate specifically to this region, the principles can also be applied to colonialism in Australia. In addition to the dominating economic and political institutions that were implemented in European colonies, Said suggests that the ideological influences located in civil society, made up by less coercive voluntary affiliations like schools, churches and families, provided a more subtle and sinister influence than those of direct domination located in these institutions.⁹⁵¹ Said refers to this influence as a form of social control that works, not through direct supremacy, but through a system of consent that allows certain cultural

⁹⁴⁷ Freud, S., 2002 (1905), *The Joke and its Relation to the Unconscious*, Crick, J (trans.), Penguin Books, London, England, pp. 108-109.

⁹⁴⁸ Freud, S., 1961 (1928), 'Humour' in *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. XXI (1927-31), The Hogarth Press Ltd, Britain, UK, pp. 162-163.

⁹⁴⁹ Gramsci, A., 1971, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks of Antonio Gramsci*, International Publishers, New York, USA.

⁹⁵⁰ Said, E., 1991, *Orientalism, Western Conceptions of the Orient*, Penguin Books, London, England and New York, USA.

⁹⁵¹ Said, E., 1991, pp. 6-7.

ideas and influences to dominate others.⁹⁵² These civil ideologies enabled Anglo-European cultures to formulate beliefs that their identities and meta-narratives⁹⁵³ were superior to those of all other non-European cultures and peoples.⁹⁵⁴ Moreover, this cultural ascendancy produced a discourse that justified the institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, doctrines and imagery of colonial life.⁹⁵⁵

3.3 Australian 'Aboriginalism'

Within an Australian context, Vijay Mishra (1987) developed the term 'Aboriginalism' that he says operates in a similar way to Orientalism, reducing all Aboriginal cultures to interpretation by a dominant discourse.⁹⁵⁶ Aboriginalism refers to non-Indigenous people's overpowering ideological beliefs that Indigenous cultures are primitive, essentialist and static. This 'Aboriginalism' envisaged a single homogenised 'Aboriginal culture' that includes all Aboriginal people as 'other' in opposition to mainstream normality and rationality.⁹⁵⁷ Aboriginalist notions are used by mainstream society as justification for, and as an instrument of, the ideological control of Aboriginal people.⁹⁵⁸ Although Aboriginalism has taken on different forms during successive periods of Australia's colonial history,⁹⁵⁹ increasingly, Eurocentric generalisations include assumptions about the authenticity of Aboriginal identities evidenced by either their full blood and/or traditional status.⁹⁶⁰ Popular and culturally influential texts and images in art and media helped to create and sustain stereotypical images of Indigenous people that fixed notions of all Indigenous behaviours into simplified and easily recognisable understandings. Moreover, such embedded cultural authority, that controls and defines mainstream relationships with Aboriginal people, has persisted.⁹⁶¹ And humour is implicit within this misappropriation.

Expression of Aboriginality can be readily seen in early colonial artworks. Views ranged from the sad benevolence of a forlorn Aboriginal woman representative of a dying race in Earl's *Natives of New*

⁹⁵² Said, E., 1991, p. 7.

⁹⁵³ Jean-Francois Lyotard says that 'meta-narratives' are those all-encompassing philosophies that societies use as a basis to legitimise their ethical and political belief systems. For example, within a western context are the meta-narratives of 'Christianity' and 'democracy' and their ensuing political and ethical belief systems. See: Halbert, M., nd., 'Emory University Research Paper on Lyotard' at: <Userwww.service.emory.edu/~mhalbert/Research/Paper/pci-lyotard.html. And IEP>, nd., 'The Postmodern Condition', *Jean-Francois Lyotard 1924–1998*, <<http://www.iep.utm.edu/lyotard/>> both viewed 27/11/12.

⁹⁵⁴ Said, E., 1991, Op. Cit., pp. 206–207.

⁹⁵⁵ Said, E., 1991, p. 2.

⁹⁵⁶ Mishra, V., 1987, 'Aboriginal Representations in Australian Texts', *Continuum, Australian Journal of Media and Culture*, vol. 2, no. 1.

⁹⁵⁷ Lingard, B., and F. Rizivi, 1994, '(Re) membering, (Dis)membering 'Aboriginality' and the Art of Gordon Bennett', *Third Text*, no. 26, pp. 75–76, p. 82.

⁹⁵⁸ Hodge, R., 1990, 'Aboriginal truth and white media: Eric Michaels meets the spirit of Aboriginalism', *Continuum, The Australian Journal of Media & Culture*, vol. 3, no. 2. np.

⁹⁵⁹ Hodge, R., 1990, np.

⁹⁶⁰ Lingard, B., and F. Rizivi, 1994, Op. Cit., p. 82.

⁹⁶¹ Lingard, B., and F. Rizivi, 1994, p. 82.

South Wales;⁹⁶² to the mockery of Gill's *Native Dignity* that ridicules Aboriginal attempts to embrace western lifestyles in their inappropriate parading of mismatched western clothing.⁹⁶³



Earle, A., 1826, 'Natives of NSW' (FN. 56)

Gill, S., 186?, 'Native Dignity' (FN. 57)



⁹⁶² Earle, A., 1826, 'Natives of New South Wales', watercolour, 19.8 x 16 cm, National Library of Australia, *Rex Nan Kivell collection*, number NK12/64. Image available on line at: <<http://trove.nla.gov.au/version/25827145>> viewed 10/04/2013.

⁹⁶³ Gill, S., 186?, 'Native Dignity', tinted lithograph, 31.8 x 22.5 cm, National Library of Australia collection number: PIC Volume 535 #U1078 NK2459/6. Image online at: <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.obj-135629702/>> viewed 10/04/2013.

A further example of such pervasive colonial authority is found in convict artist, T.R. (Richard) Browne's illustrations of native flora and fauna, which included images of local Indigenous people whom he categorised as native fauna.⁹⁶⁴ His *Magil Corroboree* is representative of his Aboriginal works.⁹⁶⁵ Browne's Indigenous subjects have elongated, spindly limbs and disproportionately large heads. His images have been described as 'exaggerated and grotesque' comic caricatures that commented on the degradation of Indigenous people in the face of European contact.⁹⁶⁶



**Browne, T.G., 1819-20, 'Magil Corroboree'
(FN. 59)**

Opinions differ as to why Browne painted his Aboriginal subjects in such distorted style. Some suggest that his exaggerations were just a reflection of his inept artistic abilities, whilst others suggest that they reveal more malicious motivation, intending to degrade and mock his Indigenous subjects.⁹⁶⁷ Given the artistic abilities revealed in other work (including his depictions of native birds) the latter motivation – to degrade and mock – may be the correct one.

⁹⁶⁴ State Library of NSW, 2/3/2013–5/5/2013, *Treasures of Newcastle from the Macquarie Era*, Education Kit, Newcastle Art Gallery and State Library of NSW, at:

<www.sl.nsw.gov.au/events/exhibitions/2013/treasures_newcastle/docs/ton_education_kit.pdf> viewed 10/3/2013, p. 6.

⁹⁶⁵ Browne, T.G., c.1819–20, 'Magil, Corroboree', drawing & watercolour, 23.5 x 22 cm. Image in Newcastle Art Gallery and State Library of NSW, Education Kit, Op. Cit., p. 7.

⁹⁶⁶ Grishin, S., 2000, 'Realism, Caricature and Phrenology: Early Colonial Depictions of Indigenous Peoples of Australia', in *The World Upside Down, Australia 1788–1830*, Collection Exhibition Catalogue, National Library of Australia, 2000, , at: <www.nla.gov.au/pub/ebooks/pdf/> viewed 10/04/2013, p. 14.

⁹⁶⁷ Newcastle Art Gallery and State Library of NSW, Education Kit, Op. Cit., pp. 6-7.

Such images helped create and sustain stereotypes of people who were unsuited to western living. These early colonial representations of Aboriginal people imbued Australia's socio-political discourse with negative ideas that continue to inform humorous portrayals of Aboriginal people.

3.4 Colonial misappropriation of Aboriginal Corroborees

Staged Indigenous corroboree⁹⁶⁸ performances also played a significant role in settler creations of 'Aboriginalism' in colonial life. Corroborees were appreciated as exotic spectacles and many performances were staged during the nineteenth century for the entertainment of non-Indigenous audiences, simultaneously fascinating and unnerving them.⁹⁶⁹

In many early colonies, corroborees were the first public forms of entertainment.⁹⁷⁰ They provided colonists with excitement and mystery that was essential in sustaining the 'noble savage' myth.⁹⁷¹ Krefft's *Corroboree on the Murray River* documents such performances as perceived by Europeans, looking down onto a theatrically darkened landscape surrounding the dramatic glowing scene of wild native dancers.⁹⁷²



Krefft, G., 1858,
'Corroboree on Murray River' (FN. 66)

⁹⁶⁸ 'Corroboree' is a word of the Dharuk people of the Sydney region that refers to open air performances of song and dance, however this term was adopted by colonists and used across Australia as a generic term for all Indigenous performances. Cahir, D., & I. Clark, 2010, 'An edifying spectacle: A history of 'tourist corroborees' in Victoria, Australia, 1835–1870', *Tourism Management*, vol. 31 (2010), p. 412.

⁹⁶⁹ Gilbert, H., & J. Lo, 2007, *Performance and Cosmopolitics, Cross-Cultural Transactions in Australasia*, Palgrave Macmillan, Hampshire & New York USA.

⁹⁷⁰ Gilbert, H., & J. Lo, 2007, Op. Cit., p. 23.

⁹⁷¹ Gilbert, H., & J. Lo, 2007, p. 23.

⁹⁷² Krefft, G., 1858, 'Corroboree on the River Murray', watercolour, 57.5 x 82.5 cm, State Library of New South Wales, nd., *Gerard Krefft Papers and Watercolours, 1830–1881, Manuscripts, Oral History & Pictures*, at: <<http://acms.sl.nsw.gov.au/item/itemDetailPaged.aspx?itemID=423229>> viewed 17/03/2013.

Jungian psychological theories regarding creation of archetype representations in human imaginations suggest that such imagery assisted to create socially recognisable symbols such as that of the ‘noble savage’.⁹⁷³ This cultural symbol possessed specific connotations about Indigenous peoples’ untamed and dangerous behaviours in the unconsciousness of colonial life.⁹⁷⁴ Such one dimensional understandings of local people and their ceremonial lives ignored the complexities of corroborees as sophisticated and essential elements of artistic and spiritual expression for Aboriginal people that provide communities with vital information about their laws, obligations and cultural philosophies.⁹⁷⁵ In turn, these over-simplified beliefs limited and diminished mainstream Australia’s understandings of Indigenous communities and their artistic performance practices.

3.4.1 Some notable Aboriginal Corroborees

In 1833 Noongar leader, Yagan, organised a corroboree in the Western Australian settlement that was ‘well attended’ by colonists including Lieutenant-Governor Captain Irwin.⁹⁷⁶ In 1839 a ‘peace-keeping’ celebration and corroboree was organised by the Victorian Government with local Kulin people in Melbourne.⁹⁷⁷ In 1849 a corroboree was held in central Brisbane known as the ‘Carbon Corroboree’ involving a number of Indigenous Queensland language groups.⁹⁷⁸ Public corroborees were also provided by locals Indigenous groups to prospectors on the Victorian gold fields in the 1850s.⁹⁷⁹ In 1868 colonial officials staged a corroboree of local native people in the Adelaide Park Lands for visiting British Royalty, the Duke of Edinburgh.⁹⁸⁰ 1885 saw the production of a ‘large scale’ corroboree spectacular on the Adelaide Oval.⁹⁸¹ Finally, journalist, entrepreneur and first Queensland Protector, Archibald Meston, organised many Indigenous performances via his ‘Wild Australia’ troupe of Queensland and Central Indigenous people who toured the country in the 1890s.⁹⁸²

These corroborees were enthusiastically received by white audiences for their displays of ‘savage fighting’ and ‘primitive prowess’, especially at a time when theatrical entertainment was limited in the

⁹⁷³ Jung, C, 1964, *Man and His Symbols*, Aldus Books Ltd, London, UK.

⁹⁷⁴ Jung, C, 1964, p. 20, p. 67.

⁹⁷⁵ Aboriginal Australia Art & Culture Centre– Alice Springs, nd., ‘Traditional Aboriginal Music: Ceremony and Corroborees’, online at: <<http://aboriginalart.com.au/didgeridoo/ceremony.html>> viewed 18/03/2013.

⁹⁷⁶ Gilbert, H., & J. Lo, 2007, *Performance and Cosmopolitics*, Palgrave Macmillian, Hampshire, UK & New York, NY, pp. 21–22.

⁹⁷⁷ Cahir, D., & I. Clark, 2010, Op. Cit., p. 413.

⁹⁷⁸ Brisbane History, nd., ‘Thomas Roper– Carbon Corroboree, Stories which give an understanding of life in Brisbane before 1900’, *Brisbane Reminisces*, at: <http://www.brisbanehistory.com/roper_corroboree.html> viewed 18/03/2013.

⁹⁷⁹ Cahir, D., & I. Clark, 2010, Op. Cit. p. 413.

⁹⁸⁰ Connors, J., 2015, ‘First Visit – Prince Alfred, 1867-1868’, *Royal Visits to Australia*, NLA Publishing, Canberra, ACT, p. 12.

⁹⁸¹ Advertiser Newspaper, South Australia, 30/05/1885, ‘The Corroboree’, p. 6, at: <<http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/page/2698557>> viewed 18/03/2013.

⁹⁸² Aird, M., & M. Mapar, 26/10/2015-05/02/2016, *Meston’s ‘Wild Australia’ Show 1892-1893*, School of Social Science, University of Queensland, online at: <<http://www.anthropologymuseum.uq.edu.au/wild-australia>> viewed 18/11/2015.

colonies.⁹⁸³ Whilst they provided clichéd representations of Indigenous cultures, they also putatively gave some dispossessed Indigenous people a semblance of cultural validity and a modicum of economic independence.⁹⁸⁴ It is clear in the quoted passage that Indigenous Australians participated in the newly imposed colonial economy from early settlement times:

Within settlements and later towns, individual performers busked, producing performances based on satire and mimicry for money, food and goods. As the nineteenth century progressed, communities performed corroborees in European towns and cities, as they found settlements in their traditional seasonal and ceremonial camping grounds or were dispossessed of their lands and forced to engage with the settler economy.⁹⁸⁵

Casey recognises that the humour techniques of mimicry and satire were used by Aboriginal performers in early colonial times, yet the substance of these performances is largely unrecorded and unknown. Nonetheless, it can be noted that live performances hold a significant place in the history of Indigenous–Non-Indigenous relationships, affording Aboriginal people at least a level of independence and authority to communicate on a more even playing field with their colonisers.

3.4.2 The usurping of Aboriginal Corroborees

However, such colonial performances which had initially incorporated Indigenous corroborees, took a backseat as western theatrical traditions became better established in the colonies. *The Bushrangers* by David Burn was the first Euro-Australian melodrama to be performed back in Britain in 1829.⁹⁸⁶ This play, that provided images of life in Australia, showed Tasmanian Aboriginals as fierce enemies of the colonists.⁹⁸⁷ The Aboriginal characters were played by white actors, blackened–up for the performance.⁹⁸⁸ Another performance of *The Bushrangers* (also called *Norwood Vale*) was written and published by Henry Melville and staged in Hobart in 1834 as the first colonial play with an Australian theme staged in Australia.⁹⁸⁹ Melville created an Indigenous black chief character, Murrahwa, who was also played by a white man made up in blackface.⁹⁹⁰ Eurocentric traditions such as the blackening up of non-Indigenous actors to play Aboriginal characters occurred often in mainstream Australian theatre right up until the end of the twentieth century, effectively dismissing Aboriginal subjectivity and self-agency.⁹⁹¹

⁹⁸³ Gilbert, H., & J. Lo, 2007, Op. Cit. p. 23.

⁹⁸⁴ Cahir, D., & I. Clark, 2010, Op. Cit. p. 412.

⁹⁸⁵ Casey, M., 2012, *Telling Stories – Aboriginal Australian and Torres Strait Islander Performance*, Australian Scholarly, North Melbourne, Victoria, p. 50.

⁹⁸⁶ Parsons, P., & V. Chance (eds.), 1997, *Concise Companion to Theatre in Australia*, Currency Press, Sydney, NSW, p. 9.

⁹⁸⁷ Parsons, P., & V. Chance (eds.), 1997, p. 9.

⁹⁸⁸ Gilbert, H., & J. Lo, 2007, Op. Cit. p. 23.

⁹⁸⁹ Flynn, E., 1967, 'Biography of Melville, Henry, (1799–1873)', *Australian Dictionary of Biography*. Online at: <<http://adb.anu.edu.au/biography/melville-henry-2445>> viewed 28/08/2014.

⁹⁹⁰ Tasker, M., 2007, 'Review of Richard Fotheringham (ed.), *Australian Plays for the Colonial Stage*' in *Journal of the Association for the Study of Australian Literature (JASAL)*, v. 6, 2007, pp. 128–131. Online at: <<https://www.nla.gov.au/openpublish/index.php/jasal/article/viewFile/459/765>> viewed 28/08/2014.

⁹⁹¹ An example is the blackface minstrel tradition of white people blackening their faces and performing songs and dances in imitation of African-American or Caribbean people. This tradition began in the USA but also has a history of representation of black people as dimwitted buffoons in other western countries such as the UK and Australia. Eric Lott says that blackface minstrel shows had their origins in the nineteenth century slave trade and 'the quite explicit "borrowing" of black cultural

However, some settler theatre did co-opt Aboriginal people to play minor, unacknowledged, roles such as animals, servants, or savages, providing an exotic ‘backdrop’ that helped to authenticate the colonial experience in comedy-melodramas.⁹⁹² This incorporation of Indigenous people within the colonial theatre industry was not an attempt by colonisers to engage with Indigenous cultures; rather, it can be seen as an attempt to ‘domesticate’ and discipline settler fascination and fear generated by earlier Indigenous corroborees, helping to better keep Indigenous groups in their ‘rightful’, subservient, place.⁹⁹³

3.5 The birth of colonial cartooning and its images of Aboriginal People

A review of early non-Indigenous cartoons of Indigenous people from this period also reflects the binary attitudes of the newly dominant culture towards First Australians that helped to fix stereotypes of their natures and behaviours as ‘other’ within mainstream thinking.

Boskin says that stereotypes help to standardise mental images and produce oversimplified opinions and uncritical judgements.⁹⁹⁴ Humour is a communicative act that plays a significant role in social exchanges. Howitt and Owusu-Bempah recognise that jokes are a way that ‘society disseminates and generationally transmits its dominant attitudes towards outgroups’.⁹⁹⁵ In early colonial Australia this frequently relates to the mainstreams’ attitudes towards Indigenous Australians that were often reflected in media cartoons. Cartooning in Australian publications, which began in earnest in the colonies from the more affluent gold rush era of the 1850s, frequently included mocking caricatures of Aboriginal people and was complicit in this production of stereotypes in mainstream popular lore.⁹⁹⁶ Said suggests in relation to the creation of the non-western ‘other’ in colonial life, that since the colonised are unable to represent themselves, ‘...they must therefore be represented by others...’ who claim authority to know more about them than they actually know about themselves.⁹⁹⁷ Caricatures acted in such a fashion, being stereotypical representations of peoples whom non-Indigenous cartoonists chose to represent in specific ways based on their own artistic license and satirical generalisations.

3.5.1 Aboriginal images in *Punch* Newspaper

Initially cartooning in colonial publications was dominated by *Punch* newspapers, a derivative of *London Punch*, which provided graphic commentary on colonial politics via funny illustrations with

materials for white dissemination (and profit)’. See Lott, E., 1992, ‘Love and Theft: The Racial Unconscious of Blackface Minstrelsy’, *Representations*, vol. 39(1), p. 23. Casey, M., 2004, *Creating Frames, Contemporary Indigenous Theatre*, UPQ, St Lucia, QLD, pp. 21-22.

⁹⁹² Gilbert, H., & J. Lo, 2007, Op. Cit., pp. 27–28.

⁹⁹³ Gilbert, H., & J. Lo, 2007, p. 28.

⁹⁹⁴ Boskin, J., 1987, ‘The Complicity of Humor: The Life and Death of Sambo’ in Morreall, J., (ed.), 1987, *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, State University of New York Press, Albany, New York, p. 250.

⁹⁹⁵ Howitt D. & Owusu-Bempah, K., 2009, ‘Race and Ethnicity in Popular Humour’ in Lockyer, S. & Pickering, M., (eds.) 2009, *Beyond a Joke, The Limits of Humour*, Palgrave Macmillan, UK, p. 51.

⁹⁹⁶ Boskin, J., 1987, p. 250. Phiddian, R., 2014, ‘Cartoons and Cartoonists [including political cartooning]’ in *A Companion to the Australian Media*, Australian Scholarly Publishing, Macquarie University, Sydney, p. 1.

⁹⁹⁷ Said, E., 1985, ‘Orientalism Reconsidered’, *Cultural Critique*, No. 1 (Autumn, 1985), p. 97.

catchy captions.⁹⁹⁸ These cartoons show both humorous sympathy and satirical abhorrence for these people; yet regardless of the image, stereotypical views of ‘other’ were produced for mainstream readership.

The 1864 Melbourne Punch cartoon, *Country Sketches*, provided the undeniably racist image of a ‘new chum’ white servant mistaking a down trodden female Aboriginal (known by the derogatory term ‘lubra’)⁹⁹⁹ for a kangaroo. The caption reads:

COUNTRY SKETCHES,

New Chum Servant—Och! Master, master! Is it there ye are? Sure now and here’s a kangaroo.¹⁰⁰⁰



Although this cartoon pokes fun at the ignorance of the new-chum Irish servant girl, it is undeniably pejorative towards the Indigenous woman. It portrays the uncomplimentary image of a stooping, exhausted Aboriginal woman, with a baby strapped to her back, exaggerated facial features and long

⁹⁹⁸ Stanner, W.E.H., 1969, p. 1. King, J., 1976, *The Other Side of the Coin – A Cartoon History of Australia*, Cassell Australia Limited, NSW & Vic, p. 11.

⁹⁹⁹ Meriam Webster Dictionary, nd., ‘Definition of Lubra’. Online at: <<http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/lubra>> viewed 04/01/2016.

¹⁰⁰⁰ King, J., 1976, Op. Cit., p. 60.

arms held forward like kangaroo paws. This image might initially evoke sympathy however the caption fixes it as derogatory. The text supports the denial of the Aboriginal woman's humanity in its superiority-styled derision and mockery. Oring says that 'cartoons are "in-your-face" communications.'¹⁰⁰¹ Cartoons can expose, rather than disguise racist and/or offensive messages.¹⁰⁰² They are deliberately explicit in order to express the fact that their producers believe that these issues should rightly be out in the open and not hidden as matters of shame.¹⁰⁰³

The animal image of the Aboriginal woman concurs with western understandings of Indigenous cultures as less evolved from animals than their own, as articulated in Darwin's influential *Origin of Species* that had been published in 1859.¹⁰⁰⁴ Rejection of Indigenous subjectivity on the seemingly 'rational' and 'scientific' basis of his popular ideologies of natural selection and survival of the fittest seemed to explain why so few 'primitive' Aboriginals had made a successful transition into white society. Justifications based on phrenological skull measurements and evolutionary underdevelopment, resulting in lower intelligence, provided "explanation" for recalcitrant Aboriginal behaviours that helped sustain Aboriginalism and seemingly warranted caste barriers.¹⁰⁰⁵

The 1880 Adelaide Punch cartoon '*Insult to Injury, A Recent Incident in Northern Queensland*' shows the stereotyped caricatures of a group of Aboriginal 'savages', waylaying a rather devious looking Chinese man for his baskets of goodies. A native holds the Chinese man by his pigtail, whilst other Aboriginal 'freebooters' celebrate their piracy.

The cartoon's caption reads:

Chief of Colored Freebooters (who have just captured a Chinaman and emptied his baskets) – "Nex dime you been come walk about long a here you bling blenty blenty dea, blenty chugah. Me bloomin full o' rice! Savee, John?"¹⁰⁰⁶

¹⁰⁰¹ Oring, E., 2003, *Engaging Humor*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, USA, p. 56.

¹⁰⁰² Oring, E., 2003, p. 56.

¹⁰⁰³ Oring, E., 2003, p. 56.

¹⁰⁰⁴ King, J., 1976, p. 60. Darwin, C., 1859, *On the Origin of Species by Means of Natural Selection or the Preservation of Favoured Races in the Struggle for Life*, John Murray, London.

¹⁰⁰⁵ Reynolds, H., 1972, Op. Cit., p. 57.

¹⁰⁰⁶ Adelaide Punch, 24/07/1880, p. 28.



While the cartoon merely states that it is representative of a ‘recent incident’, this image conjures recognisable stereotypes of both Indigenous and Chinese people; two races which were frequently criticised and derided within the dominant culture of the late 1800s. The industrious nature of Chinese people is satirised in appearance as well as for the goodie-baskets; whilst the Indigenous men are represented as pirates’ pillaging their victims for the satisfaction of tea, sugar and alcohol. In support of the comic image, an incongruent Aboriginal English vocabulary is mocked in the caption via colloquial and phonetic words, including the substitution of letters ‘p’ with ‘b’ and ‘d’ for ‘t’.¹⁰⁰⁷ These words include a final racial slur about Asian rice consumption as a ‘foreign’ food source that further fixes these characters as an inappropriate ‘other’ presence. Majority members of society often joke about the accents of marginal groups of people. Mock accents distinguish their modes of speech as ‘funny’ and incorrect.¹⁰⁰⁸

Euro-Australian xenophobic fears abounded in colonial Australia in relation to a potential invasion of Chinese immigrants which heightened during the gold rush of the 1850s.¹⁰⁰⁹ In this cartoon superiority

¹⁰⁰⁷ It must be noted that this language-style has been recognised as a linguistically accurate rendition of Aboriginal English that puts the verbal mockery of this cartoon in doubt. Personal communication, 23/05/2016, Dr C. Nicholls to K. Austin, Flinders University, Adelaide.

¹⁰⁰⁸ Billig, M., 2005, *Laughter and Ridicule. Towards a Social Critique of Humour*, Sage Publications, UK, p. 206

¹⁰⁰⁹ Melbourne Immigration Museum and The Golden Dragon Museum, 13/06/2001–16/09/2001, ‘Showing Face: Chinese Identity in Regional Victoria from the 1850s to Federation’. Online at: <<http://www.sbs.com.au/gold/story.php?storyid=46>> viewed 28/08/2014.

humour is used to morally condemn Indigenous criminal actions and reassert the necessity for restrictive and punitive dealings with both Aboriginal and Chinese people. Furthermore, the negative meanings encoded within such stereotypes justified the mainstream's need to control the (inferior) intellectual and cultural spheres of such groups in parallel with their command over social economic and political spheres.¹⁰¹⁰

Christie Davies believes that ethnic humour aims to mock social groups on the periphery of mainstream culture.¹⁰¹¹ Racial slurs assist to reduce social ambiguity about that group's (lower) place in the social hierarchy in relation to the dominant culture by attempting to clarify social and moral boundaries and appease anxiety about conflicting norms and values via mockery and contempt.¹⁰¹² Ethnic jokes help to police those boundaries by ascribing traits to such groups that they don't wish to recognise amongst their own group members.¹⁰¹³

3.6 Indigenous humour in the Protectionist Era (1830s–1930s)

Following concern over the decreasing numbers of Aboriginal populations and reports of frontier settler abuses and massacres, the 1837 House of Commons Select Committee on Aboriginal Welfare recommended protecting and Christianising remaining populations of Aboriginal people.¹⁰¹⁴ The British government established a series of Aboriginal protectorates in each of the colonies.¹⁰¹⁵ Aboriginal Protectors were chosen from missionaries, policemen and teachers who established separate reserves for Aboriginal people in order to segregate them from white aggression, and from their own traditions.¹⁰¹⁶

Recommendations solidified by the end of the century into policies that aimed at segregating particularly full-blood Aboriginal people from outsider interferences and onto reserves and missions.¹⁰¹⁷ Laws were passed restricting their movement from reserved areas, their rights to marry and access alcohol, and controlling their employment and curtailing their civil rights.¹⁰¹⁸ Part-Aboriginal children were removed from their families and relocated to institutions aimed at educating

¹⁰¹⁰ Hodge, B., & V. Mishra, 1990, *Dark Side of the Dream, Australian literature and the postcolonial mind*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, Australia, p. 27.

¹⁰¹¹ Davies, C., 1982, 'Ethnic jokes, moral values and social boundaries', *The British Journal of Sociology*, vol. 33/3, September 1982, p. 386.

¹⁰¹² Davies, C., 1982, pp. 383–403, esp. p. 400.

¹⁰¹³ Davies, C., 1982, p. 384.

¹⁰¹⁴ Great Britain House of Commons, 1837, 'Report of the Parliamentary Select Committee on Aboriginal Tribes, (British Settlements)', London, Pub. for the Society by W. Ball [etc.], London, England, esp. at pp. 116–123. Online at: <<https://archive.org/details/reportparliamen00britgoog>> viewed 29/08/2014.

¹⁰¹⁵ Clark, M., 1995, *A Short History of Australia*, (4th ed.), Penguin Books, Camberwell, Victoria, p. 99.

¹⁰¹⁶ Clark, M., 1995, p. 99.

¹⁰¹⁷ Australian Law Reform Commission, (ALRC), nd., 'Aboriginal Societies: The Experience of Contact', np. Online at:

<<http://www.alrc.gov.au/publications/3.%20Aboriginal%20Societies%3A%20The%20Experience%20of%20Contact/changing-policies-towards-aboriginal>> viewed 29/08/2014.

¹⁰¹⁸ ALRC, nd., np.

them in European ways.¹⁰¹⁹ However, segregation policies that herded Aboriginal populations from their lands and onto reserves and missions beyond the reaches of white populations' social consciousness.¹⁰²⁰

Nevertheless, even given the patronising Anglo-centric benevolence that dominates Aboriginal Protectionist Reports of the early twentieth century, a few signs of Aboriginal humour practices can be found. These incidents can generally be seen as forms of resistance to white control and re-assertion of traditional cultural practices. Overall, the reports reveal that life for Aboriginal people on missions, stations, and in various state run institutions, was serious, regimented and often punitive. Only infrequent references to humour are made. However, it could be assumed that this is mostly due to the fact that their white Australian authors, as superintendents, saw their primary tasks as recording Aboriginal physical and emotional wellbeing and documenting their Christian and economic progress, rather than noting frivolity.

In part, Chief-Protector Howard's 1909 Queensland report reveals Euro-Australian attitudes of superiority towards their Indigenous wards, frustration with their behavior and less-than-enthusiastic work ethic; however, a reference to Aboriginal humour as a form of mickey-taking is also made:

Like all other barbarous people, the aborigines of Queensland in their primitive state are remarkably indolent, and seldom exert themselves in any way, unless forced to do so from pressure of hunger... They have a keen perception of the ludicrous and grotesque, and a decided taste for what may be called dry humour; their talent for mimicry is really wonderful. If there is anything uncommon or peculiar in the appearance or demeanour of any European in their district—as, for instance, if he should be lame, if he has a proud over-bearing manner or anything remarkable in his tone of voice—they are sure to take him off with the most ludicrous effect.¹⁰²¹

Once again, familiar signs of mimicry that mocks and belittles a subject, signalling difference, can be seen. This mickey-taking has been recognised as a particularly Australian form of humour that attempts to curtail people from over-elevating their own importance or taking themselves too seriously.¹⁰²² In addition, Bergson suggests that we find that 'rigidity' of movement, whether in physical or mental processes, provokes comic laughter.¹⁰²³ Bergson says that mockery has the ability to 'correct men's manners', bringing either recalcitrant or 'proud over-bearing' people into line with social expectations through the embarrassment that it inspires.¹⁰²⁴ However, given the differences in

¹⁰¹⁹ ALRC, nd., np.

¹⁰²⁰ Langton, M., 2003, 'Aboriginal art and film: the politics of representation' in Grossman, M (ed.) *Contemporary Critical Writing by Indigenous Australians*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, Victoria, p. 113.

¹⁰²¹ Howard, R.B., 1909, *Queensland Government Annual Report of the Chief Protector of Aboriginals for the Year Ending 1909*, Government Printer, Brisbane, p. 5.

¹⁰²² Milner-Davis, J., 2009, Op. Cit., p. 39. Goddard, C., 2009, 'Not taking yourself too seriously in Australian English: Semantic explications, cultural scripts, corpus evidence', *Intercultural Pragmatics*, v.6 (1), Walter de Gruyter, Berlin, pp. 30–32.

¹⁰²³ Bergson, H., [1911], 2005, Brereton, C & Rothwell, F. (trans.), *Laughter – An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, Dover Publications Inc., Mineola, New York, USA, pp. 5–6.

¹⁰²⁴ Bergson, H., [1911], 2005, p. 9.

social status between Aboriginal people and their white bosses, the ability for their mocking humour to alter European behaviour is doubtful. Rather, in this instance, Aboriginal mocking humour serves in-group purposes. Boskin and Dorinson argue that, in relation to minority groups, mocking humour targeted at those in charge questions their authority and enables the subordinate group to maintain their own self-respect.¹⁰²⁵

Potter suggests that in social situations where direct influence is improbable, this ‘oppositional’ humour offers disempowered groups a way to cope with the tensions and frustrations that come from living under such conditions.¹⁰²⁶ Furthermore, she believes that oppositional humour provides a ‘training ground for (future) confrontations with oppressors’, assisting minorities to put the dominant group off-kilter, maybe even provoking them to question some of their entrenched beliefs.¹⁰²⁷ Having a sense of humour generally allows minorities to create ‘psychic distance’ or mental space for themselves, assisting them to gain a better perspective on and appreciation of beliefs and situations that are touted as absolute truth and reality.¹⁰²⁸

Travelling protector Isdell’s 1910 report from the West Kimberley region documents, somewhat incredulously, a young Indigenous man’s defiant and humorous response to punishment:

On my arrival there I investigated the matter and found it correct. The boy, aged about 17 years, was put on the chain by the manager as a punishment for running away from a team whilst on the road from Derby; he was in no way ill-treated ... Whilst making his statement to me he laughed and looked on it as a great joke, and rather liked it, as [if] he had a good time.¹⁰²⁹

This humorous defiance to punishment gives example of an instance of Aboriginal resistance that was levelled rebelliously at the protector by a young man, powerless to defend himself against forced labour in any other way. Humour is a relatively safe way to inflict a non-physical ritualistic form of violence against oppressors in response to the sheer injustice of the situation.¹⁰³⁰ Freud has noted the important cathartic function of humour as a form of defiance to injustice in ‘fending off the possibility of suffering [that] places it among the great series of methods which the human mind has constructed in order to evade the compulsion to suffer’.¹⁰³¹

The Indigenous tendency to tell humorous yarns is documented by Protector MacDonald in the 1915–1917 Northern Territory Administrator’s report:

¹⁰²⁵ Boskin, J. & J. Dorinson, 1985, ‘Ethnic Humor: Subversion and Survival’ in *American Quarterly*, v. 37/1, *Special Issue: American Humour* (Spring 1985), The Johns Hopkins University Press, p. 84.

¹⁰²⁶ Potter, N., 2003, ‘Is there a Role for Humor in the Midst of Conflict?’ *Social Philosophy Today*, vol. 17, p. 104.

¹⁰²⁷ Potter, N., 2003, p. 104, p. 120.

¹⁰²⁸ Potter, N., 2003, p. 110.

¹⁰²⁹ Gale, C.F., 1910, *Western Australia Chief Protector of Aborigines Report for Financial Year Ending 30/06/1910*, Government Printer, Perth, p. 11.

¹⁰³⁰ Potter, N., 2003, Op. Cit., p. 112.

¹⁰³¹ Freud, S., 1961 (1928), ‘Humour’ in *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud*, Vol. XXI (1927–31), The Hogarth Press Ltd., Britain, UK., p. 163.

All the other natives on the place are quiet, and well behaved; but at their work they must have supervision, otherwise one or two will be working and the others dodging or telling funny yarns.¹⁰³²

Kennedy also recognises this distinctive love of telling ‘funny yarns’ that she believes is a well-known feature of her Indigenous community, stating:

...stories are dragged up at every opportunity we get ... and we laugh our guts out for hours. I treasure those yarns, those stuff-ups’...¹⁰³³

Tell-tale signs of Indigenous people’s use of humour in funny yarns can be seen in Protectors’ reports that did little to acknowledge Aboriginal resistance to colonial subjugation, including via the use of humour techniques. Like the reports, Australian news media ignored the complexities of Indigenous interventions into mainstream socio-political discourses by sustaining stereotypical images of Aboriginal as wayward subjects in need of white discipline.

3.7 Cartoon images of Indigenous Australians within the news media

Regular news media cartooning was not established in Australia until the founding of the national weekly *Bulletin Newspaper* in 1880; and following the First World War in 1919, *Smith’s Weekly*.¹⁰³⁴ These publications promoted and enhanced a growing Australian independence and nationalism, playing ... ‘a substantial role in the making of a distinctive cultural identity (egalitarian and Anglo-centric) in the decades leading to and following Federation.’¹⁰³⁵ Cartoons became tools for sustaining images of Aboriginal people that influenced and enhanced mainstream humorous understandings of, and relationships with, Aboriginal people.

Whilst Phiddian recognises that ‘[c]artoons have seldom if ever changed the course of history’;¹⁰³⁶ Hogan suggests that (political) cartoons especially tend to reinforce (negative) images and ‘are important in helping to inform the electorate’.¹⁰³⁷ What is true, however, is that images in the media reflect and record issues of current socio-political relevance; they keep them alive and often confirm the readership’s pre-existing perceptions of those issues.¹⁰³⁸ In genuine democratic societies that include cartoons provide a ‘backdrop’ to everyday life that facilitates a form of ‘public involvement’ in mainstream socio-political discourse.¹⁰³⁹

¹⁰³² MacDonald, R, 10/01/1918, *Northern Territory of Australia Report of The Administrator for the Years 1915–16 and 1916–17*, Government of the Commonwealth of Australia, A.J. Mullett, Government Printer, Victoria, p. 50.

¹⁰³³ Kennedy, G., 2009, ‘What Makes a Blackfulla Laugh?’ in *Australian Author*, Vol. 41/3, Dec. 2009, p. 13.

¹⁰³⁴ King, J., 1976, *Op. Cit.*, p. 11.

¹⁰³⁵ Phiddian, R., 2014, *Op. Cit.*, p. 2.

¹⁰³⁶ Phiddian, R., 2014, p. 2.

¹⁰³⁷ Hogan, M., 2001, ‘Cartoonist and Political Cynicism’ in *The Drawing Board: An Australian Review of Public Affairs*, vol. 2/1, University of Sydney School of Economic and Political Science, p. 29.

¹⁰³⁸ Hogan, M., 2001, p. 28.

¹⁰³⁹ Craig, G., 2004, *The Media Politics and Public Life*, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, NSW, p. vii.

It is, for example, a significant reflection of the Australian socio-political ethos that until 1960, the *Bulletin's* motto was 'Australia for the White Man' that supported Euro-Australian dominance in social and political spheres of life.¹⁰⁴⁰ Publications like the *Bulletin* supported the growing sentiment of independence and patriotism in mainstream Australian societies of the late 1800s that gave birth to independence from Britain and Federation in 1901.¹⁰⁴¹ Jones recognises that humour has contributed significantly to Australia's national myth-making.¹⁰⁴² Humour has often been used to police cultural boundaries in Australia, imposing an authority that attempts to undermine anyone who stands separate from its mainstream westernised colonial mythology.¹⁰⁴³

3.8 Aboriginal images in light of Australian nationalism

One of the first acts of the newly established Australian Government was *The Immigration Restriction Act* [1901], colloquially known as the 'White Australia Policy'.¹⁰⁴⁴ This Act sought to restrict entry into the country by those of 'Asiatic' and 'coloured' descent.¹⁰⁴⁵ This focus on sustaining a western, white, population set the tone for relations with non-white people, including Aboriginals, within the country until it was finally (completely) abolished in 1973.¹⁰⁴⁶

Aboriginal affairs were mostly matters for each of the individual states; however the Federal Government has some say in Indigenous management.¹⁰⁴⁷ Aboriginal people were excluded from the national *Invalid and Old Age Pension Act* (1908); they were unable to vote in Federal Elections or have their names placed on the Electoral Roll; nor were they to be counted in the census; and they were also barred from the Australian Workers' Union that would have guaranteed them equal pay to white Australians.¹⁰⁴⁸ Unequal, and with no citizenship recognition, yet still many Aboriginal men sought to support their country and enlist in the First World War. Regardless, racist jokes about Aboriginal incompetence and their inability to provide adequate assistance to the war effort continued.

The *Bulletin's* 1915 '*A Question of Color*' cartoon shows an Aboriginal man humorously explaining his attempts to join Australia's Light Horse Brigade:

¹⁰⁴⁰ Jones, D., 1997, 'Setting Limits: Humour and Australian National Identity' in *Special Issue of the Australian Journal of Comedy*, Visual and Performing Arts Department, Australian Catholic University, Victoria, p. 35.

¹⁰⁴¹ Jones, D., 1997, p. 35.

¹⁰⁴² Jones, D., 1997, p. 33.

¹⁰⁴³ Jones, D., 1997, p. 34, p. 41.

¹⁰⁴⁴ Australian Federal Government, Department of Immigration, nd., 'Abolition of the 'White Australia' Policy', Fact Sheet 8 online at: <<http://www.immi.gov.au/media/fact-sheets/08abolition.htm>> viewed 10/3/2013.

¹⁰⁴⁵ Australian Federal Government, Department of Immigration, nd.

¹⁰⁴⁶ Australian Federal Government, Department of Immigration, nd.

¹⁰⁴⁷ Australian Federal Government, House of Representatives, 10/05/2011, 'Overview of Indigenous Affairs: Part I: 1901 to 1991', online at:

<http://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/BN/1011/IndigenousAffairs1> viewed 11/03/2013.

¹⁰⁴⁸ Australian Federal Government, House of Representatives, 10/05/2011. King, J., 1976, *The Other Side of the Coin*, p. 110. Australian Broadcasting Commission (ABC), nd., 'Australian Democracy Struggles', <<http://www.abc.net.au/civics/democracy/struggle.htm>> viewed 18/08/2011.

“Hulloa, Jacky, not enlisted yet?”

“Yes. Boss! Tried to join Light Horse, but plurry sergeant turn me down. Him say: ‘You too plurry dark for Light Horse’ – he, he!”¹⁰⁴⁹



The darkly clad, pipe-smoking Aboriginal, carrying his little sack of belongings and wearing no shoes, contrasts sharply to the cane carrying white ‘boss-man’ with his symbols of colonial authority in his pith-hat, white suit and shoes. The use of the word ‘plurry’ substitutes for the more offensive word ‘bloody’ – a very Australian word that emphasises the sergeant’s annoyance at Jacky’s dark appearance – as if it is something of an inconvenience to the war efforts.¹⁰⁵⁰ In addition, this cartoon refers to the Aboriginal man by the derogatory name of ‘Jacky’, a generic name for all Australian Indigenous men used throughout colonial Australia.¹⁰⁵¹ As Monro has noted, such words conjure up recognisable stereotypes, re-enforcing the image.¹⁰⁵² This image, coupled with Jacky’s colloquial language and self-deprecating acknowledgement of the white boss-man, suggests that Jacky is a rather

¹⁰⁴⁹ King, J., 1976, p. 111.

¹⁰⁵⁰ Oxford Dictionary, nd., ‘Plurry: An Australian/New Zealand informal word used in the early 19th Century to express anger, annoyance, or shock, or simply for emphasis’. Online at: <<http://www.oxforddictionaries.com/definition/english/plurry>> viewed 08/01/2016.

¹⁰⁵¹ Originally Jacky Jacky (Jackey Jackey) was the name given to the Aboriginal young man who assisted Assistant Surveyor-General and Explorer, Edmund Kennedy, on his survey expedition of Cape York Peninsula, Queensland, in 1848. Malone says that ‘for whites it was a generic dismissive [name], denying blacks their individuality and hence their dignity.’ See: Malone, S., & C. Grosz, 2010, ‘Jackey Jackey & the Yadhaykenu’, *The Monthly*, Online at: <<https://www.themonthly.com.au/issue/2008/april/1290558655/shane-maloney/jackey-jackey-yadhaykenu>> viewed 08/01/2016.

¹⁰⁵² Monro, D., 1951, *Argument of Laughter*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, Victoria, pp. 241-242.

foolish and subservient person. Moreover, the ‘joke’ about his colour in contrast to the celebrated ‘Light Horse Brigade’ reveals the flagrant racism against darker coloured people which was deemed socially acceptable at that time.

However, whilst this cartoon evokes recognisable types, and its caption pokes fun at the idiomatic use of English by Aboriginals, one could argue that the purpose of this cartoon was to highlight social contradictions and prejudices. It has been suggested that the job of political cartoonists was, and still is, to pass satirical commentary on the political and social life of a nation.¹⁰⁵³ Western democratic principles of ‘freedom of the press’ imply by association, that cartoonists, like journalists, should function as impartial ‘watchdogs’ in society, scrutinising and uncovering the existence of social disparities that should be challenged within the democratic process.¹⁰⁵⁴ This cartoon, and others like it, could perhaps be considered primarily as critical judgments of societies which belittle and dismiss Indigenous input; however, given the history of restrictive Indigenous treatment generally in Australian societies at that time, this more benign interpretation falters.

Mulkay says that political cartoons operate within a broader realm of political discourse that is organised around the conflict between antagonistic groupings in societies.¹⁰⁵⁵ Political cartoons are a part of the politics of ‘oppositional language’ between those conflicting groups.¹⁰⁵⁶ They reinforce existing community divisions and reflect existing forms of political life more than they challenge and disrupt existing social patterns.¹⁰⁵⁷ Humorous discourse is not even recognised as funny unless it is relevant to and expresses the social situation in which it occurs.¹⁰⁵⁸

Yet regardless of whether this cartoon was created to arouse pity or present outright racist humour, it and other images like it in mainstream media continued to satirise Aboriginalism, creating comic interpretations and making familiar generalisations about one homogenous Indigenous ‘culture’ that denied the multiplicity of diverse Indigenous communities.

A 1922 *Smith’s Weekly* cartoon contains another image of a downtrodden Indigenous man. His caricature is the broad, smiling face of a barefoot simpleton in plain short sleeve shirt and pants, seated in front of a humpy. His figure contrasts strongly to that of a ‘western’ man dressed in dark sophisticated clothing that includes hat, coat, scarf, long trousers, and of course, shoes. The general demeanour of each figure – ‘laughing fool’ and ‘austere upstanding citizen’ – is representative of the social status and positioning of each of the men. To help solidify the image, the caption reads:

¹⁰⁵³ Craig, G., 2004, Op. Cit., p. 19.

¹⁰⁵⁴ Craig, G., 2004, p. 19.

¹⁰⁵⁵ Mulkay, M., 1988, *On Humour, Its Nature and Place in Modern Society*, Polity Press, Oxford, UK, p. 5.

¹⁰⁵⁶ Mulkay, M., 1988, p. 5.

¹⁰⁵⁷ Mulkay, M., 1988, p. 5.

¹⁰⁵⁸ Mulkay, M., 1988, p. 153.

Prohibition canvasser: You'll vote for Prohibition, won't you, Jacky?
Jacky: My oath, boss. You gib it bottle rum Jacky vote anything you like.¹⁰⁵⁹



*Prohibition canvasser: You'll vote for Prohibition, won't you, Jacky?
Jacky: My oath, boss. You gib it bottle rum Jacky vote anything you like.*

Again, these words conjure up a familiar stereotype by referring to the Indigenous man by the dismissive name 'Jacky', coupled with the suggestion that his loyalties extend just as far as his next alcoholic drink. Typecast images of lazy, alcoholic Aboriginals remain consistent and easily recognisable in mainstream Australian discourse to this day.

However, once again, it is important to acknowledge that strategies of interpretation contribute to the understanding of this cartoon too. Given the severe financial difficulties of the depression era in Australia during the 1920s, and a level of social sympathy for those people 'doing it tough' economically, this cartoon could be understood as a criticism of the over-dressed white 'wowsers', another common stereotype. Jacky could be considered a Harlequin-like clever character, cunningly exploiting the *naïve* prohibition canvasser. This shrewd figure may in fact have been created to

¹⁰⁵⁹ The Koori History Website, nd., 'Race, Aborigines & the Australian Cartoonist', Swain, D., *200 in the Shade – A historical selection of cartoons about Aborigines*, Collins, Sydney, 1988; and online at: <<http://www.kooriweb.org/foley/images/history/toons/toonsdx.html>> viewed 26/11/2012.

provide mickey-taking mockery of white wowsers. Such an alternative interpretation reveals the elusive nature of humour comprehension, and confirms the importance of current social understandings in its complex interpretation. In order to understand the message of humorous cartoons, they must be read in historical context and in conjunction with prevailing social ideologies and interactions.¹⁰⁶⁰ Literature, like the Protectors' reports, and the existence of restrictive laws, help make it clear that the social stereotypes and understandings of the fickle nature of Australian Aboriginals were well known at that time. Nonetheless, regardless of the interpretation, such images assisted to create simple caricatures of Aboriginal people within mainstream non-Indigenous imaginations.

3.9 Heightened Indigenous political activism & protests from the 1930s

From the 1930s some Aboriginal people began to petition governments, and to establish political action lobby groups attempting to obtain citizenship rights, social justice and overall better living conditions for Aboriginal people.

For example, in 1923 South Australian Ngarrindjeri elders presented a petition to the Governor of South Australia imploring him not to sign the *Aborigines (Training of Children) Act 1923 (SA)* that provided for removal of Aboriginal children.¹⁰⁶¹ However, he did not heed the petition.¹⁰⁶² The *Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association* was formed in 1925 in attempt to fight the discrimination faced by Aboriginal returned servicemen following World War I.¹⁰⁶³ In 1932 William Cooper established *The Australian Aborigines League* that collected a petition of over 1800 signatures that he hoped would be sent by the Prime Minister, Joseph Lyons, to the King.¹⁰⁶⁴ This petition which called for better Aboriginal living conditions and improved parliamentary representation, only received token acknowledgement.¹⁰⁶⁵ Indigenous frustrations led to the organisation of a national day of protest in Sydney, known as a 'Day of Mourning' that sought to counter white Australia's 150 years of settlement celebrations on the 26th of January 1938.¹⁰⁶⁶ Many Aboriginal people recognised the fact that they had very little to celebrate since the establishment of colonialism.¹⁰⁶⁷ In fact, 'generations' of Indigenous people regard this event 'as the birth of the modern Indigenous political movement' and a pivotal moment in modern Indigenous political activity.¹⁰⁶⁸ It was during the 1920–30s that a myriad of Aboriginal political organisations were formed all over the country,

¹⁰⁶⁰ Mulkay, M., 1988, Op. Cit., p. 38.

¹⁰⁶¹ Australian Government, House of Representatives, 10/05/2011, Op. Cit., np.

¹⁰⁶² Australian Government, House of Representatives, 10/05/2011, np.

¹⁰⁶³ Maynard, J., 1997, 'Fred Maynard and the Australian Aboriginal Progressive Association: One God, One Aim, One Destiny', *Aboriginal History*, vol. 21, pp. 1–13, Australian National University Press, Canberra.

¹⁰⁶⁴ AIATSIS, nd., 'The Day of Mourning', at:

<www.aiatsis.gov.au/collections/exhibitions/dayofmourning/background.html> viewed 17/03/2013.

¹⁰⁶⁵ AIATSIS, nd., 'The Day of Mourning'.

¹⁰⁶⁶ AIATSIS, nd., 'The Day of Mourning'.

¹⁰⁶⁷ ABC, nd., 'Australian Democracy Struggles', Op. Cit., p. 12.

¹⁰⁶⁸ Foley, G., 2000, 'Lin Onus—A personal/political memory', *Urban Dingo, the Art and Life of Lin Onus 1948–1996*, Queensland Art Gallery, Queensland, pp. 35–36.

making protests and representations to various levels of government with regards to Aboriginal socio-political grievances and matters of injustice.¹⁰⁶⁹

3.10 Indigenous humour in the Assimilationist era (1930s–1960s)

Despite heightened protests about Australian governments' paternalistic control, a conference of non-Indigenous Commonwealth and State Aboriginal Authorities was held in Canberra in 1937 to discuss the administration of Aboriginal affairs.¹⁰⁷⁰ The conference agreed to better standardise national policies and on a united resolve to assimilate mixed-race Indigenous people into mainstream Australian societies, effectively sustaining tight control over Indigenous lives.¹⁰⁷¹ By the 1950s 'assimilation' became the widely accepted goal for all Indigenous people, adopted by Australian governments on both state and federal levels.¹⁰⁷²

Indigenous political activities were further curtailed by the outbreak of the Second World War in 1939. Despite the lack of acknowledgement of the services provided by them during the First World War, over 3,000 Indigenous people enlisted in defense forces.¹⁰⁷³ Ironically, the war opened up more mainstream opportunities for Aboriginal people.¹⁰⁷⁴ The services gave Indigenous people an avenue of escape from protection authorities and reserve life.¹⁰⁷⁵ It also provided more civilian employment opportunities for Indigenous people who moved into some of the jobs left vacant by white people who had enlisted.¹⁰⁷⁶

3.11 Humour about Aboriginal Australians during World War Two (1939–1945)

Humorous satire pertaining to Indigenous enlistments were evident in this war too. The 1942 *Bulletin* cartoon, *Natural-born Australian?* challenges the legitimacy of Aboriginal enlistment as Australians, given their lack of citizenship status.¹⁰⁷⁷

¹⁰⁶⁹ Attwood, B., & A. Markus, 1999, *The struggle for Aboriginal rights: a documentary history*, Allen and Unwin, Sydney, NSW, pp. 11–15.

¹⁰⁷⁰ Australian Government, House of Representatives, 10/05/2011, Op. Cit. Australian Federal Government, 1937, 'Aboriginal welfare: Initial conference of Commonwealth and State Aboriginal authorities', Canberra, 21–23 April 1937, Commonwealth Government Printer, Canberra, ACT, online at: <<http://www.nla.gov.au/apps/doview/nla.aus-vn118931-p.pdf>> viewed 13/01/2016.

¹⁰⁷¹ Australian Government, House of Representatives, 10/05/2011, np.

¹⁰⁷² ALRC, nd., Op. Cit., np.

¹⁰⁷³ Foley, G., 2000, p. 12.

¹⁰⁷⁴ Hall, R., 1997, *The Black Diggers, Aborigines and Torres Strait Islanders in the Second World War*, pp. 6–7.

¹⁰⁷⁵ Hall, R., 1997, pp. 6–7.

¹⁰⁷⁶ Hall, R., 1997, pp. 23–24.

¹⁰⁷⁷ Rice, N.18/11/1942, 'Natural-born Australian?' *The Bulletin*, in Hall, R., 1997, p. 16.



In this instance, the cartoon's caption appears to highlight and question the hypocrisy of this injustice within mainstream media. It ridicules the 'white Australia' policy and expresses sympathy for the Aboriginal person trapped by its racist contradiction. The cartoon shows a person with some comprehension of western dress codes in the the character's neat white suit and shirt, although he probably wears cast-off clothing. Nonetheless, the cartoon also presents an element of derogatory mockery with its image of an archetype 'foolish' Aboriginal, inappropriately and incongruously barefoot. So, although it highlights the injustice of the Indigenous Australian's plight, the cartoon simultaneously perpetuates the familiar mockery of Aboriginal unpopular representations.

While the apartheid prevailed in Australia, Indigenous people continued to protest their situation and lobby governments for a better deal. Collaboration between Aboriginal groups and the *Returned Services League* led to ex-service Aboriginal people obtaining the Federal vote in 1949.¹⁰⁷⁸ Furthermore, some well-respected non-Indigenous artists began to explore and express Indigenous themes within their work. Composer John Antill produced the ballet score *Corroboree* in 1946 based on Indigenous dance and music.¹⁰⁷⁹ Poet Judith Wright was another of a new wave of white Australians to use Indigenous themes in her book of poetry *The Moving Image* also in 1946.¹⁰⁸⁰ Her poems *Bora Ring*, *Nigger's Leap* and *Half-Caste Girl* attempted to invoke a reappraisal of the legitimacy and spiritual significance of Indigenous cultures and most importantly,

¹⁰⁷⁸ ABC, nd., 'Australian Democracy Struggles', Op. Cit., 18/08/2011.

¹⁰⁷⁹ Casey, M., 2012, Op. Cit. p. 52.

¹⁰⁸⁰ Shoemaker, A., 1992, *Black Words, White Page. Aboriginal Literature 1929–1988*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, Queensland, p. 8.

recognised a need for social atonement of past injustices inflicted on Indigenous people by their non-Indigenous counterparts.¹⁰⁸¹ However, works of this kind were appropriations by non-Indigenous artists that involved little, if any, collaboration and/or artistic input by Indigenous Australian people themselves.¹⁰⁸²

3.12 *Indigenous artistic responses to injustice (1940s–1950s)*

In the post-war period Aboriginal people grew in social confidence and participated more effectively in mainstream society. This led to greater awareness of Indigenous needs in the wider Australian community. This participation included the establishment of *The Coolbaroo League* in Perth in 1946.¹⁰⁸³ This organisation was founded by returned Yamatji soldiers Bill and Jack Poland, Helena Clarke and non-Indigenous returned soldier Geoff Harcus.¹⁰⁸⁴ It was named ‘Coolbaroo’, a Yamatji word meaning (black and white) magpie; and was based on the concept of conciliation between black and white Australians.¹⁰⁸⁵ Its clubrooms were situated on the outskirts of Perth CBD as Indigenous people were banned from inner city areas after 6pm.¹⁰⁸⁶ It offered Indigenous and non-Indigenous people alike music, dancing, singing and comedic/vaudevillian entertainment.¹⁰⁸⁷

Despite frequent police interference enforcing alcohol bans, the club flourished and became a symbol of Indigenous self-determination, which involved artistic performances and a clear socio-political voice.¹⁰⁸⁸ The club was closed by police in the late 1940s but, by popular demand, re-opened in the early 1950s, operating until 1960.¹⁰⁸⁹ From 1952–1957 this Aboriginal-controlled club published its own newspaper *The Westralian Aborigine* that lobbied government on pertinent issues such as the removal of children and citizenship laws, as well as generally raising the visibility of the Aboriginal presence in Western Australia.¹⁰⁹⁰ This organisation provides an example of the way that Indigenous people were more clearly using their own public performance means to support and enhance their political activities and calls for greater mainstream justice from this time.

Increased political activism of Aboriginal people was occurring all over the country, frequently revealing itself in Indigenous artistic endeavours that attempted to intervene in the mainstream,

¹⁰⁸¹ Shoemaker, A., 1992, p. 82.

¹⁰⁸² Casey, M., 2012, Op. Cit. p. 52.

¹⁰⁸³ Murray, L., 15/06/2011, ‘Coolbaroo Club Reunion Proves Popular in Perth’, *Koori Mail*, p. 29, at: <http://aiatsis.gov.au/sites/default/files/docs/digitised_collections/the_koori_mail/503.pdf> viewed 26/02/2013.

¹⁰⁸⁴ Murray, L., 15/06/2011, p. 29.

¹⁰⁸⁵ Kaartdijin Noongar Culture, nd., ‘Coolbaroo League’ at: <<http://www.noongarculture.org.au/coolbaroo-league/>> viewed 26/03/2013.

¹⁰⁸⁶ Murray, L., 15/06/2011, Op. Cit., p. 29.

¹⁰⁸⁷ Murray, L., 15/06/2011, p. 29.

¹⁰⁸⁸ Murray, L., 15/06/2011, p. 29.

¹⁰⁸⁹ Murray, L., 15/06/2011, p. 29.

¹⁰⁹⁰ Darbyshire, J., 2010, ‘The Coolbaroo Club’, at: <<http://www.jodarbyshire.com/other-projects/curatorial-work/the-coolbaroo-club>> viewed 17/03/2013.

challenging stereotyped representations and affirming their cultural identity and pride in difference.¹⁰⁹¹

In 1950 the Victorian State Government announced a programme of cultural events in 1951 for the state's centenary celebrations.¹⁰⁹² These Anglo-Australian celebrations did not include an Aboriginal presence. Frustrated, President of the Australian Aborigines' League, Pastor Doug Nicholls, threatened to organise another *Day of Mourning*, and in concession was granted funding to produce the Indigenous performance *An Aboriginal Moomba—Out of the Dark*.¹⁰⁹³ This event again represented a strategy that saw Aboriginal leaders specifically using artistic cultural expression in their political struggles for justice.

Another member of the league, Bill Onus, believed that the only way Aboriginal people would overcome 'institutionalised racism' was by showcasing socially successful Aboriginal people to the mainstream public.¹⁰⁹⁴ *An Aboriginal Moomba* can also be seen as a continuation of corroboree traditions in Aboriginal provision of storytelling, songs, dance, and mime to Anglo-Australians audiences.¹⁰⁹⁵ It represented Aboriginal culture in two sections 'The Past' and 'The Present'.¹⁰⁹⁶ And whilst such idealised representations might be considered contrived expositions of Aboriginality, this event provided an important marker for self-representation that reaffirmed Aboriginal cultural heritage and expression.¹⁰⁹⁷ The four performances received great acclaim in the press for the professional presentation made by the all-Aboriginal cast that included Harold Blair, Bill Onus and actress Georgia Lee (Dulcie Pitt).¹⁰⁹⁸

3.13 The political back-drop to Indigenous performance humour (1960s–1970s)

The 1960–70s were decades of heightened political protests and activism for Indigenous people in Australia who undertook regular civil rights campaigns, publically and politically articulating their rights to be treated as legitimate members of the nation.¹⁰⁹⁹

¹⁰⁹¹ Kleinert, S., 1999, 'An Aboriginal Moomba: remaking history', *Journal of Media & Cultural Studies*, Vol. 13/3, p. 345.

¹⁰⁹² Kleinert, S., 1999, p. 347.

¹⁰⁹³ Kleinert, S., 1999, p. 348.

¹⁰⁹⁴ Kleinert, S., 1999, p. 349.

¹⁰⁹⁵ Kleinert, S., 1999, p. 349.

¹⁰⁹⁶ Kleinert, S., 1999, p. 349. Casey, M., 2004, *Creating Frames, Contemporary Indigenous Theatre 1967–1990*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, QLD, p. 5.

¹⁰⁹⁷ Kleinert, S., 1999, pp. 350-51.

¹⁰⁹⁸ See for example the following newspaper articles: 25/06/1951, 'Native Moomba an Exciting Show', *The Age*, Fairfax Media, Melbourne, p. 6. O'Callaghan, J., 29/06/1951, 'Moomba – Something to Rave About', *Courier-Mail*, News Corp., Brisbane, QLD, p. 2. Doherty, F., 30/06/1951, 'Moomba took us by storm', *Argus Newspaper*, Melbourne, p. 15. All articles can be viewed at National Library of Australia's Trove online:

<<http://trove.nla.gov.au/newspaper/result?q=Performance+An+Aboriginal+Moomba>> viewed 16/03/2013.

Casey, M., 2004, Op. Cit., p. 5.

¹⁰⁹⁹ Australian Federal Government Museum of Australian Democracy, nd., 'Documenting a Democracy: Australia's Story', online at: <<http://foundingdocs.gov.au/amendment-amid-21.html>> viewed 05/03/2014.

By 1962 all Indigenous Australians had finally won the Federal right to vote; however, they were still precluded from State elections in Queensland until 1965.¹¹⁰⁰ Inspired by civil rights activism in the USA, in 1965 Arrente/Kalkadoon man, Charles Perkins, led a bus of Sydney University Students on a protest tour of New South Wales.¹¹⁰¹ Called the 'Freedom Rides' this tour drew media attention to the racism and segregation faced by Aboriginal people in country towns across the nation. In 1967, two sections of the Australian Constitution were amended as the result of a national referendum. The first amendment of Section 52 (xxvi) enabled the Federal Government to assume responsibility and to legislate for Indigenous people in all states and territories.¹¹⁰² The second amendment, to Section 127, allowed for Indigenous Australians to be counted in the national census.¹¹⁰³ While this latter amendment has particularly been noted by many as provision of citizenship rights to Indigenous Australians, this is not strictly true.¹¹⁰⁴ Citizenship rights had been granted to them on a State by State basis in a disjointed and *ad hoc* fashion.¹¹⁰⁵ The referendum sought to remove any lingering legal impediments for Indigenous people resulting from their status as 'protected' people.¹¹⁰⁶ These two amendments began the process of effecting a national standardisation in the governing of Indigenous Australians that was an important marker for future (positive) reforms.¹¹⁰⁷ Moreover, it was a significant step towards constituting Indigenous Australians as 'normalised' subjects of Australia's liberal democracy.

Indeed, soon after these changes, in 1971, Neville Bonner became the first Indigenous Australian to sit in the Australian Parliament, when he was chosen to fill a casual vacancy in the Senate caused by the resignation of a Queensland senator.¹¹⁰⁸ Bonner was later elected to this position in 1972, 1974,

¹¹⁰⁰ Australian Federal Government, Australian Electoral Commission, 14/01/2013, 'Indigenous Australians and the Vote' online at: <<http://www.aec.gov.au/indigenous/indigenous-vote.htm>> viewed 05/03/2014.

¹¹⁰¹ Perkins, R., & Langton, M. (eds.), 2008, *First Australians, An Illustrated History*, The Megunyah Press, Carlton, Victoria, p. 340.

¹¹⁰² Nicholls, C., 17/04/2015, personal communication with K. Austin. Creative Spirits, 07/11/2012, 'The Australian 1967 Referendum', online at: <<http://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/history/australian-1967-referendum#toc1>> viewed 05/03/2014. It should be noted that the Commonwealth Government persisted in discriminatory practices for some years following this change. These practices included a delay in applying compulsory voting and in the eligibility for some welfare benefits. Robins, J., 08/06/2016, personal communication with K. Austin.

¹¹⁰³ Nicholls, C., 17/04/2015. Australian Federal Government Museum of Australian Democracy, nd., Op. Cit.

¹¹⁰⁴ Nicholls, C., 17/04/2015. On 10 April 1967, Indigenous leader and referendum campaigner, Bill Onus, was reported as saying: "Australians must vote to give the Aborigine full citizenship rights." Attwood claims that this is how the campaign for the referendum was represented; however, Onus also said that the campaign was a question of basic human rights and recognition of Indigenous Australians as a race of people and these points were not reported as clearly. See: Attwood, B., 2003, *Rights for Aborigines*, Allen and Unwin, Crows Nest, NSW, p. x.

¹¹⁰⁵ For example, in 1962, the Federal Council for Aboriginal Advancement published a brochure on the lack of consistency between the five States and the Northern Territory with regards to Indigenous rights. Indigenous Australians did not have the right to vote in WA & QLD; they could not marry freely in WA, QLD & NT; they could not move around freely in Vic, SA, WA, NT, QLD; they could only own property and receive award wages in NSW. See this pamphlet set out in: Attwood, B., & A. Markus, 1997, *The 1967 Referendum, or when Aborigines didn't get the vote*, Aboriginal Studies Press, Canberra, ACT, p. 13.

¹¹⁰⁶ Australian Federal Government Electoral Commission, 'History of the Indigenous Vote', nd., online at: <<http://www.aec.gov.au/indigenous/history.html>> viewed 25/08/2014.

¹¹⁰⁷ Creative Spirits, 07/11/2012, Op. Cit.

¹¹⁰⁸ Australian Federal Government National Archives of Australia, nd., 'Neville Bonner Facts Sheet 231', online at: <<http://www.naa.gov.au/collection/fact-sheets/fs231.aspx>> viewed 25/08/2014.

1975 and 1980.¹¹⁰⁹ In 1972 a Federal Labor Government was elected following 23 years of Liberal-Coalition rule (since 1949).¹¹¹⁰ This new government sought to address a broad range of social justice issues pertaining to Indigenous Australians.¹¹¹¹ Furthermore, it developed a stronger National Arts focus that reorganised the Australia Council (formally known as the Council for the Arts) to include specialist subsidiaries, including the establishment of the Aboriginal Arts Board, with 15 Indigenous Australian members.¹¹¹² These initiatives gave Indigenous artists greater access to funding, both under the Board as well as through the existing Federal Department of Aboriginal Affairs.¹¹¹³

Greater social acknowledgement and appreciation of Indigenous people occurred in tandem with these political changes. Some Indigenous Australians, such as Oodgeroo Noonucal (known at that time as Kath Walker) and Kevin Gilbert, achieved a level of mainstream respect for their artistic work, in which they articulated Indigenous concerns with government policies and called for greater social justice for Indigenous Australians.¹¹¹⁴ Oodgeroo is widely acknowledged as the first Indigenous Australian to produce and publish a book of poetry in Australia, with *We are Going* in 1964.¹¹¹⁵ Gilbert is credited with writing the first Indigenous play in English, *The Cherry Pickers*, written in 1968 and first performed in 1971.¹¹¹⁶ In parallel with these artistic achievements, both writers actively participated in Indigenous political organisations and protest campaigns. From the early 1960s, Oodgeroo was secretary of the Queensland Council for Aboriginal Advancement and Federal co-ordinator of the campaign for changes to Australia's Constitution.¹¹¹⁷ Gilbert helped establish the powerfully symbolic Aboriginal Tent Embassy at (old) Parliament House in Canberra in early 1972, helping draw world attention to land-rights claims that were immensely significant to Indigenous Australians.¹¹¹⁸ Each of the issues noted in the preceding paragraphs led to greater socio-political support and acknowledgement that was essential to the advancement of Indigenous arts and, in turn, foundational to the establishment of Indigenous Australian theatre.

Whilst neither Oodgeroo's nor Gilbert's endeavours could be classified as comedies, comedic strategies were often employed by both artists to express their Indigeneity. Their texts revealed how Indigenous literature often uses humour to deal with sensitive, often unpalatable social issues such as racial discrimination, hardship, poverty, sexuality and alcoholism. Through clever satire and parody they treat serious issues in a humorous tone, softening their oppressive nature and making them more

¹¹⁰⁹ Australian Federal Government National Archives of Australia, nd.

¹¹¹⁰ Farnsworth, M., nd., '1972 Federal Election', *Australianpolitics.com*, nd., online at: <<http://australianpolitics.com/voting/elections/1972-federal>> viewed 05/03/2014.

¹¹¹¹ Australian Federal Government Prime Ministers Centre, nd., 'Prime Facts 21 – Edward Gough Whitlam, AC, QC', nd., online at: <static.moadoph.gov.au/opfgovau/media/images/apmc/docs/21-Whitlam-Web.pdf> viewed 05/03/2014.

¹¹¹² Casey, M., 2004, Op. Cit., pp. 95–96.

¹¹¹³ Casey, M., 2004, p. 96.

¹¹¹⁴ Shoemaker, A., 1992, Op. Cit., pp. 181–186, pp. 192–197.

¹¹¹⁵ Walker, K., 1964, *We are Going*, Jacaranda Press Pty Ltd, Brisbane, QLD.

¹¹¹⁶ Casey, M., 2004, Op. Cit., pp. 18–19.

¹¹¹⁷ Attwood, B., and A. Markus, 1997, Op. Cit., pp. 30–32.

¹¹¹⁸ Attwood, B., 2003, Op. Cit., pp. 341–343. Shoemaker A., 1992, Op. Cit., p. 111.

acceptable to audiences. Such literary strategies allow Aboriginal writers to push the boundaries of acceptable behaviour thereby challenging existing ‘Aboriginalist’ concepts and cathartically releasing tensions about socially abhorrent behaviours.

3.14 Humour as a key strategy of Gilbert’s play: ‘The Cherry Pickers’ (1968)

The Cherry Pickers is a dramatization of the activities of a group of itinerant Aboriginal workers waiting to begin seasonal work picking cherries. The narrative traces the interactions among Aboriginal men, women and children and explores themes of economic hardships, social disjunction, fracturing and loss of culture, ties to land and dispossession, poverty, despair, death, social justice and kinship relationships – all from a unique Aboriginal perspective. Gilbert first wrote this play from prison in 1968 where he was serving a life sentence for murder (later successfully appealed).¹¹¹⁹ Ironically, he found the living standards of prisoners better than those of many non-incarcerated Aboriginal people of the time, and he used his play to tell audiences about the injustice of this alarming disparity. Despite the darkness of his material he frequently treats it with humour.¹¹²⁰

The Cherry Pickers was first staged in Sydney in 1971. Gilbert later expanded his original script to incorporate a prologue that helped to reinforce the context of Indigenous spirituality, land rights and colonial injustice.¹¹²¹ Following its workshop at the 1987 First National Black Playwrights Conference, the play was finally published in 1988.¹¹²² The dialogue of the play is interspersed with poetic language, imagery, song, and comedy, following traditional Indigenous oral communicative means:

Stole my country
Killed the kangaroo
Now I live on bit o’ land
Like Jacky in the zoo¹¹²³

The incongruity of this humorous verse is recognisable in familiar concepts and images. Gilbert parallels the common-held, derogatory name ‘Jacky’ with a kangaroo which suggests that Aboriginal people have been treated as animals, and ‘less than human’. His political reference to illegal land possession and Indigenous displacement are presented in funny poetic rhyme that is both easy to recognise and to recall.

The play opens with the Aboriginal workers waiting for their unofficial leader and hero, (especially with the ladies), Johnollo:

¹¹¹⁹ Casey, M., 2004, Op. Cit., p. 16.

¹¹²⁰ Casey, M., 2004, p. 16.

¹¹²¹ Gilbert, K., 1988, ‘Introduction’, *The Cherry Pickers*, Burrumbinga Books, Canberra, Australia, pp. vii–ix.

¹¹²² Shoemaker, A., 1992, Op. Cit. p. 236.

¹¹²³ Gilbert, K., 1988, *The Cherry Pickers*, Burrumbinga Books, Canberra, ACT, p. 17.

Emma: ... *that* Johnollo! Strong! 'Leven babies he made last season an' only one gerl missed.¹¹²⁴

Humour about Johnollo's sexual prowess –and lack of moral scruples– is a form of black humour that makes light of subjects that are generally considered socially tragic, inappropriate or lacking in 'taste', like Johnollo's promiscuity and lack of ethical consciousness. O'Neil recognises black humour as the humour of entropy that can arise from grotesque or taboo subject matter or situations.¹¹²⁵ Black humour includes a 'good dose of irony' that enables it to bridge the comic and the tragic to produce an existential way of looking at life.¹¹²⁶ This edgy humour is a frequently discernible element of Indigenous Australian performance comedy at this time. Black humour is used by Indigenous artists to shock audiences and to help lighten the social stigma attached to various taboo or unpalatable topics like alcoholism, criminal behavior, racism and debauchery.

Furthermore, black humour was a way in which Indigenous people could laugh at the grim realities of their own lives. Oshima suggests that being able to tell and laugh at jokes (humour) concerning one's own ethnicity is a form of 'self-duplicating' (rather than self-deprecating) humour that demonstrates a pride in the humorist's culture.¹¹²⁷ Self-duplicating humorists recognise the fact that their own ethnic group is both defective and virtuous as the same time, like all groups of people, and they have the authority to best portray their own characteristics.¹¹²⁸ Oshima also recognises that this humour can, at times, help to avoid an offensive situation by laughing at one's own defects, before they are pointed out by others.¹¹²⁹ Moreover, making jokes about oneself takes courage and confidence.¹¹³⁰ And self-duplicating humour is a good 'ice breaker', easing tensions about sensitive situations and providing understanding of the good humour located within a culture.¹¹³¹

Another recognisable humour technique employed by Gilbert is his use of Indigenous language throughout the script. The clever and often witty use of words, not commonly found in wider non-Indigenous Australian societies, raise the issue of the legitimacy of Aboriginal languages, often lost to the dominant role of English within Aboriginal communities. By such means Gilbert enhances the cultural identity of Aboriginal people, reinstating the validity and acceptability of Indigenous

¹¹²⁴ Gilbert, K., 1988, p. 41.

¹¹²⁵ O'Neil, P., 1983, 'The Comedy of Entropy: The Contexts of Black Humour', *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature*, vol. 10/2, p. 157. Online at: <<https://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/crcl/article/view/2606/2001>> viewed 09/09/2014.

¹¹²⁶ O'Neil, P., 1983, p. 158.

¹¹²⁷ I suggest that Oshima deliberately calls this style of humour 'self-duplicating' as opposed to 'self-deprecating' to distinguish the idea of Indigenous comedians passing on insider information about their own ethnic characteristics as opposed to belittling those characteristics. Oshima, K., 2000, 'Ethnic jokes and social function', *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, v. 13/1, De Gruyter, Berlin, p. 41, p. 52.

¹¹²⁸ Oshima, K., 2000, p. 54.

¹¹²⁹ Oshima, K., 2000, p. 55.

¹¹³⁰ Oshima, K., 2000, p. 55.

¹¹³¹ Oshima, K., 2000, p. 55, p. 53.

languages and colloquial vernacular. For example, although we don't know the exact meaning of the Indigenous words used in the following example, we understand that sexual matters are involved:

PRIVATE: You sure are a wonderful woman Subina!

SUBINA: Git!! Git out of me sight or I'll flatten ya!!

BUBBA: Widgelli, binjelli and doonjulla. That's all men ever think about these days!¹¹³²

The use of Indigenous words, mostly unfamiliar to non-Indigenous audiences, is a recognisable and frequently employed humour technique found in much modern Indigenous humour. Humour, especially of a salacious nature, tempers the seriousness of the play, yet at times, Gilbert directly implores his audience to understand and sympathise with Indigenous cultures, which had so frequently become lost in stereotypical assumptions and sweeping generalisations. Gilbert suggests that ultimately, despite all of the sorrow and loss, Aboriginal people are survivors and their use of humour is an existential reflection of the profound realisation of the absurdity of their harsh experiences. Playwright Jack Davis suggests that revealing a rounded emotional experience is a significant purpose of Aboriginal theatrical performances:

Don't just show them [the audience] the comic side of life right through ... show them sadness, pathos, gladness, happiness, sorrow, and all the in-betweens ...¹¹³³

Non-Indigenous theatre critic Leonard Radic criticised Gilbert's play as structurally 'uneven and clumsy';¹¹³⁴ however, he also conceded that it must be put into the context of what it attempted to achieve in mainstream theatre of the early 1970s:

... it should be seen for what it is – an earnest attempt on the part of a black writer to use the stage to tell the story of white occupation from the point of view of the Aborigine.¹¹³⁵

Notably, Aboriginal people used theatrical means to tell their side of the story of the colonial occupation of their lands. The themes broached by Gilbert in *The Cherry Pickers*, and the forms and functions of the humour used by him to express them, have remained important and consistent Indigenous interventions within the history of Australia's socio-political discourse. Moreover, Gilbert's use of observational comedy to comment on society's hypocritical and unjust treatment of Aboriginal people heralds the way that contemporary stand-up comedians use comedy to comment on these matters of socio-political importance to the nation. Mintz suggests that standup comedians now provide some of the most socially insightful and valuable social commentary.¹¹³⁶

¹¹³² Gilbert, K., 1988, p. 22.

¹¹³³ Shoemaker, A., 1982, 'An Interview with Jack Davis', *Westerly*, Vol. 27/4, p. 112.

¹¹³⁴ Radic, L., 2006, *Contemporary Australian Drama*, Brandl & Schlesinger, Blackheath NSW, p. 183.

¹¹³⁵ Radic, L., 2006, p. 183.

¹¹³⁶ Mintz, L., 1985, 'Standup Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation', *American Quarterly*, vol. 37, no. 1, *Special Issue: American Humor* (Spring 1985), p. 77.

3.15 *The emergence of Black Theatre and its significant use of humour*

Black Theatre movements began in Australia in the early 1970s as a direct result and in support of this heightened Indigenous social and political activism. Early Indigenous theatre groups were co-operative enterprises that stemmed from mainstream non-Indigenous organisations. Melbourne's *New Theatre Movement* created the company *Nindethana* in 1972.¹¹³⁷ *Nindethana* is a Victorian Koori word that Indigenous playwright Gerry Bostock defines as 'a place for corroboree', or a place for communal gathering.¹¹³⁸ Sydney's first contemporary Indigenous theatre company, *Black Theatre*, originally staged street performances in the early 1970s, supporting Indigenous Australian political protest rallies.¹¹³⁹ In 1972, a Federal Government development fund grant was provided to launch a permanent company, *The National Black Theatre* (NBT).¹¹⁴⁰ NBT's first production, *Basically Black*, was a joint project with non-Indigenous theatre group, *The Nimrod Theatre Company*.¹¹⁴¹

Basically Black was a series of satirical sketches presented in revue-style.¹¹⁴² It was created by Indigenous and non-Indigenous writers, yet the production had an all-Indigenous cast that included Aileen Corpus, Gary Foley, Zac Martin, Bob Maza and Bindi Williams.¹¹⁴³ According to Casey, '[t]he revue was intended to present the Indigenous view of Australia in a satirical form, not just to entertain but also to communicate with and inform both Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences.'¹¹⁴⁴ *Basically Black* presented audiences with a unique Indigenous perspective on Australian life, with its socio-political inequalities and its racism. Indeed, the stage play was so successful that in 1973, the NBT was approached by the Australian Broadcasting Commission to create a television series.¹¹⁴⁵ This resulted in the production of only one pilot episode, but it was to become notable as the first Australian television programme to have an all-Indigenous cast.¹¹⁴⁶ Several skits from this pilot can still be found on the Internet.¹¹⁴⁷

3.15.1 *Basically Black's 'Boong' skit*

The pilot shows that sketches were often cheeky and arguably quite shocking for their original audience, presenting Australian life in a subversively satirical, political light. One sketch (from the

¹¹³⁷ Casey, M., 2004, Op. Cit., pp. 23–24.

¹¹³⁸ Bostock, G., 1985, 'Black Theatre' in Davis, J., & B. Hodge, (eds.), 1985, *Aboriginal writing today*, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, p. 67.

¹¹³⁹ Bostock, G., 1985, pp. 67–70.

¹¹⁴⁰ Casey, M., 2004, p. 52.

¹¹⁴¹ ABC Message Stick, 01/07/2012, 'The National Black Theatre', online at: <<http://www.abc.net.au/tv/messagestick/stories/s3538616.htm>> viewed 19/10/2013.

¹¹⁴² Casey, M., 2004, Op. Cit., p. 53.

¹¹⁴³ Casey, M., 2004, p. 53.

¹¹⁴⁴ Casey, M., 2004, p. 54.

¹¹⁴⁵ The Koori History Website, nd., 'Images from Australian Indigenous History—The 1970s Pioneer ABC-TV Production of *Basically Black*', online at: <<http://www.kooriweb.org/foley/images/history/1970s/blacktheatre/abctvdx.html>> viewed 29/01/2014.

¹¹⁴⁶ The Koori History Website, nd.

¹¹⁴⁷ Youtube Australia, 05/02/2008, 'Basically Black', online at: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6cSKGGsrWL4>> viewed 25/03/2013.

television version) shows black actors wearing white masks, portraying a ‘white’ crew filming an Indigenous Australian man (Bindi Williams), attired in a stereotypically ‘traditional’ loincloth, with face and body painting.¹¹⁴⁸ Williams greets the camera with a broad smile, and says, ‘Good morning. I am a human being.’ The white-masked director (Bob Maza) cuts the action, and turning to the crew, he notes the poor treatment that Indigenous Australian people have received in colonial Australia. He implores a sensitive, more politically correct approach to this Indigenous Australian man. Maza then turns to Williams, incongruously stating, ‘Cue the boong.’¹¹⁴⁹

This skit plays on, and laughs at, familiar black/white roles—the binary idea of a white person in authority, ‘directing’ the actions of a ‘traditional’ Indigenous Australian. The sketch effectively ‘takes-the-mickey’ out of non-Indigenous pomposity and authority, whilst also exposing Indigenous images as inappropriate expositions of savagery. Milner Davis recognises taking-the-mickey as an enduring practice of Australian life.¹¹⁵⁰ She suggests that, whilst this humour form is a recognisable and acceptable challenge to authority in Australia, it does not pose any serious challenge to the status quo.¹¹⁵¹

The pilot skit also employs visual humour in mimicry. Although attired in traditional ‘savage’ garb, the Aboriginal man (Williams) fidgets and grins in a warm and cheeky manner. His physical appearance and movements express a sense of fun that mocks his portrayal of an Indigenous stereotype frequently noted as fierce and alien to the mainstream Australian public. Bergson claims that comedy depicts characters that we have come across before: ‘It aims at placing types before our eyes.’¹¹⁵² Stereotypes trigger understandings in our minds about how characters ought to act. As Critchley says, we often laugh when we recognise predictable human behaviours in all their habitual absurdity.¹¹⁵³ Moreover, the subversive nature of Indigenous actors playing roles that mock and mimic themselves, as well as white stereotypes, provides a disarming element of surprise and contrast that Bergson also notes as particular to the comic.¹¹⁵⁴

The word ‘boong’ was, and still is, an offensive word for Indigenous people, used as a derogatory term in mainstream Australia.¹¹⁵⁵ The Indigenous actors in *Basically Black* subversively ‘reclaimed’ this offensive word by using it mockingly. Such humour, with its superiority-styled indifference to

¹¹⁴⁸ Youtube Australia, 05/02/2008.

¹¹⁴⁹ Youtube Australia, 05/02/2008. ABC Message Stick, 01/07/2012.

¹¹⁵⁰ Milner-Davis, J, 2007, ‘Taking the mickey: a brave Australian tradition’, *The Fine Print*, issue 4, Aug 2007, p. 24, online at: <<http://www.emendediting.com/html/ezine/issue4/pdfs.mickey.pdf>> viewed 30/01/2014.

¹¹⁵¹ Milner-Davis, J, 2007, p. 24.

¹¹⁵² Bergson, H., [1911], 2005, *Op. Cit.*, p. 80.

¹¹⁵³ Critchley, S., 2010, *On Humour*, Routledge, Taylor & Francis Group, London and New York, p. 59.

¹¹⁵⁴ Bergson, H., [1911], 2005, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 19–20.

¹¹⁵⁵ Although the origins of this word are not entirely certain, online sources suggest that it is a derivative of an Eora or Cadigal (NSW) word, ‘boonga-boonga’, that means ‘bum’ or ‘arse’, see: <<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Boong&defid=4114897>> viewed 09/09/2014.

historically racist images and language, deliberately attempts to shock audiences who comprehend the traditional vitriol. Therefore, re-use by traditionally derided subjects can serve to disempower the racial sting. As Bostock advised Sykes, Indigenous Australian people should 'get in first' and call themselves racist, derogatory names such as 'bastard' or 'nigger'. Then there is nothing left for non-Indigenous Australians to taunt them with.¹¹⁵⁶

However, McKee questions how this 'boong' comedy should be read.¹¹⁵⁷ Is using the term 'boong' really an effective parody of racism, or does it merely reinforce pejorative stereotypes of Aboriginal people, especially given the history of racial intolerance associated with this derogatory term?¹¹⁵⁸ Ultimately, McKee contends that these Aboriginal comedians themselves provide authorship to the reading of comedy.¹¹⁵⁹ In the field of comedy, he suggests, authorship and history help to stabilize its meaning.¹¹⁶⁰

Moreover, self-deprecating humour, making fun of oneself or one's own people, is particularly noticeable as a humour technique employed by Indigenous humorists from this time onwards. Mintz argues that self-deprecating can be considered a form of "pseudo-masochism" where proponents surprisingly derive pleasure from a potentially painful matter.¹¹⁶¹ Additionally, he recognises that self-deprecating humour functions to deflate hostilities through ironic reversal.¹¹⁶² Yet for Aboriginal people, Holt suggests that Indigenous Australian humour is cathartic, bringing 'perspective and relief.'¹¹⁶³ Holt says that this humour, in part, is 'a spoofing of the stereotypes, both black and white [a] ... laughing at ourselves and at others and then letting it go.'¹¹⁶⁴

The white masks worn by black actors in the skit are a visual, mocking parody of the tradition of non-Indigenous Australian actors 'blacking-up' with make-up to play 'authentic' Indigenous roles in colonial Australia.¹¹⁶⁵ As noted previously, this practice, known as 'blackface', had been occurring in Australian mainstream theatre from early colonial times with melodramas such as Melville's 1834 *Bushrangers*.¹¹⁶⁶ By contrast, the white masks from *Basically Black* are a protest against mainstream society's dismissal of Indigenous participation and ability to portray themselves in colonial

¹¹⁵⁶ Bostock, G. to Sykes, R., 1989, 'Do caged kookaburras still laugh? Humour in Aboriginal writing', *Thalia: Studies in literary humour*, vol. 10, no. 2, p. 46.

¹¹⁵⁷ McKee, A., 1996, 'Superboong! ... ': the Ambivalence of Comedy and Differing Histories of Race' in *Continuum Journal of Media and Cultural Studies*, v.10/2 (1996), Perth, Western Australia.

¹¹⁵⁸ McKee, A., 1996, p. 44.

¹¹⁵⁹ McKee, A., 1996, p. 55.

¹¹⁶⁰ McKee, A., 1996, p. 46.

¹¹⁶¹ Mintz, L. 1977, 'Jewish Humor: A Continuum of Sources, Motives, and Functions', *American Humor*, vol. 4, no. 1, (Spring 1977), American Humor Studies Association, p. 4.

¹¹⁶² Mintz, L. 1977, p. 4.

¹¹⁶³ Holt, L., 2009, 'Aboriginal humour: A conversational corroboree' in De Groen, F., & P. Kirkpatrick (eds.), 2009, *Op. Cit.*, p. 83.

¹¹⁶⁴ Holt, L., 2009, p. 83.

¹¹⁶⁵ Gilbert, H., & J. Lo, 2007, *Op. Cit.*, p. 23.

¹¹⁶⁶ Tasker, M., 2007, *Op. Cit.*

performance. These masks are symbols of Indigenous presence as active members of Australian society.

Aboriginal humorous wordplay techniques like the reuse of offensive terms, and the deliberate use of phonetic language, destabilise the dominant language of the oppressor and assist to validate their own language practices. In the case of the *Basically Black* pilot the phonetic words ‘Basacilly Bleck’ are graffitied across a brick-wall in the background of early scenes that signal apartheid South Africa and serve such humorous purposes.¹¹⁶⁷ Most especially from this time onwards, the use of phonetic wordplay can be seen as one of the humorous strategies used in Indigenous humour practices to dislodge the dominance of White Australian English and assert the validity of Aboriginal English.

3.15.2 *Basically Black’s ‘Super-Boong’ skit*

Another skit from the pilot of *Basically Black* introduced Indigenous Australian superhero ‘Super Boong’—aka ‘Lionel Mouse’.¹¹⁶⁸ This superman/Clark Kent like character, played by actor Zac Martin, is a parody of popular Indigenous world champion boxer, Lionel Rose. Superheroes have always been identifiable stereotypes in western cultures, with greater physical, intellectual and moral attributes than mere ‘ordinary’ human-beings. Lendrum notes that early mainstream popular comics (1930s–1950s) did not include people of colour.¹¹⁶⁹ And there were most certainly no Indigenous Australian superheroes produced in mainstream Australian society in the early 1970s.¹¹⁷⁰ Therefore, Super Boong’s type-cast image of moral ‘righteousness’ and ‘goodness’ makes a clear point about the exclusion of Indigenous people from popular Australian mythology. Furthermore, Bergson says that the art of caricature plays on exaggerations such as superhero characteristics in order to highlight a comic element.¹¹⁷¹ An extract from the pilot skit presents a humorous play on the familiar Superman idiom:

Is it a bat? Is it a crow? Is it the flying doctor? No! It’s Super Boong! Strange visitor from a northern tribe, who came to the city possessing powers far beyond those of mortal praise. Faster than a killer boomerang, and able to leap over tall gum trees ... Super Boong uses his secret identity as mild-mannered Indigenous Australian ex-boxing champion Lionel Mouse to fight a never-ending battle against racism wherever it may be found!¹¹⁷²

¹¹⁶⁷ Youtube Australia, 05/02/2008, Op. Cit.

¹¹⁶⁸ ABC TV, (1972) 28/11/2013, ‘Super Boong’, *Basically Black*, online at: <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Skuv_DF8nIY> viewed 29/01/2014.

¹¹⁶⁹ Lendrum, R., 2005, ‘The Super Black Macho, One Baaad Mutha: Black Superhero Masculinity in 1970s Mainstream Comic Books’ in *Extrapolation*, vol. 46/3, Liverpool University Press, Liverpool, UK, p. 365.

¹¹⁷⁰ In 1985 Indigenous Australian visual artist Lin Onus created a graphic comic character ‘Kaptn Koori’ (1985, gouache and ink on illustration board, 67.0 x 44.0 cm) for his son, recognising a lack of positive Indigenous role models in the medium. See: Neale, M., 2000, *Urban Dingo, the art and life of Lin Onus 1948–1996*, Craftsman House, Sydney, Australia, p. 64.

¹¹⁷¹ Bergson, H., [1911], 2005, Op. Cit., p. 13.

¹¹⁷² ABC Message Stick, 01/07/ 2012, Op. Cit.

In one skit, Lionel Mouse hears a cry for help (resulting from a racist attack) and the distant dinging of boxing bells (again referencing boxer Lionel Rose). He dashes into a local pub to change into his superhero identity. However, within a short time he is back out, still wearing his regular clothing. When questioned why he has not transformed into his superhero identity, Mouse notes ironically that Indigenous people are restricted from entering the pub. The satirical humour of this skit subversively points to the injustice of the discriminatory laws imposed on Indigenous Australians until the late 1960s, such as a prohibition on supplying alcohol to them.¹¹⁷³ Such hypocritical injustices were frequently unacknowledged by non-Indigenous Australians.¹¹⁷⁴

More than simply a means of reclaiming the offensive ‘boong’ label, Super Boong represents the physical appearance of an Indigenous character in heroic pursuit of justice, thereby providing a positive symbol and role-model for Indigenous and non-Indigenous audiences alike. Once again, such techniques are specific attempts to assist non-Indigenous audiences to face issues of hypocrisy in Australia with humour.

3.16 The benefits of humour to modern Indigenous performances

Lockyer and Pickering similarly contend that humour encourages audiences to think about issues in a more creative manner than by using more ‘serious’ emotional techniques.¹¹⁷⁵ They suggest that humour can ‘bring out the viewpoints of ... marginalised groups, and cut through pomposity, lies, deceit and doublespeak.’¹¹⁷⁶

Freud notes the benefits of deploying such ‘rebellious’ forms of humour, especially when used by beleaguered people who do not hold positions of social power.¹¹⁷⁷ According to Freud, humour is not resigned; it is rebellious.¹¹⁷⁸ Feelings of anger, indignation and injustice against those in social authority can remain significant psychological ‘obstacles’ for oppressed people, but humour is well-suited to attacking the socially esteemed and powerful.¹¹⁷⁹ Minority people, such as Indigenous Australians, are able to replace socially unacceptable behaviours with tendentious jokes and humour, in environments where physical violence is disdained and forbidden by law.¹¹⁸⁰ In this context,

¹¹⁷³ Attwood, B., & A. Markus, 1997, Op. Cit., p. 15.

¹¹⁷⁴ For example, after a successful meeting held in 1963 between Prime Minister Menzies and an Indigenous delegation for constitutional change, Menzies was surprised to be told that he was breaking the law by offering Kath Walker/Oodgeroo an alcoholic drink. See Attwood, B., & A. Markus, 2007, Op. Cit., pp. 32–33.

¹¹⁷⁵ Lockyer, S., & M. Pickering, 2009, ‘The Ethics and Aesthetics of Humour and Comedy’ in Lockyer, S., & M. Pickering, (eds.), 2009, *Beyond a Joke—The Limits of Humour*, Macmillan Publishers Limited, Basingstoke, Hampshire, UK, p. 20.

¹¹⁷⁶ Lockyer, S., & M. Pickering, 2009, p. 20.

¹¹⁷⁷ Freud, S., 2002 (1905), p. 98.

¹¹⁷⁸ Freud, S., [1927], 1964, ‘Humour’ in *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, v.XXI (1927–31)*, Clark, Irwin & Co. Ltd, Toronto, Canada, p. 163.

¹¹⁷⁹ Freud, S., 2002 (1905), p. 100, p. 102.

¹¹⁸⁰ Freud, S., 2002 (1905), p. 100.

humour represents a form of rebellion against authority and provides inner freedom from the oppression it imposes.¹¹⁸¹

Basically Black provided pleasure to Indigenous Australian actors and Indigenous audience members. Gary Foley says of this performance:

... the best part for us blackfellas from NBT was that the humour itself was subversively political in terms of presenting a direct challenge to prevailing racial attitudes, and we were not only able to get away with saying things to whitefellas that might have got us shot in other places, at the time, but we also managed to get people to seriously think about the issues.¹¹⁸²

Humour gave Indigenous people an outlet for pent-up frustrations within a colonial socio-political system that had disadvantaged their communities on so many levels. It allowed them to express issues of cultural loss and grief to the mainstream public; these issues could have angered white audience members if portrayed in a serious or dramatic fashion. Humour's ability to shock in a 'non-bona fide' frame allowed Indigenous Australians to artistically and originally express a range of issues that non-Indigenous Australians had long ignored or neglected.¹¹⁸³

Especially by using humour Indigenous theatre allowed Indigenous artists to begin to challenge the negative stereotyped representations that so many non-Indigenous people had held about Aboriginal natures, the validity of their cultures and the legitimacy of their claims for greater justice in colonial Australia.

3.17 Changing perceptions of Aboriginal images in media cartoons

Just when mainstream perceptions of Indigenous cultures were being challenged by Indigenous performers, cartoons in mainstream media also began to reflect greater tolerance and understanding of significant Indigenous socio-political issues. The 1970s cartoon '*Free Legal Service for Aborigines*' in the *Australian* notes the new extension of these services to Aboriginal people.¹¹⁸⁴ The image depicts an ironic challenge by a group of Indigenous people advising a conservative looking white professional: 'For openers, we'll proceed against the white man for illegal entry into our country!'¹¹⁸⁵

¹¹⁸¹ Freud, S., 2002 (1905), p. 101–2. Billig, M., 2005, *Laughter and Ridicule. Towards a Social Critique of Humour*, Sage Publications, London, UK, p.164.

¹¹⁸² Foley, G., 05/10/2012, 'The Contrarian: Black Power, Black Theatre and Black Humour', *Tracker Magazine* online at: <Tracker.org.au/2012/10/the-contrarian-black-power-black-theatre-and-black-humour/> viewed 16/10/2012.

¹¹⁸³ Lockyer, S., & M. Pickering, 2009, Op. Cit., p. 20.

¹¹⁸⁴ Collette, A., 1970, 'Free Legal Services for Aborigines', *The Australian*, p. 50, in King, J., 1976, Op. Cit., p. 214.

¹¹⁸⁵ King, J., 1976, Op. Cit. p. 214.



This satirical cartoon exaggerates and plays on the controversial legal concept that Australia was *Terra Nullius* (land of no-one) at the time of colonisation. Ironically it foreshadows a later legal challenge (1992) where the Australian High Court ruled on its inaccuracy.¹¹⁸⁶ However, at this time, this potential legal challenge provides a superiority style of humour for Indigenous people in support of their perspective of colonialism.

The sympathetic irony of the 1972 *Digger* magazine cartoon, *Trespassing*, is similar; it notes the beleaguered ability of Indigenous people to resist British usurpation of their country.¹¹⁸⁷ The bold word ‘trespassing’ is sandwiched between two cartoon images. The top cartoon contains a colonial drawing of three armed soldiers holding a British flag and pointing a gun at two unarmed Indigenous men. The lower section of the cartoon contains the image of ten burly non-Indigenous police officers attempting to evict two lone, and unarmed, Aboriginal protestors from their Tent Embassy. Aboriginal protestors had erected this symbolic tent on the lawns of Australia’s National Parliament in Canberra in 1972.¹¹⁸⁸ This makeshift embassy suggested that Aboriginal people were treated like foreigners in their own country by British ‘trespassers’.

¹¹⁸⁶ High Court of Australia, 1992, *Mabo v Queensland* (No. 2) (1992) 175 CLR 1.

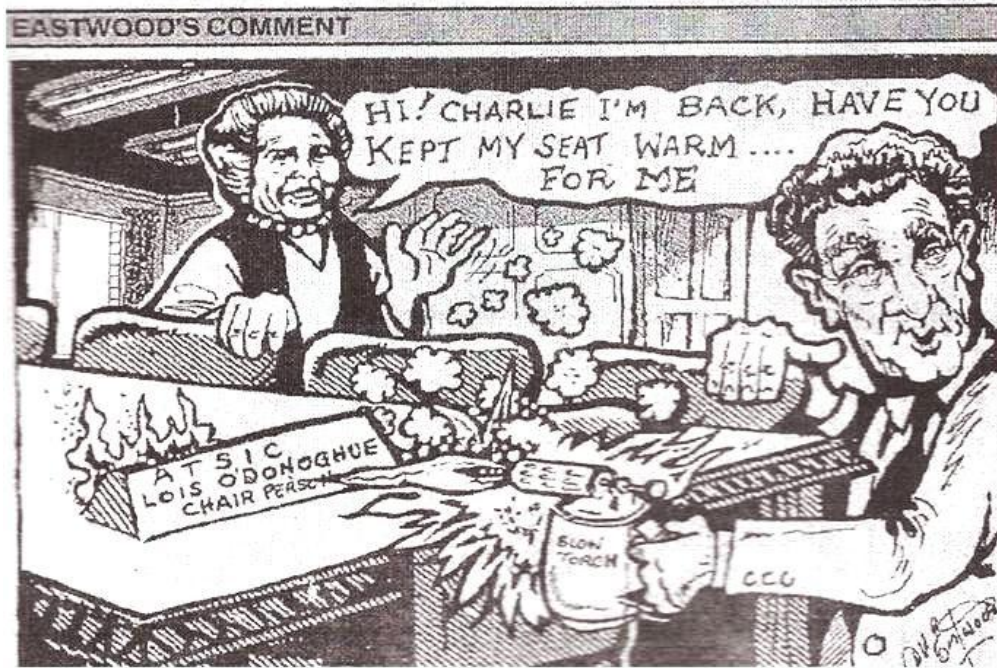
¹¹⁸⁷ Cobb, R., 1972, ‘Trespassing’, *Digger Magazine*, in King, J., 1976, *Op. Cit.*, p. 214.

¹¹⁸⁸ Attwood, B., 2003, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 341–343.



Both sections of this cartoon reflect an Indigenous perspective on Australian socio-political issues of the time whilst implying inappropriate white aggression, and without providing the familiar Indigenous stereotypes of laughing fool or pathetic degenerate. However, no matter how sympathetic these images might now have become, the fact remains that they were not produced by Indigenous artists. Not until 1991 did cartoons by an Indigenous artist appear regularly in printed media. Danny Eastwood was a pioneer in this field contributing items to the Indigenous newspaper *The Koori Mail*¹¹⁸⁹ that reflected issues of socio-political importance to Indigenous communities across the country.

¹¹⁸⁹ Eastwood, D., 18/05/1994, 'Eastwood's Comment', *Koori Mail*, online at: <<http://aiatsis.gov.au/collections/collections-online/digitised-collections/koori-mail/koori-mail-issues>> viewed 25/03/2013.



The caption reads:

(*ATSIC chairperson Lois O'Donoghue, to Deputy Chairperson Charles Perkins*)
 "Hi! Charlie I'm back, have you kept my seat warm.... for me")

In this cartoon Eastwood takes an authentic Indigenous perspective on the incongruous political tensions of the 1990s and the challenge of advocating for Aboriginal rights whilst acting under the banner of a non-Indigenous bureaucracy. Eastwood says that a good political cartoon allows people to see all perspectives on an issue, including those of Aboriginal people:

'You will see the political and the humour all in one, or vice versa, you see the political and the serious side of things. It's about getting people to see the truth.'¹¹⁹⁰

In an arena in which Indigenous people have been so often negatively portrayed, the stage had been set for their greater socio-political input, and humour was an important aspect of their endeavours.¹¹⁹¹

¹¹⁹⁰ Deadly Vibe, 18/03/2013, 'Cartoonist Danny Eastwood Evens the Score', *Deadly Vibe, our culture, our stories, our health*, online: <<http://www.deadlyvibe.com.au/2013/03/cartoonist-danny-eastwood-evens-the-score/>> viewed 25/03/2013.

¹¹⁹¹ Regardless of the positive steps made by Aboriginal people themselves in the field of political cartooning, controversial and negative stereotypes of Aboriginal people remain elements of Australia's media. On 04/08/2016 *Australian* newspaper cartoonist, Bill Leak, published the negative image of an Aboriginal father, beer in hand, unable to recognise his young son who is being restrained by a police officer. Giles argues that '[t]he cartoon suggests that Aboriginal men, in particular, are alcoholics and that they are irresponsible parents and community members.' See: Giles, T., 05/08/2016, 'Cartoon yet another symptom of Racism', *First Nations Telegraph*, online at: <<http://www.firstnationstelegraph.com/#!socialcartoon-yet-another-symptom-of-ra/c1v84>> viewed 05/08/2016. However, it has been argued that the cartoon is merely representative of the clash between two Indigenous views on appropriate fathering given that both police officer and father are Indigenous men.

4. CONCLUSION

The late 1960s and early 1970s, were significant times for Australia's Aboriginal people. By means of public expressions, frequently provided by the Arts, they began to make greater headway in the long fight for recognition of the importance of their cultures to the nation and their desires for self-representation. Many Indigenous people recognised that the Arts provided them with powerful psychological tools by which they could challenge the negative assumptions held about their cultures by a great many Australians. They hoped to counter these beliefs with alternative representations that revealed Indigenous complexities and provided evidence of the value of their self-expressions. More clearly than ever before, Indigenous people began to express a counter-educative voice that protested and challenged the stereotypical interpretations which non-Indigenous Australians had been making about them even since first contact. In these attempts to oppose Anglo-centric hegemonic domination, humour has remained a consistent factor, reflecting Indigenous resilience and self-determination, thereby moving Aboriginal people from 'other' to main-stage in Australian discourse.

The next chapter will explore some of the important developments that occurred in Indigenous live performance after the 1970s. Moving through the following decades the arts became even more important for Indigenous people. Moreover, by the close of the century Indigenous artistic expression, especially in theatrical performances, began to receive global acclaim for its excellence. And, during this period humour techniques solidified as important ways that Indigenous people intervened in Australia's socio-political discourse, with matters of importance to them. Humour in witty language, mimicry, funny yarns, dry satirical wit, mickey-taking, along with the emerging use of black and self-deprecating humour were important devices in these endeavours. However, these performances reveal that socio-political themes are the mainstay of performance humour, assisting to distinguishing it as characteristically Aboriginal humour.

CHAPTER 5

THE USE OF HUMOUR IN INDIGENOUS ARTISTIC AGENCY (1970-2000)

I am not really surprised that my Aboriginal background has been a great asset in theatre. The Nyoongah language was always full of humour and music. Theatre, in a bush area, is the very essence of an Aboriginal corroboree and performances there are often full of brilliant dance and mime. There was and is great opportunity for theatre to draw upon the rich Aboriginal literature.

Jack Davis [1917–2000]¹¹⁹² Western Australian, Nyoongah, playwright and poet.

1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores Indigenous performing arts in some urban Australian regions from the 1970s through to the turn of this century that can be seen as expressions that enabled Indigenous artists to better articulate their calls for greater access to mainstream social, political and educational resources. The theories of sociologist Pierre Bourdieu relating to accessibility to mainstream ‘cultural capital’ are significant to this investigation.¹¹⁹³ As noted in the previous chapter, early contemporary Indigenous performances frequently stemmed from, and played a part in Aboriginal socio-political activism. Such ideological aims led to performances that explored what it was to be Aboriginal in modern Australia and to assert pride in those identities and unique Indigenous cultural heritages.¹¹⁹⁴ In such endeavours, humour was frequently employed by Indigenous artists to make audiences laugh at issues that could often be considered very bleak. This type of black humour celebrated a triumph over the harsh realities of the lives of many Indigenous people.¹¹⁹⁵ Such identity explorations can be seen as precursors to greater confidence in performance arts practices that have resulted in current Indigenous artistic leadership and self-representations that ‘hold their own’ on national and international stages.

2. CHAPTER OUTLINE

In this chapter I provide details of Indigenous performing arts in some urban Australian regions from the 1970s through to the turn of this century that grew from the better recognition, education and financial support afforded to them. Initially urban Indigenous artists often worked collaboratively in

¹¹⁹² Davis, J., in Chesson, K., 1988, *Jack Davis, A Life-Story*, Dent Australia, Victoria, Australia, p. 197.

¹¹⁹³ Bourdieu, P., [1979] 2010, *Distinction: a social critique of the judgment of taste*, Routledge, London.

¹¹⁹⁴ Shoemaker, A., 1992, *Black Words White Page, Aboriginal Literature 1929–1988*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, QLD, p. 233. Syron, L., nd.,(2012), ‘Afterword: Contemporary Indigenous theatre and performance practice in Australia: Cultural integrity and historical significance’, p. 135, in Casey, M., 2012, *Telling Stories, Aboriginal Australian and Torres Strait Islander Performance*, Australian Scholarly, Melbourne, Victoria, pp. 134–152.

¹¹⁹⁵ Non-Indigenous Australian actor Bryan Brown who was involved in early Indigenous theatre in Sydney has noted that there was “lots of laughing from the Aboriginal audience,” especially at moments that he considered “grim” in a radio interview quoted in Casey, M., 2004, *Creating Frames, Contemporary Indigenous Theatre 1967–1990*, UQP, St Lucia, QLD, p. 114.

order to better control all aspects of their own affairs.¹¹⁹⁶ Indigenous artists supported one another while attempting to enhance the profile of Indigenous Arts as a united front.¹¹⁹⁷ Some of the noteworthy early contemporary Indigenous performances of the 1970–80s are discussed with regards to their use of humour techniques for specific socio-political purposes. Familiar forms of Indigenous humour such as quick witty language, funny yarns, mimicry and mickey-taking can be seen in these endeavours. Additionally, the greater use of black and self-deprecating humour techniques that are recognisable in the early contemporary performance traditions discussed in the previous chapter became more prevalent. However, most characteristic of Aboriginal performance humour from this time frame (1970-80s) is the emphasis on socio-political topics. The examples provided in this chapter help to better clarify an understanding of the characteristics and purposes of Aboriginal Australian humour.

Political events, like the 1980s centenary celebrations of colonial occupancy, continued to provide Indigenous artists with inspiration to articulate their counter-educative voices with their own stories of living in this colonised nation. Indigenous Arts practices began to change during the 1990s. Indigenous artists began to assert themselves, undertaking work that shifted away from shared concerns towards individual expressions.¹¹⁹⁸ These artistic expressions culminated in some important autobiographical performances that are discussed in light of their distinctive use of humour. The recognisable humour forms of witty yarning, mimicry and mickey-taking, coupled with the more prevalent use of black, observational and self-deprecating humour, can again be seen in these performances. Although works from the 1980-90s discussed in this chapter often relate to personal stories, underlying socio-political themes of injustice and discrimination continue to dominate humour topics. The contributions these performances made to Australia's socio-political discourse were significant during this period. In addition to providing Aboriginal people with an outlet for creative expression and re-educating non-Indigenous people with Aboriginal perspectives on colonisation, they enhanced the excellence of Australia's cultural contributions both nationally and internationally.

3. INDIGENOUS ARTISTS' HUMOROUS INTERVENTIONS INTO MAINSTREAM AUSTRALIA'S SOCIO-POLITICAL DISCOURSE (1970–2000)

3.1 Australia's Changing Socio-Political Order of the 1970s

In frustrated response to the Australian Liberal-Coalition Government's refusal to recognise Aboriginal land rights, a symbolic Aboriginal Tent Embassy was established in Canberra overnight on

¹¹⁹⁶ Casey, M., 2004, Op. Cit., p. 102.

¹¹⁹⁷ Boomalli Aboriginal Arts Cooperative, nd., 'The History', online at: <www.boomalli.com.au/history.html> viewed 17/5/2013.

¹¹⁹⁸ Syron, L., nd., (2012), Op. Cit., p. 146.

Australia Day, 26th January 1972, drawing world attention to an issue that was immensely important to Indigenous Australians.¹¹⁹⁹ Later that year, Australia elected a new Federal Labor (Whitlam) Government for the first time in 23 years (since 1949).¹²⁰⁰ Whitlam's Government sought to address a broad range of social justice issues pertaining to Indigenous people in counter to the legacy of conservative politics to date.¹²⁰¹ It removed the final remnants of the *Immigration Restriction Act (1901)*, including ratifying International agreements on race and immigration, as well as removing race as a prohibiting factor to Australian citizenship.¹²⁰² In addition, it developed a stronger national Arts focus that re-organised the Australia Council (formally known as the Council for the Arts) to incorporate specialist subsidiaries, including the establishment of the Aboriginal Arts Board with fifteen Aboriginal members.¹²⁰³ These initiatives gave Indigenous artists greater access to funding both under the board as well as via the existing means of the Federal Department of Aboriginal Affairs.¹²⁰⁴

In addition, a national seminar was held for the first time in 1973 that formalised directives for the development of Aboriginal Arts on an Australia-wide basis both in traditional and urban contexts.¹²⁰⁵ At this seminar Indigenous actor Brian Syron proposed the establishment of black theatre companies for each state that led to the establishment of a Brisbane Black Theatre group and the re-invigoration of Aboriginal theatre in Sydney by means of 'The Black Theatre Arts and Cultural Centre' established at Redfern in 1974.¹²⁰⁶

3.2 Redfern's Black Theatre Arts and Cultural Centre (1970s)

The aim of the Redfern Centre was primarily to support the Indigenous community, reflect their concerns and then to educate the wider non-Indigenous community about Indigenous issues.¹²⁰⁷ As Kevin Gilbert wrote in 1973:

¹¹⁹⁹ SBS News, 05/07/2012, 'Timeline, Aboriginal Tent Embassy', online at:

<www.sbs.com.au/news/article/1663500/Timeline-Aboriginal-Tent-Embassy> viewed 21/5/2013.

¹²⁰⁰ Farnsworth, M., nd. 1972 'Federal Election' in *Australianpolitics.com*, online at:

<<http://australianpolitics.com/voting/elections/1972-federal>> viewed 05/03/2014.

¹²⁰¹ Australian Prime Ministers Centre— Museum of Australian Democracy, nd, 'Prime Facts 21— Edward Gough Whitlam, AC, QC' at <static.moadoph.gov.au/ophgovau/media/images/apmc/docs/21-Whitlam-Web.pdf> viewed 17/5/2013.

¹²⁰² Australian Government, nd., 'Fact Sheet — Abolition of the White Australia Policy', Department of Immigration and Boarder Protection, online at:

< <https://www.border.gov.au/about/corporate/information/fact-sheets/08abolition>> viewed 29/08/2016. Although this was a significant move, the Australian Federal Government did not ratify the most important Indigenous rights convention of that time — the International Labour Organisation's ILO 107 that sought to protect Indigenous populations from oppression and discrimination. This has now replaced by convention ILO 169, that has still not been ratified by the Australia Government. Personal communication from J. Robbins to K. Austin 19/10/2016.

¹²⁰³ Casey, M., 2004, Op. Cit., p. 57 & pp. 95–96.

¹²⁰⁴ Casey, M, 2004, p. 96.

¹²⁰⁵ Casey, M, 2004, p. 96.

¹²⁰⁶ Casey, M, 2004, pp. 97–98.

¹²⁰⁷ Casey, M., 2004, p. 98.

In my view, Black Theatre should be aiming, for the time being, at social comment. Give on-stage blacks' views of the white society—the hard truth about its history, values. But we also have to attack apathy and laziness in our black society as well.¹²⁰⁸

However, Gilbert was concerned that, although the Australia Council might now be willing to better support black playwrights, they would be expected to produce European-styled theatre and be taught to write solely for white audiences.¹²⁰⁹ Indigenous artists desired to express their own creativity and provide their own unique voice within theatre, frequently by humorous means. While they believed that entertainment was a great teaching medium, Indigenous artists did not want to shock and turn off non-Indigenous audiences.¹²¹⁰ Rather, it seemed that the decision was made to convey 'difficult' messages to mainstream audiences about the plight of Indigenous people with humour rather than sadness, anger or moral condemnation. Maza felt that '...you could teach people more by making them laugh than by making them cry'.¹²¹¹

3.3 *The benefits of Black Theatre*

Indigenous theatre proved an array of benefits to Australians. It presented innovative theatre to non-Indigenous audiences – and those audiences had to go into the predominantly Aboriginal populated areas, like Redfern, to see it.¹²¹² It gave Indigenous artists a cathartic outlet for their own self-expressions. And, it provided quality performance for their own people, many of whom had never experienced it before.¹²¹³ Black theatre gave its Indigenous audiences a sense of pride in community achievements, positive identity reinforcement, as well as just plain old entertainment.

Reminiscing about the early days of Black theatre, Gilbert notes that, in his opinion, it was a 'beautiful thing' to see Indigenous people who did not ordinarily attend theatre, dressing up in their finest clothes and even offering assistance to the cast and crew.¹²¹⁴ The benefits from these early Aboriginal theatre performances in the 1970s were many for both Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples alike.

In addition, to the provision of community theatre, the Redfern Centre had an exhibition space for showcasing Indigenous visual arts and design, while its clear focus on culturally specific training led to the running of workshops both in performing and visual arts.¹²¹⁵ In June 1975 the centre was given \$86,000 funding from the Federal Government for these classes. The funding included the running of

¹²⁰⁸ Gilbert, K., 1973, *Because a White man'll never do it!*, Angus and Robertson Pty Ltd, Fortitude Valley, Brisbane, p. 122.

¹²⁰⁹ Gilbert, K., 1973, p. 122.

¹²¹⁰ Maza, B., quoted in *ABC Message Stick*, 04/02/2005, 'Summer Series 10– Bob Maza', online at <<http://www.abc.net.au/tv/messagestick/stories/s1276748.htm>> viewed 19/10/2013.

¹²¹¹ Maza K quoting Maza, B., in *ABC Message Stick*, 04/02/2005.

¹²¹² Bostock, G., 1985, 'Black Theatre' in Davis, J., & B. Hodge, (eds.) 1985, *Aboriginal Writing Today*, Australian Institute of Aboriginal Studies, Canberra, ACT, p. 72.

¹²¹³ Bostock, G., 1985, p. 72.

¹²¹⁴ Gilbert, K., 1973, Op. Cit. p. 121.

¹²¹⁵ Casey, M., 2004, Op. Cit., pp. 98-99.

a six week Black Theatre training program that had twenty-eight national Indigenous students.¹²¹⁶ Eora man Brian Syron, who had himself studied ‘method’ acting under Stella Adler in New York from 1961–68, conducted the course.¹²¹⁷ It included Bibbulmun / Western Australian writer Jack Davis [1917–2000], giving him his first experience as a professional actor, enhancing his already established writing career.¹²¹⁸

3.4 *The humour of Jack Davis*

Although Davis had been writing since 1931 when he was fourteen years old, his first book of poetry entitled *The First-born and Other Poems* was not published until 1970.¹²¹⁹ He then wrote his first one act play in 1972 called *The Steel and the Stone*. It was performed at the Bunbury Arts Festival in 1973.¹²²⁰ Davis said of writing for theatre:

I had seen the script of a short play by Kath Walker and was extremely interested in the prospects the medium presented. Theatre offers an opportunity to use all the talents of speech and body-movement present in Aboriginal oral literature and dance since time began. It was an exciting way of reaching a wide audience.¹²²¹

Shortly following this, Davis formed a working relationship with the non-Indigenous director of Perth’s National Theatre Company, Andrew Ross.¹²²² Davis recognised Ross’s ‘great gift for visualisation and infinite patience in bringing out the best abilities latent within an acting group’,¹²²³ especially among Indigenous actors who had very little theatre experience at that time.¹²²⁴ The two men collaborated to produce this and subsequent plays that were performed for commercial and school productions.¹²²⁵ *Steel and Stone* was extended beyond one act, renamed *The Dreamers*, and performed at the 1982 Festival of Perth to great acclaim.¹²²⁶

3.4.1 *The Dreamers (1971/1982)*

The overarching theme of *The Dreamers* is Davis’s exploration of what it means to be an Indigenous person living in modern suburban Australia. In the script Davis provides insights from an Indigenous

¹²¹⁶ Casey, M., 2004, pp. 106–107.

¹²¹⁷ Syron, L., nd., (2012), Op. Cit., p. 135.

¹²¹⁸ Casey, M., 2004, Op. Cit., pp. 106–107.

¹²¹⁹ Davis, J., 1985, in Davis, J. & B. Hodge, (eds.), 1985, Op. Cit., p. 13.

¹²²⁰ Davis, J., 1985, p. 13. Wilde, W., Hooton J. & B. Andrews, (eds.), 1991, *Oxford Companion to Australian Literature*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, p. 206.

¹²²¹ Chesson, K., 1988, Op. Cit., p. 191.

¹²²² Chesson, K., 1988, p. 194.

¹²²³ Chesson, K., 1988, p. 194.

¹²²⁴ Radic, L., 2006, *Contemporary Australian Drama*, Brandl & Schlesinger, Blackheath, NSW, p. 186.

¹²²⁵ Chesson, K., 1988, Op. Cit. p. 194.

¹²²⁶ Wilde, W., et al (eds.), 1991, p. 206. Davis, J., (1982), 1989, ‘The Dreamers’ in Brisbane, K. (ed.), 1989, *Plays from Black Australia*, Currency Press, Paddington, N.S.W, p. 4.

perspective.¹²²⁷ Like Davis, other Indigenous artists, including Gilbert, were also posing identity questions at this time:

But what is Aboriginality? Is it being tribal? Who is an Aboriginal? Is he or she someone who feels that other Aboriginals are somehow dirty, lazy, drunken, bludging? Is an Aboriginal anyone who has some degree of Aboriginal blood in his or her veins and who has demonstrably been disadvantaged by that? Or is an Aboriginal someone who has had the reserve experience? Is Aboriginality institutionalized gutlessness, an acceptance of the label 'the most powerless people on earth'? Or is Aboriginality, when all the definitions have been exhausted, a yearning for a different way of being, a wholeness that was presumed to have existed before 1776?¹²²⁸

The Dreamers recognises issues pertinent to the lives of Indigenous people in the 1970s, the Wallitch family, as they struggle to live in an urban region. With very little economic and social standing, they survive thanks to the strong family bonds that tie them together. Their close relationships, that reference their proud and strong Aboriginal cultural heritage, are embellished with a good deal of wry humour. Most particularly, throughout the play humour is used by Davis to deal with unpalatable Aboriginal social issues such as alcohol abuse and dealings with mainstream legal systems:

PETER: Look, *Nyoongahs* buy their grog from *Wetjalas*, they break the law and they git jugged by *Wetjalas*. The lawyer's white, the cops are white, the magistrate's white, the warden's white: the whole box and dice is white. Put a *Nyoongah* against all them. I tell you we ain't got a bloody chance.

ELI: Warders, they're no trouble. I know 'ow to handle them bastards: 'yes sir, no, Warden. I'll do it, sir.' All you gotta do is butter 'em up a bit. Play it smart.

PETER: Playin' along with the system eh?¹²²⁹

The style of humour, mocking serious or tragic matters, was one in which Indigenous people laughed at the bleak realities of their own lives, just as Gilbert explored this grim theme in the play *The Cherry Pickers*.¹²³⁰ Again this recognisable style of comedy can be considered a form of black humour that O'Neil argues is a term used to describe humour '...which is variously grotesque, gallows, macabre, sick, pornographic, scatological, cosmic, ironic, satirical, absurd, or any combination of these.'¹²³¹ This cutting humour is again employed as a discernible element of contemporary Indigenous Australian comedy, adopted to shock and to lighten the social stigma attached to the socially taboo topics of Indigenous criminal behaviour and non-Indigenous racism.

Freud says that this type of (black) humour can nullify internal distress and frustrations that would ordinarily arise when negative issues such as injustice or social hypocrisy are raised.¹²³² Unlike the repression that 'denies' a bad situation, this form of humour, expressed by Aboriginal actors and

¹²²⁷ Shoemaker, A., 1992, Op. Cit., p. 133.

¹²²⁸ Gilbert, K., 1977, *Living Black. Blacks talk to Kevin Gilbert*, The Penguin Press, Ringwood, Victoria, p. 184.

¹²²⁹ Davis, J., (1982), 1989, Op. Cit., pp.15–16.

¹²³⁰ Gilbert, K., 1988, 'The Cherry Pickers', Burrumbinga Books, Canberra, Australia.

¹²³¹ O'Neil, P., 1983, 'The Comedy of Entropy: The Contexts of Black Humour', *The Canadian Review of Comparative Literature*, June 1983, p. 145; online at: <<https://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/crcl/article/view/2606/2001>>, viewed 09/09/2014.

¹²³² Freud, S., [1905], 2002 Crick J (trans.), *The joke and its relation to the unconscious*, Penguin Books, p. 225.

enjoyed by Aboriginal audiences, acknowledges reality but consciously chooses not to be dismayed by it.¹²³³ Psychologically, such unexpected responses could have had a powerful impact on 1970s non-Indigenous audience members too. Non-Indigenous audiences, who might be surprised by such ironic responses, were given powerful lessons about the Indigenous community's camaraderie, resilience and self-respect.

In addition, Davis' humorous socio-political observations about the realities of one element of urban Aboriginal life at that time make him an important social commentator and comic spokesperson in the vein of Shakespeare's theatrical fools who shrewdly observed society and spoke the 'truth' that was recognised by many, but was too politically sensitive to articulate.¹²³⁴ This use of current social and political topics in Davis' performance humour is a distinguishable aspect of his plays. For example, with *The Dreamers*, Davis comically suggests that Aboriginal people have been forced to 'act up' in colonised Australia in order to deal with foreign (western) disempowering legal systems. Performance allows Aboriginal people to negate a system that is so alien to their own pre-existing ones and their own world view:

You see, we've always been acting. Aboriginal people are the greatest actors in the world ... we've acted up before magistrates, we've acted up before the police, we've acted up before social workers; we've always done our own mime... when we lived in the Bush we had our own way of doing these things ourselves...¹²³⁵

Like other Indigenous artists at the time, Davis makes extensive use of Nyoongah language in his narrative. His use of Indigenous words and vernacular, often in witty dialogue, asserts the validity of Aboriginal languages and enhances the authenticity of Indigenous experiences. Davis makes no excuses for his extensive use of language that is unfamiliar to many, particularly to his non-Indigenous audiences, and he provides no direct translations. Regardless, his narration is still comprehensible within the context of the script and its action. Just like Gilbert's use of Indigenous language in *The Cherry Pickers*, the meaning of these words are unnecessary to understanding an implicit meaning:

ELI: Pop, you got some *boondah* [*money] and I'll go and get another bottle of port for us.
[WORRU starts to go through his pockets.]
Look in this one.
[He goes to search WORRU but WORRU pushes him away.]
WORRU: what do you think I can't see? I got two eyes not like you, *meowl birt*. [*a blind person]¹²³⁶
[*my additions]¹²³⁷

¹²³³ Freud, S., [1905], 2002, p. 227.

¹²³⁴ Mintz, L., 1985, 'Standup Comedy as Social and Cultural Mediation', *American Quarterly*, vol. 37, no. 1, Special Issue: American Humor (Spring 1985), The John Hopkins University Press, Maryland, USA, p. 76.

¹²³⁵ Shoemaker, A., 1982, 'An Interview with Jack Davis', *Westerly*, Vol. 27/4, p. 114.

¹²³⁶ Davis, J., (1982), 1989, Op. Cit., pp.20–21.

¹²³⁷ A glossary of the Nyoongah terms used in *The Dreamers* is included with the script in Brisbane, K. (ed.), 1989, *Plays from Black Australia*, Currency Press, Paddington, N.S.W, pp. 72–73.

The Indigenous love of humorous yarns has often been noted by commentators on Indigenous social interaction.¹²³⁸ According to Bessarab and Ng'andu, yarning is a form of cultural communication traditionally used by Indigenous people in conversations.¹²³⁹ It is an informal storytelling tool and a way of sharing traditional information and knowledge.¹²⁴⁰ Indigenous artists often employ this style of casual communication to draw audiences into their confidence to convince them to consider their traditional knowledge and alternative social perspectives. This familiar use of funny anecdotes, presented in conjunction with Nyoongah and Aboriginal English vocabulary, is a technique frequently used by Davis to situate his play as a particularly Indigenous tale:

ROY: Yeah, Unc, tell us the yarn.

WORRU: Well, they was gitten old fellas, them two, Cornell and Milbart, they was stayin' in Wagin an' they wanted to git to Katanning Show, see? And they was *wayarning* [frightened] of the train, real *wayarning*. [*Laughing*]. Anyways, they got in a railway carriage and that train was goin' *keert kooliny*, *keert kooliny* [going quickly] round them bends and them corners. An' – an' – they was ... they was ... [*He coughs and splutters.*] ... sitting close together, like. [*He laughs again and claps his hands.*] Anyway, they went around one corner and Cornell got a real fright and he shouted 'choo' [shame] and he pushed Milbart like that. [*He pushes Peter almost off his seat.*] And he said, he said, 'Wart army yit, [move along] Milbart, git ober in de udder corner an' help me balance this thing before it bloody tips over.'¹²⁴¹

Likewise, 'stuff-ups' and physical acts of slap-stick, albeit sometimes rather black, provide fertile soil for quick Aboriginal laughter.¹²⁴² Davis exploits these familiar traits within his dialogue:

WORRU: ...You remember Winarn, ol' fella with *doot* arm? [*Chuckling*] Yeah, yeah, he pinched a bottle a whisky from his boss an' he got cruel drunk 'an 'e rolled in the fire and burnt his arm right off – [*pointing*] this one, no, no, that one.

DOLLY: [*laughing*] U-n-c-l-e!¹²⁴³

Here Davis employs the same black humour as Gilbert in *The Cherrypickers* (1969)¹²⁴⁴ It operates to release the stress of unpalatable social issues like theft and alcohol abuse. He references the tragic fact that many Indigenous people are all too familiar with Australia's penal system. In addition, they have also been frequently confronted with the hypocrisies and platitudes of Christianity:

[...ELI can be heard singing 'Onward Christian Soldiers'.]

ELI: ...Ay? 'ow can you be a soldier an' a Christian? Lot a rot; soldiers used to chuck Christians to the lions. I'm a Christian, Freo Prison Christian. Ain't nobody gonna chuck me to the lions. The *Wetjala*'s a

¹²³⁸ Stanner, W., [1956] 1982, 'Aboriginal Humour', *Aboriginal History*, Vol. 6, pp. 39–48. Kennedy, G., 2009, 'What Makes A Blackfulla Laugh?', *Australian Author*, v. 41/3, December 2009.

¹²³⁹ Bessarab, D., & B. Ng'andu, 2010, 'Yarning about Yarning as a Legitimate Method in Indigenous Research', *International Journal of Critical Indigenous Studies*, v. 3(1). Available at: <http://www.isrn.qut.edu.au/pdf/ijcis/v3n1_2010/Final_Bessarab_Bridget_IJCIS.pdf>, viewed 26/08/2014.

¹²⁴⁰ Bessarab, D & B. Ng'andu, 2010.

¹²⁴¹ Davis, J., (1982), 1989, Op. Cit., pp. 16–17.

¹²⁴² Kennedy, G., 2009, Op. Cit., p. 12.

¹²⁴³ Davis, J., (1982), 1989, Op. Cit., p. 26.

¹²⁴⁴ Gilbert, K., (1969) 1988, *The Cherry Pickers*, Burrumbinga Books, Canberra, ACT.

lion, he eats, Aw, he eats, he eats everything: land, trees, rivers, forests, even people, ‘specially people.’¹²⁴⁵

Comedic incidents abound in the play as Davis’s characters take-the-mickey out of each other and life in general. It could be argued that Davis exposes his Aboriginal characters to moral condemnation and ridicule by portraying their lives in a ‘warts and all’ fashion that confirm mainstream racial stereotypes.¹²⁴⁶ However, on the contrary, Davis’s use of socially unacceptable matters can be seen as a celebration of the ‘humour of the ordinary’ of modern Aboriginal life.¹²⁴⁷ Humour is used as a term of endearment, deflating pretensions, and enabling laughter rather than tears at adversity. Audiences are subtly confronted with the bittersweet realities of Aboriginal lives that continue to suffer negative effects of colonialism, yet still survive. Davis tempers this serious and detrimental legacy with his clever use of humorous techniques because he suggests that:

They (the audience) can’t stand it if it’s all heavy, heavy. You’ve got to lighten up every little while or they just turn off... You get nowhere if it’s all intensity.¹²⁴⁸

Hodge and Mishra recognise that Davis’s dramatic work best achieved his aim of providing a full range of urban Aboriginal voices – ... ‘drunk, vulgar, full of energy and humour, anger and warmth ... shaped and refined to a condition of typicality.’¹²⁴⁹ This raw honesty references the complexities and authenticity of Indigenous Australian urban experiences. It evokes compassion and contemplation, providing possible explanation for the prevalence of Indigenous social dysfunction as observed by him in the 1970s. Above all, it is the socio-political emphasis of much of Davis’ humour that is so significant in his plays.

3.5 Growing opportunities for Indigenous Australian performance of the 1970s

During the 1960s there was limited schooling available to aspiring Australian actors.¹²⁵⁰ NIDA, the premier National Institute of Dramatic Arts, had only been established in 1958,¹²⁵¹ and although there were a few private acting schools, state-run institutions did not open up until the late 1970-early 1980s.¹²⁵² Moreover, these limited outlets were mainly accessed by white Australian students.¹²⁵³ So the actor training workshops run in the early 1970s at Black Theatre in Redfern offered seminal

¹²⁴⁵ Davis, J., (1982), 1989, Op. Cit., pp. 52–53.

¹²⁴⁶ Hodge, B., and V. Mishra, 1990, *Dark Side of the Dream, Australian literature and the postcolonial mind*, Allen & Unwin, Sydney, Australia, p. 108.

¹²⁴⁷ Peters-Little, F., ‘High art and the humour of the ordinary’ in Kleinert, S., & M. Neale, 2000, *The Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, Australia, pp. 362–363.

¹²⁴⁸ Davis, J., in Sykes, R, 1989, ‘Do caged kookaburras still laugh?’ Humour in Aboriginal writing, *Thalia: Studies in Literacy Humor*, 10(2), p. 46.

¹²⁴⁹ Hodge, B., and V. Mishra, 1990, Op. Cit. p. 108.

¹²⁵⁰ Syron, L., nd., (2012), Op. Cit., p. 147.

¹²⁵¹ NIDA is the acronym for Australia’s ‘National Institute of Dramatic Arts’. See their ‘Homepage’ online at:

<www.nida.edu.au/NIDA-History/default.aspx> viewed 22/5/2013.

¹²⁵² Syron, L., nd., (2012), Op. Cit. p. 147.

¹²⁵³ Syron, L., nd., (2012), p. 147.

Australian performance opportunities.¹²⁵⁴ Nonetheless, mainstream labelling of Indigenous performers as ‘unprofessional’ reaffirmed Euro-Australian dominance and control over mainstream theatre.¹²⁵⁵ Justine Saunders says of this time that Aboriginal drama had to ‘adopt and adapt European forms’ just to be recognised by dominant theatre institutions.¹²⁵⁶ Moreover, challenging enduring mainstream expectations and stereotypes of Aboriginal people with active, politicised, independent people was incredibly confronting for many people in mainstream. Marcia Langton suggests that ... ‘racist stereotypes and mythologies which inform Australian understandings of Aboriginal people [are] revealing ... it is from these that most Australians ‘know’ about Aboriginal people.’¹²⁵⁷ Much mainstream knowledge about Aboriginal Australians was static, caught between the tired tropes of authentic bush savage and/or dysfunctional city fringe dwelling misfit.

Added to issues of credibility were those of money, as the Redfern Centre was fully subsidised by government funds.¹²⁵⁸ Following its successful application in 1975, a 1976 funding application was denied by the Council for the Arts.¹²⁵⁹ With limited funds available the centre decided to restrict its focus to producing Bundjalung man Gerry Bostock’s play *Here Comes the Nigger*.¹²⁶⁰ While only two acts of the play have been recorded¹²⁶¹ the familiar use of humour to soften socially difficult themes can be seen in them.

3.6 ‘*Here Comes the Nigger*’ (c.1977)

The use of the racially disparaging and politically incorrect word ‘Nigger’ in the title reveals to audiences that this is a play that is unafraid to confront socially contentious issues. Humour here, and in other sections of the play, is used as a form of socio-political ‘counter-attack’— where Aboriginal people jump in first and call themselves derogatory names like “bastard” or “nigger”, then there is nothing left for non-Indigenous Australians to taunt them with.¹²⁶²

Freud described the purpose of humour that evokes recognisable distasteful Jewish stereotypes in a similar way. He said:

A situation particularly favourable to the tendentious joke is set up when the intended criticism of protest is directed against one’s self, or, put more circumspetly, against a person in whom that self has a share,

¹²⁵⁴ Syron, L., nd., (2012), pp. 147–148.

¹²⁵⁵ Syron, L., nd., (2012), pp. 147–148.

¹²⁵⁶ Syron, L., nd., (2012), p. 144.

¹²⁵⁷ Langton, M., 2003, ‘Aboriginal art and film: the politics of representation’ in Grossman, M. (ed.), 2003, *Contemporary Critical Writing by Indigenous Australians*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, p. 119.

¹²⁵⁸ Casey, M., 2004, Op. Cit. p. 109.

¹²⁵⁹ Casey, M., 2004, p. 108.

¹²⁶⁰ Casey, M., p. 110. ‘Bundjimagic Homepage’ online at: <<http://bundjimagic.com.au/about-gerry.html>> viewed 23/5/2013.

¹²⁶¹ Bostock, G., 1977, ‘Two scenes from ‘Here Comes the Nigger’ and Interview’, *Meanjin Quarterly*, vol. 36, no. 4, December 1977, University of Melbourne, Victoria, pp. 479–493.

¹²⁶² Sykes, R., 1989, Op. Cit., p. 46.

a collective person, that is, one's own people, for example. This determinant of self-criticism may explain to us how it is that a number of the most telling jokes ... have grown from the soil of Jewish popular life. They are stories invented by Jews and aimed at Jewish characteristics... Jews ... know their real faults and how they are related to their good points...¹²⁶³

Arguably, this controversial black humour was used in a similar manner to the humour used by racially vilified Jewish people in Europe of the early 1900s. In a psychologically empowering manner the teller is unaffected by this racially disparaging humour. Furthermore, Freud also suggests that such insider knowledge leads to creation of the best ('most telling') comedy ('jokes').¹²⁶⁴ The subject position of the jokers as members of the beleaguered group gives them a level of authority and intimacy with a range of racial characteristics that leads to a more surprising, insightful, compassionate, and thus funny, commentary.

Here Comes the Nigger was based on urban Indigenous characters in particular the blind Aboriginal poet Sam and blind non-Aboriginal Australian woman, Odette who is tutoring him for HSC examinations. Their relationship is 'illicit' and naïve.¹²⁶⁵ The play references physical, emotional and social blindness in its exploration of the racism and sexism present in Australian societies.¹²⁶⁶ It is notable as the first Indigenous play to be written, directed and performed predominantly by Indigenous people that focused on urban Aboriginal issues and concerns.¹²⁶⁷

Like other Indigenous plays of the time, Bostock's dialogue frequently uses humour to raise sexual issues in a joking way:

VERNA: Gettin' any lately, big brother?
SAM: I know love's suppose t'be blind ... but I ain't found anyone that blind enough, yet!
VERNA: Nemmine. Ah still loves ya, honey!
SAM: Garn, ya gin. I bet ya say that t'all us handsome blackfellas!¹²⁶⁸

A familiar witty, teasing banter occurs between the Aboriginal characters. This is coupled with the relaxed vernacular of Aboriginal English, which adds to the authenticity of urban Indigenous experiences. Shoemaker suggests that Bostock's sexual humour is interspersed with serious matters as an intentional technique to release the pressure of bitterness and resentment.¹²⁶⁹ He further argues that the play's linguistic and symbolic humour reveals a unified group of urban Aboriginal people, joined by adversity and in stress-reducing light relief.¹²⁷⁰

¹²⁶³ Freud, S., [1905], 2002, Op. Cit., pp. 108–109.

¹²⁶⁴ Freud, S., [1905], pp. 108–109.

¹²⁶⁵ Shoemaker, A., 1992, Op. Cit., p. 245.

¹²⁶⁶ Casey, M., 2004, Op. Cit. pp. 110-111.

¹²⁶⁷ Casey, M., 2004, p. 111.

¹²⁶⁸ Bostock, G., 1977, Op. Cit., pp.481– 483.

¹²⁶⁹ Shoemaker, A., 1992, Op. Cit., p. 247.

¹²⁷⁰ Shoemaker, A., 1992, p. 247.

And like other Indigenous playwrights, Bostock employs humorous techniques, such sexual and/or wry humour, to raise issues of current political contention. For example, he uses salacious humour to criticise current government policies relating to Indigenous people such as white-run Indigenous reserves, and to expose the appalling health conditions of many Indigenous people.¹²⁷¹

Blind Indigenous protagonist Sam has a ‘clarity of vision’ which enables him to see people beyond the colour of their skin and to their inner essence:

SAM: ... I’m blind. I’m forced to look inside of people to see what they’re really like; to see what colour they are on the inside.¹²⁷²

Ultimately however, the play is a tragedy, and ends with Sam being beaten to death.¹²⁷³ The violent forces of racism and sexism win out; innocent love is destroyed, and Sam pays the ultimate price, his life, for attempting to rise above the ‘disabilities’ of a racist, angry world.¹²⁷⁴ Just as Jack Davis uses socio-political observations, so too Bostock tempers his harsh social criticism about the racism and injustice located in Australia’s socio-political discourse, with humour. And like Davis, his observational, sometimes self-deprecating, humour heralds its use by the practice of current Indigenous stand-up comedians who also challenge audiences to consider current social issues from an alternative perspective. Again, it is the political purpose of Bostock’s humour that can be seen as an important element of his performances.

The play’s original cast was made up of both Indigenous and non-Indigenous actors, but was written and directed by Indigenous artists.¹²⁷⁵ On reflection, Bostock felt that non-Indigenous audiences were ‘disconcerted’ by many of the incidents that Indigenous audiences actually found funny.¹²⁷⁶ Moreover, Bostock believes that Indigenous people particularly enjoy humour that parallels their own experience:

... if it’s a black audience, [they] laugh uproariously, because they are looking at the funny side of their life, whereas white society, when they see the play, is really freaked out by it.¹²⁷⁷

This emphasis on the funny side of socially contentious matters continues the traditions of Indigenous narratives that use humour techniques to express and process difficult social issues pertaining to Aboriginal Australian experiences. And it is this socio-political element of Indigenous humour that gives it such a distinctive edge. This play drew broader audiences than just the local Indigenous

¹²⁷¹ Bostock, G., 1977, Op. Cit., pp. 484–485.

¹²⁷² Bostock, G., 1977, p. 479.

¹²⁷³ Casey, M., 2004, Op. Cit., p. 111.

¹²⁷⁴ Casey, M., 2004, p. 111.

¹²⁷⁵ Casey, M., 2004, p. 112.

¹²⁷⁶ Bostock, G., 1985, Op. Cit., p. 72.

¹²⁷⁷ Bostock, G., 1985, p. 72.

community, and is recognised as the first production by an Indigenous playwright to achieve a mainstream profile.¹²⁷⁸ However, regardless of its relative success, the Centre was in severe financial difficulties, exacerbated when Prime Minister Fraser announced that it would no longer receive funding from the Department of Aboriginal Affairs, and by the end of 1977 it was forced to close.¹²⁷⁹

3.7 Strengthening directions for Indigenous Australian performance in mainstream Australia (1980-90s)

The 1970s can be seen as a transition period for individual Indigenous artists who formed collective enterprises in order to gain mutual support and a foothold into mainstream Australian theatre.¹²⁸⁰ Gilbert articulated a common held view in the early 1970s that Black Theatre should be aimed at social commentary and at educating white society from an Aboriginal perspective of its values and history.¹²⁸¹ Indigenous live performances of this time began to make a more significant impact on Australia's socio-political discourse by producing work that strove for these artistic goals. However, given such specific aims, it was not until the 1980s and 1990s that Indigenous drama moved on from producing collaborative theatre mainly comprised of 'community concerns' towards representation by trained individuals who achieved even greater mainstream attention.¹²⁸²

Moreover, while the closure of the Redfern Centre was a blow for Black Theatre in Australia, Luthi, writes that in the 1980s Indigenous Australian communities in urban regions ... 'developed into a powerhouse of cultural and political self-confidence.'¹²⁸³ The Western Australian Academy of Performing Arts established its specific Aboriginal Theatre course in 1979.¹²⁸⁴ In 1984, Aboriginal playwright, Robert Merritt, supported by Federal Government body, TAFE¹²⁸⁵ and the NSW Education Minister, established the Eora Centre in Regent Street, Sydney, as an Aboriginal alternative to NIDA, providing a specifically Indigenous performance education.¹²⁸⁶ Prominent Indigenous artists/actors were employed on staff, including Gordon Syron, Justine Saunders, Bob Maza and Athol Compton.¹²⁸⁷

¹²⁷⁸ Casey, M., 2004, Op. Cit., p. 111.

¹²⁷⁹ Casey, M., 2004, p. 116. 'Redfern Oral History, Black Theatre', 20/01/2016, *Redfern Oral History Organisation*, online at: <<http://redfernoralhistory.org/Enterprises/BlackTheatre/tabid/204/Default.aspx>>, viewed 22/01/2016.

¹²⁸⁰ Casey, M., 2004, p. xxvi.

¹²⁸¹ Gilbert, K., 1973, Op. Cit. p. 122.

¹²⁸² Syron, L., nd., (2012), p. 146.

¹²⁸³ Luthi, B., 2000, 'Translating Cultures – Lin Onus, a man of many ways' in Neale, M., 2000, *Urban Dingo, The Art and Life of Lin Onus*, Queensland Art Gallery & Fine Arts Press, p. 51.

¹²⁸⁴ Milne, G., 2010, 'Indigenous Performing Arts Training in Australia– Liza-Mare Syron, in conversation with Geoffrey Milne', *Australasian Drama Studies* 57 (Oct. 2010), p. 150, p. 160.

¹²⁸⁵ TAFE is an acronym for 'Technical and Further Education'.

¹²⁸⁶ Sydney Institute TAFE, 2010, 'Eora College History', online at:

<http://www.sit.det.nsw.edu.au/imagine/history_category/eora-college-history>, viewed 27/03/2014. In 1994 Eora changed from its origins as a community college to become a Registered Training Organisation of TAFE and Sydney TAFE's 'Aboriginal arm'. See: Syron, L., in Milne, G, 2010, Op. Cit., p. 150.

¹²⁸⁷ Sydney Institute TAFE, 2010, Op. Cit.

These newly established training and development opportunities for Aboriginal artists, supported by mainstream entities, began to strengthen Aboriginal people's social positioning from this time onwards.¹²⁸⁸ Hetti Perkins, former curator at the Gallery of New South Wales, states that the 1980s saw Aboriginal artists living and working in large Australian cities, undertaking tertiary arts education and formalising networks in the arts world.¹²⁸⁹ Bourdieu has noted the decisive role of education in obtaining more powerful roles within established class hierarchies and in gaining greater social status.¹²⁹⁰ Politically established institutions, management bodies and education qualifications provide sources of symbolic 'cultural capital' that give recipients the right to share in society's 'profits of recognition'.¹²⁹¹ Cultural capital comprises the knowledge, skills, behaviours and connections of dominant groups in society.¹²⁹² It is a symbolic form of social wealth that is less tangible than monetary or material capital, but nonetheless, an important source of mainstream esteem and acceptance. Taking advantage of both formal and informal education as a means of investing in their cultural capital, Aboriginal people strengthened their incorporation in mainstream artistic fields thanks to their improved access to political and social resources made available to them from this time.

3.8 The 1988 Bicentennial celebrations and Indigenous Australian performances

Gilbert and Lo contend that, although Indigenous people had so little to celebrate themselves, the 1988 Bicentenary celebrations of British colonisation proved an impetus for Indigenous theatre, leading a broader number of Australians to pay more attention to the form.¹²⁹³ This increased consciousness was, they suggest, partly the result of increased media awareness about the impact of colonisation on Indigenous people, itself partly an outcome from the First National Black Playwrights' Conference and Workshop¹²⁹⁴ held at Australian National University, Canberra, in 1987.¹²⁹⁵

Many scripts from this period show the efforts of Indigenous artists' insert their presence into colonial history and to confront current issues of socio-economic disparities from Aboriginal perspectives that reference strong connections to Country and rich spiritual heritages. These plays provide an alternative view of Australia's colonial past, thereby encouraging all Australians to consider

¹²⁸⁸ Gellatly, K., 2000, 'Is there an Aboriginal Photography?' in Kleinert, S., & M. Neale, (eds.), 2000, Op. Cit., p. 286.

¹²⁸⁹ Perkins, H., 2003, 'Seeing and Seaming: Contemporary Aboriginal Art', in Grossman, M., (ed.), *Blacklines: Contemporary Critical Writing by Indigenous Australians*, Melbourne University Press, Victoria, Australia, p. 100.

¹²⁹⁰ Bourdieu, P., [1977] 1990, Op. Cit.

¹²⁹¹ Bourdieu, P., 1989, 'Social Space and Symbolic Power', *Sociological Theory*, 7 No. 1 (1989), pp. 21-22.

¹²⁹² Claussen, S., & J. Osborne, 2013, 'Bourdieu's Notion of Cultural Capital and Its Implications for the Science Curriculum', *Science Education*, 97/1 (2013), p. 59.

¹²⁹³ Gilbert, H., & J. Lo, 2007, *Performance and Cosmopolitics, Cross-Cultural Transactions in Australasia*, Palgrave Macmillan, Hampshire, England, p. 50.

¹²⁹⁴ Gilbert, H., & J. Lo, 2007, pp. 50-53.

¹²⁹⁵ Croft, B., National Gallery of Australia, 2006, 'Glossary', *Michael Riley, Sights Unseen*, online at: <<http://nga.gov.au/exhibition/riley/Default.cfm?MnuID=4&Essay=9>>, viewed 06/03/2014.

alternative ways of understanding the shared past. For example, Richard Walley's play *Coordah* was first performed by the Western Australian Theatre Company in 1987 and looked at Aboriginal family life in an Australian country town;¹²⁹⁶ Bob Maza's *The Keepers* in 1988 studied the Boandik people of South Australia and their early dealings with colonists;¹²⁹⁷ and Eva Johnson's *Murras*, 1988, was another play that showed the struggles of a contemporary Indigenous family and their survival in urban Australia.¹²⁹⁸ Enoch notes this bicentennial period as a time when Indigenous artists were afforded opportunities to present their works to broader audiences thanks to an array of arts celebrations sponsored by the Federal Government.¹²⁹⁹

Hodge and Mishra also believe that mainstream Australia began to heed its own 'underlying anxiety' about the legitimacy of British colonisation in this time surrounding the 100 year celebrations.¹³⁰⁰ Bicentennial celebrations were a catalyst for many people to begin the rather uncomfortable process of reflecting on a national character that might not be quite the 'egalitarian, fair-go, lucky country' experience for all Australians as often assumed. These culturally specific Indigenous productions subliminally called non-Indigenous Australians to acknowledge their culpability in creating societies that had excluded and dismissed the country's first people, leading to lives of inequality and hardship.

3.9 Establishment of a National Black Playwrights Conference (1987)

The First National Black Playwrights Conference and Workshop of 1987 elected a steering committee consisting of Indigenous members: Brian Syron, Kevin Gilbert, Lydia Miller, Rhoda Roberts, Suzanne Butt, Michael Johnson and Lesley Fogarty (Justine Saunders was an adviser).¹³⁰¹ This committee was set up to promote and protect Aboriginal Performing and Visual Arts endeavours. It formed 'The Aboriginal National Theatre Trust Limited' (ANTT) that aimed at establishing a National Aboriginal Theatre and acted as mediator between Indigenous and non-Indigenous production houses, theatre companies, educational institutions and individuals.¹³⁰² A number of new Indigenous play scripts that influenced Australia's mainstream theatre, as well as providing significant Aboriginal perspectives of colonial history, were workshopped at these conferences.¹³⁰³ They included

¹²⁹⁶ Walley, R., 1987, (1989), 'Coordah', Brisbane, K., (ed.), 1989, *Plays from Black Australia*, Currency Press Pty Ltd, Paddington, NSW, pp. 113–166.

¹²⁹⁷ Maza, B., 1988 (1989), 'The Keepers', Brisbane, K., (ed.), 1989, pp. 167–229.

¹²⁹⁸ Johnson, E., 1988 (1989), 'Murras', Brisbane, K., (ed.), 1989, pp. 79–107.

¹²⁹⁹ Enoch, W., 2000, 'Performance' in Kleinert, S., & M. Neale, 2000, *Op. Cit.*, p. 353.

¹³⁰⁰ Hodge, B., & V. Mishra, 1990, *Op. Cit.*, p. x.

¹³⁰¹ National Gallery of Australia, (NGA), 2006, *Op. Cit.*

¹³⁰² NGA, 2006.

¹³⁰³ These work-shopped plays include 'The Keepers' by Bob Maza, Richard Walley's 'Coordah' and Eva Johnson's 'Murras'. See: Casey, M., 2004, *Op. Cit.*, p. 167. State Library of NSW, 2007, 'Aboriginal National Theatre Trust Ltd. Records', *Manuscripts, Oral History and Pictures*, online at: <<http://acms.sl.nsw.gov.au/item/itemDetailPaged.aspx?itemID=141261>>, viewed 06/03/2014.

Jimmy Chi's *Bran Nue Dae* which was workshopped at the conference held in 1989 at Macquarie University, Sydney.¹³⁰⁴

3.10 A '*Bran Nue Dae*' (1990)

Bran Nue Dae is credited as the first Indigenous Australian musical of note in the tradition of western musicals.¹³⁰⁵ It is an energetic blend of rock opera, song and dance all mixed in with liberal doses of humour and romance.¹³⁰⁶ Serious issues of importance to Indigenous people, such as land rights, sovereignty and historical injustices are all covered, although they are handled in a manner that is unique, memorable and often uplifting. Writer Jimmy Chi, an Asian-Indigenous man from Broome in Western Australia, along with the band, *Kuckles*, composed the songs that Chi later turned into a musical.¹³⁰⁷ The play was first performed by the non-Indigenous *West Australian Theatre Company* for the Festival of Perth in 1990, but included a predominantly Indigenous Australian cast.¹³⁰⁸ The play's script reveals that *Bran Nue Dae* is full of physical (often slapstick) comedy, dancing and catchy, satirical songs with cheeky lyrics.¹³⁰⁹ The upbeat dancing and singing about issues ordinarily considered serious and often negative provide a powerful physical incongruity that is both surprising and vivid. In addition, the script contains many Aboriginal English phrases which assert the validity of this kriol vocabulary.¹³¹⁰ Katherine Brisbane suggests that the play is as farfetched and "silly" as that of any European grand opera.¹³¹¹ In a classic 'road-trip' narrative the play follows a 1960s journey of Indigenous Australian teenager Willie. The narrative details Willie's expedition from a church-run school (an Indigenous boys' hostel) in Perth as he returns to his home in Broome, over 2,000 kilometers away. Willie's rite of passage journey is both physical and psychological as he discovers his heritage, his family, and his love for Rosie along the way. After helping himself to a few illicit Cherry Ripes and Cokes, Willie is expelled by Father Benedictus (or as the boys say, "Faada" – mocking his German accent), who castigates Willie in stereotypically harsh German tones: "You will never change: You are zer leedle Hitler! You are leading der boys astray."¹³¹² In defiant response, Willie dances and sings, bursting forth with a funny, catchy song:

There's nothing I would rather be
than to be an Aborigine

¹³⁰⁴ Bibby, P., 1991, 'Introduction' in Chi, J and Kuckles, 1991, *Bran Nue Dae, A musical journey, Jimmy Chi and Kuckles*, Currency Press Pty Ltd, Paddington, NSW and Magabala Books Aboriginal Corporation, Broome WA, p. viii.

¹³⁰⁵ Bibby, P., 1991, p. viii.

¹³⁰⁶ Chi, J., & Kuckles, 1991, *Op. Cit.*, 14.

¹³⁰⁷ Bibby, P. in Chi, J and Kuckles, 1991, *Op. Cit.*, p. vii.

¹³⁰⁸ Bibby, P. in Chi, J and Kuckles, 1991, p. viii.

¹³⁰⁹ Bibby, P. in Chi, J and Kuckles, 1991, p. viii.

¹³¹⁰ The term Aboriginal English is used as the preferred name given to the various kinds of English spoken by Indigenous Australian people throughout Australia. See: Eades, D., 2012, 'Aboriginal English' in *Language Varieties Website*, University New England, Armidale, NSW. Online at: <<http://www.hawaii.edu/satocenter/langnet/definitions/aboriginal.html>>, viewed 11/09/2014.

¹³¹¹ Brisbane, K., 1995, 'The Future in Black and White— Aboriginality in Recent Australian Drama' in *Selected Readings in Drama and Theatre Education: The IDEA '95 Papers*, NADIE Publications, Brisbane, p. 15.

¹³¹² Chi, J., & Kuckles, 1991, *Op. Cit.*, p. 15.

And watch you take my precious land away.
For nothing gives me greater joy than to
Watch you fill each girl and boy
With superficial existential shit.

Now you may think I'm cheeky
But I'd be satisfied
To rebuild your convict ships
And sail you on the tide.¹³¹³

In sardonic rhyme, this song challenges mainstream assimilation policies and non-Indigenous claims to sovereign rule of Australia. It voices what is often an unspoken Indigenous desire for non-Indigenous people to return to the place from which they came, as a form of mickey-taking, stress releasing humour.

After running away from school, Willie meets eccentric Uncle Tadpole who is, coincidentally, also from Broome. Tadpole wishes to return to his Country before he dies, as the hard life of droving and drinking that he took up after losing his wife to another man draws to an end.¹³¹⁴ On their journey back to Broome, Willie and Tadpole meet up with hippie German tourist 'Slippery' (Wolfgang) and his Australian girlfriend, 'Marijuana Annie'— two characters who typify the free-spirited, liberal ideals of young non-Indigenous backpackers. After a staged 'accident' in which this naïve couple is led to believe that they have run over Tadpole in their van, they agree to take him and Willie all the way to Broome. This incident cheekily references the familiar Australian stereotype of the cunning and inventive Indigenous Australian person, so also reappropriates a trope often used by non-Indigenous Australians as justification for punitive treatment of Aboriginal people. Following a stint in jail, the gang makes it to Broome, where a series of revelations and reunions occur. In a delightfully funny, ironic and particularly 'Indigenous' manner, we find out that, in the end, not only are most of the main cast members Indigenous Australians, but a number of them are actually related to one another: Tadpole is the long lost husband of Willie's mother and is also Willie's father; 'Slippery' is Willie's half-brother and Father Benedictus' son; and even Marijuana Annie is a 'stolen generations' Indigenous Australian, allowing the idea of a genuine reconciliation between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians to take on a very potent, personal, but hilarious tone. To top off the climax in which these farcical and happy reunions occur, the unrequited love between Willie and Rosie is also finally consummated in these scenes.

The script is filled with Aboriginal English phrases, such as 'What they bin doing to you my boy, they bin hit you!'¹³¹⁵ and the script's dialogue generates a comical yet authentic representation of Indigenous Australians in its parody of phonetic dialect. Politically sensitive references to alcoholism,

¹³¹³ Chi, J., & Kuckles, 1991, p. 15.

¹³¹⁴ Chi, J., & Kuckles, 1991, p. 17.

¹³¹⁵ Chi, J., & Kuckles, 1991, p. 19.

Indigenous forays into the penal system, and even dealings with social security are all mocked in the play, confirming Holt's argument that humour may be used to represent difficult truths that are hard to accept:

Humour is a brilliant vehicle for conveying those unpalatable truths that we all would prefer not to confront ... [because its]...power is that it is invariably invested with a sting of truth.¹³¹⁶

Again, the Indigenous tradition of taking-the-mickey out of social authority and 'serious' issues is noteworthy. Such mickey-taking liberties can be seen to have arisen in Indigenous theatre in the 1970s *Basically Black* pilot skit, which includes Maza's characterisation of a pretentious 'white' film producer.¹³¹⁷ Mickey-taking can also be seen in the early colonial Australian records of First Officer William Tench who recorded Indigenous Australians mocking and mimicking British pomposity and awkwardness in the Australian Bush.¹³¹⁸ Moreover, catchy, funny songs are frequently repeated and sung in moody styles to match their respective scenes. For example, the song 'Is U Mah Baby' is sung at one stage as a romantic love song; another as a mother's plea to find her child; and again, in German, when Father Benedictus and his son Wolfgang are reunited.

Such repetition reminds us of Bergson's suggestion that humour is found in habitual and simple contrivances.¹³¹⁹ Bergson observes how the light comedy of the early twentieth century often employed repetitious methods, which led characters to reproduce a series of incidents, or to re-experience a series of similar accidents in increasingly varied circumstances.¹³²⁰ We delight in such familiarity and 'coincidences', and especially in those that also include a twist or a surprise.¹³²¹

Frequent references to sex are scattered throughout the script, connecting this play to other Indigenous plays that use sexual issues to shock and surprise audiences. Moreover, Christian symbolism and Latin are mockingly teased, for example, incongruously likened to a well-known brand of soap:

BENEDICTUS: Ve are all angels und devils
 Creatures of darkness and bodies of light...
 Lux in Tenebris!

TADPOLE: What that, toilet soap?¹³²²

Father Benedictus' use of the Latin phrase 'Lux in Tenebris' also operates as a clever allusion to the farcical comedy of the same name, written by German playwright, Bertolt Brecht in the early

¹³¹⁶ Holt, L., 2009, 'Aboriginal humour: A conversational corroboree' in De Groen, F., & P. Kirkpatrick, (eds.), 2009, *Serious Frolic, Essays on Australian humour*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, QLD, p. 86.

¹³¹⁷ ABCTV, 1973, 'Basically Black', at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uTunYAlu6Rk>> viewed 08/01/2015.

¹³¹⁸ Clendinnen, I., 2003, *Dancing with Strangers*, Text Publishing, Melbourne, pp. 201–203.

¹³¹⁹ Bergson, H., [1911], 2005, Op. Cit., p. 38.

¹³²⁰ Bergson, H., [1911], 2005, p. 45.

¹³²¹ Bergson, H., [1911] 2005), pp. 44–45.

¹³²² Chi, J., & Kuckles, 1991, Op. Cit., p. 84.

1900s.¹³²³ According to Herbert Knust and Leonie Marx, Brecht's play mocks the biblical symbolism of darkness and light that distinguishes sinful from non-sinful acts, providing an ironic critique of (western) social corruption.¹³²⁴ *Bran Nue Dae* also shamelessly mocks the frequent use, primarily in western religious and legal arenas, of Latin. But such mockery is also a form of the characteristically belittling humour of Australians that, similar to mickey-taking, is colloquially known as 'cutting down the tall poppy' or as 'tall poppy syndrome.'¹³²⁵ This playfully irreverent humour implies that traditions such as the use of Latin are implicitly ostentatious. Milner Davis argues that such typically Australian styles of humour help to ensure that people do not impute to themselves any unwarranted airs and graces.¹³²⁶ 'Big-noting' and modes of pretentious self-regard are often ripe subjects for ridicule in Indigenous Australian comedy, indicating the form's familiarity with the well-known Australian egalitarian ideology of a 'fair go' for everyone.

It must be acknowledged however that although this upbeat, unrealistically utopian, play has been praised for its 'exuberance',¹³²⁷ especially in its latter film form (2009-2010),¹³²⁸ Germaine Greer argues that it is not actually a 'feelgood' script.¹³²⁹ Specifically referring to the film that is based on the original play script, Greer calls it a 'feelbad movie', pointing to the '[d]isparaging stereotypes of drunken licentious Aboriginal people' that are portrayed as 'both accurate and hilarious.'¹³³⁰ Such negative stereotypes of Aboriginal people particularly include the female characters, all of whom play minor roles. Female characters are often objectified as sexual objects, subservient to the male characters, (*Willie's girlfriend, Rosie, his mother, Theresa, and the flirtatious Roxanne*); or they are drug-riddled and/or vague (*Marijuana Annie and Roadhouse Betty*).

The title of the play itself, *Bran Nue Dae*, is made up of colloquial, phonetic words with multiple references – both to colonial attempts to impose a 'new reality' on First Australians; and to the hope that, in the end, we can all believe that a 'nue dae' will come in which reconciliation may be achieved. The reality of humour as a process through which self-actualisation and resilience may be achieved

¹³²³ Knust, H., & L. Marx, 1972, 'Abstract to Brecht's *Lux in Tenebris*' in *Monatshefte*, 65/2 (1972), np. Online at: <<http://www.jstor.org/discover/10.2307/30165102?uid=24241&uid=3737536&uid=2134&uid=2&uid=70&uid=3&uid=24240&uid=67&uid=62&uid=5909656&sid=21104677523513>> viewed 11/09/2014.

¹³²⁴ Knust, H., & L. Marx, 1972.

¹³²⁵ The 'tall poppy syndrome' refers to the propensity for egalitarian loving Australians to cut successful people and/or issues down a peg or two for fear that they might be considered overly elevated and important. This concept was made popular by NSW Premier Jack Lang in his 1934 parliamentary speech in which he referred to making some deserving 'tall poppies suffer'. See newspaper article: *Canberra Times*, 19/07/1934, 'The Premier's Plan: Signing by Mr Lang, admitted by party member', at: <<http://trove.nla.gov.au/ndp/del/article/2364407>> viewed 20/05/2014. Goddard, C., 2009, 'Not taking yourself too seriously in Australian English: Semantic explications, cultural scripts, corpus evidence', *Intercultural Pragmatics*, vol. 6-1, Walter de Gruyter, Berlin, pp. 30–31.

¹³²⁶ Milner-Davis, J., 2009, 'Aussie humour and laughter: Joking as an acculturating ritual', in De Groen, F., & P. Kirkpatrick, (eds.), 2009, *Op. Cit.*, p. 39.

¹³²⁷ Eccles, J., 07/02/1991, 'Bran Nue Dae, Sydney', *The Stage and Television Today (Archive: 1595–1994)*, p. 14.

¹³²⁸ Hawker, P., 20/05/2009, 'Bran Nue Dae to give International Film Festival an upbeat finale', *The Age*, Melbourne, p. 17.

¹³²⁹ Greer, G., 26/07/2010, 'It's clunky and full of stereotypes – but *Bran Nue Dae* still deserves a UK release', *The Guardian*, online at: <<https://www.theguardian.com/film/2010/jul/25/bran-nue-dae-germaine-greer>> viewed 25/08/2016.

¹³³⁰ Greer, G., 26/07/2010.

during life's journey is reinforced in this unique farce. Although the play is mostly interpreted as irreverently funny, its more ominous undercurrent also challenges the authority of colonisation and governmental assimilation policies. And such political themes can be seen as the major topic for much of the play's humour. While decidedly ambivalent in its humorous presentation, in the end, *Bran Nue Dae* constitutes a celebration of Indigenous Australian cultural survival and identity.

3.11 'Corrugation Road' (1996)

In 1996 Chi wrote another humorous 'feel-good' musical, again a story of reunited love, entitled *Corrugation Road*.¹³³¹ The play's story revolves around a wife's search for her missing husband, whom she finds in a psychiatric hospital, deeply depressed.¹³³² Having suffered from schizophrenia since his early 20s, Chi well understood the workings and frustrations of psychiatric treatment.¹³³³ Once again, he chose to turn a potentially negative experience into a funny celebration for his protagonist, 'Bob Two Bob', on his 'bumpy' (corrugated) journey through mental illness. Once again humour can be seen as a form of stress reduction for socially unpalatable issues.

As in *Bran Nue Dae*, the play's dialogue is enhanced by songs that take-the-mickey out of the social authority of religious institutions like Christianity, and the health profession. It mocks the psychiatric profession via 'Dr Fruitcake' and 'Dr Basketcase':

He's a Modern Doctor of Psychiatry
And He's trained in Freudian psychotherapy
And when something works he says "bugger me"
He's a Modern Doctor of Psychiatry.¹³³⁴

Chi uses a combination of funny songs and Aboriginal, Greek and Irish dancing to canvass the notion of multicultural unity in the play.¹³³⁵ Ultimately, like Sisyphus who faced torment with such stoicism that Camus was able to pronounce him 'happy';¹³³⁶ the mentally ill characters in this work suggests that one can existentially laugh at life's difficulties, thereby negating the stress associated with its difficulties and demands. And, moreover, hardships are best faced with the support of family, friends and the community.

¹³³¹ Collins, B., 06/10/2014, 'Aboriginal playwright and composer Jimmy Chi on the strength to live with mental illness', *ABC Kimberley*. Online at: <<http://www.abc.net.au/local/photos/2014/10/03/4100197.htm>> viewed 12/10/2014.

¹³³² Chi, J., Pigram Brothers, Kuckles & Friends, 1996, *Corrugation Road Music CD*, Angoorabin Records, Broome, WA.
Radic, L., 2006, *Contemporary Australian Drama*, Brandl & Schlesinger, Blackheath, NSW, p. 192.

¹³³³ Casey, M., 2004, Op. Cit. p. 183.

¹³³⁴ Chi, J., Pigram Brothers, Kuckles & Friends, 1996, Op. Cit.

¹³³⁵ Radic, L., 2006, Op. Cit., p. 193.

¹³³⁶ Camus, A., [1942] 1971, *The Myth of Sisyphus and other essays*, trans. O'Brian, J., Hamish Hamilton Ltd., London, UK.

Corrugation Road was produced by Black Swan Theatre, directed by Andrew Ross, and premiered in Perth in 1996.¹³³⁷ Black Swan won the prestigious ‘Age Critics Award’ for its performance.¹³³⁸ Later, a revised version of the play toured four states and the Northern Territory.¹³³⁹

Even though plays like *Bran Nue Dae* and *Corrugation Road* provided Indigenous theatre a significantly greater mainstream presence and wider audiences, the few independent Indigenous theatre initiatives that had been created in the 1980s ultimately closed.¹³⁴⁰ However, the seeds had been sown for greater Indigenous presence in the Australian theatre of the 1990s.¹³⁴¹

3.12 Nationally important imperatives for Indigenous Theatre in the 1990s

In the socio-political climate of the 1990s, many publically esteemed Australians vocalised challenges to the validity of Australia’s colonised history in relation to non-Indigenous authority to occupy the country and its past treatment of Indigenous people. These ‘history-war’¹³⁴² challenges were exacerbated by the Federal Labor Government’s promotion of the need for reconciliation between non-Indigenous and Indigenous Australians.¹³⁴³ Reconciliation proved to be a continuing impetus for Indigenous theatre productions that often told Aboriginal stories of dispossession and poor treatment at the hands of its colonisers.¹³⁴⁴ In turn, Aboriginal performance strengthened in its ability to expand Australia’s socio-political discourse by bringing an Indigenous perspective on our history, and humour was often a significant aspect of their stories.

Moreover, by 1994 the Keating Labor Government had developed Australia’s first ever cultural policy, *Creative Nation*, that recognised how important culture and the arts were to Australia’s

¹³³⁷ Iemma, C., 06/05/2013, personal communication with Black Swan Theatre Companies’ Artistic Director.

¹³³⁸ Iemma, C., 06/05/2013.

¹³³⁹ Radic, L., 2006, Op. Cit. p. 193.

¹³⁴⁰ This included *Marli Biyol Theatre Company* in WA that closed in 1990 and the *ANTT* that folded in 1991. See: Casey, M., 2004, Op. Cit., pp. 194–195.

¹³⁴¹ Casey, M., 2004, p. 195.

¹³⁴² Termed the ‘culture wars’ or ‘history wars’, these challenges stemmed from an article historian Dr Geoffrey Blainey wrote in *Quadrant Magazine* in 1993 in which he suggested that Australians had taken on a ‘black arm-band’ view of history, and in fact, Indigenous people had not been treated as poorly in colonial Australia as other historians (such as Professor Manning Clark and Henry Reynolds) had suggested. See: Blainey, G. 1993, ‘Drawing up a balance sheet of our history’, *Quadrant Magazine*, v. 37, no. 7/8, Sydney. Prime Minister John Howard joined the bandwagon by supporting these claims in his 1996 Sir Robert Menzies Lecture in which he said: “*The 'black armband' view of our history reflects a belief that most Australian history since 1788 has been little more than a disgraceful story of imperialism, exploitation, racism, sexism and other forms of discrimination. [...] I believe that the balance sheet of our history is one of heroic achievement and that we have achieved much more as a nation of which we can be proud than of which we should be ashamed.*” Howard, J., 1996, ‘The Liberal Tradition. The Beliefs and Values which guide the Federal Government’, ‘Sir Robert Menzies Lecture’ online at: <<http://www.menzieslecture.org/1996.html>> viewed 04/09/2014.

¹³⁴³ ‘The Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation’ (CAR) is an independent not-for-profit organization established in 1991 in attempt to reach concrete decisions by 2001 on how best to make amends for the past and to recognise the contributions of Indigenous Australians to the nation. See: Federal Government, 1991, ‘Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation Act’ - C2004A04202, online at: <<https://www.comlaw.gov.au/Details/C2004A04202>> viewed 12/09/2014. When this council was disbanded, the Federal Government established the ‘Reconciliation Australian’ organisation in 2001. See: Reconciliation Australia, nd., ‘Homepage’, <<http://www.reconciliation.org.au/>> viewed 12/09/2014.

¹³⁴⁴ Glow, H., & K. Johanson, 2009, ‘Your Genre is Black: Indigenous Performing Arts and Policy’, *Platform Papers, Quarterly Essays on the Performing Arts*, No. 19, January 2009, p. 22.

economy, since they generated \$13 billion per year and employed around 336,000 Australians in related industries.¹³⁴⁵ Additionally, the 1991 Royal Commission into Aboriginal Deaths in Custody, (enhanced by the subsequent 1997 National Inquiry into Stolen Generations), recognised that cultural participation was significant to the social and economic well-being of Indigenous communities too.¹³⁴⁶ *Creative Nation* allocated \$250 million in additional funding to various cultural institutions. This included grants to many Aboriginal arts ventures as they were important to Australia's international economy, national cohesion, and as a 'significant step in the reconciliation process' it promoted.¹³⁴⁷

Prior to this, beginning in the early 1980s several well publicised legal claims for land ownership had been fiercely contested in Australia's courts by the Meriam people of Mer Island in the Torres Strait.¹³⁴⁸ In 1992, their ownership was finally recognised.¹³⁴⁹ Following this, a new *Native Title Act 1993* was passed by the Federal Parliament that enabled Indigenous people throughout Australia rights to claim traditional land ownership; albeit with limitations in relation to burden of proof issues.¹³⁵⁰ Known by the eponymous term 'Mabo', they had major ramifications in Australian nationhood debates; it provided further opportunity for Australians to consider Indigenous socio-political positioning within the nation.¹³⁵¹ This decision was extended in 1996 by a further case known as the 'Wik Decision' where Australia's High Court decided that pastoral leases did not automatically extinguish native title rights— another important challenge to the veracity of Australia's nationhood.¹³⁵²

The 1997 International Human Rights Commission Inquiry, and subsequent report, into the practice of removing Aboriginal children from their families' added fuel to the fire of these legitimacy debates.¹³⁵³ Indigenous Australians became the unwilling victims of the rebuffing of culpability by many non-Indigenous Australians who, like Australia's Prime Minister, John Howard,¹³⁵⁴ believed

¹³⁴⁵ Federal Government/Australian Policy Online (APO.Org), 30/10/1994, 'Creative Nation: Commonwealth cultural policy', *Office for the Arts*, October 1994, at: <<http://apo.org.au/research/creative-nation-commonwealth-cultural-policy-october-1994>> viewed 29/10/2014.

¹³⁴⁶ Glow, H., & K. Johanson, 2009, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 19–21.

¹³⁴⁷ Federal Government/Australian Policy Online (APO.Org), 30/10/1994, *Op. Cit.*, p. 21. Glow, H., & K. Johanson, 2009, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 20–21.

¹³⁴⁸ Museum of Australian Democracy, (MAD), nd. 'Documenting a Democracy— Mabo v Queensland No. 2 1992 (Cwlth)' at Foundingdocs.gov.au/item-did-33.html viewed 29/5/2013.

¹³⁴⁹ MAD, nd.

¹³⁵⁰ MAD, nd.

¹³⁵¹ Glow, H., 2007, *Power Plays: Australian Theatre and the Public Agenda*, Currency Press, Strawberry Hills, NSW, p. 22.

¹³⁵² High Court of Australia 1996, *Wik Peoples v Queensland*, ("Pastoral Leases Case") [1996], 187 Commonwealth Law Reports, 1, viewed 01/06/2013 online < <http://www.austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/sinodisp/au/cases/cth/HCA/1996/40.html>>.

¹³⁵³ Calma, T., 13/02/1997, Human Rights and Equal Opportunity Commission Report, *Bringing Them Home: National Inquiry into the Separation of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Children from their Families*. At:

<https://www.humanrights.gov.au/sites/default/files/content/pdf/social_justice/bringing_them_home_report.pdf> viewed 02/04/2014.

¹³⁵⁴ Liberal politician, John Howard, was Australia's Prime Minister for 11 years from March 1996 to December 2007.

that contemporary Australians had nothing to be ashamed of in treatment of them.¹³⁵⁵ Howard did not share Keating's ideological vision about the importance of Aboriginal participation in Australia's cultural life; yet regardless, federal cultural policy was maintained with an emphasis on Indigenous arts as an important form of national cultural capital.¹³⁵⁶

Additionally, a significant backlash of Anglo-Australian nationalism and xenophobia dominated Australia's political culture of the 1990s, calling for racial homogeneity based on representations of 'ordinary Aussies' – these being white and middle class.¹³⁵⁷ The imperative for Indigenous people to tell a wider Australian (and world) audience about their experiences of living in a colonised country seemed more important than ever. More than ever, Indigenous Australian artists used their work to emphasise their pride in the uniqueness of their cultures, to refute denialist perspectives of their history, and to humanise the face of their struggles. Although at times they faced some bleak and sombre issues, once again, humour was used as one of the essential tools to help them achieve this aim.

3.13 Aboriginal artistic response to 1990s cultural challenges

In parallel with these complex and often contradictory socio-political issues, the 1990s was an era when some significant Indigenous woman playwrights emerged, asserting their own subjectivities and providing complexity of voice in Australian theatrical discourse. Casey notes that Indigenous women's writing 'contested and confronted' mainstream representations of them as passive, powerless victims.¹³⁵⁸ In 1991 author and visual artist Sally Morgan wrote her first script, *Sistergirl*, encouraged by veteran Indigenous playwright, Jack Davis.¹³⁵⁹ Morgan's play was written in collaboration with her musician-brother, David Milroy.¹³⁶⁰ It was first performed for the 40th Anniversary of the Festival of Perth in 1992.¹³⁶¹ This performance was co-directed by her and non-Indigenous director Andrew Ross, and performed by members of the Black Swan Theatre Company, including seasoned Indigenous actor Jack Charles playing humorously 'lecherous' black stud, Tommy.¹³⁶² Whist the script to this play has been suppressed out of respect for the death of one of its

¹³⁵⁵ See footnote above for PM Howard's 1996 Sir Robert Menzies' speech regarding the positive nature of Australian colonialism.

¹³⁵⁶ Glow, H., 2007, Op. Cit., p. 22.

¹³⁵⁷ Glow, H., 2007, p. 77.

¹³⁵⁸ Casey, M., 2005, 'A Compelling Force: Indigenous Women Playwrights' in Fenshaw, R. et al, 2005, *The Dolls' Revolution, Australian Theatre and Cultural Imagination*, Australian Scholarly Publishing, Melbourne, Victoria, p. 212.

¹³⁵⁹ Lorrie, V., 23/10/1999, 'An Interview with Sally Morgan', *Unionsverlag*, (Morgan is also the renowned author of *My Place*, 1987, a myriad of children's books, and an acclaimed visual artist). See:

<www.unionsverlag.com/info/link_id=6000&pers_id=91&pic=../portrait/MorganSally.jpg&tit=SallyMorgan> viewed 01/06/2013.

¹³⁶⁰ Radic, L., 2006, *Contemporary Australian Drama*, Brandl & Schlesinger, Blackheath, NSW, p. 190.

¹³⁶¹ Lorrie, V., 23/10/1999, Op. Cit.

¹³⁶² Collett, A., 03/03/1992, 'Wicked old girls' *The Bulletin*, Australian Consolidated Press, Sydney, p. 105.

cast members,¹³⁶³ reviews discuss its content. They particularly note Morgan's distinctive use of humour to expose the trials and stoic nature of Aboriginal people.¹³⁶⁴

Radic says that on one level, the play is an exhilarating and robust comedy, but it is through the laughter that a 'heart-rending tale' of loss and tragedy is revealed.¹³⁶⁵ It is set in the alcohol recovery ward of a hospital with two rather obstreperous older female characters— Rosie, a dying diabetic Aboriginal woman, and, the initially prim, Irish, Miss Murphy.¹³⁶⁶ The play is acknowledged by Katharine Brisbane as one of the first Indigenous scripts to successfully create a 'rounded' white character.¹³⁶⁷ Murphy's eventual camaraderie and equality with black protagonist, Rosie, symbolically points to a level playing field for reconciliation between the two races.¹³⁶⁸ At first the women bicker amusingly, yet, as the night grows longer, and with the help of a bottle of gin, Rosie's deep sadness at the removal of her baby and subsequent death of her estranged 16 year old daughter is revealed.¹³⁶⁹

The intentionally humorous way in which the play leads into the politically controversial issue of Aboriginal children having been taken from their parents provides another example of the way in which Indigenous artists so distinctively use humorous tactics to respond to socio-political issues relevant to their lives that may be unknown, misunderstood, and even denied, in the mainstream.¹³⁷⁰ The intense poignancy of Rosie's story is undercut by the comedic, often slapstick elements of the play as the women verbally spar with one another and their nurse, flout hospital rules, and even dance a mock corroboree.¹³⁷¹ This is a method of telling audiences about a significant issue that was not fully revealed to mainstream Australia until publication of a Human Rights Commission Report into the issue years later.¹³⁷² Although similar tactics have been used by subsequent Indigenous performers to tell stories about the effects of this emotional issue on Aboriginal people,¹³⁷³ at the time of this play this would have been quite new to many non-Indigenous audiences.

¹³⁶³ Australia Council for the Arts, nd., 'Sally Morgan', Online at:

<http://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0005/32378/aia_entire.pdf> viewed 2/6/2013.

¹³⁶⁴ Banks, R., 15/02/1992, 'Morgan creates magical world of bed and bawd', *The West Australian*, p. 40. Collet, A., 1992, Op. Cit. Farmer, A., 1992, 'Exhilarating treatment', *The Australian*, 17/02/1992, p. 10.

¹³⁶⁵ Radic, L., 2006, Op. Cit., pp. 190–191.

¹³⁶⁶ Farmer, A., 1992, Op. Cit., p. 10.

¹³⁶⁷ Brisbane, K., 2000, 'Indigenous theatre: The future in black and white in Australia Council for the Arts', 2000, *Australia's Indigenous Arts booklet* produced for 8th Festival of Pacific Arts, p. 6, online at:

<http://www.australiacouncil.gov.au/__data/assets/pdf_file/0005/32378/aia_entire.pdf> viewed 02/04/2014.

¹³⁶⁸ Brisbane, K., 2000, p. 6.

¹³⁶⁹ Radic, L., 2006, Op. Cit., p. 191.

¹³⁷⁰ Radic, L., 2006, p. 191.

¹³⁷¹ Radic, L., 2006, p. 191.

¹³⁷² Calma, T., 13/02/1997, Op. Cit.

¹³⁷³ Harrison, J., 2002 [1998], 'Stolen', Currency Press, Strawberry Hills, NSW. Cheetham, D., nd. [1997], 'Synopsis of White Baptist Abba Fan', at: <http://www.deborahcheetham.com/white_baptist_abba_fan> viewed 2/04/2014.

Amongst the frivolity, the two ‘wicked old girls’ provide consolation and comfort to one another as women and equals, referencing a common humanity.¹³⁷⁴ Audience reactions to the play are noted as ‘paralytic with laughter’ yet the sensitive, often contested, nature of its subject matter left ‘many in tears at the end of the performance. *Sistergirl* reveals how effectively an Indigenous artist, like Morgan, can use humour to approach such disturbing issues.¹³⁷⁵ This play had four weeks of sell-out performances in Perth before commencing a highly successful tour in Adelaide, Darwin, Alice Springs and Sydney.¹³⁷⁶ As Freud suggests, by means of the use of humour, people are able to more successfully overcome distressing situations.¹³⁷⁷ Humour is a special quality that is found in people of strong character, who are able to overcome adversity and seek comedic relief from situations that might otherwise drive them to the serious depths of despair.¹³⁷⁸ Moreover, humour of stress release is found in traditional Aboriginal artistic expressions.

Indigenous plays created during the 1980s and early 1990s, brought Indigenous theatre greater mainstream recognition and also helped to lay the foundations for the establishment of Indigenous theatre companies that were formed in the 1990s, including Perth’s Yirra Yaakin Noongar Theatre Company, Illbjerri Theatre Company in Melbourne, and Kooemba Jdarra in Brisbane – all of which remain viable entities today.¹³⁷⁹ These newly formed companies showcased the diversity of Aboriginal cultures and experiences for mainstream audiences, dispelling myths about the existence of one homogenised Aboriginal culture.¹³⁸⁰ They also effectively established creative control of theatre productions for Indigenous Australian artists.¹³⁸¹ And most importantly, they continue to diversify Australia’s cultural discourse with the unique Aboriginal qualities and perspectives they bring.

In addition to the formation of specific Indigenous companies, arts management opportunities expanded with Melbourne’s Swinburne University commencing an Indigenous Performing Arts Course (SIPA) in the early 1990s.¹³⁸² SIPA was designed to provide Aboriginal students with the skills to plan and manage performances, preparing them for Arts administration careers;¹³⁸³ and in

¹³⁷⁴ Collet, A., 1992, Op. Cit. p. 105, Casey, M., 2005, Op. Cit., p. 214.

¹³⁷⁵ Farmer, A., 1991, p. 10.

¹³⁷⁶ Casey, M., 2005, Op. Cit., p. 214.

¹³⁷⁷ Freud, S., [1905], 2002, Op. Cit., p. 223.

¹³⁷⁸ Freud, S., [1905], 2002, p. 223.

¹³⁷⁹ Casey, M., 2004, Op. Cit., p. 195. *Illbjerri Theatre Company* was established in 1990, see: <<http://ilbjerri.com.au/>> viewed 06/03/2014. *Yirra Yaakin Noongar Theatre Company* was established in 1993, see: <https://yirrayaakin.com.au/> viewed 06/03/2014. *Kooemba Jdarra Indigenous Performing Arts Company* was also established in 1993, see: <<http://theatrenetwork.com/ads/kooemba-jdarra-indigenous-performing-arts/>> viewed 06/03/2014.

¹³⁸⁰ Glow, H., 2007, Op. Cit., p. 22.

¹³⁸¹ Casey, M., 2004, Op. Cit., p. 195.

¹³⁸² Swinburne University of Technology, 2001, ‘Course Guide Book, Diploma of Arts: Small Companies and Community Theatre’, Prahran Campus, p. 92. Online at: <http://www.swinburne.edu.au/lib/coursehandbooks/CG_TUG_2001.pdf> viewed 08/09/2015. Email from Wakefield, K. To Austin, K., 08/09/2015, Swinburne University of Technology’s SIPA course.

¹³⁸³ Swinburne University of Technology, 2001, Op. Cit.

Brisbane, with support from state and federal governments, the Aboriginal Centre for Performing Arts (ACPA) was established in 1997.¹³⁸⁴

3.14 Achievements of the 1990s– ‘The Seven Stages of Grieving’

Under the artistic direction of Wesley Enoch, a Minjerribah man from Stradbroke Island,¹³⁸⁵ the Brisbane based Indigenous theatre company, *Kooemba Jdarra Indigenous Performing Arts*, staged *The Seven Stages of Grieving* in 1995, a play that toured nationally in 1996.¹³⁸⁶ Following its successful Australian tour, the play went to London and Zurich in 1997.¹³⁸⁷ The script is a one-woman performance by Deborah Mailman, written by Enoch and Mailman herself. Mailman is an actress of Indigenous Australian (Bidjara) and New Zealand Maori descent.¹³⁸⁸ Both she and co-author Enoch graduated from Queensland University of Technology with Bachelor Degrees in Performing Arts in 1993.¹³⁸⁹

The play’s title and themes borrow from Elisabeth Kübler-Ross’s seminal 1969 book *On Death and Dying*, which proposes the five psychological stages of grief experienced by the terminally ill in their journey towards death.¹³⁹⁰ But Kübler-Ross’s formulation was reconfigured so as to express the seven phases of Indigenous Australian history: namely, Dreaming, Invasion, Genocide, Protection, Assimilation, Self Determination, and Reconciliation.¹³⁹¹ The play takes audiences on an emotional journey through an Indigenous Australian ‘everywoman’s’ grief in the face of the deaths of her family members, mirroring the historical ‘death’ and ‘grief’ experienced by Indigenous communities more broadly. Despite her hardships, the woman reflects warmly on her life and hard experiences, acknowledging Indigenous peoples’ propensity to ... ‘cry, laugh, and tell their stories together.’¹³⁹² This positivity sets the scene for the use of humour by Indigenous Australian people as a self-creating and empowering life attitude. As Kennedy observes of much Indigenous humour, “[i]f you didn’t laugh, you’d bloody well have to cry.”¹³⁹³ The dialogue is presented as a traditional yarn, involving many elements of the storytelling genre, including allegorical metaphors.¹³⁹⁴ This manner of

¹³⁸⁴ Milne, G., 2010, Op. Cit., p. 150, p. 160. See also: ACPA, nd., ‘About Aboriginal Centre for Performing Arts’, at: <<http://acpa.net.au/about>> viewed 08/09/2015.

¹³⁸⁵ HLA Management, nd., ‘Wesley Enoch’ at: <<http://www.hlamgt.com.au/client/wesley-enocho/>> viewed 06/03/2014.

¹³⁸⁶ Enoch, W., & D. Mailman, [1996] 2002, ‘A History of Kooemba Jdarra’ in *The Seven Stages of Grieving* (3rd ed.), Playlab Press, Fortitude Valley, Queensland, pp. 26–27.

¹³⁸⁷ Enoch, W and D. Mailman, [1996] 2002, p. 34.

¹³⁸⁸ IMDb, nd., ‘Deborah Mailman– Biography’, at: <<http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0537648/>> viewed 06/03/2014.

¹³⁸⁹ IMDb, nd.

¹³⁹⁰ Kübler-Ross, E., [1969] 1970, *On Death and Dying*, Tavistock, London, UK.

¹³⁹¹ Enoch, W., & D. Mailman, [1996] 2002, Op. Cit., back cover.

¹³⁹² Enoch, W., & D. Mailman, [1996] 2002, back cover.

¹³⁹³ Kennedy, G., 2009, Op. Cit., p. 14.

¹³⁹⁴ Prior to English colonisation, all Indigenous Australian cultures had oral language traditions. These oral traditions incorporated a storytelling genre, frequently labelled ‘Dreaming stories’ by non-Indigenous Australians who grappled to understand these complex, often lengthy, narratives. Indigenous stories encompass messages about creation, morality, laws, rights and responsibilities for living in communities and are still integral elements in some traditional societies. See

conveying information to audiences is inclusive, forming a relatively unthreatening tool through which Indigenous performers may canvass their perspective on justice and injustice to audiences without the appearance of moral condemnation. Tragic issues are frequently doused in ironic humour, providing a poignant sense of paradox and incongruity. Mockery and superiority are used in humorous teasing about English colonisation, providing a form of release for Indigenous people from a range of social injustices. Self-deprecating humour indicates the ongoing racism that is faced by Indigenous Australians in this country.

Freud suggests that to understand the complete gambit of pleasure that self-directed humour can provide, we must first understand what it does to listeners – or, in this case, the audience.¹³⁹⁵ Freud claims that listeners might expect tellers (here Indigenous performers) to show signs of affect from their experience of certain injustices: they may be expected to get angry, complain or otherwise express despair.¹³⁹⁶ However, Freud notes that by using humour instead, such expectations are disappointed.¹³⁹⁷ Rather than express negative or judgmental emotions, Indigenous performers make jokes. As Freud claims, “There is no doubt that the essence of humour is that one spares oneself the affects to which the situation would naturally give rise and dismisses the possibility of such expressions of emotion with a jest.”¹³⁹⁸ The surprising and incongruous operations of humour enable audiences to process unpalatable issues without experiencing guilt or defensiveness. On experiencing such a surprising response, suggests Freud, the listener or audience is given permission to follow suit and to experience a more relaxed form of pleasure in the performance.¹³⁹⁹ Humour here represents a metaphorical olive branch, warranting a respectable mediation between Indigenous performers and their audiences. A humorous example from the *Seven Stages of Grieving* in relation to initial arrival of European colonists demonstrates the effect:

1788

“Oi. Hey, you! Don’t you be waving back at me! Yeh, you with that hat! You can’t park here, eh! You’re taking up the whole bloody harbour! Just get in your boat and go. Go on, go on get!”¹⁴⁰⁰

Audiences are invited to laugh at this sassy vocabulary, which appears familiar and quotidian to their ears, echoing the directions of a parking inspector. But this joke also underscores the contentious issue of colonisation (or invasion), which had been exacerbated by the ‘history wars’ of the 1990s. While

Behrendt, L., 2012, ‘Indigenous Literature: We’ve Always Been Storytellers’ in Behrendt, L., 2012, *Indigenous Australia for Dummies*, Wiley Publishing Australia Pty Ltd, Milton, QLD, pp. 293–4.

¹³⁹⁵ Freud, S., [1927] 1964, ‘Humour’ in *The Complete Psychological Works of Sigmund Freud, v.XXI (1927-31)*, Clark, Irwin & Co. Ltd, Toronto, Canada, p. 162.

¹³⁹⁶ Freud, S., [1927] 1964, p. 162.

¹³⁹⁷ Sigmund Freud, S., [1927] 1964, p. 162.

¹³⁹⁸ Freud, S., [1927] 1964, p. 162.

¹³⁹⁹ Freud, S., [1927] 1964, p. 162.

¹⁴⁰⁰ Enoch, W., & D. Mailman, [1996] 2002, p. 50.

the parodic presentation of the issue is humorous, the exchange also goes to the heart of continuing Indigenous land rights and sovereignty debates.

On the question of identity, audiences of the *Seven Stages of Grieving* can laugh at a matter that has been the ongoing cause of shame and embarrassment of many Indigenous Australian people: the colour of their skin. As Mailman's character asks at one point,

Have you ever been black? You know when you wake up one morning and you're black? Happened to me this morning. I was in the bathroom, looking in the mirror, "Hey, nice hair, beautiful black skin, white shiny teeth ... I'm BLACK!"¹⁴⁰¹

With mickey-taking irony, Mailman's persona suggests that many Indigenous Australian people have felt the need to deny and hide their Indigenous heritage in order to avoid discrimination and racism. Referencing a well-known, and arguably overused, term in contemporary Australian political context – 'reconciliation' – *The Seven Stages of Grieving* features Mailman's character's recital of a poem of that title:

The boats are ready for departure, if you don't want to stay.
A **Wreck** on arrival,
A changing flag,
A **Con**,
A **Silly** pride for sale,
My **Nation** knows my identity,
A sun,
A land,
A people, travelling.
What a mess.¹⁴⁰²

As the poem is read, such punning and homophonous words as 'Wreck', 'Con', 'Silly', and 'Nation' are also projected onto a large screen. As a term that is easily recognised by Australian audiences, 'reconciliation' reminds those familiar with the reconciliation debate of recent Federal Government attempts to evoke national harmony between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians.¹⁴⁰³ This word-play sarcastically exploits the deployment of 'reconciliation' in current government marketing and policymaking documents, making it an emblem among references to a series of terms used in governmental attempts to deal with the breakdown of relationships between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians. The purpose of such humour is, as Morreall notes of much political humour, to undermine and subvert such governmental propaganda.¹⁴⁰⁴ Once again, the use of current socio-

¹⁴⁰¹ Enoch, W., & D. Mailman, [1996] 2002, p. 52.

¹⁴⁰² Enoch, W., & D. Mailman, [1996] 2002, Op. Cit., p. 69.

¹⁴⁰³ 'The Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation' was established by the Australian Federal Government in 1991. See: <<http://pals.daa.wa.gov.au/en/Reconciliation/Reconciliation-Australia/>> viewed 12/09/2014. When this council was disbanded, the Federal Government established the 'Reconciliation Australian' organisation in 2001. See: <<http://www.reconciliation.org.au/>> viewed 12/09/2014.

¹⁴⁰⁴ Morreall, J., 2009, 'Humour and the Conduct of Politics' in Lockyer, S., and M. Pickering, (eds.), 2009, *Beyond a Joke – The Limits of Humour*, Macmillan Publishers Limited, Basingstoke, Hampshire, p.80.

political issues as humour themes is a very discernible aspect of this Indigenous performance. By and large, the play suggests that in the face of overwhelming colonised sadness and grief, Indigenous people are still able to laugh and thus to survive the injustice of living in a largely bigoted country.¹⁴⁰⁵ Humour is, as Freud explains, a triumph of narcissism, which enables the victorious assertion of the ego's invulnerability. *The Seven Stages of Grieving* demonstrates how Indigenous egos refuse to be distressed by the provocations of reality, expressing the resistance to all and any temptation to wallow in suffering.¹⁴⁰⁶

3.15 Indigenous artists' participation in 'The Festival of Dreaming' (1997)

The Seven Stages of Grieving was originally produced for one of Australia's most significant artistic events, *The Festival of Dreaming*.¹⁴⁰⁷ In the lead-up to the Sydney 2000 Olympic Games, Australia staged various cultural events, including a series of annual festivals that were held all over the country from 1997 until 2000.¹⁴⁰⁸ Directed by Bundjalung woman, Rhoda Roberts,¹⁴⁰⁹ Sydney's Olympic Arts Festival series included *The Festival of Dreaming* as a celebration of world Indigenous peoples.¹⁴¹⁰ Staged in September–October of 1997, it encompassed traditional visual arts, dancing, singing, and story-telling from seven hundred world Indigenous artists, and included the biggest display of Indigenous Australian performing arts ever showcased.¹⁴¹¹ It also incorporated a pivotal *Wimmin's business* series of plays, which comprised seven monodramas about Indigenous Australian, Maori, and Native American women's lives.¹⁴¹²

The festival's Indigenous Australian plays, like much work by Indigenous artists of the time, focused on the telling of personal narratives to mainstream audiences. This tactic of personalising Indigenous narratives continues to evoke a level of accountability from audiences as they are bought face-to-face with a 'real,' living, breathing Indigenous Australian: a person who has faced the hardship of bigotry and suffering in her or his life.¹⁴¹³ Although these works are often morally challenging, humour is a very significant element of them, allowing the performer to soften the harsh reality of their character's (and often also the actor's) lived experience.

¹⁴⁰⁵ Enoch, W., & D. Mailman, [1996] 2002, Op. Cit., p. 16.

¹⁴⁰⁶ Freud, S., [1927] 1964, Op. Cit., p. 162.

¹⁴⁰⁷ Enoch, W., & D. Mailman, [1996] 2002, Op. Cit., inside cover.

¹⁴⁰⁸ Trove, National Library of Australia, nd., 'Posters from the 1997 Olympic arts festival, Festival of Dreaming' at: <<http://trove.nla.gov.au/work/27889794?q&versionId=33674135>> viewed 06/03/2014.

¹⁴⁰⁹ National Library of Australia, 01/01/2010, 'Sydney 2000 Olympics Arts Festivals (1997–2000)', *Trove database*, online at: <<http://trove.nla.gov.au/list?id=1219>> viewed 06/03/2014. Adjrun, R., 31/03/2012, 'Interview with Artistic Director, Rhoda Roberts' *ABC-Radio National Away!* online at: <<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/away/saturday-31st-march/3921226>> viewed 06/03/2014.

¹⁴¹⁰ National Library of Australia, 01/01/2010.

¹⁴¹¹ National Library of Australia, 01/01/ 2010. Casey, M., 2004, Op. Cit. pp. 246-247.

¹⁴¹² Gilbert, H., & J. Lo, 2007, Op. Cit., p. 66.

¹⁴¹³ Watson, C., 2000, 'Believe me: Acts of Witnessing in Aboriginal Women's Autobiographical Narratives', *Journal of Australian Studies*, v.24:64, p. 143.

3.16 'Box the Pony' (1997)

Another successful Indigenous play from this series, *Box the Pony*, was co-written by Indigenous writer and actress, Leah Purcell, and non-Indigenous playwright, Scott Rankin.¹⁴¹⁴ Playing at the Sydney Opera House in September 1997, *Box the Pony* is a semi-biographical representation of Purcell's life, a narrative in which, after growing up in Murgon Queensland, she 'escapes' to Sydney as a young adult.¹⁴¹⁵ Purcell plays all seventeen characters, including main protagonist Steff, her mother Flo, Nanna Daisy, a range of nameless male characters, herself, and even a cow, delivering her story in a feisty, animated, stand-up comedic style.¹⁴¹⁶ Purcell narrates the story and speaks the dialogue as the narrative jumps from past to present in a format that keeps audiences 'on its toes,' covering such difficult socio-political issues as racism, alcoholism, poverty, ill-health, and violence. These serious themes are veiled, however, with a sharp and subversive wit that helps Purcell to face them without sentimentality and with much humour. Describing herself as "a bit of a joker," Purcell uses humour as an important element of her work.¹⁴¹⁷ As Purcell explains, humour was integral to *Box the Pony's* appeal, inviting audience's to identify with Indigenous issues through generating unusual responses.¹⁴¹⁸ As Purcell reflected on the play: "[i]t was jokes, more jokes... and then next minute you're down into this big issue ... And then the audience thinks, well if they're laughing about this stuff, then I can join them."¹⁴¹⁹

Bergson has written that in order to produce comedy, a person must undergo a temporary numbing, or an 'anesthesia of the heart.'¹⁴²⁰ Expressing sadness or anger at the injustices of colonial Indigenous experiences could evoke in audiences feelings such as guilt, anger and rejection. These negative emotions could effectively prevent mainstream audiences from comprehending alternative Indigenous perspectives of Australia's history, and stop them hearing about the experiences of life for Indigenous Australians in this country. The comic pursuit, Bergson believes, is an intellectual, and not an emotional, enterprise.¹⁴²¹ Indigenous performers, such as Purcell, specifically put aside their sadness or anger in order to elicit a less threatening and a more humorous response in their audiences about Indigenous affairs. Purcell appreciates that mainstream audiences are infinitely more receptive to an Aboriginal perspective when it is presented in a humorous yarn rather than in condemnatory terms.

¹⁴¹⁴ Rankin, S., & L. Purcell, [1997] 2008, *Box the Pony*, Hodder Headline Australia Pty Ltd, Sydney, NSW.

¹⁴¹⁵ Rankin, S & L. Purcell, [1997] 2008, n.p, inside cover.

¹⁴¹⁶ Rankin, S & L. Purcell, [1997] 2008, n.p, inside cover.

¹⁴¹⁷ Capp, R., 10/2002, 'Interview with Leah Purcell', *Senses of Cinema*, issue 22, online at: <<http://sensesofcinema.com/2002/australian-women/purcell/>> viewed 26/08/2014.

¹⁴¹⁸ Capp, R., 10/2002.

¹⁴¹⁹ Capp, R., 2002.

¹⁴²⁰ Bergson, H., [1911] 2005, p. 3.

¹⁴²¹ Bergson, H., [1911] 2005, pp. 2-3.

Purcell suggests that from an early age, she knew that she could tell a great yarn.¹⁴²² In the play, she addresses the audience directly, setting up lines of intimate communication that enable her to employ this traditional Indigenous mode of narratorial address. Stylistically, while this technique is warm and personable, it also remains morally challenging. Purcell's humorous storytelling becomes a way in which she convinces non-Indigenous audiences to explore the possibilities of their moral culpability in supporting or passively endorsing the same social systems that have caused such severe trauma in so many Indigenous lives. Her story, functions like other Indigenous performances discussed in this chapter, veiling uncomfortable or confronting socio-political issues in a personal and intimate way that is both comical and cutting.

Humour is, as Freud suggests, a doubled-edged sword, hiding and concealing its disparagement as it also expresses something whose articulation is socially 'forbidden'.¹⁴²³ In this way, Indigenous humour is similarly a tool that attempts to challenge and transform established structures of power in mainstream in a subversive, yet politically effective, manner.

Comedy is introduced to the audience right from the beginning of *Box the Pony*. Playing ten year old Steff, Purcell is cajoled into singing and dancing as the 1980s song 'Kung Fu Fighting' plays in the background. Steff performs in a self-deprecating style that both takes-the-mickey out of the song itself, as well as satirises her own character's childish persona. Suddenly, however, reverting to childlike embarrassment, Steff goes all 'myall'; shy and reticent. Then switching back to her adult self, Steff announces the following lines in further self-deprecating tone:

Gunnar gunnar, eh... like my mum said, you can take the girl out the mission, but you can't take the mission out of this myall little black gin for up'ome'der!¹⁴²⁴

The play uses much traditional language, Aboriginal English, and even mainstream Australian slang to situate it as a humorous Australian, and specifically Murri, story. People can be 'solid,' 'deadly,' or even excellent 'like John Wayne' (apparently a folk hero in Murgon). Girls can also find themselves 'poxed up' (pregnant), or 'charged up' (drunk). A good friend is a 'cuz' (cousin) and a white person a 'gubba' who is perhaps about to step in dog 'gunung' (animal dung or droppings). The meaning of these words is readily grasped within the context of the sentences, yet such colloquial vernacular heightens the humour and accessibility of the text, enhancing Steff's (Purcell's) mode of intimate yarning with the audience in what is a continuing interaction: at times, Steff looks at the audience for a fight, at others, she warmly addresses them as 'cuz' inviting them into an Indigenous Australian kinship relationship and asking them about their heritage ("Are you Murri, Koori, Nunga?").

¹⁴²² ABC TV, 14/02/2014, 'Leah Purcell: Foxtell Screenwriters Address', *Big Ideas*, at: <<http://www.abc.net.au/tv/bigideas/stories/2014/02/14/3943060.htm>> viewed 26/08/2014.

¹⁴²³ Freud, S., [1905], 2002, Op. Cit., pp. 102–103.

¹⁴²⁴ Rankin, S., & L. Purcell, [1997] 2008, Op. Cit., p. 27.

Boxing is a theme that is woven into the text of *Box the Pony* and represented as a form of defensive bravado, suggesting Steff's defiance by indicating that no situation can 'box' her (the pony) into a corner or dent her resilience. Purcell's character talks about the long line of boxing heroes in her family, bemoaning the prevalence of sexism in an ironic line:

"The boys got all the deadly things, the trophies, the Golden Gloves... the brain damage."¹⁴²⁵

This darkly humorous statement highlights the incongruity of boxing throughout the play. Boxing is a multi-faceted image: it is at once a prized possession, a triumphant show of strength, a bitter cruelty, and a 'necessary' tool of survival in a racist world. And yet the boxing metaphor is also tempered with humour, enabling Steff to rationalise the presence of physical aggression in her young life and in the lives of so many Indigenous Australians. At the same time, boxing also symbolises the innermost desires and struggles that Steff has faced – and will continue to face – in her life. Her feisty vigour and funny moves (hitting a large boxing bag, dancing and miming), contrast sharply with her experience of times of emotional rejection, trauma, and sadness. In addition to connecting her storytelling to traditional Aboriginal physical humour and mimicry techniques, her physical activities and vulnerabilities enhance the emotional roller-coaster ride that the play presents. Drama and humour work hand-in-hand, disarming audiences, yet also keeping them attentive and receptive to those issues that are important to Purcell's character.

In her 1999 foreword to the play-script, Robyn Archer, has described *Box the Pony* as a play that it is, in many ways, a story about losers. However, because the narrative is related to the audience with such feisty humour and delightful vitality, it becomes, in effect, an affirmation of life.¹⁴²⁶ Steff's ability to laugh triumphantly in the face of violence, poverty and racism provides an effective device for raising these issues with audiences who, while not ordinarily disposed to thinking about their own attitudes, may now be able to laugh at themselves and their prejudices vicariously through Purcell's characters. Through the persona of Steff, Purcell shows that she has consistently overcome her difficulties by laughing at them. As Freud has noted, humour is not a sign of resignation, but of defiance, signifying a person's ability to assert themselves in an unjust world.¹⁴²⁷ Following its state performances, *Box the Pony* went on to play in theatres around Australia, and then overseas: in Edinburgh, Scotland; at London's Barbican Theatre; and finally to Broadway in New York.¹⁴²⁸ Purcell was awarded the Premier's Literary Award in New South Wales and Queensland for both the

¹⁴²⁵ Rankin, S., & L. Purcell, [1997] 2008, p. 29.

¹⁴²⁶ Archer, R., 1999, *Foreword* in Rankin, S., & L. Purcell, [1997] 2008, Op. Cit., p. x.

¹⁴²⁷ Freud, S., [1927] 1964, Op. Cit., p.163.

¹⁴²⁸ Auslit, nd., 'Leah Purcell (29 works by)' online at:

<<http://www.austlit.edu.au/austlit/page/OLD?id=A%23tM&idtype=oldid>>, viewed 06/03/2014.

playscript and her acting.¹⁴²⁹ The script has since been included as an audition monologue in Australia's premier drama school, NIDA.¹⁴³⁰ In 2004 Purcell was awarded a US 'Eisenhower Fellowship' for outstanding leadership, the first Indigenous Australian to receive this prestigious award.¹⁴³¹

These accolades and the staging of this play at such prominent venues can again be seen in terms of Bourdieu's account of cultural capital or cultural esteem. However, it would be wrong to suggest that such Indigenous theatrical 'success' as Purcell's represents an act of valorisation of, or a kowtowing to, mainstream cultural structures. Rather, this success, which enables Indigenous performers to receive such mainstream public exposure, should be considered one of the many ways in which Indigenous artists have been able to better persuade and convince mainstream Australians and others to reconsider the existence of Indigenous worldviews, and even to adopt a part of their unique perspective.

3.17 'White Baptist Abba Fan' (1997)

Deborah Cheetham is another Indigenous artist who was commissioned by the Olympic Arts Festival to write and perform her play, *White Baptist Abba fan*, for the *Wimmin's business* Festival series.¹⁴³² Cheetham's one-woman production, written and performed by her, is a 70 minute personal testimony of her life's story. The play describes experiences that could have rendered it a very sombre piece; however, instead, it is a good-humoured portrayal of her personal resilience and empowerment as an Indigenous woman.¹⁴³³ Cheetham is a 'stolen generations' child, taken away from her Aboriginal family as a baby, and not reconciled with them again until she was thirty years old.¹⁴³⁴ This reunion is the catalyst for her story that describes their initial awkwardness and lack of common ground.¹⁴³⁵

The play's title humorously alludes to the incongruities of Cheetham's life. She is a gay opera singer, having been raised with middle class (white) Christian values and tastes; and far removed from the experiences of her Aboriginal family.¹⁴³⁶ These contradictions could have made for serious theatre, displaying the anger and frustrations of a difficult life, and at a government system that lied and betrayed both her and her Aboriginal mother. However, Cheetham chose instead to put them to great

¹⁴²⁹ Auslit, nd., 'Leah Purcell'.

¹⁴³⁰ NIDA is the acronym for 'Australia's National Institute of Dramatic Arts' – See NIDA's homepage online at <<http://www.nida.edu.au/>>, viewed 06/03/2014.

¹⁴³¹ Eisenhower Fellowships, nd. 'Inspiring Leaders and Eisenhower Fellowships' homepage at: <<http://www.efworld.org/>>, viewed 06/03/2014.

¹⁴³² Cheetham, D., nd. Op. Cit.

¹⁴³³ Brazil, J., 1998, 'Being Lost and the Nearness of Being Found – Deborah Cheetham's White Baptist Abba Fan', *Third Text*, vol. 12/44, viewed 15/5/2013.

¹⁴³⁴ Copeland, J., 1999, 'Interview with White Baptist Abba Fan's creator, Deborah Cheetham', *ABC Radio National*, at: <<http://www.abc.net.au/arts/headspace/rn/artstalk/cheetham/>>, viewed 22/09/2014.

¹⁴³⁵ Copeland, J., 1999.

¹⁴³⁶ Copeland, J., 1999.

comedic use. She deliberately approached these topics in a funny manner, eliciting laughter from audiences, rather than inducing sadness, guilt or denial. Cheetham explains that it is laughter that has allowed her to maintain a sense of humour in life and even to help her ‘survive’ the story-telling process.¹⁴³⁷ Incongruity is generally funny, Mulkay claims, because humour (jokes) needs to have recognisable connections between opposing frames of reference for people to make sense of their challenges to our logical understandings of the way things ought to be.¹⁴³⁸

The narrative is full of humour, at times, ironically appearing as a far-fetched sit-com; then including moments of poignant reality, as when her Aboriginal mother’s letter to her is read out aloud.¹⁴³⁹ The play traverses Cheetham’s life from childhood to her teenage love of Swedish pop-group Abba, to becoming a world renowned opera singer who studied at the prestigious Julliard School in New York.¹⁴⁴⁰ Her performance cleverly observes and confronts sensitive socio-political issues with distinctive Indigenous grace, forgiveness and humour, challenging audiences to respond likewise. Nonetheless, Cheetham recognises her comedy as a ‘very Australian’ form of humour with its laughter at adversity and jokes about ‘the most horrendous situations’ that help with life’s survival and enrichment.¹⁴⁴¹ Ultimately, like Camus’ Sisyphus, Cheetham’s life becomes a metaphor for the ‘absurd victory’ that can be obtained in the face of life’s heavy burdens.¹⁴⁴² And, like Sisyphus, who was condemned by the Gods to continually push a heavy rock to the top of a mountain, from where it would quickly roll back down for him to begin the gruelling task over again; Cheetham faced her destiny with a similar stoicism.

3.18 ‘Bindjareb Pinjarra’ (1994)

Another notable Indigenous comedy performance from the 1990s, also performed as part of the *Festival of Dreaming*, is *Bindjareb Pinjarra*.¹⁴⁴³ This play was originally conceived and written by Western Australian Nyoongar and non-Indigenous (Wadjella) actors.¹⁴⁴⁴ Its title was taken from the West Australian Indigenous words for the local Indigenous Binjareb Nyoongar people living in the Pinjarra region, south of Perth, at the time of white settlement there in the 1830s.¹⁴⁴⁵ Supported by Fremantle’s *Deckchair Theatre Company*, the play toured the country for over 20 years, visiting

¹⁴³⁷ Copeland, J, 1999.

¹⁴³⁸ Mulkay, M., 1988, *On Humour— Its Nature and Place in Modern Society*, Polity Press, Oxford, UK, pp. 33–34.

¹⁴³⁹ Copeland, J, 1999, Op. Cit.

¹⁴⁴⁰ Brazil, J., 1998, Op. Cit.

¹⁴⁴¹ Copeland, J, 1999, Op. Cit.

¹⁴⁴² Brazil, J, 1998, Op. Cit.

¹⁴⁴³ In 1991 Nyoongar actor Kelton Pell, and non-Indigenous actors, Geoff Kelso and Phil Thomson worked with Pinjarra man Trevor Shorty Parfitt to devise the original script of the play that was first performed in 1994. See: Deckchair Theatre, nd. ‘Bindjareb Pinjarra Teacher’s Resource Kit’ online at: http://ilbijerri.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2015/03/BindjarebPinjarraTeacher_sResourceKit.pdf, viewed 30/06/2013.

¹⁴⁴⁴ Deckchair Theatre, nd.

¹⁴⁴⁵ Deckchair Theatre, nd.

Victoria, Queensland and Northern Territory in 2012 and playing as part of Adelaide's *Comeout Festival* in May 2013.¹⁴⁴⁶

Bindjareb Pinjarra was inspired by the true story of the 1834 massacre of up to 150 Bindjareb Nyoongar people, (mostly woman and children), by white settlers following skirmishes between the two groups as colonists settled on Nyoongar lands.¹⁴⁴⁷ Indigenous oral evidence contradicts official colonial records of the incident which claim that only 15–20 Bindjareb Nyoongars were killed to teach the 'aggressive natives' a lesson following the killing of colonist Hugh Nesbit.¹⁴⁴⁸ Additionally, these records suggests that only one white man died following a fall from his horse, possibly after having been speared.¹⁴⁴⁹

While, once again, these events could have been told by Aboriginal people in a critical and condemnatory manner, the group decided that the best way to tell the story was with humour.¹⁴⁵⁰ Indigenous performer, Kelton Pell, has said that: "[a] lot of blackfellas find it easier to laugh at distressing things, ...[and] [w]e just want [audiences] to understand that this is part of history that hasn't been told in the history books. The only way we could tell it was to have a comedy."¹⁴⁵¹

The idea that a comedy can deal with such serious issues, jumping from historical to contemporary times, continues modern traditions of Indigenous playwrights who use comedy to broach socially contentious issues, providing alternative historical perspective, and provoking community discussions. No two performances of the play are alike, primarily due to the fact that the play has no director; rather, collaboratively, the actors improvise each scene by performing new ideas and constantly re-inventing their characters.¹⁴⁵² This improvisational style continually challenges the cast to incorporate new information gained from their audiences, as well as current affairs, into performances.¹⁴⁵³ As a result, performances have remained fresh and relevant for both actors and audiences alike.¹⁴⁵⁴

¹⁴⁴⁶ Deckchair Theatre, 2012, 'Productions, Umbrella: Bindjareb Pinjarra', at: <www.deckchairtheatre.com.au/2012_productions> viewed 16/10/2012.

¹⁴⁴⁷ Deckchair theatre, nd. Op. Cit.

¹⁴⁴⁸ Deckchair theatre, nd.

¹⁴⁴⁹ Austin, K., 26/05/2013, 'personal attendance at Bindjareb Pinjarra performance', *SA Come Out Festival*, Dunstan Playhouse, Adelaide Festival Centre (25–28/05/2013). Government of Western Australia, Heritage Council, 29/06/1998, 'Pinjarra Massacre Site 03975: History', online <<http://inherit.stateheritage.wa.gov.au/Public/Inventory/Details/1214b928-d904-41f1-89ba-8dea7bd452a0>> viewed 30/09/2015.

¹⁴⁵⁰ Kelso, G., nd., 'Statements from the Cast', Deckchair Theatre Teachers Resource Kit, nd., Op. Cit.

¹⁴⁵¹ Pell, K., nd., 'Statements from the Cast', Deckchair Theatre, nd. Op. Cit.

¹⁴⁵² Austin, K., personal attendance 26/05/2013, Op. Cit., 'Audience Discussion'.

¹⁴⁵³ Austin, K., personal attendance, 26/05/2013.

¹⁴⁵⁴ Thomson, P., nd., 'Statements from the Cast', Deckchair Theatre, nd., Op. Cit.

Additionally, the play's narrative that jumps from 'past to present'— from 'real to speculative' events— provides the multiple viewpoints of both European and Nyoongar people.¹⁴⁵⁵ These perspectives help to challenge audiences to think more broadly about historical issues, the way that historical 'facts' are taught in Australian schools, and about current Australian race relationships that are products of our colonial past. In the end, audiences are left pondering about whose view of history is accepted as the 'truth' and, conversely, whose is not— and why?

The play also includes plenty of physical and slapstick comedic interactions between the characters, who sometimes spar with each other, and at other times, frolic and play. Moreover, simple props like wooden clap sticks are used for both guns and cigars, sticks for spears and boundary posts, and there is even a boomerang which doubles as the handle bars of a motorbike.¹⁴⁵⁶ The ingenuity of such simple contrivances elicits great laughter from audiences.¹⁴⁵⁷ Actors seamlessly flow from playing old characters to young characters; from historical figures to contemporary ones; even playing with different races.¹⁴⁵⁸ Such improvisations provide the play with a flexibility that suggests that racial differences need not be so divisive after all.

Moreover, funny yarns that incorporate the actors' own personal experiences and understandings of Indigenous/non-Indigenous relationships provide the performance with a sincerity that encourages greater audience participation in an open-floor discussion held between the actors and audience at the end of the performance.¹⁴⁵⁹ The humorous tenor of the play, coupled with this final 'debriefing' about the issues it raises, allows audiences to leave the performance in good spirits, despite the emotionally charged nature of the work.¹⁴⁶⁰ In fact, *Dreaming Festival* director, Rhoda Roberts claims that this play is 'reconciliation theatre at its best'.¹⁴⁶¹ The longevity and relevance of its themes, provided in such a brilliantly improvised and comedic manner, attest to the veracity of her statement. And the ongoing humorous use of current political issues continues this discernible aspect of Indigenous performance humour.

4. CONCLUSION

Indigenous plays, like the ones discussed, demonstrate the important contributions that Indigenous Australians now make to Australia's cultural industries. Melbourne Festival director, Sue Natrass, did

¹⁴⁵⁵ Austin, K., personal attendance, 26/05/2013.

¹⁴⁵⁶ Austin, K., personal attendance, 26/05/2013.

¹⁴⁵⁷ Austin, K., personal attendance, 26/05/2013.

¹⁴⁵⁸ Austin, K., personal attendance, 26/05/2013.

¹⁴⁵⁹ Austin, K., personal attendance, 26/05/2013.

¹⁴⁶⁰ Deckchair Theatre, nd., Op. Cit.

¹⁴⁶¹ Roberts, R., nd. 'About the Play', Deckchair Theatre, nd.

not hesitate to choose Purcell's and Cheetham's plays for her 1998 festival.¹⁴⁶² Indeed, in 2000, Indigenous novelist, Melissa Lucashenko, recognised this success and the lucrative potential of Indigenous Australian cultural capital in her wry rumination (playing on a popular Australian tourist advertising campaign at the time):

What the bloody hell did Australians give their overseas relations before Aboriginal Australiana was invented?¹⁴⁶³

In 1995 Katherine Brisbane had noted Indigenous theatre's potential. However, she said that not many of the plays could be considered major works, nor were many of them ready for international showcasing.¹⁴⁶⁴ But the proverbial tide has turned. Indigenous Australian artists could now 'hold their own' in mainstream discourse as a significant artistic presence in theatre productions, both nationally and internationally.¹⁴⁶⁵ Many of the Indigenous plays from this time have now been adapted for the screen. *Box the Pony* was, in part, filmed and made into a teaching resource in 1999; *Bran Nue Dae* was made into a mainstream hit movie in 2010. Both are further testament to Indigenous performance excellence. This chapter has demonstrated how important Aboriginal humour techniques have been in this endeavour, assisting Aboriginal artists to make audiences laugh while imparting their 'serious' stories to them. It is by means of techniques like the use of humour that they have become better equipped at convincing non-Indigenous Australians to reconsider important aspects of history and culture from Indigenous points of view. And most importantly this has been done on Indigenous artists' own terms.

While Indigenous Australian performances have continued to flourish from the turn of this century, Indigenous fights for equality and justice continue, giving them ongoing reasons to tell their own stories of living in Australia. And humour continues to be an important tool with which Aboriginal performers make an impact. To date this review has recognised some of the distinctive humour forms that can often be found in Aboriginal performances. These include the use of mickey-taking, mimicry, and witty wordplay, often delivered directly to audience in the style of intimate, relaxed yarns. Since the 1970s black and self-deprecating humour techniques have also become more discernible in humour performances. Mickey-taking and self-deprecating humour particularly signals Aboriginal people's embeddedness within Australia's mainstream humour culture, while techniques like humorous yarning and mimicry point to more classical Indigenous uses of humour. However, what has made Indigenous performance humour so distinctive is the propensity for Indigenous artists to express their own perspectives on current socio-political issues to mainstream audiences through this medium.

¹⁴⁶² Radic, L., 2006, Op. Cit., p. 193.

¹⁴⁶³ Lucashenko, M., 2000, 'Black on Black, an Interview with Melissa Lucashenko', *Meanjin*, vol.3, p. 113.

¹⁴⁶⁴ Brisbane, K., 1995, Op. Cit. p. 21.

¹⁴⁶⁵ Enoch, W., 2000, Op. Cit. p. 354.

The final two chapters of this thesis will critically analyse some of the significant Indigenous performances of the past decade and a half that continue to use humour as a noteworthy theatrical device. In lieu of a continuing chronological discussion of comedy performances beyond the year 2000, these performances will be reviewed by references to the humour forms commonly found in the pre-millennium works already discussed to see if they remain important elements of contemporary performances. Additionally, they will be analysed to see if socio-political concerns have remained dominant and distinctive topics of Aboriginal performance humour, consistent with the performances discussed to date.

CHAPTER 6

THE ONGOING USE OF HUMOUR IN INDIGENOUS PERFORMANCE IN THE NEW CENTURY

1. INTRODUCTION

This chapter explores the development of Aboriginal humorous theatrical performance from the turn of the last century until the present day. By the new millennium, Radic suggests, Indigenous theatre had become a ‘force in the land’ and Indigenous playwrights and actors had found their places in mainstream Australian performance.¹⁴⁶⁶ Current Indigenous theatrical performance owes much to foundations discussed in previous chapters. And although Indigenous theatre draws on a wide range of processes to challenge audiences into considering issues from Aboriginal perspectives, humour remains an important aspect of this success. To date, the humour techniques Indigenous artists use in performances can be seen as an incorporation of both classical Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australian humour traits that helped sign a distinctive position in mainstream Australia’s cultural discourse. Humour has helped Indigenous artists to confront and define Australian culture beyond a limited Anglo-centric perspective.

Previous chapters have shown that Indigenous performance humour has been frequently based on socio-political issues of concern to Aboriginal artists, creating a public avenue for raising these topics. There has also been a propensity to use mimicry, witty wordplay, humorous yarns and mickey-taking to help curb pretensions, teach, and confirm existing Indigenous ideologies. Self-deprecating black humour techniques have been used more extensively in Aboriginal performances since the 1970s. Of recent note is the growing influence of sketch and stand-up comedy techniques on some performances. However, in relation to current Indigenous theatre practices, the question is: are the humour techniques noted in earlier chapters still found in these contemporary performances?

2. CHAPTER OUTLINE

This chapter will critically review some Indigenous theatrical performances in the new millennium specifically with regard to the humour forms and functions recognised as significant to Indigenous comedy and discussed in previous chapters. This issue based examination responds to the question of whether or not these recognisable humour traits remain significant elements of contemporary Indigenous humorous performances. Additionally, the humour located in these performances is discussed in light of recent academic literature on humour’s nature and purposes.

¹⁴⁶⁶ Radic, L., 2006, *Contemporary Australian Drama*, Brandl & Schlesinger, Blackheath, NSW, p. 193.

Various challenges relating to dealings with Aboriginal people remain significant issues affecting Australia's contemporary socio-political discourse and, in turn, marring Australia's identity as a nation of equality and freedom.¹⁴⁶⁷ Issues of racism, land rights, identity, negative health outcomes, culpability for past injustices, and historical inaccuracies, remain some of the significant matters affecting Aboriginal wellbeing and equal participation in the nation's discourse. This chapter will investigate whether or not Indigenous artists continue to respond to these issues in recent humour performances, confronting and challenging audiences and telling unique stories about living in this nation.

3. 'CONTEMPORARY INDIGENOUS ARTISTS' HUMOROUS INTERVENTIONS IN MAINSTREAM AUSTRALIA'S SOCIO-POLITICAL DISCOURSE

3.1 'Casting Doubts'—An Aboriginal response to racism (2002)

Although Enoch has suggested that: '[c]olour-blind casting'¹⁴⁶⁸, founded in the USA and UK, had finally arrived in Australia by the turn of the new century, other theatrical performers have disagreed.¹⁴⁶⁹ Non-Indigenous actor and director, Lee Lewis, was shocked at the 'whiteness' of Australian production casts on return to Sydney from working overseas in 2001— a situation which — she insists, remains an ongoing problem in Australian theatre.¹⁴⁷⁰ This issue of racism, and in particular the typecasting of Aboriginal artists' solely for Aboriginal roles was the subject of Torres Strait Islander playwright, Maryanne Sam's humorous play *Casting Doubts* that was co-produced by Ilbijerri and non-Indigenous partner Playbox Theatres in Melbourne in 2002.¹⁴⁷¹ Although raising some contentious issues about colour-blind casting and racism in Australian theatre, the play approaches them with recognisably Indigenous humour.

¹⁴⁶⁷ In 1900 Australia's First Prime Minister, Sir Edmund Barton, said in part: "... we are of the stock which insists on equal opportunity and uses it boldly, but wisely, under the feeling of responsibility... [and] ... keeps its balance by the equipoise of freedom and duty." See: National Library of Australia, nd., *Barton Papers: Speeches articles 1898–1901*, online at: <<http://nla.gov.au/nla.ms-ms51-5-977>> viewed 04/02/2016.

¹⁴⁶⁸ 'Colour-blind casting' was founded in the USA and UK and, although not strictly colour-blind, it relates to the idea of supporting non-traditional casting of minority actors in roles in which 'race, gender, ethnicity and/or physical capability' are not crucial. It commenced in New York in 1986 and by 2001 the Arts Council of England had produced a report developing strategies to combat racism in its theatre industries and the Royal Shakespeare Company employed a black (Nigerian) actor in the role of an English monarch for the first time in 2000. See: Richards, D., 21/01/1996, 'Casting Call for All', *The Washington Post*, at: <<http://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/lifestyle/style/1996/01/21/casting-call-for-all/e8e1e2d1-b986-4d01-8868-6fff58f1654/>> viewed 22/09/2015.

Mead, C., 2008, 'What is an Australian Play? Have we failed our Ethnic Writers', *Platform Paper No. 17*, July 2008, p.14.

Gibbons, F., 19/09/2000, 'RSC casts black actor as English king for first time', *The Guardian*, at: <<http://www.theguardian.com/uk/2000/sep/19/fiachragibbons>> viewed 22/09/2015.

¹⁴⁶⁹ Enoch, W., 2000, 'Performance' in Kleinert, S., & M. Neal, 2000, *The Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture*, Oxford university Press, Melbourne Australia, p. 353.

¹⁴⁷⁰ Lewis, L., 2007, 'Cross-Racial Casting, Changing the Face of Australian Theatre', *Platform Quarterly Essay on the Performing Arts*, No. 13, July 2007, p. 1. Also see: Donegan, J, 29/09/2015, 'Theatre director Lee Lewis uses Top 100 influential women title to tackle domestic violence on stage', *702 ABC*, Sydney, at: <<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2015-09-29/theatre-director-lee-lewis-uses-top-100-women-title/6812782>> viewed 03/11/2015.

¹⁴⁷¹ Sam, M., 2002, 'Casting Doubts', *Blak Inside, Six Indigenous Plays from Victoria*, 2002, Currency Press Pty Ltd, Sydney.

Sam, an Indigenous actor herself, wrote the script inspired by her frustration with an article that called for Indigenous actors to become 'more visible'.¹⁴⁷² To her, Indigenous actors had always been 'visible' and it was producers and casting agencies who were blinkered in their attempts to locate the 'perfect' looking Aboriginal actor that were the problem.¹⁴⁷³ Along with confronting racism in the industry, Sam wished to explore issues of differences amongst Indigenous people, 'casting doubts' on the perception of their identity and homogeneity.¹⁴⁷⁴

Sam sets much of her play in a casting agency, focusing attention on her characters. The agency is run by non-Indigenous business woman, Deborah, a driven, 'chardonnay guzzler' and her able assistant, Tiffany, who has unrevealed Aboriginal origins. The rest of the cast are made up of young Indigenous actors who represent various complex Aboriginal personalities— Linda is clearly Aboriginal, yet knows little of her culture; Mick is a fair-skinned Aboriginal person, strong in his culture, and desperate for an Indigenous role; Jimi, also strong in his culture, is a 'brilliant', yet frustrated actor; and finally there is Wally, who is regarded as a 'real' Aboriginal man, dark skinned and successful as a 'black' actor, yet one who can't really act.¹⁴⁷⁵

Sam's use of various humour techniques throughout the play softens socially difficult issues and provides cathartic relief from recognisable Indigenous stereotypes.

3.2 *The humour techniques used in 'Casting Doubts'*

Taking the Mickey

Sam's character, Jimi, reveals the racism of an industry that chooses Aboriginal actors primarily on their looks, sadly denied to the earnest, but 'white' skinned, Aboriginal actor Mick. Although sympathetic, Jimi is not beyond 'taking the mickey' out of Mick, tricking him into dressing and acting the stereotyped Aboriginal 'tracker':

Wally: ...So, are they expecting him? (*Mick*)

Jimi: [*jokingly*] No one *ever* expects Mick, bruz. Anyway they don't give a shit. It's open cattle call for us blacks. They'd pick you up off the street if you looked the part.

...

Mick: I dunno. Look, are you sure we're meant to wear this?

Jimi: Yeah, oh yeah, you gotta look the part, mate. And don't forget this... [*applying paint to Mick's face*]... and this... [*passing him a spear and singing*] 'My name is Mick, but they call me Michael J... was Black a few years ago but I'm white today!'

Mick: Oh, very bloody funny. You can make fun all ya want but you'll be smilin' out the back of ya moom when I do it.¹⁴⁷⁶

¹⁴⁷² Sam, M., 2002, 'Author's Notes to Casting Doubts', *Blak Inside, Six Indigenous Plays from Victoria*, Currency Press Pty Ltd Sydney, p. 110.

¹⁴⁷³ Sam, M., 2002, p. 110.

¹⁴⁷⁴ Sam, M., 2002, p. 110.

¹⁴⁷⁵ Sam, M., 2002, *Casting Doubts*, *Blak Inside, Six Indigenous Plays from Victoria*, Currency Press Pty Ltd, Sydney, p. 109.

¹⁴⁷⁶ Sam, M., 2002, pp. 118–119.

Goddard recognises mickey-taking in Australia as a mocking humour technique that supports and reinforces the important proscription of ‘not taking yourself too seriously’ or over elevating your own importance.¹⁴⁷⁷ This strategy is frequently found in Australian humour, arising, as it does, from a culture that downplays the recognition of individual achievements in favour of the principles of egalitarianism, historically prized in colonial Australia.¹⁴⁷⁸ It is particularly effective as a levelling tool that reminds in-group members that they are no more nor less special than others.¹⁴⁷⁹ Additionally, it shows how Aboriginal Australians readily use humour forms common in mainstream comedy repertoires. Such a sharing of humour strategies suggests the overlapping of traditions and commonality of shared traditions.

Moreover, Boskin and Dorinson suggest that by mocking features ascribed to them by outsiders, this style of ethnic humour has become one of the most effective components of ethnic humorists’ repertoires.¹⁴⁸⁰ In presenting caricatures of themselves, they represent those stereotyped traits which they wish to renounce through mockery, jolting audiences into an awareness of the deep cultural underpinnings that have assisted to sustain their oppression.¹⁴⁸¹ This technique is also much like the self-referential humour located in the ‘boong’ skit of National Black Theatre’s (NBT) 1970s *Basically Black*.¹⁴⁸² Sam uses a form of self-referential mimicry, or, as Oshima calls it, ‘self-duplicating’ humour, to allay the tensions associated with established racial stereotypes.¹⁴⁸³ This helps audiences recognise the good humour located within Aboriginal cultures, because being too serious about yourself is an implicit contrast to the more relaxed style of joking.¹⁴⁸⁴ However, Howitt and Owusu-Bempah argue that ethnic jokes, including ingroup jokes, ‘are conceptually more confusing in that often they are promulgated almost as if they were an opportunity to rejoice in the culture of an ethnic group.’¹⁴⁸⁵ Although these jokes may offer greater insight into Aboriginal cultures, they may also reduce these cultures to trivialities ‘to be laughed at and not something to be valued.’¹⁴⁸⁶

Further example of mickey-taking in *Casting Doubts* allows Sam to ironically portray the ignorant, casual racism of Australian non-Indigenous casting directors in a superiority style of putdown humour. In another scene, pretentious Deborah yearns for ‘real’ Aboriginals to fulfil her *cliché*-ridden

¹⁴⁷⁷ Goddard, C., 2009, ‘Not taking yourself too seriously in Australian English: Semantic explications, cultural scripts, corpus evidence’, *Intercultural Pragmatics*, vol. 6-1 (2009), Walter de Gruyter, Berlin, pp. 30–31.

¹⁴⁷⁸ Goddard, C., 2009, p. 30.

¹⁴⁷⁹ Goddard, C. 2009, p. 36.

¹⁴⁸⁰ Boskin, J., & J. Dorinson, 1985, ‘Ethnic Humor: Subversion and Survival’, *American Quarterly, Special Issue: American Humor*, v. 31/1, (Spring, 1985), p. 97.

¹⁴⁸¹ Boskin, J., & J. Dorinson, 1985, p. 95. Mintz, L., 1977, ‘The ‘New Wave’ of Standup Comedians: An Introduction’, *American Humor*, v.4 (Fall, 1977), p. 1.

¹⁴⁸² Youtube Australia, 05/02/2008, ‘Basically Black – Boong Skit’, online at: <<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6cSKGGsrWL4>> viewed 25/03/2013.

¹⁴⁸³ Oshima, K., 2000, ‘Ethnic jokes and social function’, *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, De Gruyter, Berlin, pp. 53–54.

¹⁴⁸⁴ Oshima, K., 2000, pp. 53–54. Goddard, C., 2009, Op. Cit., p. 35.

¹⁴⁸⁵ Howitt D., & Owusu-Bempah, K., 2009, ‘Race and Ethnicity in Popular Humour’ in Lockyer, S., & Pickering, M., (eds.) 2009, *Beyond A Joke, The Limits of Humour*, Palgrave Macmillan, Hampshire, UK, p. 64.

¹⁴⁸⁶ Howitt D., & Owusu-Bempah, K., 2009, p. 64.

Indigenous briefs, despite the presence of a group of Aboriginal actors who frequent her agency. The irony of Deborah's despair represents the rejection of Indigenous people in Australia's performance industries who are not selected to play roles of their own race because they do not fit the recognisable stereotypes:

Deborah: Maud darling, it's Deborah. I'm in a bind. The casting for this film, *Northern Spears* is a nightmare ... I need some Aboriginal actors, have you got any on your books? ... I'm just desperate enough to grab them off the street if called for...If they're out there, they must be invisible...¹⁴⁸⁷

Sam uses Deborah's metaphorical "blindness" (she can't see Aboriginal people) for the ignorance found in the theatre industry. Despite Deborah's unintentional use of this phrase, she truly is blind to the frustrating, insensitive and unprofessional manner in which she treats Aboriginal actors based on trite physical attributes and not on their acting credentials.

Critchley observes that much ethnic humour is the Hobbesian laughter of superiority at others' ignorance.¹⁴⁸⁸ Deborah's inability to see of Aboriginal actors is ridiculed, along with her self-importance, in another familiar Australian form of levelling humour that cuts down 'tall poppies'.¹⁴⁸⁹ Billig suggests that there is always amusement in laughing at those who have elevated views of themselves.¹⁴⁹⁰ In addition, a good deal of minority in-group humour is still aimed at outsiders.¹⁴⁹¹ However, Gockel and Kerr suggest that put-down humour has to have specific parameters if it is not to be considered too aggressive.¹⁴⁹² These include the fact that the play-frame needs to be clearly reinforced by markers like tonal voice changes and exaggerations, and it should occur within an environment where other styles of putdown humour are already practised.¹⁴⁹³ Sam appears to have met these parameters since she includes much self-referential Aboriginal putdown humour (discussed below) along with the comic exaggerations of Deborah's words and actions.

In-group Mickey-taking

In-group teasing is humour at the expense of another group member.¹⁴⁹⁴ In a sense, this style of humour is a mickey-taking technique that serves potentially to teach lessons, curb pretensions and/or reinforce group camaraderie. In another scene from *Casting Doubts* Jimi once again tricks sincere Mick into dressing with him in red lap-laps carrying spears and putting dot make-up on their faces for an audition:

¹⁴⁸⁷ Sam, M., 2002, 'Casting Doubts', *Blak Inside, Six Indigenous Plays from Victoria*, Currency Press Pty Ltd, Sydney, p. 123.

¹⁴⁸⁸ Critchley, S., 2010, *On Humour*, Routledge, Oxon, UK, p. 70.

¹⁴⁸⁹ Goddard, C., 2009, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 30–31.

¹⁴⁹⁰ Billig, M., 2005, *Laughter and Ridicule, Towards a Social Critique of Humour*, Sage Publications Ltd, London, UK, p. 40.

¹⁴⁹¹ Gockel, C., & N. Kerr, 2015, 'Put-Down Humor Directed at Outgroup Members Increases Perceived— but Not Experienced— Cohesion in Groups', *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, 28(2), p. 208.

¹⁴⁹² Gockel, C., & N. Kerr, 2015, pp. 224–225.

¹⁴⁹³ Gockel, C., & N. Kerr, 2015, pp. 224–225.

¹⁴⁹⁴ Terrion, J. & B. Ashforth, 2002, 'From 'I' to 'we': the role of putdown humor and identity in the development of a temporary group', *Human Relations*, 55(1), p. 59.

Tiffany: Excuse me, Can I help you?

Jimi: What...? [*Referring to his outfit*] Not quite what you were expecting, eh? Thought it'd help you fellas... y'know... get the picture.

...

Deborah appears from her office.

Deborah: Tiff, we're ready to see the next lot of actors. Now who have we got here? Oh, you boys have gone to a lot of trouble [*referring to their lap-laps*].

... Jimi smiles, looking at Deborah and Walley. Mick is upset...¹⁴⁹⁵

This humorous jibe is one of the many examples of in-group mickey-taking among the play's Aboriginal characters and is a form of humour that is commonly associated with ethnic minorities.¹⁴⁹⁶ Some theorists argue that put-downs can have a negative effect on group development by unequally elevating the status of specific members by belittling another¹⁴⁹⁷ but Terrion and Ashforth suggest that such teasing is a potent communication medium for fostering a sense of group bonding and belonging.¹⁴⁹⁸ Put-downs can highlight group members' common identities by suggesting that they can laugh at themselves together and that individuals are important and respected enough to withstand the insult.¹⁴⁹⁹ Whilst they note that there is equivocality in the way that members interpret this humour;¹⁵⁰⁰ they suggest that if it occurs within a less-threatening 'play-frame',¹⁵⁰¹ progressing through stages from 'self' to 'shared' to 'out-group' to 'individual in-group' put-downs, it can signal increasing trust,¹⁵⁰² and it can foster a sense of shared history and cohesion.¹⁵⁰³ Put-down humour in *Casting Doubts* serves to foster a sense of in-group camaraderie which implies that Aboriginal people can, and do, make fun of themselves because they have great senses of humour and can take jokes.

Wordplay

Like other Indigenous productions previously discussed, *Casting Doubts* often employs wordplay techniques of Aboriginal English and rhyming. Wordplay functions both as a witty sparring tool between the Indigenous characters revealing the good humour in their relationship; and as a humorous way to assist the recall of various topics important to the playwright. Playwrights including Kevin Gilbert, Gerry Bostock and Jack Davies incorporated their own verse in their plays.¹⁵⁰⁴ Rhyming wordplay techniques are used by Sam to exemplify the frustrations and contradictions faced by Aboriginal people in Australia. Although far from emotionally charged poetry, simple rhymes like

¹⁴⁹⁵ Sam, M., 2002, Op. Cit., pp. 136–137.

¹⁴⁹⁶ Gockel, C., & N. Kerr, 2015, Op. Cit., p. 208.

¹⁴⁹⁷ Terrion, J. & B. Ashforth, 2002, Op. Cit., pp. 59–60.

¹⁴⁹⁸ Terrion, J. & B. Ashforth, 2002, Op. Cit., p. 56.

¹⁴⁹⁹ Terrion, J. & B. Ashforth, 2002, Op. Cit. p. 70–71.

¹⁵⁰⁰ Terrion, J. & B. Ashforth, 2002, Op. Cit., p. 80.

¹⁵⁰¹ Gruner, C., 1997, *The Game of Humor – A Comprehensive theory of Why We Laugh*, Transaction Publishers, New Jersey, USA, p. 14. Terrion, J. & B. Ashforth, 2002, Op. Cit., p. 58.

¹⁵⁰² Terrion, J. & B. Ashforth, 2002, Op. Cit., pp. 70–71, p. 60. Gockel, C., & N. Kerr, 2015, Op. Cit., p. 207.

¹⁵⁰³ Terrion, J. & B. Ashforth, 2002, p. 60.

¹⁵⁰⁴ Bostock specifically recognised that theatre offered him a good forum for his poetry. He notes: "Of course being a poet it was the only way that I could get some of my poetry aired because no-one wanted to print me. The next step was to become a playwright so I could have it produced and have people listen." Casey, M., 2004, *Creating Frames: Contemporary Indigenous Theatre 1967–1996*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, p. 110.

Jimi's taunting of Mick: "My name is Mick, but they call me Michael J... Was Black a few years ago but I'm white today!"¹⁵⁰⁵ help to connect global examples of (skin colour) racism to Australia as well as enhancing the cadenced humour of the scene.¹⁵⁰⁶

Salacious wordplay that references well-known coffee advertising serves to reassert Aboriginal sexual desirability and male virility:

Walley: [looking down at his crotch, smiling knowingly] I see my reputation precedes me?
Jimi: Sorry?
Walley: Well, they don't call me the Nescafe man for no reason.
Jimi: Whaaat?
Walley: [sensing Jimi's uncertainty, he exaggerates the size of his crotch] The looooooong blaiaaack!
Jimi: You wanker, Stephens. You're forty-three beans short of a cup, mate!¹⁵⁰⁷

Sexual innuendo and bravado frequently manifests as humorous banter or one-up-manship between the characters and is a way of reasserting the manliness of Aboriginal male characters. Freud observes that much sexual humour employs risqué double entendres, and he suggests that such tendentious jokes evoke greater laughter than innocent ones can.¹⁵⁰⁸

The use of Aboriginal English words like 'bruz', 'moom', 'deadly' and 'solid' reasserts the authority of Aboriginal vocabulary and also provides authenticity to the Aboriginal experience, countering bigotry. Aranda recognises the use of indigenous vernacular within the course of another language communication (English) as an inter-lingual 'code-switching' technique.¹⁵⁰⁹ This is a technique commonly used in ethnic humour where speakers switch between two distinct languages.¹⁵¹⁰ Code-switching can be both a tool of creativity used to generate humour, as well as a marker of cultural identity that encourages in-group solidarity.¹⁵¹¹

Both of these two wordplay techniques are commonly found, and previously noted in significant Indigenous humour performances from Gilbert's 1968 *The Cherry Pickers* and Davies' *The Dreamers* to more contemporary plays like Chi's *Bran Nue Dae* and Purcell's *Box the Pony*. These techniques continue to help celebrate the uniqueness and validity of Aboriginal characters, their interactions and colloquial modes of speech.

¹⁵⁰⁵ Sam, M., 2002, Op. Cit., p. 118.

¹⁵⁰⁶ Michael Jackson was an infamous African-American popstar who is well recognised for receiving much media attention due to the lightening colour of his skin.

¹⁵⁰⁷ Sam, M., 2002, Op. Cit., p. 117.

¹⁵⁰⁸ Freud, S., 2002 (1905), Crick, J (trans.), 'The joke and its relation to the unconscious', Penguin Books, London, England, p. 99.

¹⁵⁰⁹ Aranda, L., 2014, 'The use of code-switching in stand-up comedy: Gabriel Igelsias', *Israeli Journal for Humor Research*, December 2014, No. 6, p. 74.

¹⁵¹⁰ Aranda, L., 2014, p. 74.

¹⁵¹¹ Aranda, L., 2014, p. 75.

Self-Deprecation

For character Linda, the racism of always being type-cast as the abused, submissive black-woman leads her to demand that her agent finds her something more ‘mainstream’; that is non-Indigenous. In response, she attends a belittling, racially insensitive, yet sadly funny, audition for washing powder:

Linda: It was set in the 50s...but, the look on their faces! I’ve never been so embarrassed... Listen to this: ‘Do you have trouble with your whites? Keeping them clean, maintaining their brilliance? Well not anymore! Now we have a new washing powder, designed specifically for whites only...’...Oh yes! And always remember: Never mix your whites with colors!’¹⁵¹²

Linda is able to recognise the humorous irony of this situation. And Kotthoff says that being able to laugh at yourself reveals a level of emotional maturity because humour is a complex form of self-representation and distancing.¹⁵¹³ Kotthoff believes that women are particularly good at making humorous self-representations in such ways that others don’t laugh at their expense, but rather at the expense of the social norms at the source of mockery.¹⁵¹⁴ Female narrators often use their humour as a means of coming to terms with negative experiences, and as a way to create emotional distance where humour functions as a form of therapeutic release from social stressors like racism.¹⁵¹⁵ This form of humour as self-deprecation is yet another characteristically post-contact Aboriginal humour form that references mainstream humour and enables Aboriginal people to acknowledge the reality of an insensitive situation, to laugh at the spoof of the stereotype, and then let the matter go.¹⁵¹⁶

Meta-knowledge References

A further wordplay technique located in the play, and used by Sam to counter racism, is the referencing of cultural meta-knowledge, or the wider cultural domain knowledge required to understand the humour. In this case, it is theatrical-specific knowledge that is required in order to comprehend the joke:

Walley: Heard you missed out on that *Corroboree Dreaming* film. Not a good idea chasing the casting chick around her office with ya spear, mate...
Jimi: Thanks for your advice, Laurence. Noted. But you are right about one thing. I should get back to learning me lines for... *Othello*!
Walley: Shit... What...?
Walley grabs his phone from his coat pocket as Mick and Jimi look on in amusement. (*Calling his agent*) ... Gene, Gene, are you holdin’ out on me...? [Pause, then he mispronounces the word ‘*Othello*’] ... *Ol’Fella*, mate, *Ol’Fella*!¹⁵¹⁷

¹⁵¹² Sam, M., 2002, ‘Casting Doubts’, *Blak Inside, Six Indigenous Plays from Victoria*, Currency Press Pty Ltd, Sydney, pp. 130–131.

¹⁵¹³ Kotthoff, H., 1999, ‘Gender and Joking: On the Complexities of Women’s Image Politics in Humorous Narratives’, *Journal of Pragmatics*, v.32, 2000, pp. 61–62, p. 76.

¹⁵¹⁴ Kotthoff, H., 1999, p. 55, pp. 76–77.

¹⁵¹⁵ Kotthoff, H., 1999, p. 60.

¹⁵¹⁶ Holt, L., 2009, ‘Aboriginal humour: A conversational corroboree’ in De Groen, F., & P. Kirkpatrick, *Serious Frolic, Essays on Australian Humour*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, QLD, p. 83.

¹⁵¹⁷ Sam, M., 2002, Op. Cit., p. 120.

Norrick suggests that comedians pose ‘tests’ for audiences that rely on their understanding of wider genres to comprehend the humour.¹⁵¹⁸ Kuipers recognises that much of the pleasure of humour lies in the sense-making process.¹⁵¹⁹ Audiences must make sense of various knowledges that relate to culturally-specific issues, social symbols, narrative patterns, genre conventions, humour scripts and even established humour techniques, in order to comprehend the humour.¹⁵²⁰ Additionally, in referencing theatrical meta-knowledge, like this reference to actor Laurence Olivier and to Shakespeare’s play *Othello*, the legitimacy of Aboriginal actors as serious actors is provided as an underlying sub-text. However, the malapropism that connects *Othello* with a slang Australian word for a penis (Ol’ Fella)¹⁵²¹ adds to the salaciousness of the humour. While this meta-knowledge wordplay is not generally recognised as a typically Indigenous humour trait, it provides an example of the more extensive use of comedy techniques currently employed by Indigenous humorists. However, in a sense, this humour technique is like the wordplay use of ‘foreign’ Aboriginal words in performance to provide legitimacy and in-group cohesion. Meta-knowledge jokes provide a similar authority about the topic at the source of the joke, legitimising Aboriginal performers as credible and professional Australian actors.

The ongoing significance of ‘Casting Doubts’

The relevance of the many issues raised in *Casting Doubts*, has remained significant for Indigenous theatre performance. In 2013, following the production of the play by WAAPA’s¹⁵²² Aboriginal theatre graduates, producer/co-director, Eva-Grace Mullaley, stated that Indigenous performance workers were still facing these same issues in the industry today, despite a heightened Aboriginal presence in some mainstream productions.¹⁵²³ Moreover, in Australia more broadly, various forms of racism and xenophobia continue to tarnish its national identity especially with the insistence that matters of bigotry are merely ‘jokes’ and not to be taken seriously.¹⁵²⁴

3.3 The reality of contemporary Australia’s socio-political environment in the new millennium

Bradley-Smith also recognises that early in the twenty-first century, Australian theatre remained defined by its ‘whiteness’– dominated by a western hegemonic ideology that continued to place white

¹⁵¹⁸ Norrick, N., 1989, ‘Intertextuality in humor’, *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, 2(2), p. 118.

¹⁵¹⁹ Kuipers, G., 2009, ‘Humor Styles and Symbolic Boundaries’, *Journal of Literary Theory*, 3(2), p. 226.

¹⁵²⁰ Kuipers, G., 2009, pp. 225–229.

¹⁵²¹ Urban Dictionary, 15/12/2003, ‘Old Fella – slang term for penis’. Online at: <<http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=Old+fella>> viewed 02/02/2016.

¹⁵²² ‘WAAPA’ is an acronym for the West Australia Academy of Performing Arts at Edith Cowan University, Perth. See WAAPA’s homepage at: <<http://www.waapa.ecu.edu.au/about/welcome-to-waapa>> viewed 30/10/2015.

¹⁵²³ Mullaley, E. G., to M. Cathcart, 20/11/2013, ‘Casting or typecasting Aboriginal Australians in Casting Doubts’, *ABC Radio National, Books and Arts Program*, online at: <<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/booksandarts/the-challenges-of-aboriginal-theatre-in-casting-doubts/5104158>> viewed 03/09/2015.

¹⁵²⁴ Due, C., 2011, ‘Aussie Humour or Racism? Hey Hey It’s Saturday and the Denial of Racism in Online Responses to News Media Articles’, *PLATFORM: Journal of Media and Communication*, v.3(1)(March), p. 40.

people as the normative standards by which other races must measure themselves.¹⁵²⁵ However, Australia's theatrical context is by no means the only arena in which the identity and legitimacy of Australia's Aboriginal people were racially challenged. Ongoing Indigenous calls for sovereignty and recognition of their claims to land, fractured by colonialism, remain significant contested issues in Australia. Following the landmark 1990s *Mabo*¹⁵²⁶ and *Wik*¹⁵²⁷ legal decisions in favour of Indigenous land claims, a significant mainstream backlash against further Indigenous land claims ensued. Coupled with a failed republican attempt,¹⁵²⁸ ongoing debates about the negative (illegal/racist) perceptions of colonialism,¹⁵²⁹ and emotive asylum seeker debates,¹⁵³⁰ mainstream Australia's colonial authority and Anglo-based national identity remained in a state of turmoil. More than ever, Indigenous theatre's relevance, and its uniquely humorous responses, provided a significant voice in these often ideological debates.

3.4 *Yanagai! Yanagai! – An Aboriginal response to land rights claims*

In late 2002 the High Court of Australia rejected the native title rights of the Yorta Yorta nation's claim to their traditional lands and waters around the Murray Goulburn region of Victoria/NSW.¹⁵³¹ Incensed by the denial of her people's sovereignty and historical connection to the land, playwright Andrea James penned *Yanagai! Yanagai!* in protest.¹⁵³² The play's title took its name from the first recorded words of the Yorta Yorta people – 'go away!'¹⁵³³ The narrative jumps from spiritual past, to colonial invasion, to the present legal environment, pointing to the Yorta Yorta's ongoing connection to the region and land rights struggles. It satirises the pomposity of the early colonists and parallels their arrogance with the elitism of Australia's Westminster-based legal system. In addition to

¹⁵²⁵ Bradley-Smith, S., 2003, 'Rhetoric, reconciliation and other national pastimes: showcasing contemporary Australian theatre in London', in Schafer, E. & S. Bradley-Smith, (eds.), 2003, *Playing Australia. Australian theatre and the international stage*, Rodopi, Amsterdam, New York, p. 197.

¹⁵²⁶ High Court of Australia, 1992, 'Mabo v Queensland No. 2' [1992], 175 *Commonwealth Law Reports*, 1. Online summary of this case at: <www.atns.net.au/agreement.asp?EntityID=741>, viewed 02/02/2016.

¹⁵²⁷ High Court of Australia, 1996, 'Wik Peoples v Queensland', ('A Pastoral Leases Case') [1996], 187 *Commonwealth Law Reports*, 1. Online at: <<http://www.austlii.edu.au/cgi-bin/sinodisp/au/cases/cth/HCA/1996/40.html>>, viewed 02/02/2016.

¹⁵²⁸ On 06/11/1999 Australians voted on two changes to their Constitution that, if successful, would have resulted in the formation of an Australian Republic in lieu of the current Constitutional Monarchy. The referendum was unsuccessful. See: Australian Electoral Commission, 24/10/2012, '1999 Referendum Report and Statistics', online at: <www.aec.gov.au/.../referendums/1999_Referendum_Reports_Statistics/> viewed 02/02/2016.

¹⁵²⁹ Well into the new century, the 1990s 'history wars,' discussed in Chapter 5, continued to challenge Australia's idea of itself as a unified nation and in particular the roles played by colonists in oppressing Indigenous people and the legitimacy of calls for non-Indigenous culpability in issues of injustice. For example, see Keith Windschuttle's book series: *The Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, published by Macleay Press, Paddington, NSW, in 2002 & 2009, and also his *The White Australia Policy* published by Macleay Press in 2004. In one response to Windschuttle's (and other) claims of colonial legitimacy were the series of rebuttal essays published in Manne, R., (ed.), 2003, *Whitewash, On Keith Windschuttle's Fabrication of Aboriginal History*, Black Inc. Books, Victoria.

¹⁵³⁰ Australia's ongoing socio-political debates over the legitimacy of asylum seekers' claims for refugee status continue to rage, including a series of ongoing controversial political policies professed by both major sides of parliament over issues of stopping boats arriving on our shores and offshore processing of those seeking political asylum in Australia. For a good history of these debates see: Manne, R., 2013, 'Tragedy of Errors: The Shambolic Cruelty of Australia's asylum seeker policy', *The Monthly*, online at: <<https://www.themonthly.com.au/australia-s-shipwrecked-refugee-policy-tragedy-errors-guest-7637>> viewed 02/02/2016.

¹⁵³¹ State Library of Victoria, nd. 'Native title and the Yorta Yorta', *Education Resources* at:

<<http://ergo.slv.vic.gov.au/explore-history/fight-rights/indigenous-rights/native-title-yorta-yorta>> viewed 22/09/2015.

¹⁵³² James, A., 2002, 'Writer's Statement' in *Yanagai! Yanagai!*, Currency Press Pty Ltd, Strawberry Hills, NSW, np.

¹⁵³³ Radic, L, 2006, *Contemporary Australian Drama*, Brandl & Schlesinger, Blackheath, Australia, p. 215.

providing snapshots of the actual evidence given to the court, James reveals the emotional and humiliating journey of her people in their quest to ‘prove’ their native title rights. Although her anger is recognisable in this mockery, the story is primarily told in a way that reveals the good humour and community spirit that continues to abound in her people. Additionally, at times recognisable forms and functions of Indigenous humour can be seen at work in the play.

3.5 *The humour techniques used in Yanagai! Yanagai!*

Taking the Mickey

Mickey-taking is a form of humour that is often aimed at those in power.¹⁵³⁴ Milner Davis argues that unspoken cultural rules decree that when a victim does not comprehend the bait, the mickey has in fact been successfully taken.¹⁵³⁵ For James, this inability to get the mockery includes non-human life forms. She employs a form of mickey-taking in the play to denote the foreignness of the colonists and their ‘strange’ livestock in contrast to the natural mannerisms of her Aboriginal ancestors:

Dingo 2: Look here! This fulla’s got the biggest boobles I’ve ever seen!
He pokes at them and they wobble profusely.

Munarra: Ayyy! Shame!

She waves her stick at the Dingo.

Dingo 1: Do you reckon this fella would make for good eating?

Dingo 2: Oooh, yeah.

The cow lifts its tail and does a loud, runny shit.

All: [together] Paaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaw!

Munarra: I reckon this one belongs to Curr. Show me your leader!

*The cow wanders off.*¹⁵³⁶

In this instance, the introduced cow’s lack of ability to communicate contrasts incongruously with the natural language of the ancient dingos, humorously pointing to the sophistication and superiority of the Yorta Yorta culture in the face of colonial ignorance (and arrogance). Additionally, the herd of cows in the play are represented by ‘clunky wooden puppets that ... ‘shit on cue.’¹⁵³⁷ In western cultures, scatological references have been used to heighten performance humour since early Greek theatrical times, further suggesting that European cows are merely base animals of no complexity, unlike the Aboriginal dingos.¹⁵³⁸

Overall, the emphasis on the sophistication of the Yorta Yorta worldview, and the amusing differences in communications between Indigenous and non-Indigenous characters, helps to re-enforce the naturalness of Aboriginal identity and (re)install cultural pride through its humorous in-

¹⁵³⁴ Milner-Davis, J., 2007, ‘Taking the mickey’, *The Fine Print*, issue 4, August 2007, p. 20.

¹⁵³⁵ Milner-Davis, J., 2007, p. 22.

¹⁵³⁶ James, A., 2002, *Yanagai! Yanagai!* Currency Press Pty Ltd, Strawberry Hills, NSW, p. 32.

¹⁵³⁷ James, A., 2002, ‘Characters’ in *Yanagai! Yanagai!* Op. Cit., np.

¹⁵³⁸ See for example: Aristophanes, 421 B.C. comedic play, *Peace*, where his protagonist, Trygaios, decides to journey to heaven to confront Zeus about the lengthy Peloponnesian War. Trygaios feeds excrement to a giant dung beetle for the purpose. Ewans, M., 06/02/2016, ‘At the Limits of Humour, Keynote Address’, 22nd Australasian Humour Studies Network Conference 2016, The University of Sydney, Sydney, NSW.

group complicity.¹⁵³⁹ Norrick calls these techniques ‘intertextual humour’ where the performer challenges the audience to comprehend a pre-existing cultural discourse that is required to appreciate the humour.¹⁵⁴⁰ The use of witty repartee by Aboriginal ancestor dingoes produces a sense of superiority and solidarity for Yorta Yorta people and acts as a metaphorical form of revenge on a colonial system that has dismissed their sovereignty rendering them powerless to respond in any other manner.¹⁵⁴¹

Further mickey-taking in the play mocks the formality of western courtroom procedures, including bowing to the judge. The play also mocks the boredom of the stenographers, and knocking of the judicial hammer. All of these practices are ridiculed and contrasted with the personable mannerisms and casual Aboriginal English of Indigenous characters.¹⁵⁴² Nonetheless, poignantly, such elements of superiority and light relief give way to scenes of sadness, community disempowerment and poverty. Although James portrays a proud and resilient people, steeped in unique history, ultimately the legitimacy of their nation is dismissed by a system of evidentiary law that suggests that their sovereignty has been washed away by the ‘tide of history’.¹⁵⁴³ Morreall recognises that because life is full of stressful incidents, like the ones highlighted in the play, humorous amusement is important because of its ability to displace or block stress emotions.¹⁵⁴⁴ Although complex, humour has been recognised as an important medicinal tool used in hospitals because of its role in assisting patients’ wellbeing and coping skills. It facilitates good interactions between patients and staff and helps to ease suffering and anxiety.¹⁵⁴⁵

However, Berger says that in assessing the effectiveness of mocking humour as a form of political satire, the satirist’s ‘ultimate result’ should be questioned.¹⁵⁴⁶ Are those in power actually affected by this mickey-taking over and above any psychological gratification gained by the in-group in this ridicule?¹⁵⁴⁷ Popa suggests that through exaggeration and emphasis on particular issues, political satire can highlight matters that might otherwise go unnoticed.¹⁵⁴⁸ Political satire serves to make audiences

¹⁵³⁹ Critchley, S., 2010, *On Humour*, Routledge, London and New York, pp. 67–68.

¹⁵⁴⁰ Norrick, N., 1989, ‘Intertextuality in humor’, *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, De Gruyter Mouton, Berlin, 2(2), pp. 120–121.

¹⁵⁴¹ The idea that language is used as a marker of solidarity and to produce a feeling of superiority is outlined by Aranda in her examination of the stand-up comedy of American-Mexican stand-up comedian Gabriel Iglesias. See: Aranda, L., 2014, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 71–86, particularly at pp. 82–83.

¹⁵⁴² James, A., 2002, *Op. Cit.* pp. 34–35.

¹⁵⁴³ High Court Judge Olney used the term ‘Tide of History’ in his rejection of the Yorta Yorta native title claim in his judgement handed down on 12/12/2002. See reference to this phrase in the play: James, A., 2002, *Op. Cit.*, p. 52.

¹⁵⁴⁴ Morreall, J., 2009, ‘Humour and the Conduct of Politics’ in Lockyer, S. & M. Pickering, 2009, *Beyond a Joke, the Limits of Humour*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, UK, p. 75.

¹⁵⁴⁵ Morreall, J., 2009, p. 75. Also see: Finlay, F., Baverstock, A. & S. Lenton, 2014, ‘Therapeutic clowning in paediatric practice’, *Clinical Child Psychology and Psychiatry*, vol. 19(4), pp. 602–603.

¹⁵⁴⁶ Berger, A., 1993, *An Anatomy of Humor*, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, New Jersey, p. 124.

¹⁵⁴⁷ Berger, A., 1993, p. 124.

¹⁵⁴⁸ Popa, D., 2011, ‘Political satire dies last: A study on democracy, opinion formation, and political satire’ in Tsakona, V., and D. Popa, (eds.), 2011, *Studies in Political Humour: In between Political Critique and Public Entertainment*, John Benjamins, Amsterdam, Philadelphia, p. 157.

more attentive to their surrounding political environment and more critical of those in power.¹⁵⁴⁹ It pinpoints socio-political incongruities and provides an important link of comprehension/interpretation between the political landscape and ordinary citizens' lives.¹⁵⁵⁰ It has also been suggested that one of political comedy's most noteworthy effects is to prime people for processing future political information.¹⁵⁵¹ However, the fact that, once in power, dictators often persecute comedians, suggests that what satirists say does actually matter and that the power to ridicule can be a politically powerful force.¹⁵⁵²

Wordplay

Wordplay is again recognisable as a humour technique employed by James to lighten the formality of the courtroom and reassert the down-to-earth nature of the Yorta Yorta people. For example, the daunting task of facing a legal system so far removed from their own experiences is revealed in a witness's unorthodox use of humour when called to give evidence:

QC: Mr James, you must answer, clearly, 'I do'.

Lesley: Bloody hell, I feel like I'm getting married—All right, 'I do' as long as I can get a divorce later. Nahh, only gammon.¹⁵⁵³

Milner Davis recognises the use of humour at inappropriate times as a particularly Australian humour occurrence. She says that: “[t]he most confronting thing about Australian humour for non-Australians is not its obscure, colloquial references... nor even its crudity and offensiveness, but rather its ubiquitous and unavoidable occurrence, regardless of time, place and social space/s.”¹⁵⁵⁴ James asserts this style of humour as particularly Indigenous by adding reference to the colloquial word ‘gammon’ used extensively by Aboriginal Australians in lieu of the phrase ‘only joking’.¹⁵⁵⁵ This episode suggests that, even in the face of nerve-racking formality, Indigenous people retain their sense of humour and joie de vivre.

Moreover, at times, in defiance, the witness Lesley James cheekily challenges the court's authority with a superiority-styled wordplay in Yorta Yorta language, unfamiliar to the ears of the western court hierarchy:

Lesley: Manarraupna mutja!

The words, 'Thunder in your anus! are projected behind Lesley.

QC: I haven't asked you a question.

¹⁵⁴⁹ Berger, A., 1993, Op. Cit., p. 124.

¹⁵⁵⁰ Popa, D., 2011, Op. Cit., p. 157.

¹⁵⁵¹ Warner, B., Hawthorne, H., and J. Hawthorne, 2015, 'A dual-processing approach to the effects of viewing political comedy', *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, 28(4), De Gruyter Mouton, Berlin, p. 554.

¹⁵⁵² Berger, A., 1993, Op. Cit., p. 124.

¹⁵⁵³ James, A., 2002, Op. Cit., p. 24.

¹⁵⁵⁴ Milner-Davis, J., 2009, 'Aussie humour and laughter: Joking as an acculturating ritual', in De Groen, F., & P. Kirkpatrick, (eds.), 2009, *Serious Frolic, Essays on Australian humour*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, QLD, p. 38.

¹⁵⁵⁵ The Online Slang Dictionary notes that 'gammon' is a colloquial word for saying something in a joking manner that is used extensively in the Northern Territory of Australia. Online at: <<http://onlineslangdictionary.com/meaning-definition-of/gammon>>, viewed 02/02/2016.

Lesley: That's language. It means 'you are my friend'. Did you get that down for the records? That's M...A...N...¹⁵⁵⁶

Billig recognises an aspect of superiority humour when people delight in laughing at those who have misplaced views of themselves, like the pompous and adversarial Queens Counsel Barrister.¹⁵⁵⁷ Once again we see example of the Indigenous propensity to levelling humour that cuts down tall poppies to even out the playing field of those who present as superior. The traditional vernacular, seen here used within the course of an English communication, is an example of cross-linguistic code-switching, where speakers switch between two distinct languages.¹⁵⁵⁸ This technique is both a tool of creativity used to generate humour, as well as a marker of cultural identity that encourages in-group solidarity.¹⁵⁵⁹ It can also be used as a linguistic mechanism of social manipulation that excludes those who do not comprehend the meaning of the word/phrase.¹⁵⁶⁰ Both the inclusive and exclusive nature of code-switching advance a form of cultural levelling that reinstalls cultural authority to this Indigenous community which is threatened and confronted by these formal European proceedings.

Black Humour

The use of black humour in the play is seen in the poignant, sometimes, sad, sometimes funny, fishing competition between traditional Yorta Yorta man, Uncle Albert, and a large, ancient – and elusive – Murray Cod named Harold.¹⁵⁶¹ Albert names the cod after his father's white boss, Harold Withers, who despised Albert's father because he was the better sheep shearer.¹⁵⁶² In a dream-like scene, and after many years of near misses, Harold is finally snared on Albert's line:

Uncle: I got him, I got him, I got him! I got the big fish! ... Come on, old fulla. I've hooked you, ya mongrel...Jesus Christ! You're uglier than I thought you'd be. Harold bloody Withers come back to haunt me...Your time is up, old fulla. So is mine.

...He unhooks the fish and lets it go.

Now go on, Harold! Get away from this fishing hole. You're too old to eat now.¹⁵⁶³

The rivalry between these two old Murray River 'fullas' provides humour in the Hobbesian superiority vein proposed by Gruner that sees delight in the game's competition.¹⁵⁶⁴ Nonetheless, the game ends with an incongruous twist. Albert is finally triumphant, but lets Harold go in an act of bittersweet resignation that gives the scene its black irony. As in the plays of Jack Davies, the sorrows

¹⁵⁵⁶ James, A. 2002, Op. Cit., p. 25.

¹⁵⁵⁷ Billig, M., 2005, Op. Cit., p. 40.

¹⁵⁵⁸ Aranda, L., 2014, Op. Cit., p. 74.

¹⁵⁵⁹ Aranda, L., 2014, p. 75.

¹⁵⁶⁰ Aranda, L., 2014, p. 75.

¹⁵⁶¹ James, A., 2002, Op. Cit., pp. 18–19.

¹⁵⁶² James, A., 2002, p. 29.

¹⁵⁶³ James, A., 2002, pp. 47–48.

¹⁵⁶⁴ Gruner, C., 1997, *The Game of Humor – A Comprehensive Theory of Why We Laugh*, Transaction Publishers, New Jersey, USA.

and suffering of Aboriginal people are often intertwined with humour that gives tragic Aboriginal experiences a sense of resilience and humanity.¹⁵⁶⁵

The significance of Yanagai! Yanagai!

Like other important Aboriginal plays from this time, *Yanagai Yanagai*'s significant themes of injustice resonated not only with mainstream Australian, but also with world audiences. The play toured the United Kingdom, France, the Philippines, Kenya, and the USA.¹⁵⁶⁶ Additionally, media in those countries help raise international awareness of Australia's relationship with its Indigenous people.¹⁵⁶⁷ This was especially true with regards to the much publicised governmental reconciliation movement,¹⁵⁶⁸ increasing pressure on the Federal Government to consider the ideological and social benefits of an apology to the stolen generations.¹⁵⁶⁹ British theatre critic, Michael Billington, recognised that to a great extent, Aboriginal theatre had truly become an important 'vehicle for reconciliation' in Australia.¹⁵⁷⁰

In 2003, the expat Australian theatre producer and director Karen Oughtred formed *The Australian Aboriginal Theatre Initiative* (AATI) in New York City.¹⁵⁷¹ This organisation was committed to introducing new Indigenous Australian plays to American audiences, and assisting to open up the dialogue between Aboriginal Australian artists and Indigenous artists in the Americas.¹⁵⁷² Joining forces with Ilbjerri and Playbox¹⁵⁷³ theatre companies in Australia, and America's Immigrants' Theatre Project (ITP),¹⁵⁷⁴ AATI brought five new works written by Indigenous Australian playwrights to New York from early 2004.¹⁵⁷⁵ The *New Indigenous Voices of Australia*¹⁵⁷⁶ project (NIVA), with its non-traditional casting principles, sought to provide new opportunities for Native American actors

¹⁵⁶⁵ Shoemaker, A., *Black Words, White Page. Aboriginal Literature 1929–1988*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, QLD, p. 255.

¹⁵⁶⁶ Ktirath, N., 12/12/2008, 'Yanagai! Yanagai!' in *News Blaze* at:

<<http://newsblaze.com/story/20081212154543jny.nb/topstory.html>>, viewed 21/03/2013.

¹⁵⁶⁷ Bradley-Smith, S., 2003, 'Rhetoric, reconciliation and other national pastimes' in Schafer, E. & S. Bradley-Smith, (eds.), 2003, *Playing Australia, Australian Theatre and the International Stage*, Amsterdam and New York, pp. 206–208.

¹⁵⁶⁸ The Council for Aboriginal Reconciliation (CAR) that functioned from 1991–2000 recognised that one of its primary goals was to tell and circulate stories about the past that included Aboriginal perspectives. Attwood notes that CAR defined its work as providing '[a] sense of all Australians of a shared ownership of their history'. Attwood, B., 2005, *Telling the Truth about Aboriginal History*, Allen & Unwin, Crows Nest, NSW, p. 184.

¹⁵⁶⁹ Bradley-Smith, S., 2003, Op. Cit., pp. 206–208.

¹⁵⁷⁰ Michael Billington OBE's critical review of Jane Harrison's play *Stolen* was published in the British Guardian Newspaper on 08/07/2000 and is quoted in Bradley-Smith, S., 2003, Op. Cit., pp. 207–208.

¹⁵⁷¹ Amerinda Organisation, nd., 'New Indigenous Voices of Australia' *Newsletter*, 7-2, at:

<<http://amerinda.org/newsletter/7-2/australia.htm>>, viewed 21/03/2013. AAIT ran until 2010 – see: Campbell, J., 2013, 'Chemistry of Love Stage Manager – Karen', *La MAMA E.T.C.* at: <http://chemistryoflove.net/?page_id=950>, viewed 21/06/2013.

¹⁵⁷² Amerinda Organisation, nd., Op. Cit.

¹⁵⁷³ In 2003 Melbourne's *Playbox Theatre Company* changed its name to *Malthouse Theatre Company*. Personal Communication with Jason of Malthouse Theatre, 21/06/2013.

¹⁵⁷⁴ New York based *Immigrant's Theatre Project* was founded in 1988 by artistic director, Marcy Arlin, and dedicated to bring the voices of worldwide immigrants and marginalised people to American audiences. See: Immigrants Theatre Project, 2012, 'About Us' at: <<http://www.immigrantstheat.org/about.cfm>>, viewed 22/06/2013.

¹⁵⁷⁵ NGO Committee – Indigenous People, 31/03/2004, 'New Indigenous Voices from Australia', at:

<https://groups.yahoo.com/neo/groups/ngo_ip_decade/conversations/messages/331> viewed 28/09/2015.

¹⁵⁷⁶ Amerinda Organisation, nd., Op. Cit.

to work with professional Aboriginal artists, staging Aboriginal Australian plays, in order to strengthen global theatre networks and to foster the exchange of artistic cross-cultural information.¹⁵⁷⁷

In March 2004 Oughtred teamed with ITP's Marcy Arlin and Yorta Yorta woman Louise Bennett to direct *Yanagai Yanagai* in New York City.¹⁵⁷⁸ Arlin believes that her experience participating in this collaboration, and specifically in this production, was significant.¹⁵⁷⁹ This project was not only important for her, but also for the Native American cast members whose own people have also been subject to historical injustices at the hands of various governments. Like Indigenous Australian people, Native Americans have faced forced relocations from their homelands and removal of their children, and were subject to various laws that sought to restrict their traditional cultural practices.¹⁵⁸⁰ In addition to the benefits of enhanced international kudos for Australian productions this project, (which also included *Box the Pony*), effectively provided American audiences with insights into some of the socio-political challenges faced by Australia's Indigenous people, particularly showcasing the unique humour used by them used to express it.¹⁵⁸¹

3.6 '*Bitin' Back*' (2005) – An Aboriginal response to identity challenges

Back in Australia, the theatre provided Aboriginal people with a medium for telling their stories to mainstream audiences, giving them a heightened sense of social voice and authority. But not all Aboriginal plays of this time focused on the historical injustices of colonial experiences. In 2005 Brisbane's Indigenous theatre company, Kooemba Jdarra, produced a stage version of Vivienne Cleven's award winning book, *Bitin' Back*.¹⁵⁸² In addition to its recognition of some specific Indigenous issues, the play covers general Australian issues of sexual and social identity, along with the gossip and discrimination found in Australian country towns. These broader Australian topics are discussed within the spectrum of funny, far-fetched, comic scenarios. However, most importantly, *Bitin' Back* included Aboriginal people within the context of contemporary life, highlighting their relevance and participation in mainstream Australia.

¹⁵⁷⁷ Amerinda Organisation, nd., 'Theatre News and Reviews – New Indigenous Voices of Australia' *Theatermania.com*, at: <http://www.theatermania.com/new-york-theater/shows/new-indigenous-voices-from-australia_103008/> viewed 28/09/2015.

¹⁵⁷⁸ NGO Committee – Indigenous People, 31/03/2004, Op. Cit.

¹⁵⁷⁹ Arlin, M., 25/06/2013, personal communication with K. Austin.

¹⁵⁸⁰ Idaho Dept. Health & Welfare, nd., 'Indian Child Welfare Act – Historical Perspective', online at: <<http://healthandwelfare.idaho.gov/Children/IndianChildWelfareAct/HistoricalPerspective/tabid/1363/Default.aspx>> viewed 28/09/2015.

¹⁵⁸¹ NGO Committee – Indigenous People, 31/03/2004, Op. Cit.

¹⁵⁸² Cleven's book won the David Unaipon Award for literary excellence in 2000. See cover of: Cleven, V., 2001, *Bitin' Back*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, Queensland. Cleven, V., 2005, '*Bitin' Back*' produced by Kooemba Jdarra Theatre Company and first shown at Queensland Performing Arts Centre, Brisbane on 05/07/2005. See: Currency Plays, 2007, *Contemporary Indigenous Plays*, Currency Press Pty Ltd, Strawberry Hills, NSW, pp. 1–54.

The protagonist, Nevil, an Aboriginal son and star footballer, decides to reveal his cross-dressing and literary aspirations in the conservative environment of a small-town which prizes the aggressive machismo of Australian football. Panicked by Nevil's revelations, his mother, Mavis, and Uncle Booty, both filled with the promise of Nevil's budding sporting career, attempt to force 'common sense' into the boy by helping him to see that he is a 'real' man. However, Nevil, under the female penname, Jean Rhys,¹⁵⁸³ has other plans for his life. His desire to write a novel about a Murri¹⁵⁸⁴ woman hoping to rebuild her life that has been stained by gossip and lies parallels his own journey, facing the maliciousness of smalltown opinions as he pursues his own literary dreams.

3.7 *The humour techniques used in 'Bitin' Back'*

Taking the Mickey

The play moves through a series of interventions and comic misunderstandings, leading to wrongful arrests, a police siege and a farcical batch of cocaine-laced fundraiser lamingtons. After such a ludicrously improbable series of comic mishaps and adventures, Mavis and Booty appear to finally accept Nevil's decision to become a cross-dressing writer. The play ends with Nevil once again playing football, and scoring for the team. This scene shows Nevil getting his own back on his overbearing and controlling mother and uncle. His very public antics attempt to teach them both a lesson on truly accepting that his life is actually his own:

Booty: That's my boy. Always knew you had it in ya, Nevil.
Nevil: It's not Nevil.
Booty: What?
Nevil: Call me Lucinda!
The CROWD gasps and look at each other.
Mavis: That's my boy. Always one for a joke.¹⁵⁸⁵

This note of humorous contradiction leaves audiences wondering about the veracity of Nevil's family's acceptance of his new identity. Here we see a connection to Bergson's understanding of the disciplinary functions of humour where the threat of laughter serves to intimidate through fear of humiliation; attempting to 'repress any separatist tendency' and challenge to the status quo.¹⁵⁸⁶

Wordplay

The play's farcical events involve a good deal of funny wordplay and themes that appeal to broader Australian audiences. This includes insider Australian humorous anecdotes about the elevated

¹⁵⁸³ Jean Rhys was female writer of the mid to late twentieth century. She wrote *Wide Sargasso Sea* in 1966. See: Grant, L., 23/02/2013, 'My Hero: Jean Rhys', *The Guardian*, online at: <<http://www.theguardian.com/books/2013/feb/22/jean-rhys-novelist-yearning-rage-desire>> viewed 28/09/2015.

¹⁵⁸⁴ Murri is the term given to Aboriginal people from areas of New South Wales and Queensland. See: Korff, J., 09/11/2015, 'Aboriginal Culture – People – Aboriginal Identity: Who is Aboriginal?' *Creative Spirits* viewed 09/09/2016 online at: <<https://www.creativespirits.info/aboriginalculture/people/aboriginal-identity-who-is-aboriginal>>.

¹⁵⁸⁵ Clevon, V., 2005, Op. Cit., p. 52.

¹⁵⁸⁶ Bergson, H., 2005 [1911], Brereton, C & F. Rothwell [trans.], *Laughter, An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, Dover Publications, Inc. New York, p. 97, p. 86.

importance of Avon makeup sales careers, fund-raising raffles, lamingtons, Tim-Tam biscuits, and even the fickle nature of football crowds who one minute abuse players, and next praise them. The ‘Australian-ness’ of the play is cemented with references to these cultural icons and the use of colourful slang from the ‘frock’ wearin’ Nev, to ‘stinkin’ bludgers’, feeling crook, gawking, sounding suss, being a wanker, poofter, sook, sheila, dodgy, and needing to ‘shut ya cakehole’.¹⁵⁸⁷ This colourful vernacular, that often reflects a working class British vocabulary, has been noted as especially prevalent in our humour by International humour scholars like Christie Davies who marvel at the number of coarse and inventive ways in which Australians describe everyday matters.¹⁵⁸⁸

Yet, at the same time, Clevel provides reference to the specific Murri nature of her main characters, scattering Aboriginal English words throughout the script such as ‘bungoo’, ‘gungie’ and ‘wombas’.¹⁵⁸⁹ These words are familiar to Aboriginal Australians, yet often unknown to non-Indigenous Australians. This continues the modern tradition of Indigenous playwrights who use Indigenous language to disarm the dominance of English. As Hodge has noted of Jack Davis’s plays:

Aboriginal words weave through the dialogue, making no concessions to White ignorance, so that Whites simply have to put up with the unselfconscious exclusion of them and their language that so many Aboriginals have endured at greater length...¹⁵⁹⁰

Although Clevel does make a concession by including a glossary of Aboriginal terms with the published script, this aspect of the play’s live performance could prove disconcerting for non-Indigenous viewers.

Yarning

Yarning in direct communication with audiences is a recognisable Indigenous technique used to convey humorous information in the play. Nyoongah¹⁵⁹¹ woman Mary Terszack says that, for Aboriginal people, yarning is a process of making meaning by connecting and passing on particular knowledge in a cultural manner.¹⁵⁹² In the play Mavis sets up an intimacy with the audience, raising her fears about her son’s sexuality by frequently talking directly to them. Her dialogue is often presented in a quirky ‘third person’ stream of consciousness— providing a typically Australian relaxed communication technique. Moreover, there is also a connection with stand-up comedy techniques where a comic’s success depends on their ability to build rapport with their audience by appealing to

¹⁵⁸⁷ A ‘frock’ is a dress; ‘stinkin’ bludgers’ are lazy people; ‘feeling crook’ is feeling sick; ‘gawking’ is staring; sounding ‘suss’ is suspicious; a ‘wanker’ is an idiot with ideas above his real capacities; a ‘poofter’ is a homosexual; a ‘sook’ is a sulker; a ‘sheila’ is a female; ‘dodgy’ is dishonest; to ‘shut ya cakehole’ is to stop talking.

¹⁵⁸⁸ Davies, C., 2002, *The Mirth of Nations*, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, USA and London, UK, p. 93, p. 101.

¹⁵⁸⁹ ‘Bungoo’ is money; ‘Gungies’ are police officers; and ‘wombas’ are crazy people. See: Clevel, V., 2005, Op. Cit., p. 53.

¹⁵⁹⁰ Hodge, R., 1984, ‘A Case for Aboriginal Literature’, *Meridian*, vol. 3/1, May 1984, p. 85.

¹⁵⁹¹ Nyoongah is the term given to Aboriginal people from a part of Western Australia. See: Korff, J., 09/11/2015 Op. Cit.

¹⁵⁹² Terszack, M., 2008. *Orphaned by the colour of my skin: A stolen generation story*, Verdant Press, Maleny, QLD, p. 90.

them directly.¹⁵⁹³ DeCamp suggests that this trust-relationship is essential in fostering the audience's willingness to consider any subsequent social commentary that is to be made.¹⁵⁹⁴

Mimicry

The play explores issues of identity as Nevil attempts to be true to himself despite the conservatism of a small country town. Nevil's desire to embody a feminine persona and to pursue a writing career is almost diametrically opposed to the stereotyped successful sports star ambition generally attributed to male Indigenous Australians. Cleven expresses identity issues through her use of overtly clichéd characters that mimic the thoughts and actions of some recognisably predictable Australian types. For example, Uncle Booty is an older Aboriginal male who lives out his own failed football fantasies through his nephew. His masculine sporting characteristics lead him to attempts to make Nevil into a 'normal' and 'proper bloke' by encouraging him to box:

Booty: [to Nevil] This'll knock the girl outta ya!
(*Booty starts shadowboxing, encouraging Nevil to join in*)
Come on, don't be a girl.¹⁵⁹⁵

A common Australian trope of masculinity, with its negative view of femininity and sensitivity, and its overt machismo is showcased humorously throughout the play.

Mavis is a comically dutiful Australian mother. She works hard at her Avon career, and undertakes charitable work for the local church, and is fiercely loyal to her football hero son, Nevil. All of Mavis and Uncle Booty's homophobic fears for Nevil are confirmed with a visit from sandal-wearing, flashy city 'nancy', Trevor Davidson, a stereotyped effeminate character, from Brisbane:

Mavis: [to the audience] it's clear to me now that Trevor and Nevil are you know what. That's why Nev's been gettin' doodee-dahed up, calling himself Jean. Mavis Dooley ain't nobody's fool.¹⁵⁹⁶

Boskin recognises that stereotypes figure prominently in conflict humour primarily because they are so prevalent in society and so 'devilishly tenacious' in colouring our cognitions.¹⁵⁹⁷ The portrayal of stereotypes continues traditions of exaggerated comic characters, which are found frequently in contemporary Aboriginal comedy performances that often confront tenacious Australian socio-political understandings of themselves.

¹⁵⁹³ DeCamp, E., 2015, 'Humoring the audience: performance strategies and persuasion in Midwestern American stand-up comedy', *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, 28(3), De Gruyter Mouton, Berlin, p. 450. Double, O., 2014, *Getting the Joke, the inner workings of stand-up comedy* (2nd ed.), Bloomsbury Publishing Plc, London & NY, p. 205.

¹⁵⁹⁴ DeCamp, E., 2015, Op. Cit., p. 450.

¹⁵⁹⁵ Cleven, V., 2005, Op. Cit., p. 27.

¹⁵⁹⁶ Cleven, V., 2005, Op. Cit., p. 25.

¹⁵⁹⁷ Boskin, J., 1985, 'Ethnic Humor: Subversion and Survival', *American Quarterly*, Johns Hopkins University Press, p. 83.

The significance of Bitin' Back

Bitin' Back makes fun of a recognisable stereotype that suggests Indigenous Australian males in particular are limited to sports for successful careers. In addition, issues of sexual and social identity, bigotry and gossip are all important humour topics in the play. These broad social issues give the play significance for all Australians and serve to situate Aboriginal people as relevant participants in the nation's social identity.

3.8 *Chopped Liver (2004) –An Aboriginal Response to Poor Health Challenges*

At the heart of Indigenous theatre has always been a strong commitment to the communities in which it was born.¹⁵⁹⁸ Enoch has said that: '[a]s an Indigenous artist you are absolutely connected to your community and you have ways of thinking about that and you create work from that perspective.'¹⁵⁹⁹ Although this commitment can be a double-edged sword, as Aboriginal artists balance this responsibility with personal expressions and social critique, Indigenous theatre's value often lies in work that directly responds to their own communities' needs. Moreover, theatrical projects that benefit communities can successfully attract financial assistance from non-arts (government) agencies and philanthropic sources as alternative sources of funding to The Australia Council.¹⁶⁰⁰ Such projects help sustain Indigenous theatre companies constantly searching for financial sources to fund ongoing work. Additionally, they also benefit the wider Australian community in providing information that educates and helps to improve the health outcomes for disadvantaged groups of the nation, most especially Aboriginal people.¹⁶⁰¹

In 2004, Kamarra Bell-Wykes, the Queensland Jagera/Dulinbara playwright of Melbourne's Ilbjerri Theatre, was commissioned by the Victorian Department of Health and the Hepatitis Council to produce a play, *Chopped Liver*, addressing issues related to Hepatitis C.¹⁶⁰² Hep C is often transmitted through intravenous drug use, and, as Bell-Wykes had previously written an award winning play that had dealt with intravenous drug use,¹⁶⁰³ her knowledge of this subject was an asset.¹⁶⁰⁴ Hep C is a significant health problem in many Aboriginal communities and places a heavy burden and great

¹⁵⁹⁸ Casey, M., 2004, Op. Cit., p. 209.

¹⁵⁹⁹ Enoch, W., quoted in Glow, H., & K. Johanson, 2009, 'Your Genre is Black: Indigenous Performing Arts and Policy', *Platform Paper*, No. 19, Currency House, Sydney, p. 31.

¹⁶⁰⁰ Bell-Wykes, K. 14/09/2015, personal communication with K. Austin.

¹⁶⁰¹ In Australia in 2014 there were 230,500 people living with chronic hepatitis C and a big percentage of these are Aboriginal people in prisons. See: Hepatitis Australia, 15/07/2014, 'Hepatitis C Facts Sheet', online at: <<http://www.hepatitisaustralia.com/information-for-journalists/>>. Resnick, I. & L. Brener, 2010, 'Hepatitis C and the Aboriginal Population', *National Centre in HIV Social Research*, University of NSW, online at: <https://csr.h.arts.unsw.edu.au/media/CSRHFile/SRB16_Hepatitis_C_and_the_aboriginal_population.pdf> both viewed 20/10/2015.

¹⁶⁰² Bell-Wykes, K., 14/09/2015, Op. Cit.

¹⁶⁰³ Bell-Wykes, K., 2003, *Shrunken Iris*, premiering at the North Melbourne Town Hall. See Ilbjerri, 2012, *Annual Report* at: <http://ilbjerri.com.au/wp-content/uploads/2014/03/2011_Annual_Report.pdf> viewed 29/09/2015.

¹⁶⁰⁴ Bell-Wykes won the 2003 Aunty Eleanor Harding Award for her play *Shrunken Iris*. See discussion regarding this play in: Bell-Wykes, K., 2006, 'Where to From Here? A Reflection', [online], *Ngoonjook*, No. 28, pp. 3–9, at: <<http://search.informit.com.au/fullText;dn=913253115236381;res=IELAPA>> viewed 29/09/2015.

expense on public health services.¹⁶⁰⁵ The commissioning authorities desired a tour-able show that could be performed in schools, prisons and Aboriginal communities throughout the country.¹⁶⁰⁶

So with just two actors (originally Isaac Drandich and Melodie Reynolds), a minimal set, and a brief requiring the play to be funny, Bell-Wykes produced a script that informed and educated people on the effective management of the disease through the often funny and personable communications of her Aboriginal characters Jimmy and Lynne.¹⁶⁰⁷ In fact, Bell-Wykes credits Drandich, through his portrayal of Jim, with much of the humour found in the original performances of the play.¹⁶⁰⁸

3.9 The humour techniques used in *Chopped Liver*

Taking the Mickey

The play opens with Jim's stylised stand-up comedy monologue that likens his past experiences as those of a small lizard who wishes to be an imposing goanna.¹⁶⁰⁹ Jim's ironic dialogue takes the mickey out of his own behaviour as he captivates his audience with a farcical story about a skink who hitches a ride in a car driven by bees that urinate into their car's tank for 'BP' fuel.¹⁶¹⁰ Humorously Jim parallels the tale of the skink's naïvety and bravado with his own story of law breaking.¹⁶¹¹ Imprisoned for his youthful misdemeanours, Jim contracts Hep C through jailhouse tattoos.¹⁶¹²

The play then jumps to his partner Lynne's story about how she contracted Hep C through her own past drug use and needle sharing. Lynne recalls that she was a shy teenager who was often teased by others for being overweight.¹⁶¹³ Wryly she recognises that this mockery, coupled with her insecurities, led to her drug taking as a way of fitting in with others. As Bergson has noted, the humour of mockery is a powerful motivator.¹⁶¹⁴ And while both stories are fictional, they provide funny, but tragic, reference to two of the most common ways in which people catch this disease.¹⁶¹⁵

Wordplay

Although the play progresses through the serious and difficult issues of fear, the stigma, prejudice and ignorance attached to the disease, humour is found in some of the witty language produced by Jim and Lynne. For example, in relation to their initial inability to accept that they both had the disease, Jim humorously recognises their ignorance and denial:

¹⁶⁰⁵ Bell-Wykes, K., 14/09/2015, Op. Cit.

¹⁶⁰⁶ Bell-Wykes, K., 14/09/2015, Op. Cit.

¹⁶⁰⁷ Bell-Wykes, K., 14/09/2015, Op. Cit.

¹⁶⁰⁸ Bell-Wykes, K., 14/09/2015, Op. Cit.

¹⁶⁰⁹ Ilbijerri Theatre Company, nd. 'Archival footage of *Chopped Liver* performance', viewed 15/09/2015.

¹⁶¹⁰ Ilbijerri Theatre Company, nd. *Chopped Liver*.

¹⁶¹¹ *Brisbane Expo '88* ran from 30 April – 30 October 1988 and its attractions can be revisited at the official Expo '88 website: <<http://www.expomuseum.com/1988/>> viewed 29/09/2015. Ilbijerri Theatre Company, nd. Op. Cit., viewed 16/09/2015.

¹⁶¹² Ilbijerri Theatre Company, nd. *Chopped Liver*, Op. Cit.

¹⁶¹³ Ilbijerri Theatre Company, nd. *Chopped Liver*.

¹⁶¹⁴ Bergson, H., 2005 [1911], Op. Cit., pp. 95–98.

¹⁶¹⁵ Ilbijerri Theatre Company, nd. *Chopped Liver*, Op. Cit.

Years pass, but we are this town's answer to Antony and Cleopatra— the King and Queen of denial...
Someone once said ignorance is bliss, but I reckon that knowledge is power.¹⁶¹⁶

Through the intense drama, incongruously contrasting with moments of wit, the play resoundingly suggests that Hep-C does not have to be a negative and life-ending experience if its symptoms are effectively managed.¹⁶¹⁷

Mimicry and Slapstick humour

Instances of physical comedy in the characters' antics and dancing provide distinct humour tactics that also assist to de-stigmatise this contentious issue for many audience members. This is especially true for those in prison environments where prejudice and bravado inhibit diagnosis of the disease.¹⁶¹⁸ In one scene, macho Jim mimics washing his hair and then carefully wrapping it in an illusionary towel turban in a particularly effeminate manner. Bell-Wykes reports that this incident particularly had many audience members in stitches.¹⁶¹⁹

Bell-Wykes believes that the play's humour had a dual purpose, enhancing its entertainment value and speaking to some very specific audiences about a topic that is often shrouded in shame and ignorance.¹⁶²⁰ In particular, she credits the play's humorous elements with affording some hardened prisoners the opportunity to more openly discuss a taboo topic and to consider obtaining medical assistance.¹⁶²¹ The play was very successful and had an extended touring life from 2006–2009 with new Indigenous performers replacing the original two, stand-up comedian Cy Fahey and dancer Nikki Ashby.¹⁶²² Attesting to the play's accomplishments, in 2008 it won both Indigenous Community Justice and Public Healthcare Awards, and has been performed to over 10,000 people around the country.¹⁶²³

3.10 The influence of standup and sketch comedy on contemporary Indigenous Theatrical Performances

In addition to the ongoing use of some now recognisable Indigenous humour forms in recent Aboriginal plays, there is the influence of sketch and stand-up comedy humour techniques. Sketch comedy vignettes that cover a range of current socio-political issues relevant to Indigenous Australians hark back to the sketch comedy of NBT and *Basically Black* review performances of the 1970s which challenged Australian socio-political injustices and helped to bring a contemporary

¹⁶¹⁶ Ilbijerri Theatre Company, nd. *Chopped Liver*.

¹⁶¹⁷ Bell-Wykes, K., 14/09/2015, Op. Cit.

¹⁶¹⁸ Ilbijerri Theatre Company, nd. *Chopped Liver*. Bell-Wykes, K., 14/09/2015, Op. Cit.

¹⁶¹⁹ Bell-Wykes, K., 14/09/2015, Op. Cit.

¹⁶²⁰ Bell-Wykes, K., 14/09/2015, Op. Cit.

¹⁶²¹ Bell-Wykes, K., 14/09/2015, Op. Cit.

¹⁶²² Deadly vibe, 'Nikki Ashby', at: <<http://www.deadlyvibe.com.au/2010/07/nikki-ashby/>> viewed 29/09/2015.

¹⁶²³ Ilbijerri Theatre Company, 'About', at: <<http://ilbijerri.com.au/about/>> viewed 29/09/2015.

humorous flavor to Aboriginal artists working in mainstream theatre.¹⁶²⁴ Moreover, the stand-up comedy technique of a sole performer reciting witty socio-political observations directly to an audience has become more recognisable in traditional theatrical performances. Arguably, this ‘stand-up’ comedy influence that is reflective of the growing participation of Aboriginal performers within the Melbourne International Comedy Festival (MICF).

In 2007, the Victorian Yorta Yorta artist Jason Tamiru launched the inaugural *Deadly Funny*, a stand-up comedy competition designed to incorporate Aboriginal people into the mainstream comedy culture of the MICF.¹⁶²⁵ In parallel with this now annual event, traditional Indigenous theatrical performances have begun to incorporate elements of stand-up comedy into their own sketch-comedy performances. Furthermore, some theatrically-based Aboriginal actors have also performed their short sketches at the *Deadly Funny National Finals & Showcase*. Currently, Aboriginal humorous live performances are a vibrant and thriving reality.

3.11 ‘Itchy Clacker’ (2007) –An Aboriginal response to injustice

Following the long-running, international success of her autobiographical play,¹⁶²⁶ the Tasmanian Indigenous actor/playwright Tammy Anderson wrote and starred in Ilbjerri’s one-woman comedy performance, *Itchy Clacker*, which ran as part of MICF, in April 2007.¹⁶²⁷ Both comic and crude, yet told with an air of confronting reality, Anderson’s performance humorously celebrates her life and the people who help make it unique.¹⁶²⁸

3.12 The humour techniques used in *Itchy Clacker*

Taking the Mickey

Apart from taking the mickey out of her daughter’s obsessive use of social networking (Skype, MySpace, Bebo) and youthful acronyms like LOL (‘laugh out loud’), her son’s love of hard rubbish collections, and her partner’s addiction to Xbox360 games, Anderson mostly laughs at her own idiosyncrasies.¹⁶²⁹

¹⁶²⁴ NBT’s *Basically Black* review performances are discussed in chapters 4 and 5 herein.

¹⁶²⁵ See Chapter 7 herein for a detailed look at Indigenous Stand-up comedy. Melbourne International Comedy Festival, 2007, ‘Deadly Funny 2007’, at: <<http://www.comedyfestival.com.au/corporate/outside-the-festival/deadly-funny/deadly-funny-2007/>> viewed 02/04/2013. Tamiru, J., 15/01/2015, personal communication with K. Austin, See Chapter 7 for details of the *Deadly Funny Comedy Final & Showcase*.

¹⁶²⁶ Anderson wrote and starred in ‘I don’t wanna play house’ in 2001. Her play dealt with the dysfunctionality of her life growing up as a poor Tasmanian Aboriginal person. The plays script was published in: *Blak Inside: Six Plays from Victoria*, Currency Press, Sydney. Deadly Vibe, 16/04/2013, ‘The Arts: Tammy Anderson Play is a Hit’, online at: <<http://www.deadlyvibe.com.au/2013/04/tammy-anderson-play-is-a-hit/>> viewed 15/10/2015.

¹⁶²⁷ Austage, nd., *Tammy Anderson’s Itchy Clacker* at: <<http://www.ausstage.edu.au/pages/event/77241>> viewed 21/09/2015.

¹⁶²⁸ Chandler, J., 06/04/2007, ‘Review of Tammy Andersons Itchy Clacker’, *Australian Stage Online*, at: <<http://www.australianstage.com.au/reviews/melbourne/tammy-andersons-itchy-clacker-269.html>> viewed 21/09/2015.

¹⁶²⁹ Anderson, T., 19/03/2007, ‘Third Draft Script of Itchy Clacker’, *Ilbjerri Theatre Company Archive*, viewed 15/09/2015.

She shamelessly laments the fact that she has suffered from an itchy ‘clacker’ all her life.¹⁶³⁰ This, she coarsely suggests, is the kind of itch that makes a person want to drag their bottom around on the carpet like a dog with worms.¹⁶³¹ She traces her latest itchy bout to wearing G-string underwear on a long flight to the United Kingdom.¹⁶³² Such intimate confessions lead Anderson to discuss the difficulties of obstetric examinations, ‘deadly’ pregnant farts, and childbirth ordeals – matters that could resonate with many audience members. Anderson’s anecdotes include her mickey-taking about the Tasmanian housing commission estate she grew up in. ‘Ravenswood’, she recognises, is a place where no one gets out of bed until their pensions are in the bank, and everyone loves takeaway food, but dislikes fruit and vegetables.¹⁶³³ Father’s Day, she humorously suggests, is the most confusing day of the year, with everyone in the neighbourhood attempting to guess the true identity of the various children’s fathers.¹⁶³⁴

Anderson’s mickey-taking does, at times, extend to ridicule of the audience. Rather salaciously she requests audience members to switch off their mobile phones, not even leave them on vibration, as she contends that she is their ‘cheap thrill’ for the evening. Mockingly she also ridicules those people who attach ‘those bloody Bluetooth things’ to the side of their heads because they look absolutely ridiculous! She laments:

Why is it that everyone wants to talk to someone who’s not in the same room as them?

Billig concurs with Bergson with regards to the predominantly disciplinary nature of much humour.¹⁶³⁵ Billig claims that the serious world and comedy are connected through the power they hold over social actors.¹⁶³⁶ Embarrassment, often the result of humour, is a powerful social force that evokes shame and fear, two internal motivators that encourage social actors to protect social codes and ensure compliance.¹⁶³⁷

Self-Deprecation

Whereas parallels to traditional Aboriginal humour are recognisable in Anderson’s use of personable yarning techniques in this performance, her use of self-criticism is something that is particularly recognisable in contemporary Aboriginal stand-up comedy. Self-deprecating humour provides important links that tie current Aboriginal theatrical performances to this relatively new comedy form for Aboriginal people, which is discussed in detail the next chapter. Self-criticism for Aboriginal performers has become a meta-communicative tool that allows them to express their solidarity, to

¹⁶³⁰ ‘Clacker’ is an Australian slang word for anus or vagina. Anderson, T., 19/03/2007.

¹⁶³¹ Anderson, T., 19/03/2007.

¹⁶³² Anderson, T., 19/03/2007.

¹⁶³³ Anderson, T., 19/03/2007.

¹⁶³⁴ Anderson, T., 19/03/2007.

¹⁶³⁵ Billig, M., 2005, Op. Cit., ‘Chapter 9, Embarrassment, Humour and the Social Order’, pp. 200–235.

¹⁶³⁶ Billig, M., 2005, pp. 214–215.

¹⁶³⁷ Billig, M., 2005, p. 215.

reveal their own sense of humour, and to minimise the effects of social criticisms in the recognition of their own vulnerabilities and weaknesses.¹⁶³⁸

For example, Anderson laments the difficulties of growing up a ‘blackfella’. She says that blackfellas could never play in the sandpit like other kids because whenever they did, all of the neighbourhood dogs would try to cover them up with sand! Arguably, this joke takes the idea of Aboriginal people being treated as little more than a bone or even excrement in Australia to a shockingly low level. However, as other Indigenous academics have observed, taking ownership of such negative stereotypes is a way in which Indigenous people can reclaim the offensiveness for themselves, rendering the derogatory barb neutral.¹⁶³⁹

Likewise, the ability of Jewish people to laugh at themselves, and negative stereotypes about themselves, is one of the most definitive characteristics of Jewish humour.¹⁶⁴⁰ It has been suggested that this self-deprecation is born from oppression, assimilation and the need to outwit oppressors by displaying Jewish intelligence.¹⁶⁴¹ Arguably, the commonalities of historical oppression and assimilation have also fashioned a similar style of humour in Australia’s Indigenous people too. Regardless, audiences at Aboriginal comedy performances are given the opportunity to acquire a new perspective on past events and assumptions through the alternative, often surprising, point of view that humour creates. And the success of this foray into producing work for MICF inspired Ilbijerri to stage several further sketch comedy performances for the festival in 2009 and 2010.

Mimicry

At various times throughout the performance, Anderson creates an array of complex characters including family members, a disabled hunch-back, and even a country-singing drunken old man, combining her acting skills with classical stand-up comedy techniques of intimate dialogue with her audience.¹⁶⁴² She transforms from one character to the next, taking on their physical characteristics and gestures along with suitable changes of speech, and highlighting the unique differences in everyone. The potential tragedy of each character’s life is offset by warmth and humour, existentially suggesting that although people face difficulties in life it is substantially more bearable, even at times pleasurable, when leavened by humour.

¹⁶³⁸ Seres, T., & A. Andres, 2014, ‘Catalan political humor: criticism and self-criticism’, *Israeli Journal for Humor Research*, June 2014, Issue 5, p. 139.

¹⁶³⁹ Sykes, R., 1989, ‘Do caged kookaburras still laugh? Humour in Aboriginal writing’, *Thalia: Studies in literacy humour*, vol. 10, no. 2, p. 46.

¹⁶⁴⁰ Friedman, L., & H. Friedman, 2009, ‘Jewish? You must be joking! The Jewish take on humor’, *Social Science Research Network*, Rochester, New York, USA, p. 4, p. 16.

¹⁶⁴¹ Friedman, L., & H. Friedman, 2009, p. 16.

¹⁶⁴² Anderson, T., 19/03/2007, Op. Cit.

Bergson has particularly observed the great humour that is to be found in characterisation.¹⁶⁴³ He recognises that comedy helps us to focus on people's gestures that express their true attitudes and their mental state, rather than merely their actions alone.¹⁶⁴⁴ The comic character expresses a person's 'lack of adaptability to society'.¹⁶⁴⁵ Bergson claims that to imitate another is to bring out the element of 'automatism' that they have allowed to 'creep' into their character, and this habitual predictability is essentially laughable.¹⁶⁴⁶ Critic Jan Chandler suggests that Anderson is a consummate comic performer, combining powerful physical characterisations with her personable, funny yarns that celebrate life and the people who make it unique.¹⁶⁴⁷ Anderson herself says that she loves to entertain people by telling stories about universal experiences and the things that she is most passionate about, like her family members.¹⁶⁴⁸

Yarning

Anderson's humorous communications, directed straight to audiences, embody an informal style of humour that could also be considered a form of Indigenous yarning. Yarning has been used successfully in contemporary Aboriginal performances to help engender a rapport between performer and audience in order for them to present their social observances. As discussed in the previous chapter, Purcell employed yarning techniques in *Box the Pony* to help diffuse sensitive issues. In conjunction with yarning's casual intimacy, Purcell challenged audiences to consider their own culpability in sustaining socio-political injustices for Aboriginal people in Australia. In a sense, by discussing her harsh childhood memories, and invoking various laughable, but rather tragic figures, Anderson does too.

3.13 'A Black Sheep Walks into a Baa'– Aboriginal responses to political and identity challenges

The use of humour in performances has been a very deliberate technique used in many of Ilbijerri's performances, and most especially under the guidance of artistic director Maza-Long.¹⁶⁴⁹ Maza-Long works on a rule told to her by her late father, Bob Maza, that – 'if you don't entertain, you don't educate' and comedy is a significant element of that process for Aboriginal people that allows them to communicate important cultural and political messages to audiences.¹⁶⁵⁰

¹⁶⁴³ Bergson, H., 2005 [1911], Op. Cit., pp. 65–98.

¹⁶⁴⁴ Bergson, H., 2005 [1911], p. 70.

¹⁶⁴⁵ Bergson, H., 2005 [1911], p. 65.

¹⁶⁴⁶ Bergson, H., 2005 [1911], p. 16, pp. 71–72.

¹⁶⁴⁷ Chandler, J., 06/04/2007, Op. Cit.

¹⁶⁴⁸ Delroy, T., 13/10/2008, 'Interview with Anderson, T. entitled Tammy Anderson. Comedian, Actor, Playwright, exhausted!' *ABC Radio Northern Tasmania* at: <http://blogs.abc.net.au/tasmania/2008/10/tammy-anderson.html?site=northtas&program=northern_tasmania_breakfast> podcast accessed 15/10/2015.

¹⁶⁴⁹ Bell-Wykes, K., 14/09/2015, Op. Cit.

¹⁶⁵⁰ Australian Centre for the Moving Image, 2015, Interview of Maza-Long, R. entitled: 'In Conversation with Rachel Mazza (sic), The Subject Speaks Back', *Screen Worlds. The Story of Film, Television & Digital Culture Exhibition*, viewed 15/09/2015.

With this philosophy in mind, in 2009, she directed a comedy review show written by collaboration between established actors John Harding, Isaac Drandich, Melodie Reynolds and emerging stand-up comedians Cy Fahey, and Mia Stanford.¹⁶⁵¹ Maza-Long acknowledges that none of the team had been involved in the comedy review process before and so they were often ‘literally floundering around in the dark’.¹⁶⁵² So, to assist with the production, established non-Indigenous comedian, Nelly Thomas, was bought in to workshop the team’s material.¹⁶⁵³ Inspired by the early works of *Nation Black Theatre*, they produced and rehearsed a show within a short five week period.¹⁶⁵⁴ *A Black Sheep Walks into a Baa* was performed in Melbourne in April 2009 as part of the MICF.¹⁶⁵⁵

3.14 *The humour techniques used in Black Sheep*

Taking the Mickey

Not all Aboriginal humour relates to issues solely of significance to Aboriginal people. Stand-up comedian Cy Faye performed some of his classic stand-up comedy routines in the review, including taking the mickey out of his own unusual name.¹⁶⁵⁶ Humorously, Faye claims that ‘Cy’ isn’t short for anything; rather it’s long for ‘K’.¹⁶⁵⁷ He suggests that it was the best that his illiterate mum could manage, as she actually thought that she was spelling ‘Robert’. Thankfully, he says, ‘Cy’ made naming his own daughter easy, as he just calls her ‘Cy-clone’.¹⁶⁵⁸ It’s a practical thing to do because if she ever ruins Christmas he can call her ‘Tracey’; or if she doesn’t like bananas he’ll call her ‘Larry’.¹⁶⁵⁹ Faye’s name jokes not only poke self-deprecating fun at himself; they also reference significant Australian cyclonic activity that would be well-known to audiences, regardless of their cultural background. Stand-up comedians frequently reference issues that are widely known by their audience in order to challenge their understanding of these local allusions.¹⁶⁶⁰ In this sense the performance is an intimately negotiated ‘claim of incongruity’ that is able to imply ‘a more or less shared worldview’.¹⁶⁶¹

¹⁶⁵¹ Ilbijerri Theatre Company, nd., ‘Performance History – A Black Sheep Walks into a Baa’ online at <ilbijerri.com.au/productions/project/a-black-sheep-walks-into-a-baa>, viewed 05/01/2015.

¹⁶⁵² Browning, D., 16/01/2010, ‘Interview with cast members of A Black Sheep Walks into a Baa’, *ABC radio program Awaye!* Online at: <<http://www.abc.net.au/radionational/programs/awaye/a-black-sheep-walks-into-a-baa/3671310>> accessed 21/09/2015.

¹⁶⁵³ Browning, D., 16/01/2010.

¹⁶⁵⁴ Browning, D., 16/01/2010.

¹⁶⁵⁵ Ilbijerri Theatre Company ‘Performance History – Black Sheep’, Op. Cit.

¹⁶⁵⁶ Browning, D., 16/01/2010.

¹⁶⁵⁷ Browning, D., 16/01/2010.

¹⁶⁵⁸ Browning, D., 16/01/2010.

¹⁶⁵⁹ Cyclones ‘Tracey’ and ‘Larry’ were two significant and devastating weather events to hit Australia in 1974 and 2006 respectively. Tracey demolished Darwin in the Northern Territory and Larry demolished banana plantations near Innisfail in Queensland. Browning, D., 16/01/2010.

¹⁶⁶⁰ Brodie, I., 2008, ‘Stand-up Comedy as a Genre of Intimacy’, *Érudit, Journal of Canadian Historical Association*, Ottawa, Ontario, Canada, p. 514.

¹⁶⁶¹ Brodie, I., 2008, p. 514.

Wordplay

The title of the review, *A Black Sheep Walks into a Baa*, is a complex, satirical wordplay pointing to colonial Australia's wealth forged from its lucrative sheep industry. A black sheep references both Aboriginal people and the idea of a family outcast; whilst the homophonic play on the word 'bar' contentiously points to a place that Aboriginal Australians had been excluded from accessing until the 1960s.¹⁶⁶² Routines were a variety of sketch-characterisations, stand-up, and musical items that laughed at, and played with, topical socio-political issues. Some topics were very challenging for Aboriginal people. These included identity issues, the 2008 Apology to the Stolen Generations and the continuing exclusion of the members of this generation from political power.¹⁶⁶³

Mimicry

One of the characters played by Drandich was fictional Aboriginal Prime-Minister, Bulupin Kwobinyarn, incongruously complete with his Armani suit and Aboriginal English, who gives a dramatic speech to his fellow 'deadly' country women and 'solid' country men from 'Parliament Tent'.¹⁶⁶⁴ Drandich combines the polished rhetoric of a politician with Aboriginal English speech to give a uniquely Aboriginal spin on this elite leadership position from which Aboriginal people have been consistently excluded. *Black Sheep* continues the tradition set by the 1970s review performance, *Basically Black*, with satirical humour that allows Aboriginal artists to highlight socio-political injustices. Although Ilbijerri mostly produced theatre for Aboriginal audiences, Drandich believes that the predominantly non-Indigenous audiences at MICF understood most of their comedy and responded with affirming laughter that the Aboriginal performers had hoped for.¹⁶⁶⁵ Lynch-Morris claims that comedy that incorporates clever 'epideictic oratory characteristics' and cultural perspectives is a real benefit to mainstream audiences.¹⁶⁶⁶ The humorous rhetoric of the ceremonial political speech made by PM Bulupin Kwobinyarn effectively became a 'bridge between two world-views' symbolically instating Aboriginal people and their perspectives into Australia's upper echelons of political power.¹⁶⁶⁷

¹⁶⁶² D'Abbs, P., 1990, *Restricted Areas and Aboriginal Drinking, Report for the Department of Health and Community Services, NT*, online at <www.aic.gov.au/media_library/publications/proceedings/01/dabbs.pdf> viewed 03/03/2015.

¹⁶⁶³ Stanford, M., 26/02/2015, personal communication with K. Austin. On the 13th of February 2008, newly elected Prime Minister, Kevin Rudd, gave a speech to Australia's Indigenous communities who had suffered many generations of injustices and family fracturing by successive government policies that had seen their children taken away from their families and placed in government ordained care. For transcript of this speech see: Rudd, K., 13/02/2008, 'Apology to Australia's Indigenous Peoples' at: <<http://www.australia.gov.au/about-australia/our-country/our-people/apology-to-australias-indigenous-peoples>> viewed 21/09/2015.

¹⁶⁶⁴ Browning, D., 16/01/2010, Op. Cit.

¹⁶⁶⁵ Browning, D., 16/01/2010.

¹⁶⁶⁶ Lynch-Morris, A., 2010, 'Native American Stand-Up Comedy: Epideictic Strategies in the Contact Zone', *Rhetoric Review*, 30(1), pp. 49–50.

¹⁶⁶⁷ Lynch-Morris, A., 2010, p. 50.

3.15 *'Black Sheep: Glorious Bastards' (2010) – A further response to political and identity challenges*

In time for the 2010 MICF, Ilbjerri again gathered a comedy team together to co-write and perform a sequel comedy review call *Black Sheep: Glorious Bastards*,¹⁶⁶⁸ The sequel utilized a similar variety format and included many of the same characters like PM Kwobinyarn with his funny pragmatic reconciliation policies and his inappropriate flirtation with A.B.O.¹⁶⁶⁹ news reporter, Anita Blackman.¹⁶⁷⁰ It drew mainstream critical acclaim which praised its energy, sharp character work and well-crafted storytelling.¹⁶⁷¹

3.16 *The humour techniques used in Black Sheep: Glorious Bastards*

Wordplay

The title *Black Sheep: Glorious Bastards* continues the derogatory imagery of Aboriginal people as 'black bastards'¹⁶⁷² and also alludes to Tarantino's 2009 hit movie, *Inglorious Basterds*.¹⁶⁷³ Once again, this wordplay tactic is easily recognised in much modern Aboriginal performance humour, including in the review shows of NBT's 1970s repertoire. The title *'Black Sheep: Glorious Bastards'* humorously reclaims easily recognised bigoted vernacular, disempowering the sting of of prejudice. In a phrase used to describe them.

Taking the Mickey and Mimicry

Significantly, the review successfully created several cheeky, but endearing characters that both mimicked and took the mickey out of certain recognisable stereotypes, Indigenous and non-Indigenous alike.

The programme included the portrayal of two mischievous Aboriginal aunties who amused audiences with their sexual innuendos, their quick wit and wisdom, along with their mocking commentary about gubbas' strange ways, their food and their funny thin-lips.¹⁶⁷⁴ The cheeky Aunties mock the stereotype of older tenacious Aboriginal women who have withstood the poverty and injustice of contemporary Australia with their domineering opinions and humour intact. These two wicked old girls celebrate Aboriginal strength, ingenuity, frank honesty and humour.

¹⁶⁶⁸ Auslit, nd., 'Black Sheep Glorious Bastaards', Ilbjerri Theatre Company, Thomas, N., Fahey, C., Maza, L., Reynolds, M., Stanford, M. at Melbourne Town Hall 25/03/2010 - 17/04/2010, <<http://www.austlit.edu.au/austlit/page/C754793>> viewed 03/03/2015.

¹⁶⁶⁹ An acronym for 'Aboriginal Broadcasting Organisation' that plays on the derogatory word for Aboriginal people – 'Abo'. Ilbjerri Theatre Company, 22/03/2010, 'Glorious Bastards Draft Script', viewed 15/09/2015.

¹⁶⁷⁰ Ilbjerri Theatre Company, 22/03/2010. Stanford, 26/02/2015, Op. Cit.

¹⁶⁷¹ Watts, R., 09/06/2010, 'Ilbjerri's Dreaming humour', *ArtsHub*, online at: <<http://performing.artshub.com.au/news-article/news/performing-arts/richard-watts/ilbjerri-s-dreaming-humour-181434>> viewed 17/09/2015.

¹⁶⁷² For example is Indigenous man, Noel Tovey's 2005 autobiography, *Little Black Bastard, A Story of Survival*, Hodder Headline, Sydney, NSW.

¹⁶⁷³ IMDb, 2009, 'Tarantino, Q. & E. Roth, *Inglorious Basterds*' online at <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0361748/>> viewed 26/02/2015.

¹⁶⁷⁴ Ilbjerri Theatre Company, 22/03/2010, Op. Cit. Stanford, M. to K. Austin, 26/02/2015.

The slapstick mimicry of 'Nina', an Aboriginal ballerina, poked fun at the serious high-art world of ballet, so prized for its cultural capital in the west. Nina's presence mercilessly mocks the image of a tall, slim, white, dancer with that of an overweight, out-of-shape, short, black, ballerina. Nina's incongruous appearance, in conjunction with her physical ineptitude, contrasts sharply with her serious demeanour. Bergson has observed that a comic scene is created when a character inverts a role that we have come to expect being played out in a particular manner.¹⁶⁷⁵ Nina is an unlikely character, whose very presence takes-the-mickey out of western notions of high art with her grounded Aboriginal subjectivity.

Another sketch in the format of the mockumentary takes the mickey out of Australian's fascination with ethnological Aboriginal studies.¹⁶⁷⁶ This mockumentary humorously turns the tables on white Australia to look at the declining birth rates amongst white people in comparison to growth in the Aboriginal population.¹⁶⁷⁷ The show also laughs at Aboriginal stereotypes via imaginary farcical high rating television shows like: 'Married with 22 children', and 'Extreme Neighbours'.¹⁶⁷⁸ These skits not only provided an Indigenous perspective on some popular mainstream television programs, but they also aspired to the inclusion of Aboriginal people in popular media from which they have been mostly excluded.

3.17 The benefits of political sketch comedy

Although political sketch comedy is often irreverent and disrespectful with regard to important institutions and authorities, it can also be beneficial in promoting critical thinking.¹⁶⁷⁹ It brings issues out into the open, helping people to conceive of a broader, more constructive range of ideas.¹⁶⁸⁰ Greenbaum believes that comic narratives are an effective means of argument and persuasion in popular culture and give ordinary people the means to challenge the social order.¹⁶⁸¹ Performance comedy has the same function as Bakhtin's carnival in that its unrestricted communal laughter becomes a form of resistance to mono-cultural dominance with its dialogic style of mixed genres and

¹⁶⁷⁵ Bergson, H., 2005 [1911], Op. Cit., p. 46.

¹⁶⁷⁶ Ibbijerri Theatre Company, 22/03/2010, Op. Cit. Stanford, M. to K. Austin, 26/02/2015.

¹⁶⁷⁷ Ibbijerri Theatre Company, 22/03/2010. Currently the Aboriginal population is growing at an average of 2.3% per year in comparison with 1.5% for the total Australian Population. See: Australian Bureau of Statistics, 30/04/2014, 3238.0 - Estimates and Projections, Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, 2001 to 2026 , online at: <<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/Products/C19A0C6E4794A3FACA257CC900143A3D?opendocument>> viewed 15/09/2015.

¹⁶⁷⁸ Ibbijerri Theatre Company, 22/03/2010, Op. Cit.

¹⁶⁷⁹ Morreall, J., 2009, 'Humour and the Conduct of Politics' in Lockyer, S., & M. Pickering, 2009, *Beyond a Joke, the Limits of Humour*, Palgrave Macmillan, Basingstoke, UK, pp. 74–75.

¹⁶⁸⁰ Morreall, J., 2009, pp. 74–75.

¹⁶⁸¹ Greenbaum, A., 1999, 'Stand-up comedy as rhetorical argument: an investigation of comic culture', *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, 12 (1), De Gruyter Mouton, Berlin, p. 33.

voices.¹⁶⁸² This is achieved by employing comedic tools such as irony, hyperbole, mockery and mimicry, through which comedians attempt to achieve a rhetorical authority that enables them to connect emotionally and intellectually with audiences, and to position themselves as authoritative voices.¹⁶⁸³ Ultimately, their comic narrative is designed to persuade audiences to see the particular, alternative, worldview that they present.¹⁶⁸⁴

3.18 The influence of sketch comedy on performance in Western Australia

On the other side of the country in Western Australia, Indigenous theatre company Yirra Yaakin, has also produced Aboriginal theatre based on sketch and stand-up comedy. In 2012, in conjunction with Blue Room Theatre, it produced a sketch comedy show for NAIDOC¹⁶⁸⁵ week celebrations.¹⁶⁸⁶ Following the show's success, a further sketch comedy performance was produced, this time for Perth's Fringe Festival in 2013.¹⁶⁸⁷

3.19 'Black as Michael Jackson...and other Identity Monologues'— A response to identity challenges and Stolen Generations issues

The original concept for the show was inspired by writer Michelle White's indignation at prominent journalist Andrew Bolt's well-publicised media attacks on Aboriginal Australians, who, in his opinion, were not dark enough to qualify as Aboriginal people.¹⁶⁸⁸ As a fair-skinned, blue-eyed, Yamitji person with the last name of 'White', she could not help but feel denigrated by Bolt's identity challenges.¹⁶⁸⁹ Joining with established Noongar dancer, Karla Hart,¹⁶⁹⁰ they co-wrote a sketch show that Hart and the Bibbulmun actor, Della Rae Morrison,¹⁶⁹¹ performed.¹⁶⁹²

¹⁶⁸² Greenbaum, A., 1999, p. 34. Bakhtin, M., 1984 (1968), 'Rabelais and His World', (Iswolsky, H., trans.), Indiana University Press, Bloomington, USA, p. 12. Online at:

<monoskop.org/.../Bakhtin_Mikhail_Rabelais_and_His_World_1984.pdf>, viewed 25/11/2015.

¹⁶⁸³ Greenbaum, A., 1999, Op. Cit.p. 34, p. 45.

¹⁶⁸⁴ Greenbaum, A., 1999, p. 45.

¹⁶⁸⁵ NAIDOC is an acronym for 'National Aboriginal and Islander Day Observance Committee' that has celebrated the ongoing history, cultures and achievements of Indigenous Australian people. See Naidoc's homepage at: <<http://www.naidoc.org.au/>> viewed 08/11/2015.

¹⁶⁸⁶ EnjoyPerth! 2012, 'Advertisement for Black as Michael Jackson – Blue Room Theatre event', 19/06-07/07/2012, online at: <<http://www.enjoyperth.com.au/events/black-as-michael-jackson-blue-room>> viewed 16/10/2015.

¹⁶⁸⁷ Yirra Yaakin, nd., '50 Shades of Black' online at: <<https://yirrayaakin.com.au/2015-what-s-on/news/fifty-shades-of-black/>> viewed 14/04/2014.

¹⁶⁸⁸ Laurie, V., 25/06/2012, 'Black as Michael Jackson: review', *720 ABC Perth*, at: <<http://www.abc.net.au/local/reviews/2012/06/25/3532340.htm>> viewed 16/10/2015. For a basic summary of Bolt's challenge of the veracity of Aboriginal people see: Kissane, K., 30/09/2010, 'Case against Bolt to test racial identity, free-speech limits', *The Age Newspaper*, Victoria, at: <<http://www.theage.com.au/victoria/case-against-bolt-to-test-racial-identity-freespeech-limits-20100929-15xg8.html>> viewed 16/10/2015.

¹⁶⁸⁹ Laurie, V., 25/06/2012, Op. Cit.

¹⁶⁹⁰ Hart is a multi-award winning dancer and manager of the Noongar Woman's dance group Kwarbah Djookian, writer, radio announcer, Emcee, rapper, teacher, see: 'Karla Hart, My Blog', at: <<http://www.karlahart.com.au/>> viewed 14/04/2014. Also see: LinkedIn, nd., 'Background Summary of Karla Hart', online at: <<http://www.linkedin.com/pub/karla-hart/22/50b/4ab>> viewed 14/04/2014.

¹⁶⁹¹ The Australian Women's Achieve Project, nd., 'The Encyclopaedia of Women & Leadership in Twentieth-Century Australia: Morrison, Della Rae', at: <<http://www.womenaustralia.info/leaders/biogs/WLE0542b.htm>> viewed 16/10/2015.

¹⁶⁹² Laurie, V., 25/06/2012, Op. Cit.

3.20 The humour techniques of 'Black as Michael Jackson'

Taking the Mickey

The review included several short film comedy skits in which Hart and Morrison present examples of the myriad of insulting clichés things that 'Shit Whitefellas' say to Aboriginal people, including:

- 'You can't be Aboriginal, you're too pretty';
- 'Why do you identify with being Aboriginal? You could pass as white';
- 'Aboriginal people get all this money and they just piss it up against the wall';
- 'Why don't they just get a job? They're just so lazy';
- 'He only got that job 'cos he's Aboriginal'.¹⁶⁹³

The hypocritical contradictions and insensitive exaggerations behind these sayings are ironic, especially to Aboriginal people, because they highlight the ignorance of some commonly held assumptions. Although such mickey-taking derisory humour can act as a social abrasive that denigrates its non-Indigenous targets in the more acceptable manner of 'just a joke', Ford et al suggest that this does not appear to initiate prejudice;¹⁶⁹⁴ nor does it change individual's attitudes or beliefs.¹⁶⁹⁵ Rather, denigrating humour, they argue, activates a form of conversational levity where listeners suspend societal 'rules' of common sense and take on a non-critical 'humor mindset'(sic).¹⁶⁹⁶ This approach enables humourists to feel more comfortable in expressing socially 'taboo' topics without the fear of social reprisals.¹⁶⁹⁷ However, Ford et al also claim that this release only occurs in those people who already have a shared understanding of the humour's implicit message, and an existing negative attitude toward the disparaged entity.¹⁶⁹⁸

Alternatively, derisory humour can enable traditionally powerless groups, like Aboriginal Australians, to turn the tables on recognisable stereotypes, enacting a form of social revenge by exposing them as just that and increasing the cohesion among their in-group members who share a history of oppression.¹⁶⁹⁹ Additionally, recent studies suggest that if audiences recognise the (minority) status of the humorist the mickey-taking humour is considered more appropriate than the same jokes told by 'non-member' comedians.¹⁷⁰⁰

¹⁶⁹³ Hart, K., White, M., & D. Morrison, 21/06/2012, 'Shit Whitefellas Say' for Yirra Yaakin and The Blue Rooms Theatre production, *Black as Michael Jackson, and Other Identity Monologues*, online at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=H59W3acqZHs>> viewed 21/01/2015.

¹⁶⁹⁴ Ford, T., Richardson, K., & W. Petit, 2015, 'Disparagement humor and prejudice: Contemporary theory and research', *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, 28(2), De Gruyter Mouton, Berlin, pp. 171–2.

¹⁶⁹⁵ Ford, T., Richardson, K., & W. Petit, 2015, pp. 171–2.

¹⁶⁹⁶ Ford, T., Richardson, K., & W. Petit, 2015, p. 175.

¹⁶⁹⁷ Ford, T., Richardson, K., & W. Petit, 2015, p. 175.

¹⁶⁹⁸ Ford, T., Richardson, K., & W. Petit, 2015, p. 175, p. 177.

¹⁶⁹⁹ Ford, T., 2015, 'The social consequences of disparagement humor: Introduction and overview', *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, 28(2), De Gruyter Mouton, Berlin, p. 164.

¹⁷⁰⁰ Ellithorpe, M., Esralew, S. & L. Holbert, 2014, 'Putting the "self" in self-deprecation: When deprecating humor about minorities is acceptable', *Humor: International journal of Humor Research*, 27(3), De Gruyter Mouton, Berlin, pp. 401–402.

Even so, humour appreciation not only depends on the humorous words, but also on their audience.¹⁷⁰¹ Some instances of disparagement humour are more ‘dangerous’ than others because of the social position held by the target person/s.¹⁷⁰² If the perpetrator disparages those who hold lesser social positions than themselves, they ‘can potentially foster discrimination and social injustice’.¹⁷⁰³ Being the butt of derision can be experienced as ‘moral rejection’ and humiliation.¹⁷⁰⁴ Nonetheless, these findings generally support the contention that the deprecating humour aimed by minorities at majority social groups can be considered less socially harmful than majority group humour about ethnic minorities.

Self-Deprecation

To counter these putative racist phrases made by non-Indigenous people about Indigenous people White and Hart produced another short film about questionable things that their own Aboriginal people, ‘Shit Noongars say’.¹⁷⁰⁵ These exasperating, yet often truthful, laughable, sayings, include a series of communications about family members ‘borrowing’ cars and not returning them; exchanges about the questionable paternal heritage of their children; and the many requests to borrow money that is promised to be returned on payday, but never is.¹⁷⁰⁶

Wordplay

The show’s title is humorously poignant. Satirically it points to the ambiguous appearance of superstar singer, Jackson, whose increasingly pallid skin colour attracted as much publicity as his musical talents. The show consisted of a series of comedy vignettes of the types of Aboriginal people whom Bolt considered weren’t black enough, interwoven with an historical tale of a Stolen Generations child who reconnects with her Aboriginality.¹⁷⁰⁷

The short films, and the performance, include many Noongar words like ‘kart-warra’, ‘moorditj’ and ‘kwan’ in a manner that situates this review as a Noongar show.¹⁷⁰⁸ Also included are a series of Aboriginal English expressions like ‘hey tups’, ‘true as nan’, and ‘just ‘ome smellin’ meself’ that typify contemporary Noongar, and working class Australian, vocabulary and serve a similar purpose

¹⁷⁰¹ Kuipers, G., 2009, ‘Humor Styles and Symbolic Boundaries’, *Journal of Literary Theory*, v.3(2), De Gruyter Mouton, Berlin, p. 231.

¹⁷⁰² Ford, T., Richardson, K., & W. Petit, 2015 Op. Cit., p. 179.

¹⁷⁰³ Ford, T., Richardson, K., & W. Petit, 2015, p. 179.

¹⁷⁰⁴ Kuipers, G., 2009, Op. Cit, p. 230.

¹⁷⁰⁵ Hart, K., White, M., & D. Morrison, 22/06/2012, ‘*Shit Noongars Say*’ for Yirra Yaakin and The Blue Rooms Theatre production, *Black as Michael Jackson, and Other Identity Monologues*, at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=soNHai-j6HA>>, viewed 21/01/2015.

¹⁷⁰⁶ Hart, K., White, M., & D. Morrison, 22/06/2012.

¹⁷⁰⁷ Laurie, V., 25/06/2012, Op. Cit.

¹⁷⁰⁸ Kart-warra means stupid; moorditj is solid, good or excellent; kwan is backside. See the Kaartdijin Noongar (Noongar Knowledge), 2012, ‘Noongar World List’ for the meaning of some Noongar words referred to in this skit. At: <<http://www.noongarculture.org.au/glossary/noongar-word-list/>> viewed 21/10/2015.

of validation. For humour can be a form of cultural insider-knowledge;¹⁷⁰⁹ it provides a unique phenomenology of ordinary life.¹⁷¹⁰ Whilst often untranslatable, it provides speakers with a sense of cultural uniqueness and social-superiority.¹⁷¹¹ Critchley says that '[w]e wear our cultural distinctiveness like an insulation layer against the surrounding alien environment. It warms us when all else is cold and unfamiliar.'¹⁷¹² The humour of these phrases has a history of use in Aboriginal discourse that makes them all the funnier to insiders who are familiar with their everyday use and meaning. Kuipers says that humour often 'relies on implicit and culture-specific knowledge', appealing to those in-group users.¹⁷¹³ However, such distinctiveness makes them simply impenetrable to outsiders and perhaps therefore intriguingly funny.

3.21 '*Fifty Shades of Black*' – A sequel celebration of Aboriginal identity

Following the show's success, Hart and Morrison performed a sequel, humorously advertised as 'the illegitimate love child of *Black as Michael Jackson*'.¹⁷¹⁴ The performance was again supported by Yirra Yaakin and performed as part of *FringeWorld Festival Perth* in 2013 to sold-out audiences.¹⁷¹⁵ Once again, live skits are interspersed with humorous short films, including a parody of an Aboriginal cooking programme that deliberately fails before the secret ingredient is revealed;¹⁷¹⁶ and a parody of the long-running and popular television soap-opera, *Home and Away*.¹⁷¹⁷ Like so many Australian television programmes, soap operas lack Aboriginal cast members.

3.22 The humour techniques used in '*Fifty Shades*'

Taking the Mickey

The *Home and Away* spoof opens with Hart on the beach at Summer Bay reading Aboriginal newspaper, the *Koori Mail*.¹⁷¹⁸ Morrison runs to her dramatically, excited because kangaroo stew has been included on the famous local diner's menu. Hart's clichéd Aussie response: 'stone the crows, Yonga stew' parodies the shows corny Australian aphorisms, as well as pointing to a favourite Noongar dish little known by most mainstream Australians. The pair's slow motion 'dash' to the diner is suddenly halted by Hart, who questions Morrison's presence on the show. Morrison states that she is playing (original cast member) Alf's long-lost daughter. Hart recognises that this means Morrison

¹⁷⁰⁹ Critchley, S., 2010, *On Humour*, Routledge, London and New York, p. 67.

¹⁷¹⁰ Critchley, S., 2010, p. 66.

¹⁷¹¹ Critchley, S., 2010, pp. 67–68.

¹⁷¹² Critchley, S., 2010, p. 68.

¹⁷¹³ Kuipers, G., 2009, Op. Cit. p. 226.

¹⁷¹⁴ Yirra Yaakin, nd., '50 Shades of Black' online at: <<https://yirrayaakin.com.au/2015-what-s-on/news/fifty-shades-of-black/>> viewed 14/04/2014.

¹⁷¹⁵ Yirra Yaakin, nd., '50 Shades of Black'.

¹⁷¹⁶ This cooking segment can be seen on Youtube at: Main, M. 22/2/2013, 'Mering Time', online at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=d6i-x0Sm10>> viewed 22/10/2013.

¹⁷¹⁷ *Home and Away* is an Australian soap-opera that has been in production since 1988. Many of its popular characters have been in it since its inception, or have returned to their roles following periods of absence. IMDb, nd., 'Home and Away TV Series' online at: <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0094481/>> viewed 22/10/2015.

¹⁷¹⁸ This *Home and Away* skit can be seen on online at: Hart, K., 22/2/2013, 'Home and Away', at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Ot_aMorAocc> viewed 21/10/2015.

will now be on the show ‘forever’ and, conversely, that her own character will need to be killed off because there can’t be two ‘token blacks’! A dramatic fight scene ensues and a pleasant voice-over tells audiences not to miss tonight’s cliff-hanger episode to see which of the ‘blackies’ will be eliminated.¹⁷¹⁹

Mickey-taking irony is a significant strategy used in the skit to support its humour. Irony is a device in which the literal meaning of a phrase is not what the character intends to communicate.¹⁷²⁰ Garmendia argues that irony is characterised by an ‘overt clash between contents’ and is ‘always and necessarily critical’.¹⁷²¹ Irony is often used in humour because of its ties to traditional humour theories.¹⁷²² These include the ‘incongruity’ of its content’s clash that is contrary to what might be expected, and the ‘superiority’ of sarcastic irony that ridicules or mocks its victims.¹⁷²³ Sometimes the use of irony can be risky, especially when a hearer doesn’t realise that the speaker is not being literal.¹⁷²⁴ Therefore, additional humour techniques, such as the use of altered voice tone, gestures, facial expressions, and hyperbole, are used to support the content’s clash and to help make it clear that the utterance is not to be taken literally.¹⁷²⁵

Wordplay

Like its inspiration, the review’s title points to the complexities of Aboriginal cultures as well as making fun of popular novel, *50 Shades of Grey*.¹⁷²⁶ Whilst the show is nothing like the sadomasochistic novel, this title points to the complexities of Aboriginal people who come in all different shapes, sizes and colour shades.

Mimicry

Satirical mimicry, or parody, is a form of imitation in which the style and mannerisms of well-known people (or entities) are ridiculed.¹⁷²⁷ To be effective, the parodied object needs to have a distinctive quality that is easily recognisable.¹⁷²⁸ Pre-existing discursive entities are both repeated and

¹⁷¹⁹ The ‘Home and Away’ skit.

¹⁷²⁰ Garmendia, J., 2014, ‘The Clash: Humor and critical attitude in verbal irony’, *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, 27(4), De Gruyter Mouton, Berlin, p. 647.

¹⁷²¹ Garmendia, J., 2014, p. 648.

¹⁷²² Garmendia, J., 2014, pp. 652–653.

¹⁷²³ Attardo claims that ‘[s]arcasm is an overtly aggressive type of irony, with clearer markers/cues and a clear target.’ See Attardo, S., 2000, ‘Irony as relevant inappropriateness’, *Journal of Pragmatics*, vol. 32, online at:

<<http://www.journals.elsevier.com/journal-of-pragmatics/>> viewed 24/11/2015, p. 795. Garmendia, J., 2014, Op. Cit., pp. 652–653.

¹⁷²⁴ Garmendia, J., 2014, p. 649.

¹⁷²⁵ Garmendia, J., 2014, p. 649.

¹⁷²⁶ James, E.L., 2012, *50 Shades of Grey*, Vintage Books (Random House), UK. See:

<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Fifty_Shades_of_Grey> viewed 16/01/2015.

¹⁷²⁷ Berger, A., 1993, *An Anatomy of Humor*, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, New Jersey, p. 44.

¹⁷²⁸ Berger, A., 1993, p. 44.

simultaneously transformed into something ridiculous.¹⁷²⁹ The intertextuality of social knowledge and cultural conventions, including pre-existing knowledge about what comedy is, are important comedic devices of parody.¹⁷³⁰ In this instance, the hyper-drama of television cooking programmes and overtly dramatic soap-operas are well-known formats to Australian audiences, and thus ripe for ironic parody as programmes that historically ignore Aboriginal Australian participation.

The significance of '50 Shades'

Hart won the 2013 *WA Emerging Artist* award for her writing and acting in *50 Shades*.¹⁷³¹ It toured throughout the state and was staged at LaMama Courthouse Theatre in Melbourne in October 2013.¹⁷³² In further recognition of the growing influence of stand-up comedy on traditional theatre performances, excerpts from the production were also showcased at the MICF *Deadly Funny Comedy Awards* in 2014.¹⁷³³ Yirra Yaakin's forays into comedy have not been restricted to sketch. In 2011 it produced former artistic director David Milroy's musical comedy, *Waltzing the Wilarra*.¹⁷³⁴ This was the first Australian theatre project with 100% Indigenous cultural ownership on every production level.¹⁷³⁵ It was the hit of the 2011 Perth Arts Festival and dominated nominations in the WA Equity Awards.¹⁷³⁶ The play was inspired by Milroy's experiences growing up with his Aboriginal grandmother a former domestic servant, and his mother, a member of the Stolen Generations.¹⁷³⁷

3.23 *Waltzing the Wilarra – A response to the 'Apology to the Stolen Generations'*

The play is initially set in 1940s post-war Australia at a (fictional) social club that enabled Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal people to mix with one another, freed from Australia's divisive exclusion zones and restrictive laws.¹⁷³⁸ Principal Indigenous characters, and club singers, Elsa and Charlie, are both 'stolen' children. Elsa is married to non-Indigenous (alcoholic) war veteran, Jack, whilst her mother works as a domestic for the family of another main character, the upper-class, non-Indigenous, Fay, and helps run the club at night.¹⁷³⁹ Antagonism between Charlie and Jack, who grew up as brothers, centres on Jack's mental illness, Charlie's love for Elsa, and jealousy.¹⁷⁴⁰ These tensions lead to a fateful fight during which Charlie helps Jack take his own tormented life. Whilst the play grows

¹⁷²⁹ Palmer, J., 2009, 'Parody and Decorum: Permission to Mock' in Lockyer, S., & M. Pickering, 2009, *Beyond a Joke, the Limits of Humour*, Palgrave Macmillian, Basingstoke, UK, p. 82.

¹⁷³⁰ Kuipers, G., 2009, Op. Cit., p. 228.

¹⁷³¹ Yorga Waabiny, nd., 'Facebook Home Page' at: <<https://www.facebook.com/YorgaWaabiny>> viewed 16/10/2015.

¹⁷³² Yorga Waabiny, nd., 'Facebook Home Page'.

¹⁷³³ Austin, K., 05/04/2015, 'personal attendance Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Deadly Funny National Showcase', Melbourne Town Hall, Victoria.

¹⁷³⁴ Milroy, D., 2011, *Waltzing the Wilarra*, Yirra Yaakin Theatre Company and Currency Press, Strawberry Hills, NSW.

¹⁷³⁵ Morrison, K., 2011, 'Artistic Director's Notes' to Milroy, D., 2011, *Waltzing the Wilarra*, Yirra Yaakin Theatre Company and Currency Press, Strawberry Hills, NSW, np.

¹⁷³⁶ Laurie, V., 26/11/2012, 'Yirra Yaakin Unveils 2013 Season', ABC Perth, at: <<http://www.abc.net.au/local/stories/2012/11/26/3640903.htm>> viewed 04/12/2013.

¹⁷³⁷ Milroy, J., 2011, 'Foreword' to Milroy, D., 2011, Op. Cit., np.

¹⁷³⁸ Milroy, D., 2011, 'Playwright's Notes', Milroy, D., 2011, np.

¹⁷³⁹ Milroy, D., 2011, 'Characters', Milroy, D., 2011, np.

¹⁷⁴⁰ Milroy, D., 2011, pp. 10–12, p.26.

increasingly dark as relationships are challenged, it is also incongruously filled with much upbeat vaudevillian music, singing, dancing, and theatrical comedy routines.

3.24 *The humour techniques used in Waltzing the Wilarra:*

Wordplay

Wordplay is a significant element of the script with its spoonerisms and language play that poke fun at some well-versed Australian colloquialisms, while also pointing to the serious realities of 1940s apartheid restrictions for Aboriginal people:

Old Toss: [reading] ‘By the royal Order of the Boot, therefore, thereby and thus far, Aborigines found loitering, littering, laughing, leaping or lolly-popping will be accosted and arrested if they cannot explain their presence in the city.’

Young Harry: Flatten me feet and call me a duck!

Old Toss: Quack! Quack! Young Harry! I has to be out of the city by six o’clock and look out if I get caught.

Young Harry: Don’t worry, Old Toss. I’m white so you can be my black shadow.

...

Old Toss: We’d be arrested for consorting!

Young Harry: By my gummy mud boots! We’s can’t go courting if there’s no resorting to consorting.¹⁷⁴¹

Old Toss is an important comic character, originally played by veteran Yamatji actor, Ernie Dingo, who returned to theatre after a 20 year absence whilst forging a mainstream career in film and on television that has included much comedy.¹⁷⁴² Old Toss is an eccentric self-appointed Aboriginal statesman who is adept in corny colloquialisms.¹⁷⁴³

Mimicry

Additionally, Dingo plays a brief, but hilarious, role in drag as a swimsuit pageant contestant winner, humorously named ‘Sandy Barr’.¹⁷⁴⁴ Barr gives a cheeky tribute to Aboriginal soldiers with her sardonic war poem, ‘Mother England’, and the irreverent ‘mooning’ of her backside to reveal a Union Jack sewn onto her knickers.¹⁷⁴⁵ Dingo’s pantomime-styled characters provide the play with much of its comic relief which serves to temper contentious issues with a larrikinism noted in much Australian humour.¹⁷⁴⁶ His cross-dressing continues a long tradition of drag humour found in Australian comedy

¹⁷⁴¹ Milroy, D., 2011, *Waltzing the Wilarra*, p. 2.

¹⁷⁴² Dingo acted in the popular 1980s movie *Crocodile Dundee II*; he played a veteran clown character ‘Jack Merrick’ in the two children’s movies entitled *Clowning Around* in 1992–1993; he played the comic character ‘Uncle Tadpole’ in the 2009 movie of the stage play *Bran Nue Dae*; he also appeared on television comedy skit show *Fast Forward* in the late 1980-90s. See: Craddock, D., 04/02/2011, ‘Historical musical Waltzing the Wilarra lives up to the hype’, *Perth Now*, at: <<http://www.perthnow.com.au/entertainment/historical-musical-waltzing-the-wilarra-lives-up-to-the-hype/story-e6frg30l-1226000426989>> viewed 23/10/2015. IMDb, nd., ‘Ernie Dingo’ at: <<http://www.imdb.com/name/nm0227669/>> viewed 21/10/2015.

¹⁷⁴³ Milroy, D., 2011, Op. Cit., np.

¹⁷⁴⁴ Milroy, D., 2011, p. 22.

¹⁷⁴⁵ Milroy, D., 2011, p. 22.

¹⁷⁴⁶ De Groen, F., and P. Kirkpatrick, 2009, ‘A Saucer of Vinegar’, in De Groen, F., and P. Kirkpatrick, 2009, (eds.) *Serious Frolic, Essays on Australian humour*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, Queensland, p. xxv.

entertainment.¹⁷⁴⁷ Although specifically discussing glam-drag stage performance, Bollen recognises the incongruity of it is a popular visual form of comedy.¹⁷⁴⁸ Drag allows a level of moral permissibility that is more open to excessive behaviour and socially insightful humour.¹⁷⁴⁹

There is also a parallel between Dingo's characters and traditional clowns. In discussing the concept of 'radical clowning' used by political activists as a non-violent protest tactic, Sorensen recognises four key clowning concepts.¹⁷⁵⁰ They include 'play, otherness, incompetence and ridicule.'¹⁷⁵¹ Clowning assists performers to create an intimate and playful complicity with their audience to express an alternative attitude to serious discourse; and to promote a more relaxed view of human frailties.¹⁷⁵² On a more sombre level, clowns expose and ridicule traditional authority but their deliberate play-frame breaks potential tensions associated with such challenges.¹⁷⁵³ This can result in strengthening audience sympathies and enhancing attention to what can be confronting issues of injustice.¹⁷⁵⁴

Although Dingo's character Old Toss is not a clown, clowning techniques enable him to express important historical and ongoing injustices for Aboriginal people. Old Toss plays with language twisting recognisable phrases into spoonerisms,¹⁷⁵⁵ challenging Aboriginal stereotypes,¹⁷⁵⁶ and singing and dancing to funny, politically contentious, rhymes and songs. Clowning parodies and humorous antics challenge the dynamics of interactions, and in so doing, optimistically hint at the possibility of a better world.¹⁷⁵⁷ Additionally, comic characters, like Old Toss, provide performances with catharsis – a release of emotional energy that can be celebratory.¹⁷⁵⁸ Comedy teaches us about how difficult people are, at times, consumed with delusions and petty jealousies; but resulting laughter, connected to tension relief, helps us to recognise our common humanity.¹⁷⁵⁹

¹⁷⁴⁷ Bollen says that "[f]emale impersonation was a popular aspect of entertainment in mid-twentieth century Australia", especially during and post WWII. See: Bollen, J., 2010, 'Cross-Dressed and Crossing Over from Stage to Television', *Media International Australia*, No. 134, February 2010, p. 141. This tradition includes entertainer Barry Humphries long standing comic character, *Dame Edna Everage* whose official website is at: <<http://www.dame-edna.com/>> viewed 24/10/2015, Mark Bin Bakar's *Mary G*, see: ABC TV 06/06/2010, 'Mark Bin Baker: The Man Behind Mary G', *Messagestick*, online at: <<http://www.abc.net.au/tv/messagestick/stories/s2911937.htm>> viewed 18/09/2014; and the popular drag queen movie, 'The Adventure of Priscilla, Queen of the Desert', 1994 at: <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0109045/>> viewed 24/10/2015.

¹⁷⁴⁸ Bollen, J., 2010, Op. Cit., p. 141.

¹⁷⁴⁹ Bollen, J., 2010, p. 149.

¹⁷⁵⁰ Sorensen, M., 2015, 'Radical Clowning: Challenging Militarism through Play and Otherness', *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, 28(1), De Gruyter Mouton, Berlin, pp. 25–47.

¹⁷⁵¹ Sorensen, M., 2015, p. 25.

¹⁷⁵² Sorensen, M., 2015, p. 29. Peacock, L., 2009, *Serious Play: Modern Clown Performance*, Intellect Ltd., London, UK, p. 14.

¹⁷⁵³ Sorensen, M., 2015, Op. cit., pp. 33–37.

¹⁷⁵⁴ Sorensen, M., 2015, pp. 38–39.

¹⁷⁵⁵ For example: 'gum ya flaps' in lieu of 'flap ya gums'. See: Milroy, D., 2011, Op. Cit., p. 1.

¹⁷⁵⁶ For example: '...if a Terra Nullian can kick a footy...[t]hat's a career path, if ever I sorid one!'. See Milroy, D., 2011, p. 35.

¹⁷⁵⁷ Sorensen, M., 2015, Op. Cit., p. 35, p. 39.

¹⁷⁵⁸ Berger, A., 1993, Op. Cit., p. 11.

¹⁷⁵⁹ Berger, A., 1993, p. 11.

Taking the Mickey

Act two is set in contemporary times and provides good example of mickey-taking humour. As the club faces demolition, Fay meets up with Elsa and Charlie in its hall at the request of her reconciliation advocate granddaughter, Athena. Athena's earnest attempts to promote happy nostalgia amongst the group leads to the resurfacing of bitter secrets and old wounds that imply that reconciliation is much more than merely saying 'sorry'.¹⁷⁶⁰ Milroy notes that inspiration for the play was PM Rudd's 'sorry speech' that evoked 'mixed emotions' in him.¹⁷⁶¹ This act reflects the complex understandings of Australia's contemporary reconciliation movement often driven by non-Indigenous hypocrisies and ignorance, Indigenous hurts and frustrations. Such contradictions are best revealed in well-meaning Athena. The play mocks Athena's well-intentioned, but insensitive ignorance about the history of black-white relationships with mickey-taking irony:

Athena: My generation is much more educated and enlightened! We won't make the same mistakes in formulating policies for indigenous people! We know what needs to be done for *you!*¹⁷⁶²

Wordplay

A powerful counter to Athena's naïve zealousness is Old Toss's insightful and ironic song, 'Shin Stew':

Old Toss: [*sung*]
Well you...
Start with colonisa-*tion* to soften up the meat,
Then miscegena-*tion* to whiten up the cheeks,
Then assimila-*tion* to make you fit right in,
ALL:
Then reconcilia-*tion* to forgive us of our sins.
Athena: It smells awful!
Old Toss: That's because it's a crock of shit...¹⁷⁶³

This stew is a funny analogy for the frustrations felt by many with ongoing good intentions that never seem to make substantial difference to inter-racial relationships. Humour here is beneficial in helping restore relationships after a rift by blocking negative emotions, which Morreall says are shown most effectively in our ability to share a joke with them.¹⁷⁶⁴ It leads into Charlie's heartfelt confessions about the night on which Jack died, and concludes with the cast singing the moving title song,

¹⁷⁶⁰ Performing Lines, nd., 'Waltzing the Wilarra, Yirra Yaakin Theatre Company', at: <<http://performinglines.org.au/productions/archive/waltzing-the-wilarra/>> viewed 21/10/2015.

¹⁷⁶¹ Milroy, D., 2011, 'Playwright's Notes', Milroy, D., 2011, Op. Cit., np. Rudd, K., PM, 13/02/2008, 'Apology to Australia's Indigenous Peoples', at: <<http://www.australia.gov.au/about-australia/our-country/our-people/apology-to-australias-indigenous-peoples>> viewed 21/10/2015.

¹⁷⁶² Milroy, D., 2011, Op. Cit., p. 48.

¹⁷⁶³ Milroy, D., 2011, pp. 48-49.

¹⁷⁶⁴ Morreall, J., 2009, 'Humour and the Conduct of Politics' in Lockyer, S., & M. Pickering, 2009, *Beyond a Joke, the Limits of Humour*, Palgrave Macmillian, Basingstoke, UK, p. 76.

Waltzing the Wilarra,¹⁷⁶⁵ a bright moon that shines light and truth onto matters hidden in dark places, ultimately revealing genuine reconciliation.

3.25 Indigenous theatre's ongoing importance in responding to Australia's socio-political challenges

Indigenous Australian artists have had much to comment on given Australia's volatile socio-political challenges of the new century including its reconciliation process, the 'Close the Gap' campaign,¹⁷⁶⁶ and the controversial intervention into the Northern Territory's remote Indigenous communities.¹⁷⁶⁷ However, Rudd's 2008 acknowledgement and apology to Australia's Indigenous peoples had 'emboldened' many Aboriginal artists to begin to see themselves as leaders in a 'post-apology' future.¹⁷⁶⁸ With support from Arts Queensland and the Australia Council, Indigenous theatre representatives from around the country met for the inaugural National Indigenous Theatre Forum (NITF) in August 2010 to discuss how best the industry could continue to respond to these challenges.¹⁷⁶⁹ Since this time, a further three NITFs have been held in 2011, 2012, and the most recently in September 2015.¹⁷⁷⁰ In 2013 as a direct result of the forum, Sydney's *Mooghalin Performing Arts*¹⁷⁷¹ staged the first Indigenous playwriting festival in over 20 years in conjunction with *Carriageworks* and the Sydney Festival.¹⁷⁷²

The now established *Yellamundie Festival*¹⁷⁷³ gathers Aboriginal directors, actors, and playwrights together for an intensive collaboration during which new Indigenous plays are workshopped for potential further production.¹⁷⁷⁴ Initiatives like these ones continue to better place Indigenous

¹⁷⁶⁵ 'Wilarra' means full moon in an Indigenous dialect. See: Performing Lines, nd., Op. Cit.

¹⁷⁶⁶ The 'Close the Gap' campaign was initiated by Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Justice Commissioner, Tom Calma, in 2005 in response to his report that revealed a 25 year gap in the life expectancy of Indigenous Australians in relation to other Australian people. From 2007 Australia's Federal Government has sought to 'close the gap' on 6 key areas of Indigenous health, infant mortality, education, and employment to varying degrees of success. See: Gardiner-Garden, J., nd., 'Closing the Gap', *Parliament of Australia*, at: <http://www.aph.gov.au/About_Parliament/Parliamentary_Departments/Parliamentary_Library/pubs/BriefingBook44p/ClosingGap>, viewed 06/11/2015.

¹⁷⁶⁷ This intervention was initiated by the Federal Government in June 2007, with no prior community consultation, following release of the 'Ampe Akelyernemane Meke Makarle: Little Children are Sacred' Report into remote Aboriginal communities that noted widespread child sexual abuse. See: Australian Human Right Commission, 2007, 'Social Justice Report into the Northern Territory 'Emergency Response' Intervention', at: <<https://www.humanrights.gov.au/publications/social-justice-report-2007-chapter-3-northern-territory-emergency-response-intervention>> viewed 04/09/2014.

¹⁷⁶⁸ Glow, H., & K. Johanson, 2009, 'Your Genre is Black: Indigenous Performing Arts and Policy', *Platform Paper*, No. 19, Currency House, Sydney, pp.1– 5. The term 'post-apology future' is referred to in: Hallett, B., 09/02/2009, 'Critical mass: hard questions for indigenous arts', *Sydney Morning Herald*, at: <<http://www.smh.com.au/news/entertainment/arts/critical-mass-hard-questions-for-indigenous-arts/2009/02/08/1234027846928.html>> viewed 08/03/2014.

¹⁷⁶⁹ Arts Queensland, nd., '2010 National Indigenous Theatre Forum Report, Centre of Contemporary Arts, Cairns', at: <<http://www.arts.qld.gov.au/projects/indigenous-theatre.html>> viewed 19/10/2015.

¹⁷⁷⁰ Arts Queensland, nd., 'Projects – Indigenous Theatre', at: <<http://www.arts.qld.gov.au/projects/indigenous-theatre.html>> viewed 19/10/2015.

¹⁷⁷¹ Mooghalin Performing Arts Inc. was established in Redfern, Sydney in 2007 in memory of the founding members of Black Theatre. See its homepage at: <<http://mooghalin.com/about.html>> viewed 08/11/2015.

¹⁷⁷² Aboriginal Art Directory, 18/01/2013, *First Aboriginal and TSI Playwriting Festival in Sydney for 20 years*, at: <<http://news.aboriginalartdirectory.com/2013/01/first-aboriginal-and-tsi-playwriting-festival-in-sydney-for-20-years.php>> viewed 05/06/2013.

¹⁷⁷³ 'Yellamundie' is a Dharug word meaning storyteller, Aboriginal Art Directory, 18/01/2013, Op. Cit.

¹⁷⁷⁴ Aboriginal Art Directory, 18/01/2013.

performance on the mainstage of Australian Culture. They allow for greater recognition and valuing of Aboriginal creativity that has, in turn, led to an expansion of performance genres.

This includes current forays into cabaret which allow Indigenous artists to encapsulate a wide variety of artistic endeavours within the one performance. However, as always, cabaret provides another environment for a display of Aboriginal comedy. Indigenous humour in cabaret can be seen as one of the latest manifestations of the use of comedy to raise socially contentious issues and to couch them in a more palatable form. Additionally, the important parallel with the emergence of Indigenous stand-up comedy continues to be seen influencing humour forms found in the more traditional performance genres of theatre.

3.26 ‘Blak Cabaret’ – A response to history and injustice

With its literal title,¹⁷⁷⁵ upbeat singing, dancing and comedy, *Blak Cabaret* is a very recent example of the way that Aboriginal artists continue to intervene ‘artistically’ into mainstream discourse, disputing historical inaccuracies and telling mainstream audiences about issues of importance to them.

In 2012, Jason Tamiru first conceived and produced *Blak Cabaret* for the inaugural Melbourne’s *Indigenous Arts Festival*, of which he was assistant producer.¹⁷⁷⁶ Tamiru was responsible for creating a ‘festival hub’ in Melbourne’s Federation Square.¹⁷⁷⁷ He was encouraged to make this performance space into a cabaret-styled event, showcasing the works of the many talented Indigenous artists who live in Victoria.¹⁷⁷⁸ His cabaret presented a variety of different arts genres from song, music, dance, and comedy that were held over three nights with 15 different acts each night.¹⁷⁷⁹ Its success evolved into his stage production, *Blak Cabaret*, supported by non-Indigenous Malthouse Theatre, at which he held the position of Indigenous Project Manager.¹⁷⁸⁰

Blak Cabaret featured in Melbourne’s inaugural *SummerSalt Outdoors Arts Festival* in 2015.¹⁷⁸¹ The cabaret starred Indigenous singer and comic performer, Kamahi Djordon King as his drag alter-ego, ‘Constantina Bush’.¹⁷⁸²

¹⁷⁷⁵ Use of the word ‘Blak’ in the title of this cabaret is a form of subversive humour that renames a racially implicated word for Indigenous vernacular ownership. The Term ‘blak’ was probably coined by Indigenous Australian artist Destiny Deacon in her 1991 exhibition *Walk and don’t look blak*. Here Deacon contends that this word takes the “c” out of the offensive phrase “bloody black cunts.” See Browning, D., 2010, ‘Editorial’ in ‘*Blak on Blak*,’ *Artlink Magazine*, 30, no. 1, p. 19.

¹⁷⁷⁶ Tamiru, J., 15/01/2015, personal communication with Austin, K. Malthouse Theatre, nd., ‘Malthouse Theatre’s Artistic Team’, at: <<http://malthousetheatre.com.au/page/artistic-team>> viewed 26/10/2015.

¹⁷⁷⁷ Tamiru, J., to K. Austin, 15/01/2015.

¹⁷⁷⁸ Tamiru, J., to K. Austin, 15/01/2015.

¹⁷⁷⁹ Tamiru, J., to K. Austin, 15/01/2015.

¹⁷⁸⁰ Tamiru, J., to K. Austin, 15/01/2015. Malthouse Theatre, nd., ‘Malthouse Theatre’s Artistic Team’, Op. Cit.

¹⁷⁸¹ Malthouse Theatre, nd., ‘Blak Cabaret lights up the night with music, comedy and dance’ at:

<<http://malthousetheatre.com.au/whats-on/blak-cabaret>> viewed 15/01/2015.

¹⁷⁸² Austin, K., 20/02/2015, personal attendance Blak Cabaret, Forecourt, Malthouse Theatre, Melbourne.

3.27 *The humour techniques used in 'Blak Cabaret'*

Mimicry

Mimicry is the most significant humour technique of *Blak Cabaret*. King is a Gurindji man from Katherine in the Northern Territory who graduated from ACPA to work in both performing and visual arts.¹⁷⁸³ In 2006 King's cross-dressing comedy character was born when he mistakenly referred to US Secretary of State, Condoleezza Rice as 'Constantina Bush'.¹⁷⁸⁴ Narcissistic Bush performs cabaret songs, dance and tells amusing, sometimes political, frequently risqué, stories in Aboriginal English.¹⁷⁸⁵ Bush exemplifies the popular Australian tradition of glamour-drag found in cabaret nightclub entertainment that is dominated by (non-Indigenous) female impersonators.¹⁷⁸⁶ Yet her appearance as a tall, glamorously-feminine, black male with a rich singing voice confronts audiences on many levels of incongruity, challenging ideas of both Aboriginal and gender representation in a humorous manner.¹⁷⁸⁷

King's mimicry continues this imitative technique recognisable in traditional Indigenous humour forms. Berger says that mimicry involves a person who maintains their own identity while simultaneously taking on recognisable identity traits of another.¹⁷⁸⁸ He suggests that the performer is not an impersonator; rather, by taking on another's mannerisms, along with their own mannerisms, the performer produces a unique form of incongruity humour.¹⁷⁸⁹ However, in this case, King's incongruity is even more complex, combining his comedic Aboriginal female-persona with recognisable stereotyped traits of (British) royalty in order to highlight the arrogant superiority of the ruling elite's wealth and social status, historically esteemed in western societies and revealed in their imperialism. The humour is intensified by combining these comic techniques to confuse identity issues and reveal the ludicrous nature of the stereotyping and labelling that plays a significant role in both Aboriginal identity *and* in humour.¹⁷⁹⁰

¹⁷⁸³ 'ACPA' is the acronym for 'Queensland's Aboriginal Centre for the Performing Arts. Northover, K., 30/07/2011, 'Faboriginal act's black humor', at: <<http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/faboriginal-acts-black-humour-20110729-1i435.html>> viewed 03/01/2014.

¹⁷⁸⁴ Bent TV, 20/11/2012, 'Interview with performer Constantine Bush', at: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=x4_fTfhuCMc> viewed 26/10/2015.

¹⁷⁸⁵ King, D., 05/06/2010, 'A Short Story of Indigenous Actor Kamahi King and his relationship with his alter ego, Constantina Bush', at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=bjCKX9qqo2M>> viewed 26/10/2015.

¹⁷⁸⁶ Creyton, B., nd., 'Record ID 39805' *National Film and Sound Archive*, Viewed 25/10/2015 <<http://www.nfsa.gov.au/collection/search-collection/>>. Bollen, J., 2010, Op. Cit., p. 147.

¹⁷⁸⁷ See the photographic image of Constantina Bush for visual representation of her strong and glamorous persona at: ABC Radio National, 2010, 'Tim Gresham's award winning photograph: Attack of the 50 Foot Black-Gin', 2010, digital print on metallic paper, A/P, edition of 7, 191 x 120 cm, *Awaye!*. Online at: <www.abc.net.au/radionational/...attack-of-the-50-foot-black/3668982> viewed 18/11/2015.

¹⁷⁸⁸ Berger, A., 1993, Op. Cit., p. 42.

¹⁷⁸⁹ Berger, A., 1993, p. 42.

¹⁷⁹⁰ Berger says that '[i]n addition to imitating style, there should be other comic techniques employed to heighten the humor.' Berger, A., 1993, p. 44.

Moreover, glam-drag continues a popular form of entertainment in Australia that female impersonator Tracey Lee says is an important comedic element in a socially ‘un-permissive’ environment.¹⁷⁹¹ Bollen recognises that glam-drag allows audiences an element of entertaining escapism in the lavish costumes and sexually risqué songs and jokes that raise issues that might ordinarily be considered quite scandalous.¹⁷⁹² This disguise allows open licence for comedians to raise socially controversial issues that might offend if raised in more serious circumstances. It is thus an appropriate method for Aboriginal performers to use to raise contentious issues with mainstream audiences, including the colonial invasion/settlement debate.

Kuipers says that much of the enjoyment of humour lies in the process of making sense of the incongruities presented by the humorist.¹⁷⁹³ Moreover, comedies often revolve around trickery, for example a male character disguised as a female, producing a conspiratorial effect in the audience by referencing female qualities.¹⁷⁹⁴ Yet mostly Bush’s complex persona cleverly allows King to air important socio-political issues for his people in a funny, entertaining manner.¹⁷⁹⁵

Taking the Mickey

Although *Blak Cabaret* includes some talented Aboriginal musicians and dancers,¹⁷⁹⁶ comedian Bush dominates the performance with a hilarious tables-turned discovery of Australia. Aply supported by actor and dancer, Kaurana woman, Nikki Ashby,¹⁷⁹⁷ Bush, dressed in full royal regalia, confidently claims the ‘exotic’ ‘empty’ continent of behalf of Aboriginal people. She declares the land ‘Terra Nullius’ and herself Queen, all in her regal, yet (contradictorily) earthy, Aboriginal English.¹⁷⁹⁸

In one scene, Bush is dressed in sombre black robes, with contrasting gold crown, cross necklace and bright red heels, parodying a pious Christian missionary. She gives a soulful rendition of ‘Jesus loves me’ in Aboriginal English – at one moment metaphorically imploring her flock to ‘suckle’ at her breast; then quickly turning to mock horror at their ‘inferior’ white skin and savage cultural belongings. Then she enacts a ‘White Protection Act’ ironically parodying the long history of colonial control of Aboriginal lives. Next she parodies the 2007 Federal Government Intervention into

¹⁷⁹¹ Lee, T., c. 1980, quoted in Bollen, J., 2010, Op. Cit., pp. 143–144;

¹⁷⁹² Bollen, J., 2010, p.

¹⁷⁹³ Kuipers, G., 2009, Op. Cit, p. 226.

¹⁷⁹⁴ Kuipers, G., 2009, p. 226.

¹⁷⁹⁵ Kaboobie, 2012, ‘Blak Queens Talking, It’s a Drag Thing’, *RealTime Arts Magazine, RealBlak*, No. 111, Oct-Nov., 2012, p. 13, at: <<http://www.realtimearts.net/article/issue111/10806>> viewed 18/11/2015. Austin, K., 07/04/2013, ‘personal attendance at Deadly Funny Showcase 2013’, Melbourne Town Hall, Swanston Street, Melbourne. See King’s performance at the showcase at: Melbourne International Comedy Festival, 03/10/2013, ‘Kamahi King as Constantina Bush – Deadly Funny Roadshow 2013’ at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-FyiFuLL44o>> viewed 26/10/2015.

¹⁷⁹⁶ *Blak Cabaret* showcased the musical talents of Indigenous musicians Deline Briscoe, Emma Donovan, Kutcha Edwards and Bart Willoughby. Malthouse Theatre and SummerSalt Festival, 20/02/2015, ‘Blak Cabaret’, Forecourt, Malthouse Theatre, 113 Sturt Street, Southbank, Melbourne.

¹⁷⁹⁷ Deadly Vibe, 21/10 /2010, ‘Nikki Ashby’, *The Arts*, at: <<http://www.deadlyvibe.com.au/2010/07/nikki-ashby/>> viewed 26/10/2015.

¹⁷⁹⁸ Austin, K., 20/02/2015 Op. Cit.

Aboriginal communities of the Northern Territory, by introducing a restrictive basic income card that parallels the real-life legislation passed for remote Aboriginal communities in the Northern Territory.¹⁷⁹⁹

The show also takes-the-mickey out of many familiar ‘white’ Australian cultural icons like Hills hoists, television personality Bert Newton, wealthy mining and media families, the Hancocks and the Murdochs, and even polka ‘Bird Dance’ music. Patronisingly, it parodies PM Rudd’s ‘sorry speech’, with a terse and insincere ‘sorry’ for past injustices to white people and an impatient request for them to just get over it.

Its final scene jumps to the year 2075, with the ‘White’ ‘Australian of the Year’ Award, mercilessly spoofing this prestigious annual event. Like Ilbjerri’s *Black Sheep Reviews*, the show continues and expands on the successful 1970s review comedy, *Basically Black*, with its satirical humour and mockery. Contemporary Indigenous theatre continues to use humour as a ‘serious’ device of intervention into mainstream society. By means of comedy’s open licence, Indigenous theatre is still used to raise controversial issues and to help educate non-Indigenous audiences on matters that are important to their lives as colonised Australians.

Wordplay

King argues that by speaking in his bush Aboriginal vernacular, non-Aboriginal audiences are encouraged to listen ‘really closely and pay attention’ to the things that he says.¹⁸⁰⁰ However, King’s ‘myall’ language use is also a marker of his Aboriginal identity that he uses to create rapport and connection with other Aboriginal people.¹⁸⁰¹ By simultaneously excluding and including members of his audience, King is better able to advance the processes of cultural levelling in his performance.¹⁸⁰² Moreover, his use of Aboriginal English provides a parody of recognisable modes of speech found in remote Australian Aboriginal communities that sets them apart from non-Indigenous Australian communities, celebrating difference and establishing legitimacy in colloquial Aboriginal language use.

4. CONCLUSION

This chapter has examined some Indigenous live performances of the new century to see if the familiar Aboriginal humour techniques noted in previous chapters can still be found in current

¹⁷⁹⁹ In June 2007 the Federal Government enacted the ‘Northern Territory National Response Act 2007’ in response to allegations of widespread sexual abuse of children in remote Aboriginal communities in the NT. See: Australian Government, 2007, ‘Northern Territory National Emergency Response Bill 2007’, *Federal Register of Legislation*, online at: <<https://www.legislation.gov.au/Series/C2007B00158>> viewed 28/10/2015.

¹⁸⁰⁰ Kaboobie, 2012, Op. Cit.

¹⁸⁰¹ Aranda, L., 2014, Op. Cit., p. 75.

¹⁸⁰² Aranda, L., 2014, p. 75.

comedy performances. This review shows that the significant Indigenous humour traits of mickey-taking, witty wordplay and mimicry remain consistently present in performances. The use of yarning techniques can also be seen in some theatrical performance humour. Yet, black and self-deprecatory forms of humour that were often used in 1970s are less common in the new century, although still present in some performances.

The use of many of these techniques can also be found at work in Australia's broader humour community, connecting Aboriginal humour to a shared colonial tradition. However, this chapter has shown that it is the socio-political purposes of much Indigenous performance humour that sets it apart as characteristically Indigenous in nature. Topics of importance to Indigenous people continue to be found as themes of much of the humour, giving a distinctive character and helping Aboriginal performers to tell audiences about these issues from their own perspectives. This humour continues to provide Aboriginal artists with the distinct ability to challenge entrenched mainstream views of Aboriginal Australian identity. This contributes to the overall understanding of ourselves as a complex nation and provides a more accurate picture of how others see us too.

What remains true about much Aboriginal theatrical performance is the fact that humour is still a significant tool used to check and challenge limited views held about Aboriginal people and about specific socio-political issues of importance to them. As Seirlis argues 'it is the very specificity of comedy that is powerful because it is capable of telling us wider and more profound truths about the state of things in a given place at a given time'.¹⁸⁰³ Moreover, it is the socio-political themes relevant to Indigenous issues located in much of their performance humour that sets it apart from humour forms that can also be found in use within Australia's non-Indigenous humour community.

Since commencement of the specific Aboriginal stand-up comedy awards in 2007, the use of sketch and stand-up techniques in Indigenous theatre comedy has increased. Moreover, boundaries between these performances and other performance genres are often blurred. Dancer Hart has produced comedy for theatre; stand-up comedians Stanford and Faye have performed in theatre; whilst actors Anderson and King have performed in classical stand-up venues. Additionally, greater performance recognition in the mainstream has provided Aboriginal artists with the versatility to expand their humour repertoires from traditional theatre, to cabaret, television, film, and, as noted, stand-up comedy. The ability for Indigenous artists to blur the lines of these genres bodes well for an innovative future. It points to the depth of talent of many Indigenous artists with the versatility to adapt their skills in a world that is continually changing, and one in which traditional environments are constantly challenged to expand and adapt.

¹⁸⁰³ Seirlis, J., 2011, 'Laughing all the way to freedom: Contemporary Stand-up Comedy and Democracy in South Africa', *Humor. International Journal of Humor Research*, vol. 24(4), pp. 514–515.

The next chapter explores the influential role of stand-up comedy within contemporary Indigenous Arts practices. It parallels stand-up with the use and purposes of humour discussed in previous chapters in order to see if similar forms and functions are present within this comedy medium. Whilst socio-political issues faced by Aboriginal people eerily repeat themselves in the face of new government mediations and policies,¹⁸⁰⁴ Aboriginal cultures are not static. The diversity of Aboriginal Australia is alive and thriving, and the Arts offer opportunities for their interventions into mainstream Australian discourse.

¹⁸⁰⁴ These challenges for Indigenous artists specifically include significant cuts of up to \$100 million to Australia's National Arts budget over the next 4 years, as outlined in the 2014 Federal Budget. Although slightly revised by new Prime Minister Turnbull in November 2015, returning \$32 million of these cuts over 4 years, they remain a significant challenge for individual artists and small (minority) Arts practices. See: Dow, S., 10/2014, 'How the Abbott Government is funding a high-culture war', *The Monthly Essays, State of the Arts*, at: <<https://www.themonthly.com.au/issue/2014/october/1412085600/steve-dow/state-arts>>.viewed 09/07/2015. See also: Keaney, F., 20/11/2015, 'Arts overhaul sees cuts to Australia Council partially reversed NPEA renamed to Catalyst', at: <www.abc.net.au/news/2015...budget-cuts...australia-council.../6957870> viewed 06/12/2015.

CHAPTER 7

STAND-UP COMEDY – THE FRESH FACE OF INDIGENOUS AUSTRALIAN HUMOUR

*We're the freshest kids on the block, but we've been telling our yarns for 60,000 years.*¹⁸⁰⁵

Sean Choolburra, Queensland Stand-up Comedian

1. INTRODUCTION

Mostly through interviews and attendances at live performances, this final chapter explores Indigenous Australians' involvement in stand-up comedy that is a recent and increasingly significant element of Aboriginal humour performance. Stand-up comedy is a contemporary humour performance genre, with its roots in much earlier live performances. It is frequently performed by a sole comic in front of a live audience. Often it involves a format where comedians speak directly to the audience, with an array of funny stories and jokes, attempting to elicit some sort of a response or reaction from them, especially one of laughter.

In Australia stand-up comedy has a long history of popularity within the mainstream but has mostly only included Indigenous Australians as 'joke' subjects. The result has been the ongoing production of negative Aboriginal stereotypes that perpetuate those generalisations discussed in previous chapters. This chapter will discuss this disparaging humour in stand-up comedy and draw conclusions about the effect it has had on our national humour identity. Yet primarily it will review and celebrate the involvement of Aboriginal people themselves within stand-up comedy. This investigation ranges from initial opportunities for Aboriginal comedians within mainstream comedy environments to the work that is currently produced by them.

This chapter will show that stand-up comedy is an increasingly popular and innovative genre for Aboriginal Australians. Stand-up comedy provides Indigenous Australians another avenue through which they can continue to make interventions into mainstream Australia's socio-political discourse about matters of importance to them and their communities. Stand-up is another forum through which Aboriginal people express their cultural experiences, correct misinformation, and impart cultural teaching and their socio-political opinions to non-Indigenous audience members. Stand-up comedy also provides entertainment that especially promotes camaraderie and identification amongst Indigenous audience members and reveals an alternative (jovial) image of Aboriginal people to non-Indigenous audiences. Most importantly, Aboriginal input diversifies and broadens the Anglo-centric

¹⁸⁰⁵ Choolburra in Miller, M., 09/04/ 2012, 'The Poster Boy of Fresh Comedy', *Herald Sun*, Melbourne, Victoria. Online at: <<http://www.heraldsun.com.au/news/special-features/the-poster-boy-of-fresh-comedy-sean-choolburra/story-fncv4qq2-1226321815699?nk=35b38f4e1351f1d0a471f32be0847af3>>, viewed 21/08/2014.

repertoire of Australia's national humour identity, creating a more inclusive sense of cultural belonging and improving networks of social trust and appreciation.¹⁸⁰⁶

2. CHAPTER OUTLINE

Initially, this chapter will discuss the history of stand-up that can be traced back through two distinct, western traditions in order to contextualise its current popularity in this country. This is followed by an investigation of the origins of the genre in Australia hosted by hotels, clubs and various Arts festivals.

In Australia, the popularity of stand-up comedy that is crude and offensive has been perpetuated by the long-running careers of several non-Indigenous comedians who mostly continue to perform their socially contentious acts in hotels and clubs. Some of the non-Indigenous comedians portray Aboriginal people in negative images that they justify on the basis of comedy's 'open license' to mock and ridicule despite modern social demands for more 'politically correct' (PC) behaviour; and/or on an alleged authority given them by their Aboriginal friends. The legitimacy of such humour is questioned with regards to current academic debate about the positive and negative attributes of racially disparaging humour. This humour is then discussed in the light of Australia's national identity which is frequently tied to our distinctive humour style.¹⁸⁰⁷ Suggestions are made as to when racial-stereotype humour might be considered more socially appropriate.

It was not until 2007, with the creation of the national *Deadly Funny Comedy Final & Showcase* ['*Deadly Funnies*'], that Indigenous Australian participation in stand-up commenced in earnest.¹⁸⁰⁸ Exceptions can however be found in Indigenous stand-up comedians Sean Choolburra and Andrew Saunders, who both commenced their careers before the creation of this specifically Aboriginal event. Importantly, each of these men continues to be supported by this event, and other off-shoot *Melbourne International Comedy Festival* (MICF) events, some specifically tailored to Aboriginal participation.

There are also two notable Indigenous Australian performance comedians, Mark Bin Bakar and Ernie Dingo, who must be acknowledged as 'comedy forerunners', both with careers in comedy performance, but not classical stand-up comedy – the focus of this chapter. Bin Bakar, via his alter

¹⁸⁰⁶ Putnam, R., 2007, 'E Pluribus Umum: Diversity and Community in the Twenty-first Century' The 2006 Johan Skytte Prize Lecture, *Scandinavian Political Studies*, Vol. 30/2, pp. 137–138.

¹⁸⁰⁷ Australian Federal Government/Big Black Dog Communications Pty Ltd, 17/12/2007, 'Australian Humour', online at: <<http://www.australia.gov.au/about-australia/australian-story/austn-humour>>, viewed 04/09/2014.

¹⁸⁰⁸ Melbourne International Comedy Festival, 2013, 'Deadly Funny', online at <<http://www.comedyfestival.com.au/outside-the-festival/deadly-funny/deadly-funny-2012/>>, viewed 14/05/2014.

ego, Mary G,¹⁸⁰⁹ has successfully performed for radio, television and live audiences in North-West Australia since 1995.¹⁸¹⁰ Mary G is the self-professed ‘Queen of the Kimberley’ whose performances consist of cheeky sexual innuendo, delivered in a matronly manner of playful banter and teasing with her audience.¹⁸¹¹ Bin Bakar continues the Australian humour tradition of cross-dressing comedy epitomised in the character Edna Everage and discussed in the previous chapter. Cross-dressing allows male comedians, like Bin Bakar, a form of disguise giving them greater licence to make scandalously humorous and funny ‘moralising’ observations to their audiences. Ernie Dingo, Indigenous Australian actor, is another comedy forerunner with his participation in theatre, screen and television comedy, especially during the 1980–90s.¹⁸¹² It would be fair to suggest that these two comedians provide good examples of Aboriginal interventions into the world of mainstream performance comedy and their presence provides inspiration for current Aboriginal comedians.

The history of Aboriginal involvement in stand-up comedy, and the support that the *Deadly Funnies* provides, are gradually becoming recognisable in mainstream comedy environments. In addition to reviewing the commencement of these Indigenous comedy awards, this chapter will investigate the performance styles of several of its leading proponents and make observations about their humour styles. Their performances will be connected to the theoretical structures of humour research, and to observations about Indigenous humour techniques discussed previously. It will consider whether or not the humour techniques commonly used in theatre performances of mickey-taking, witty wordplay, mimicry and yarning can also be found in stand-up comedy.

It will reveal whether the black and self-deprecating humour, found in 1970s theatrical performances, is present in stand-up comedy. And finally, it will investigate whether or not socio-political topics of importance to Aboriginal stand-ups are dominant humour topics, as they are in humorous theatrical performances. In so doing, an underlying question is posed: are the recognisable humour forms and functions found in theatrical performances also present in stand-up comedy?

¹⁸⁰⁹ The ‘G’ is short for ‘Gedarrdyu’ which Mary G says translates from Kriol into English as ‘get out of here’ and refers to what the stern white mistress from the pastoral station on which she grew up used to yell at her when she was caught stealing tucker from the whitefellas’ house because she was ‘proper hungry’ as a child. See: Madden, R., 2001, ‘The Mary G Show: Race and Gender in the New Deep North’ *Metro Magazine*, no. 131/132, p. 134.

¹⁸¹⁰ Bin Bakar began performing his character ‘Mary G’ in 1995 on his variety show for Goolarria Radio 99.7FM in Broome. His character soon had her own show ‘The Mary G Radio Show’ that comically dealt with issues including health, culture, native title and respecting elders. See: ABCTV, 2014, ‘Mary G & Broome, How the quest was won’, online at: <<http://www.abc.net.au/tv/quest/txt/s1457236.htm>>, viewed 24/08/2015. SBS ran two series of ‘The Mary G Show’ in 2001 and 2002 that was broadcast around Australia. See: ABC TV 06/06/2010, ‘Mark Bin Bakar: The Man Behind Mary G’, *Messagestick*, online at: <<http://www.abc.net.au/tv/messagestick/stories/s2911937.htm>>, viewed 18/09/2014. In Aug 2015 Mary was back on SBSTV with ‘The Mary G Cooking Show’ series. For example see episode 2 online: <<http://www.sbs.com.au/yourlanguage/video/378391619557/The-Mary-G-Cooking-Show-Ep2>>, viewed 27/08/2015.

¹⁸¹¹ Madden, R., 2001, Op. Cit., pp. 134–139.

¹⁸¹² In addition to his early Aboriginal theatrical work discussed in chapter 6, Dingo had a small comedy part in 1988 comedy movie *Crocodile Dundee II* yet he is better known for his role on television comedy skit shows *Fast Forward* in 1989. See: Brough, J., 1990, ‘Behind Ernie Dingo’, *Made In Australia: An Anthology of Writing*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, pp. 38–39.

3. THE ORIGINS OF STAND-UP COMEDY

Whilst stand-up comedians can readily be paralleled to medieval European court jesters whose public foolishness and irreverence functioned to confront the rich and powerful with their ‘excessive vanities and pretensions’,¹⁸¹³ contemporary stand-up comedy is most immediately traced back through two distinct strands in the United States of America and in the United Kingdom. According to Oliver Double, stand-up evolved in parallel in both countries.¹⁸¹⁴ In America, vaudeville shows, which began around 1894, offering a mixture of singing, dancing, performance and comedy, are generally acknowledged as direct precursors to stand-up comedy.¹⁸¹⁵ From the mid-1800s, live comedy in the United Kingdom was found in music halls, then working men’s and folk music clubs, with funny songs and comic monologues, performed to live audiences.¹⁸¹⁶

However, modern stand-up began in earnest in the 1970s in the United States, with the creation of specific comedy clubs.¹⁸¹⁷ These clubs, often in areas around New York and Hollywood, had intimate stages designed specifically for solo performances on which comedians performed nightly in front of live audiences, mostly talking directly to them with jokes, observational humour, and using forms of double-voiced parody, asking and answering their own questions.¹⁸¹⁸ Moreover, the use of microphones allowed the stand-up’s voice to project at its natural register, creating the illusion of intimacy, irrespective of audience numbers.¹⁸¹⁹ London’s first American-styled stand-up comedy club, *The Comedy Store*, opened in 1979.¹⁸²⁰ Double recognises that comedy venues like these provided upcoming comedians with the opportunity to mix with one another, and also gave them a regular stage on which they could learn to be funny.¹⁸²¹ Nowadays, popular stand-up comedians in both countries have moved into mainstream television, onto talk shows, sitcoms and into films.

3.1 *Stand-up comedy in Australia*

In Australia stand-up comedy has followed a similar trajectory and can also be considered a forerunner in supporting live comedy performances. Vaudeville and variety shows were popular

¹⁸¹³ Prentki, T., 2012, *The Fool in European Theatre, Stages of Folly*, Palgrave Macmillan, UK, p. 1.

¹⁸¹⁴ Double, O., 2000, *Getting the Joke, the Inner Workings of Stand-Up Comedy*, Methuen, London, UK, p. 29.

¹⁸¹⁵ Double, O., 2014, *Getting the Joke: the Inner Workings of Stand-Up Comedy* (2nd ed.), Bloomsbury, London, UK, p. 23.

¹⁸¹⁶ Encyclopaedia Britannica, nd., ‘The British tradition and the spread of stand-up comedy’, online at: <<http://www.britannica.com/EBchecked/topic/693256/stand-up-comedy>>, viewed 13/01/2015. Double, O., 2014, Op. Cit., p. 35, p. 37.

¹⁸¹⁷ About.com, nd., ‘History of Stand-up Comedy in the 1970s’, online at: <<http://comedians.about.com/od/historyofstandupcomedy/a/history70s.htm>> viewed 13/01/2015. Double, O., 2014, Op. Cit., pp. 30–32.

¹⁸¹⁸ About.com, nd., Op. Cit.

¹⁸¹⁹ Brodie, I., 2008, ‘Stand-up Comedy as a Genre of Intimacy’, *Ethnologies*, 30/2, pp. 153–180, online at: <http://www.erudit.org/revue/ethno/2008/v30/n2/019950ar.html>, viewed 18/05/2015.

¹⁸²⁰ Double, O., 2014, Op. Cit., p.44.

¹⁸²¹ Double, O., 1997, *Stand Up! On Being a Comedian*, Methuen, Random House, London, UK, pp. 165–166.

forms of entertainment from the early 1900s.¹⁸²² The Tivoli Theatre circuit ran in Perth, Adelaide, Melbourne and Brisbane, often producing elaborate variety shows that promoted local comedy talent.¹⁸²³ Following their demise from the late 1950s with the spread of television entertainment, smaller comedy clubs emerged.¹⁸²⁴ These clubs provided more intimate venues for comedy revues that later turned into stand-up comedy performances that were less expensive to produce.¹⁸²⁵

Paralleling the United States, the *Last Laugh Comedy Club* opened in Melbourne in 1975, and our own *Comedy Store* with its open-mic stand-up sessions began in Sydney in 1981.¹⁸²⁶ Comedy clubs opened around the country, including here in Adelaide. *The Comedy Café* opened on Gouger Street in 1982,¹⁸²⁷ and was later renamed *Comix Comedy Cellars*, operating in Grenfell Street since 1990.¹⁸²⁸ In Perth the *Laugh Resort Comedy Club* opened in 1991.¹⁸²⁹ And Brisbane's *Sit Down Comedy Club* opened in 1992.¹⁸³⁰ Pubs, clubs and casinos have also become important and popular alternative venues for the promotion of stand-up comedy in Australia.¹⁸³¹

4. MAINSTREAM AUSTRALIAN HUMOUR RELATING TO ABORIGINAL PEOPLE

Most humour scholars agree that Australian humour includes much larrikin 'egalitarian-levelling' crudity and offensiveness that, at times, enables Australians to find the lighter side of life in the face of adversity and challenge.¹⁸³² Additionally, scholars acknowledge a tendency to self-deprecation; yet Milner Davis, who recognises these traits as aggressive humour, says that it is not generally directed at self, but at 'others' – those deemed foreign to an Anglo-Australian dominance and who might assume unwarranted authority.¹⁸³³ Moreover, there appears to be scant social concern about its

¹⁸²² Australian Government, 17/12/07, Op. Cit.

¹⁸²³ Australian Government, 17/12/07.

¹⁸²⁴ Australian Government, 17/12/07.

¹⁸²⁵ Australian Government, 17/12/07.

¹⁸²⁶ Melbourne's *Last Laugh Comedy Club*, nd., online at: <<http://www.thecomedyclub.com.au/>>. Sydney *Comedy Store*, nd., online at: <http://www.comedystore.com.au/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=46&Itemid=54>. Adelaide *Comix Comedy Cellars*, nd., online at: <<http://www.australianexplorer.com/restaurants/12901/profile.htm>>, all viewed 13/01/2015.

¹⁸²⁷ Comix Comedy Cellars, nd., 'Our Comedy Roots', online at: <<http://www.comixcomedycellar.com.au/-history>> viewed 13/01/2015.

¹⁸²⁸ Australian Explorer, nd., Op. Cit.

¹⁸²⁹ The Laugh Resort Comedy Club, nd., 'About', online at: <[http://www.thelaughresort.com.au/About\(2797221\).htm](http://www.thelaughresort.com.au/About(2797221).htm)> viewed 26/02/2015.

¹⁸³⁰ The Sit Down Comedy Club, nd., 'Home of comedy in Brisbane', online at: <<http://www.standup.com.au/>> viewed 26/02/2015.

¹⁸³¹ Australian clubs that have a history of supporting stand-up comedy including RSL, workers and sporting clubs whose billboard regularly feature comedians amongst the array of entertainment offered to their patrons.

¹⁸³² See for example: Introduction to Wannan, B., (ed.), 1964, *Fair Go Spinner. A Treasury of Popular Australian Humour*, Lansdowne Press, Melbourne. Willey, K., 1984, *You Might as Well Laugh, Mate. Australian Humour in Hard Times*, The Macmillan Company of Australia, Melbourne. Jones, D., & B. Andrews, 1988, 'Australian Humour' in Hergenhan, L, 1988, *The Penguin New Literary History of Australia*, Penguin Books Australia, Victoria.

¹⁸³³ Milner-Davis, J., 2009, Op. Cit., pp. 36–37.

potentially hurtful nature.¹⁸³⁴ Adams and Newell also document their surprise at the lack of reader outrage over the offensive nature of the racist, blasphemous and phobic jokes they recorded in their research.¹⁸³⁵ They note a proliferation of ‘repulsive’ anti-Aboriginal jokes that they tried to ‘offset’ with offensive jokes told by Aboriginal people about non-Aboriginal people – which they struggled to find.¹⁸³⁶ In fact, embracing such aggressive humour is often celebrated as part and parcel of truly being an Aussie.¹⁸³⁷

Irreverent humour that mocks others on the basis of difference has enjoyed a long and popular history in Australian performance comedy, reaching back to Roy Rene and George Wallace’s vaudeville performances, to more contemporary comedians like Paul Hogan, Dave Hughes and even ‘The Chasers’ group.¹⁸³⁸ Pointedly, this transgressive comedy that attacks social ‘sacred cows’ is also often masculinist in character.¹⁸³⁹ It is sometimes expressed in country music-styled songs and ocker dialogue and enjoys much of its success in venues such as pubs, clubs and casinos. These venues have helped to sustain the long-standing careers of some non-Indigenous Australian comedians such as Rodney Keft, Dennis Bryant and Louis Beers. The bawdy comedy of these three performers is reviewed (with a focus on their anti-Aboriginal humour) in order to contextualise the environment in which Indigenous Australian comedy exists and to suggest what this says about our national identity.

¹⁸³⁴ Milner-Davis, J., 2009, p. 36.

¹⁸³⁵ Adams, P., & P. Newell (eds.), 1996, *The Penguin Book of more Australian Jokes*, Penguin Books Australia, Ringwood, Victoria, p. 8. Also noted in: Milner-Davis, J., 2009, Op. Cit., p. 37.

¹⁸³⁶ Adams, P., & P. Newell (eds.), 1994, *The Penguin Book of Australian Jokes*, Penguin Books Australia, Ringwood, Victoria, pp. 13–14.

¹⁸³⁷ Milner-Davis, J., 2009, Op. Cit., p. 38.

¹⁸³⁸ De Groen, F., & P. Kirkpatrick, 2009, ‘Introduction: A saucer of vinegar’ in De Groen, F., & P. Kirkpatrick, 2009, *Serious Frolic, Essays on Australian Humour*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, QLD, p. xxv. The Chaser’s satirical comedy group of Julian Morrow, Dominic Knight, Charles Firth, Craig Reucassel, Chas Licciardello, Christopher Taylor and Andrew Hansen are behind several very successful TV series run on ABC television where they take-the-mickey out of various socio-political figures, especially politicians. See: ‘About The Chasers’, online at: <<http://www.chaser.com.au/about/>> viewed 19/08/2015.

¹⁸³⁹ Former Australian Federal Attorney-General, Hon. Philip Ruddock, is noted as recognising the importance of irreverent Australian comedy that ensures that ‘*sacred cows don’t stay sacred for very long*’ by its propensity to challenge authority. Ruddock, P., in *Sydney Daily Telegraph*, 30/11/2006, as quoted in Milner-Davis, J., 04/08/2007, ‘Taking the mickey’, *The Fine Print*, 4th ed., p. 20, p. 24. Dorothy Jones recognises the viewpoint of Australian humour ‘is almost invariably male’ with a character of ‘mingled aggression and anxiety’. See: Jones, D., 1997, ‘Setting Limits: Humour and Australian National Identity’, Special Issue of the *Australian Journal of Comedy*, University of NSW Press, p. 33, p. 35.



(Image: Rodney Rude)¹⁸⁴⁰

4.1 Rodney Rude

Although Keft (aka ‘Rodney Rude’) is better known for his scatological and sexual crudity than his race-based humour, his long career (since 1969) includes a lot of offensive mickey-takes about Japanese, Vietnamese, Iraqis and, at times, Aboriginal Australians. Humorous songs like *Sharks Prefer Eating Asians* and *Mate of Mine* take the mickey out of non-European people on the basis of hostile cultural stereotypes. *Mate of Mine* jokes about Rude’s Aboriginal friend who keeps pet goannas down his pants and eats them.¹⁸⁴¹ This song promotes the stereotype of a savage, yet cunning Aboriginal person, whose pet loyalty only extends as far as his unrestrained appetite.

Some will argue that Rude’s style of humour is not mainstream, but it must be noted that he has produced more stand-up comedy recordings than any other Australian comedian, has sold over three million CDs, videos and DVDs worldwide, and has been nominated six times for ARIA¹⁸⁴² awards for best comedy albums.¹⁸⁴³ Rude, who came out of retirement in 2010, still, at 72, performs sell-out gigs on the national comedy circuit.¹⁸⁴⁴ His *Facebook* page has over 17,000 ‘friends’ and in it he continues to make regular offensive comments about topical Australian socio-political issues and people that his fans respond to with enthusiasm.¹⁸⁴⁵ As Palmer notes, commercial success is evidence of public approval.¹⁸⁴⁶

¹⁸⁴⁰ Daily Telegraph, 21/09/2013, ‘Rodney Rude is Back to Shock’, *Mt Druitt/St Marys Standard*, online at: <<http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/newslocal/west/rodney-rude-is-back-to-shock/story-fngr8i5s-1226723621807>>, viewed 09/04/2016.

¹⁸⁴¹ The lyrics to ‘Mate of Mine’ can be found online at: <http://www.lyricsmania.com/mate_of_mine_lyrics_rodney_rude.html>, viewed 11/08/2015.

¹⁸⁴² ARIA is an acronym for the ‘Australian Recording Industry Association Music Awards’.

¹⁸⁴³ Eddy, L., 24/05/2013, ‘Rodney Returns Home for Final Funnies’, *Western Advocate* online at: <<http://www.westernadvocate.com.au/story/1523040/rodney-returns-home-for-final-funnies/>>, viewed 11/08/2015.

¹⁸⁴⁴ Rodney Rude’s Official *Facebook* Site refers to his current *Wrong Hole* tour 2015 at: <<https://www.facebook.com/Official.Rodney.Rude>>, viewed 11/08/2015.

¹⁸⁴⁵ Rodney Rude’s Official *Facebook* Site.

¹⁸⁴⁶ Palmer, J., 2009, ‘Parody and Decorum: Permission to Mock’ in Lockyer, S., & M. Pickering, (eds.), 2009, *Op. Cit.*, p. 82.



(Image: Kevin Bloody Wilson)¹⁸⁴⁷

4.2 Kevin Bloody Wilson

Even though Bryant's comic persona, Kevin Bloody Wilson (KBW), is not mainstream either, his lengthy career (since the early 1980s) has seen him sell more than three million albums in Australia alone and play to large audiences around the world, including at London's Palladium and the Sydney Opera House.¹⁸⁴⁸ He has amassed billions of dollars, owning his own radio station and production studios.¹⁸⁴⁹ Far from the image of 'your average Australian yobbo' that he projects, he is a wealthy, popular Australian comedy figure with public approval expressed through the 'commercial success' of his work.¹⁸⁵⁰ In fact, KBW credits his success to the very fact that he doesn't have much mainstream media acknowledgement, with his popularity spread through the word of mouth of 'ordinary' people.¹⁸⁵¹ Like Rude, KBW's comedy performances mostly consist of the 'decomposition' of well-known songs to create bawdy ballads with irreverent claims (such as D.I.L.L.I.G.A.F.),¹⁸⁵² scatological, sexual and alcohol references. He often mocks groups like lesbians, Muslims and Aboriginal Australians. KBW claims that his humour is unashamedly 'politically incorrect', and this defiance is mostly what resonates with his fans.¹⁸⁵³

KBW has often been challenged on his racism, which he denies vehemently, arguing that his work is born of good-natured fun and not hatred.¹⁸⁵⁴ His stock response regarding his mockery of Indigenous people is to acknowledge the authority vested in him by his childhood mate Nigel,¹⁸⁵⁵ an Aboriginal person who gives

¹⁸⁴⁷ Kapriz, 25/12/2012, 'Image of Kevin Bloody Wilson', *Famous Fix*, online at: <<http://www.famousfix.com/topic/kevin-bloody-wilson/photos>>, viewed 09/04/2016.

¹⁸⁴⁸ ABC Television, 13/10/2008, *Enough Rope with Andrew Denton – episode 189: Kevin Bloody Wilson*, online at: <<http://www.abc.net.au/tv/enoughrope/transcripts/s2389925.htm>> viewed 01/06/2015. KBW's Facebook page has 519,838 friends. See: <<https://www.facebook.com/pages/Kevin-Bloody-Wilson/5602849297>> viewed 12/08/2015.

¹⁸⁴⁹ In a 2008 interview, Andrew Denton acknowledged that Bryant has 'quite an empire...[o]bviously many billions' that was not refuted by Bryant. ABC Television, 13/10/2008, Op. Cit. Mark Rainbird also records that Bryant owns his own production company, *Both Barrels Music*, a recording studio and a merchandising company. See Rainbird, M., 2004, 'Humour Multiculturalism and Political Correctness'. Refereed paper presented to the *Australasian Political Studies Association Conference*, University of Adelaide 29/09/2004 – 01/10/2004, Adelaide, South Australia, p. 20.

¹⁸⁵⁰ KBW's first album released in 1984 was entitled: *Your Average Australian Yobbo*, see: *Beat Magazine*, 9/12/2010, 'Kevin Bloody Wilson', online at: <<http://www.beat.com.au/arts/2011/03/25/kevin-bloody-wilson/australian-cunt-funny-kevin-bloody-kevin-bloody-wilson-royal-albert-hall-wilson>>, viewed 12/08/2015. Palmer, J., 2009, Op. Cit. p. 82.

¹⁸⁵¹ ABC Television, 13/10/2008, Op. Cit. Noakes, M., 09/11/2011, 'Kevin Blood Wilson, from Catholic school to X-rated comedy', *Perth Now*, at: <<http://www.perthnow.com.au/entertainment/bloody-hell-kev/story-e6frg30c-1226036482341>>, viewed 14/10/2014.

¹⁸⁵² Acronym for: Do I Look Like I Give a Fuck?

¹⁸⁵³ ABC Television, 13/10/2008, Op. Cit. Noakes, M., 09/11/2011, Op. Cit.

¹⁸⁵⁴ ABC Television, 13/10/2008, Op. Cit.

¹⁸⁵⁵ KBW says that Nigel's Aboriginal name is 'Nunga Nunga' that coincidentally rhymes well in the lyrics to his songs about Nigel (*Nigel Nungnungasan from the Crackatinnny Tribe*). See: *Beat Magazine*, 9/12/2010, Op. Cit. In addition, Nigel is more than a little

him much of his funniest material.¹⁸⁵⁶ KBW defends his use of words like ‘coon’ and ‘sambo’ suggesting that they are freed from their historical vitriol when used in humour.¹⁸⁵⁷ Additionally, he justifies his mockery by saying that it would actually be racist of him *not* to mock Aboriginals, as he does other social groups.¹⁸⁵⁸

Loyal fans call out ‘*Fukin’ Legend*’ in habitual response to KBW’s songs about Nigel performed at many of his concerts, revealing delight in their familiarity with this ‘tribal elder from the Crackatinny Tribe’.¹⁸⁵⁹ These songs mockingly play to negative images of Aboriginal people as heavy-drinking social freeloaders, who use their crafty ‘coon’ wits to gain social advantages and, at times, government riches not available to other Australians.¹⁸⁶⁰ One of his most popular Aboriginal songs, *Living Next Door to Alan*, describes a large family of Aboriginal people moving into an exclusive waterfront location next door to infamous Australian tycoon, Alan Bond.¹⁸⁶¹ Mockingly, the song suggests that cunning Aboriginals need only turn to the government to provide them with luxury property items via means of sacred site claims.¹⁸⁶² Their privileges are paralleled to the self-made wealth and extravagance of Bond’s 1980s financial success and based on (illegitimate and unwarranted) claims for first nation’s privileges. These stereotypes continue to perpetuate the dominant Australian humour ideology noted in previous chapters that defensively rejects the legitimacy and worth of Indigenous Australian cultures through mockery.

similar to ‘Neville’ the concrete Aboriginal garden statue. This was the name given to Aboriginal people in other non-Indigenous Australian comedy routines like popular 1980s Australian tv sitcom *Kingswood Country* which starred a xenophobic, racist, working class Aussie bloke, Ted Bullpit. See: *Kingswood Country* (1980–1984) at: <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0078637/>> viewed 12/08/2015.

¹⁸⁵⁶ Bennett, S., 18/09/2009, ‘Kevin Bloody Wilson Diligaf tour review’, *Chortle: The UK Comedy Guide* at: <http://www.chortle.co.uk/comics/k/33539/kevin_bloody_wilson>, viewed 12/08/2015.

¹⁸⁵⁷ ABC Television, 13/10/2008, Op. Cit.

¹⁸⁵⁸ Rainbird, M., 2004, Op. Cit., p. 13. KWB, 01/12/2003, *Kevin Bloody Wilson: Let Loose Live in Ireland DVD* 2003, Dublin, Ireland. Distributed by Both Barrels Music and Marketing.

¹⁸⁵⁹ Beat Magazine, 9/12/2010, Op. Cit.

¹⁸⁶⁰ Rainbird, M., 2004, Op. Cit., p. 16.

¹⁸⁶¹ This song is a reworking of British band Smokie’s 1976 hit song: ‘Living Next Door to Alice’, see clip at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-XxGf4KAWPs>>, viewed 12/08/2015.

¹⁸⁶² KWB, (1985) 1997, lyrics to Living Next Door to Alan online at: <<http://www.songlyrics.com/kevin-bloody-wilson/living-next-door-lyrics/>>, viewed 12/08/2015.



(Facebook Image: King Billy Cokebottle)¹⁸⁶³

4.3 King Billy Cokebottle

Louis Beers is the least well-known of these ocker comedians, but like them, he too continues to perform his Aboriginal humour to Australian audiences under the guise of a mimicked comic character, 'King Billy Cokebottle'. His comedy is also still readily available on the internet, CDs, DVDs, and mainstream radio.¹⁸⁶⁴

Although of Anglo-Australian descent, for Cokebottle performances Beers dons blackface, pretending to be Aboriginal. His most infamous sketches are found on *YouTube* and viewing hits and comments attest to their ongoing popularity.¹⁸⁶⁵ Beers tells ocker comic anecdotes about Cokebottle and his mate Morton, both of whom display similar socially degraded, yet inventive, characteristics in their evasion of government authorities and the law. Beers can be controversial; following protests about the racist nature of his comedy by Victorian Aboriginal and ethnic community groups, Melbourne's Crown Casino cancelled his show there in 2002.¹⁸⁶⁶ Yet Beers, like KBW, justifies his performances on the basis of his popularity with Aboriginal people themselves and on his connections to them via his own Aboriginal grandson.¹⁸⁶⁷

5. POSSIBLE POSITIVE ASPECTS OF DISPARAGING ETHNIC HUMOUR

Freud pays particular attention to sexual and aggressive humour in his work.¹⁸⁶⁸ In relation to aggressive jokes he says that our natural hostile impulses are subject to censorship and repressions brought about by

¹⁸⁶³ This is the image of found on Beers official *Facebook* page. See: Facebook, 21/04/2013, 'King Billy Cokebottle, Comedian', *Facebook Homepage*, Online at: <<https://www.facebook.com/King-Billy-Cokebottle-392660377514810/>> viewed 09/04/2016.

¹⁸⁶⁴ See his various *YouTube* clips noted below. The official 'King Billy Cokebottle' website is online at: <<http://billycokebottle.com/>> at which CDs and DVDs can be purchased, viewed 18/08/2015. Adelaide Radio station, Coast FM, 88.7, has regular King Billy Cokebottle morning comedy segments (7.50 am) as at Aug 2015.

¹⁸⁶⁵ Cokebottle, KB, 18/01/2009, 'Roadside Breath Test' online at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BKzF9I1UMXQ>>, has 263,690 viewing hits.

Cokebottle, KB, 26/11/2009, 'Goat' at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YGnPbKbuqfU>> has 375,348 viewing hits.

Cokebottle, KB, 11/03/2009, 'Pet Mud Crab' at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=TAOq99LdsoY>> has 613,780. All viewed 18/08/2015.

¹⁸⁶⁶ Coslovich, G., 10/07/2002, 'Why casino dethroned racist King Billy', *The Age*, at: <<http://www.theage.com.au/articles/2002/07/09/1026185044085.html>> viewed 18/08/2015.

¹⁸⁶⁷ Coslovich, G., 10/07/2002.

¹⁸⁶⁸ Freud, S., 2002, [1905], 'The Tendencies of the Joke' in *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, (trans. Crick, J.), Penguin Books Ltd, London, pp. 87–114.

the rise of cultivated society.¹⁸⁶⁹ To Freud, aggressive jokes clothe illicit feelings in a more socially acceptable form.¹⁸⁷⁰ Additionally with jokes, we've developed a technique for insulting others by drawing a third person, a listener, into complicity with our own feelings via their laughter.¹⁸⁷¹ Jokes allow us to put down our 'enemies' (those who frustrate us) by making them appear comical, thus alleviating the stress that their presence causes in our lives.¹⁸⁷² Yet whereas humour can at times be a way of avoiding restrictions, Oring recognises that people with specific hostilities generally use humour in a more deliberate manner, rarely acknowledging the necessity to disguise their feelings of hatred.¹⁸⁷³

Bergson saw the humour of ridicule as necessary for maintaining good social order.¹⁸⁷⁴ Billig suggests that mainstream codes of behavior are protected by the humour of embarrassment, because what is embarrassing is comic to onlookers.¹⁸⁷⁵ The prospect of being made fun of, and laughed at, by others therefore plays an important self-disciplinary role in social life.¹⁸⁷⁶ Rebellious humour can possess disciplinary functions too.¹⁸⁷⁷ On the surface, it appears to break social codes, but subliminally it assists to maintain differential power structures by teaching about conventions and taking innocuous 'revenge' against them.¹⁸⁷⁸

Other contemporary humour scholars who see some positive benefits of disparaging humour generally focus their investigations on its purpose and what it can tell us about racial groups and/or about relationships between groups.¹⁸⁷⁹ Even Oring suggests that humour in itself is neutral: ... '[h]umour affords no more possibilities for the indirect expression of aggression and programs of violence than any other mode of expression. Neither the humorous forms nor the more expository forms advocate going out and hunting down a "nigger" or "kike" tomorrow.'¹⁸⁸⁰ These theorists generally see humour as a social form of harmless play. Aggressive humour provides a socially permissible 'safe space' in which to vent social repressions and/or negative feelings.

Gruner's humour theory is motivational. It claims we are provoked to act by our innate desire for competition and self-preservation.¹⁸⁸¹ For Gruner humour is a game of winning and losing in social

¹⁸⁶⁹ Freud, S., 2002, [1905], p. 99.

¹⁸⁷⁰ Freud, S., 2002, [1905], p. 98.

¹⁸⁷¹ Freud, S., 2002, [1905], p. 100.

¹⁸⁷² Freud, S., 2002, [1905], p. 100.

¹⁸⁷³ Oring, E., 2003, *Engaging Humor*, University of Illinois Press, Urbana and Chicago, USA, p. 57.

¹⁸⁷⁴ Bergson, H., 2005, [1911], *Laughter An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, (trans. Brereton, C & F. Rothwell), Dover Publications, Inc., Mineola, New York, pp. 9–11.

¹⁸⁷⁵ Billig, M., 2005, Op. Cit., pp. 201–202.

¹⁸⁷⁶ Billig, M., 2005, p. 202.

¹⁸⁷⁷ Billig, M., 2005, pp. 211–214.

¹⁸⁷⁸ Billig, M., 2005, p. 211.

¹⁸⁷⁹ Cundall, M., 2012, 'Towards a better understanding of racist and ethnic humor', *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, 25(2), Berlin, Germany.

Cohen, T., 1999, *Jokes: Philosophical thoughts on joking matters*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago.

Neu, J., 2008, *Sticks and Stones, the Philosophy of Insults*, Oxford University Press, New York.

Davies, C., 2002, *The Mirth of Nations*, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick and London. Gruner, C., 1997, *The Game of Humor – A Comprehensive Theory of Why We Laugh*, Transaction Publishers, New Jersey, USA.

¹⁸⁸⁰ Oring, E., 2003, Op. Cit., p. 53.

¹⁸⁸¹ Billig, M., 2005, Op. Cit., p. 51.

interactions where we substitute humorous mockery for our true desire for violence is more socially acceptable than physical altercations.¹⁸⁸² Moreover, ridiculing laughter evolved in order to satisfy a fundamental desire for a victorious thrill.¹⁸⁸³ Humorous interactions are made within a recognisable play-frame that allows us to more openly deal with unspeakable subjects and/or laugh at matters that are ordinarily considered ‘unfunny’.¹⁸⁸⁴

Davies believes that humour is ambiguous and, like Gruner, that it merely plays with aggression rather than actually expressing it.¹⁸⁸⁵ Disparagement humour functions similarly around the world, and rather than being a direct expression of hatred, it provides a picture of relationships that already exist amongst various groups within that society.¹⁸⁸⁶ Davies says that: ‘[t]o become angry about jokes and to seek to censor them because they impinge on sensitive issues is about as sensible as smashing a thermometer because it reveals how hot it is.’¹⁸⁸⁷ Rather than ‘shooting the messenger’ and attributing moral blame to the joke teller, a joke must be seen as a reflection of the characteristics of the society in which it is permissible. In regards to western societies, Davies says that the mainstream’s jokes about ethnic minorities reflect uncertainties in social boundaries, power structures, and competing moral values of the nation.¹⁸⁸⁸ In making fun of minority groups, the social boundaries of the dominant are clarified and ambiguities made to appear less threatening in their reassertion of the status quo.¹⁸⁸⁹

Following Radcliffe-Browne,¹⁸⁹⁰ Neu discusses the idea of ritualised insulting.¹⁸⁹¹ He references ‘The Dozens’, where low socio-economic African-American boys take it in turns to exchange aggressive jokes and insults.¹⁸⁹² Following strict rules, and with taboo subjects, this stylised joking expresses illicit topics like personal defects, incest and sex with each other’s mothers.¹⁸⁹³ Rhymes are used to convey taunts and players are urged on by a crowd who select the ‘winner’ by means of their praises.¹⁸⁹⁴ Misogynistic underpinning aside, Nue recognises that The Dozens is a way for economically and socially disadvantaged groups to vent frustrations and aggressions in a safer manner than actual physical violence.¹⁸⁹⁵ Appropriating insults and criticisms made about the boys by majority, less disadvantaged groups, is another positive aspect of this game.¹⁸⁹⁶ It is also an important means of establishing a masculine culture in areas

¹⁸⁸² Gruner, C., 1997, Op. Cit., p.9, p. 25.

¹⁸⁸³ Gruner, C., 1997, p. 18.

¹⁸⁸⁴ Gruner, C., 1997, p. 46.

¹⁸⁸⁵ Davies, C., 2002, *The Mirth of Nations*, Transaction Publishers, New Brunswick, USA and London, UK, p. 24.

¹⁸⁸⁶ Davies, C., 1990, *Ethnic Humor Around the World – A Comparative Analysis*, Indiana University Press, Bloomington and Indianapolis.

¹⁸⁸⁷ Davies, C., 1990, p. 9.

¹⁸⁸⁸ Davies, C., 1982, ‘Ethnic Jokes, Moral Values and Social Boundaries’, *The British Journal of Sociology*, v. 33(3), p. 383.

¹⁸⁸⁹ Davies, C., 1982, p. 383.

¹⁸⁹⁰ See ‘Chapter One – Literature Review’ herein for Radcliffe-Brown’s anthropological explanation of humour in the form of ‘Joking Relationships’. Radcliff-Brown, A.R., 1940, ‘On Joking Relationships’ in *Africa, Journal of the International Institute of African Languages and Cultures*, Dawson & Sons Ltd., London, UK, pp. 195–210.

¹⁸⁹¹ Neu, J., 2008, ‘The Dozens’ in *Sticks and Stones, The Philosophy of Insult*, Oxford University Press, Inc., Oxford, New York, pp 57–81.

¹⁸⁹² Neu, J., 2008, pp. 57–81.

¹⁸⁹³ Neu, J., 2008, p. 60.

¹⁸⁹⁴ Neu, J., 2008, pp. 60–61.

¹⁸⁹⁵ Neu, J., 2008, p. 62.

¹⁸⁹⁶ Neu, J., 2008, pp. 62–63.

where adult male role models are often absent.¹⁸⁹⁷ It provides a structured and controlled context in which young boys can achieve their identity partly by revolting against adult authority and partly by means of peer approval.¹⁸⁹⁸ Neu says that in such joking relationships we are able to see aggressive humour masked by the challenging concept ‘just joking’ that assists to shape character and to teach about group standards.¹⁸⁹⁹ Similar in-group joking relationships have also been recognised in Indigenous Australian communities.¹⁹⁰⁰ Billig suggests that, generally, teasing is ‘much gentler’ than mockery and ridicule.¹⁹⁰¹ Humour, he says, can be used to achieve a variety of ends from empathy, compassion, mutual identification, liberation, and better communication.¹⁹⁰²

In reviewing the range of (negative/positive) aspects of disparagement humour, Cundall notes that some statements made that involve race may not actually be racist and/or discriminatory.¹⁹⁰³ He says that: ‘[i]t seems perfectly acceptable that a group use a joke that has, as its basis, stereotypes that would demean that group. If the group is simply having fun with the stereotype in a parodic fashion, or is simply finding the humorous mechanisms enjoyable, then why worry? If one is a satirist trying to raise public awareness about the silliness of certain stereotypes, then this seems a fine use of *blason populaire* [racist and ethnic] humor too.’¹⁹⁰⁴

Moreover, Cohen does not believe that such jokes can actually be objected to on moral grounds.¹⁹⁰⁵ It cannot be proven that such humour actually causes the target group any ‘genuine harm’.¹⁹⁰⁶ Rather, such jokes produce opinions about issues, but these opinions are not actually sustainable facts.¹⁹⁰⁷ Furthermore, it is impossible to predict how individuals, who ‘get’ the joke, recognising the stereotypes required for it to work, might react to it.¹⁹⁰⁸

6. POSSIBLE NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF DISPARAGING ETHNIC HUMOUR

The most common arguments against the use of disparaging ethnic humour form what Cundall calls ‘consequentialist arguments’ where this humour is deemed wrong because of its resulting effects.¹⁹⁰⁹ In particular, it harms targeted groups by reinforcing existing negative stereotypes and prejudices about

¹⁸⁹⁷ Neu, J., 2008, pp. 64–65.

¹⁸⁹⁸ Neu, J., 2008, p. 68.

¹⁸⁹⁹ Neu, J., 2008, pp. 232–233.

¹⁹⁰⁰ See ‘Chapter One – Literature Review’ herein for details of a contemporary joking relationship noted in an Aboriginal community of Western Arnhem Land and discussed by anthropologist Murray Garde. Garde, M., 2008, ‘The Pragmatics of Rude Jokes with Grandad: Joking Relationships in Aboriginal Australia’, in *Anthropology Forum*, v. 18/3, November 2008, pp. 235–253.

¹⁹⁰¹ Billig, M., 2005, Op. Cit. p. 25.

¹⁹⁰² Billig, M., 2005, p. 25.

¹⁹⁰³ Cundall, M., 2012, Op. Cit., p. 158.

¹⁹⁰⁴ Cundall, M., 2012, p. 174.

¹⁹⁰⁵ Cohen, T., 1999, Op. Cit., p. 162.

¹⁹⁰⁶ Cohen, T., 1999, p. 162.

¹⁹⁰⁷ Cohen, T., 1999, p. 162.

¹⁹⁰⁸ Cohen, T., 1999, p. 162.

¹⁹⁰⁹ Cundall, M., 2012, Op. Cit.

them.¹⁹¹⁰ Martineau notes that it can produce social disintegration¹⁹¹¹ whereas Boskin says that it perpetuates societal attitudes and beliefs, preserving an illusion of racial superiority and prolonging existing systems of subjugation.¹⁹¹² Boskin also suggests that both humorist and audience are aware of, and accept, the illusion of the stereotype.¹⁹¹³ Critchley states that much humour confirms the status quo by denigrating certain sectors of society.¹⁹¹⁴

Other scholars continue to recognise more insidious ramifications of racist and ethnic humour. Ford and Ferguson propose that disparaging humour expands the boundaries of socially appropriate conduct, ‘creating a norm of tolerance of discrimination’ and is a potential ‘releaser of prejudice.’¹⁹¹⁵ In making light of expressions of prejudice toward a target group, disparagement humour communicates an overarching message to audiences about what the acceptable standards of behavior and tolerance are towards that group.¹⁹¹⁶ Additionally, it suggests that any discrimination aimed at this target group need not be considered in either a serious or critical manner because of the humorous environment in which it has been generated.¹⁹¹⁷

Yet most significantly, the innocuous qualities of disparagement humour ‘communicate...an implicit *injunctive* norm of tolerance of discrimination’ for people already high in prejudice.¹⁹¹⁸ Indeed, as KBW acknowledges that people who attend his shows already know and like his comedy, it could be concluded that those people also concur with his humorously expressed opinions.¹⁹¹⁹ Such audiences, potentially already high in bias, are not motivated to suppress their prejudices by his comedy.¹⁹²⁰ Rather, due to their greater approval of disparagement-styled humour they are more likely to perceive a shared normative standard of discrimination tolerance.¹⁹²¹ A similar logic could apply to the other non-Indigenous comedians discussed herein, especially given the lengthy periods during which they have consistently performed their trademark humour.

Rainbird, who broadly agrees with Davies that disparagement humour says a lot about the society in which it is generated, is not as easy on the joke-teller as Davies.¹⁹²² Although specifically discussing the

¹⁹¹⁰ Cundall, M., 2012, pp. 156–157, p. 160. Ford, T., & M. Ferguson, 2004, ‘Social Consequences of Disparagement Humor: A Prejudiced Norm Theory’, *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 2004, v. 8/1, p. 79.

¹⁹¹¹ Martineau, W., 1972, ‘A Model of the Social functions of Humor’ in Goldstein, J., & P. McGhee, 1972, *The Psychology of Humor*, Academic Press, Inc., New York, USA, p. 115.

¹⁹¹² Boskin, J., 1987, ‘The Complicity of Humor: the Life and Death of Sambo’ in Morreall, J., 1987, *The Philosophy of Laughter and Humor*, State University of New York Press, pp. 250–263.

¹⁹¹³ Boskin, J., 1987, p. 260.

¹⁹¹⁴ Critchley, S., 2010, *On Humour*, Routledge, Abingdon, Oxon, UK, New York, pp. 11–12.

¹⁹¹⁵ Ford, T., & M. Ferguson, 2004, Op. Cit., p. 79. Ford, T., Richardson, K., & W. Petit, 2015, ‘Disparagement humor and prejudice: Contemporary theory and research’, *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, 28(2), p. 175.

¹⁹¹⁶ Ford, T., & M. Ferguson, 2004, Op. Cit., p. 83.

¹⁹¹⁷ Ford, T., & M. Ferguson, 2004, p. 83.

¹⁹¹⁸ Ford, T., & M. Ferguson, 2004, p. 84.

¹⁹¹⁹ Ford, T., & M. Ferguson, 2004, p. 85. KWB in Rainbird, M., 2004, Op. Cit., p. 5, p. 13.

¹⁹²⁰ Ford, T., & M. Ferguson, 2004, p. 85.

¹⁹²¹ Ford, T., & M. Ferguson, 2004, p. 85.

¹⁹²² Rainbird, M., 2004, Op. Cit. In particular see p. 16 where Rainbird notes that Davies says that jokes are an attempt to demean groups at the margins by reinforcing the notion of ‘mainstream’ superiority.

ramifications of KBW's disparaging humour, Rainbird's findings, like those of Ford and Ferguson, can equally apply to the other comedians, Beers and Rude.

Rainbird recognises that mainstream identity is affirmed in the marginalisation of others, but he says that mainstream identity confirmation is as much about *inclusion* as it is about exclusion.¹⁹²³ The privileging of certain identities by denying a 'legitimacy of difference' in others is just as insidious as marginalisation.¹⁹²⁴ In this regard, KBW says that he treats all nationalities, religions and races equally in the name of an inclusive, singular Australian identity.¹⁹²⁵ KBW promotes himself as someone who has the courage to speak up on behalf of ordinary Australians with his unashamedly 'politically in-correct' humour, undeterred by PC that sees certain groups, like Aboriginals, given advantages according to their social status.¹⁹²⁶ Paradoxically, in his humour, KBW projects a victim status in his maintenance of an Anglo-white identity pitted against PC elites like Aboriginal people.¹⁹²⁷ This status actually serves to reassert the privileged position held by him, and a white majority in Australia, particularly white men, whom Lindley notes are free to be offensive in a public space that they still largely control.¹⁹²⁸

KBW's popular song, *Living Next Door to Alan*, is example of his ability to maintain the authority of a white identity at the expense of Aboriginal people. His humour doesn't just poke fun at negative Aboriginal stereotypes it subliminally suggests that Aboriginal inventiveness avails them of special privileges that are not available to ordinary Australians, excluded by Australia's unfair PC and multicultural policies.¹⁹²⁹ In KBW's projection, Aboriginal people are a powerful and privileged group, and thus legitimate targets for joking of this sort.¹⁹³⁰ The comedy of Rude and Beers also plays to this stereotype of Aboriginal inventiveness and their ability to disregard laws and standards that apply to other Australians. Rainbird believes that such aggressive humour actually informs us of ongoing national identity battles over PC and cultural pluralism that are constantly contested in the socio-political environments of this nation.¹⁹³¹

6.1 Political Correctness

'Political Correctness' is an ambiguous and contested term;¹⁹³² however it is a significant justification for the racially disparaging humour used by KWB is his defiance of the unreasonable restrictions of

¹⁹²³ Rainbird, M., 2004, p. 6.

¹⁹²⁴ Rainbird, M., 2004, p. 12.

¹⁹²⁵ Rainbird, M., 2004, p. 14.

¹⁹²⁶ Rainbird, M., 2004, pp. 17–18.

¹⁹²⁷ Rainbird, M., 2004, pp. 14–15. Dorothy Jones also recognises that much Australian humour has a male 'underdog' victim stance. See: Jones, D., 1997, 'Setting Limits: Humour and Australian National Identity', *Special Issue of the Australian Journal of Comedy*, UNSW Press, Sydney, p. 33.

¹⁹²⁸ Lindley, M., 1995, 'Is Sam Newman funny?' *Australian Journal of Comedy*, 1(2), p. 60. Rainbird, M., 2004, Op. Cit., p. 15.

¹⁹²⁹ Rainbird, M., 2004, Op. Cit., p. 17.

¹⁹³⁰ Rainbird, M., 2004, p. 17.

¹⁹³¹ Rainbird, M., 2004, p. 18.

¹⁹³² Hughes says that PC is a complex and variable phenomenon changing through time from its initial concerns with sanitising language within education and the curriculum, it is now used to set agendas, reforms, and issues of race, culture, gender, disability, animal rights and the environment. Often these issues are neither 'political' nor are the 'correct' within the ordinary way that those terms are understood. See: Hughes, C., 2010, 'Defining Political Correctness' in *Political Correctness: A History of Semantic and Culture*, Wiley online at: <<http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com.ezproxy.flinders.edu.au/doi/10.1002/9781444314960.ch1>>, viewed 03/04/2016.

contemporary PC.¹⁹³³ It has certainly been a contentious, ongoing, notion in Australian society since the mid-1990s when issues of difference stimulated public and academic debate in light of the Federal election of Pauline Hanson on a platform of open hostility towards PC multiculturalism and Aboriginal ‘privileges’.¹⁹³⁴ Other politicians, like long-term Prime Minister John Howard, also recognise PC as a ‘nitpicking’ threat to people’s ability to express themselves in public for fear of persecution of their potentially racist, sexist or homophobic comments.¹⁹³⁵ Prominent right wing journalist Andrew Bolt continues to carve out a career of challenging PC standards by denying the accuracy of Indigenous claims of historical prejudice and disadvantage.¹⁹³⁶ Light-skinned Aboriginal people, Bolt laments, are merely taking advantage of this tenuous history to gain social advantages.¹⁹³⁷

Australian humour more specifically has faced similar identity challenges in what Milner-Davies terms a ‘counter revolution’ as comedians protest limitations placed on their work in the name of PC.¹⁹³⁸ Matte laments the curbing of topics deemed appropriate for comedy.¹⁹³⁹ Smilovici suggests that PC is ‘misguided.’¹⁹⁴⁰ PC, he says, is actually an authoritarian force attempting to curb comedy into a restricted form of moral behavior.¹⁹⁴¹ Whilst outright racist statements remain socially unacceptable, it would appear that those made in a joking manner remain acceptable to many in Australia’s mainstream.¹⁹⁴² Defensiveness can also be seen in the way that Australians’ responded to outsider criticism of the racial appropriateness of our distinctive mickey-taking humour.

A comedy skit on the 2009 reunion special of popular television comedy show *Hey, Hey Its Saturday*, provoked intense debate about the politically incorrect, racist nature, of Australian comedy.¹⁹⁴³ In a repeat of a winning skit from the 1980s, a group of non-Indigenous medical specialists ‘blacked up’ in minstrelsy

¹⁹³³ KBW claims that his humour is unashamedly ‘politically incorrect’, and this defiance is mostly what resonates with his fans in his interview by Denton. ABC Television, 13/10/2008, Op. Cit.

¹⁹³⁴ Rainbird, M., 2004, p. 2. See also Hanson’s maiden speech to Federal Parliament, 10/09/1996 in which she said: “We now have a situation where a type of reverse racism is applied to mainstream Australians by those who promote political correctness and those who control the various taxpayer funded ‘industries’ that flourish in our society servicing Aboriginals, multiculturalists and a host of other minority groups.” See her speech online at: <<http://australianpolitics.com/1996/09/10/pauline-hanson- maiden-speech.html>>, viewed 24/08/2015.

¹⁹³⁵ BBC World News, 05/10/2000, ‘Australian minister sparks race row’, online at: <<http://news.bbc.co.uk/1/hi/world/asia-pacific/957544.stm>> viewed 24/08/2015. Rainbird, M., Op. Cit., p. 11.

¹⁹³⁶ Bolt, A., 15/04/2009, ‘It’s so hip to be Black’, *Herald Sun*, online at: <http://www.abc.net.au/mediawatch/transcripts/1109_heraldsun09.pdf>, viewed 24/08/2015. Bolt, A., 21/08/2009, ‘White Fellas in the Black’, *Herald Sun*, at: <www.heraldsun.com.au/.../white-fellas-in-the-black/story-e6frfiffo-12257> viewed 24/08/2015.

¹⁹³⁷ On 29/09/2011 Bolt was successfully sued in the Federal Court by 9 Aboriginal claimants for breaching the Racial Discrimination Act (1975) with these two articles that Judge Bromberg found were not written in good faith and contained factual errors. See: ABC News, 29/09/2011, ‘Bolt breaches Discrimination Act, Judge rules’ online at: <<http://www.abc.net.au/news/2011-09-28/bolt-found-guilty-of-breaching-discrimination-act/3025918>>, viewed 24/08/2015.

¹⁹³⁸ Milner-Davis, J., 2009, Op. Cit., p. 37.

¹⁹³⁹ Matte, G., 1996, ‘Where are the Aboriginal Jokes? The Apartheid in Australian Comedy’, *Australian Journal of Comedy*, v.1/2, Melbourne, pp. 7–29. (Also see Matte’s 1996 article: ‘What is this thing called Political Correctness?’ In which he ruminates about public sagas blown out from ordinary events because of their interpretation through a PC lens of propriety, *Australian Journal of Comedy*, v. 2(1), Melbourne, Victoria, pp. 23–32).

¹⁹⁴⁰ Smilovici, G., 1996, ‘Comedy and Political Correctness– Are they compatible?’ *Australian Journal of Comedy*, v. 2(1), Melbourne, Victoria p. 16.

¹⁹⁴¹ Smilovici, G, 1996, p. 16.

¹⁹⁴² Rainbird, M., 2004, Op. Cit., p. 18.

¹⁹⁴³ Due, C., 2011, ‘Aussie Humour or Racism? Hey Hey It’s Saturday and the Denial of Racism in Online Responses to News Media Articles’, *PLATFORM: Journal of Media and Communication* v.3 (1)(March), pp. 36–51.

attire to perform a parody of the African-American singers, the Jackson Five.¹⁹⁴⁴ The inappropriate nature of the performance was condemned by guest judge, American entertainer, Harry Connick Junior.¹⁹⁴⁵ He accused the skit, indeed the show itself, of condoning racism against black people who had faced a long history of racial discrimination that systematically rendered them buffoons.¹⁹⁴⁶ Following the show, an overwhelming number of media comments made by Australians about this incident defensively denied that the skit had racist intent.¹⁹⁴⁷ The comments suggested that Connick's criticism was another sign of unrestrained PC, with a social outsider condemning something that was merely 'a bit of fun' and based on legitimate Australian humour practices.¹⁹⁴⁸

6.2 Modern racism

Due recognises these denials as a form of 'modern racism' where Australian society produces a discourse that further marginalises already disadvantaged groups.¹⁹⁴⁹ She says that contemporary racism includes forms of 'reverse racism' where dominant groups argue that it is they who are the victims of PC and not availed of the privileges afforded to other minority social groups.¹⁹⁵⁰ Modern racism also includes trivialising the seriousness of the event by suggesting that it is merely a joke and not to be taken seriously.¹⁹⁵¹ And finally, racism is often pursued via positive self-presentation that claims to value tolerance in the treatment of 'others'.¹⁹⁵²

Similar modern forms of racism are recognisable in the justifications of the bawdy comedians discussed earlier in this chapter. KBW and Rude project themselves as liberators of ordinary Australians in their stance against excessive PC.¹⁹⁵³ KBW validates his racism as a form of humour readily comprehended by his fans as merely joking.¹⁹⁵⁴ Beers and KBW both highlight their personal racial tolerance, noting that Aboriginal people themselves are among their greatest fans.¹⁹⁵⁵

¹⁹⁴⁴ Hey Hey It's Saturday, 07/10/2009 'The Jackson Jive', *Red Faces Segment*, online at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qEtjaZ8ZuNU>> viewed 24/08/2015.

¹⁹⁴⁵ Connick-Junior, H., 07/10/2009, quoted in Molitorisz, S., & M. Steffens, 10/10/2009, 'Hey Hey, ABC, Deny Skit is Racist', *Sydney Morning Herald* at: <www.smh.com.au/news/.../tv...is.../2009/10/.../1255019613342.html>, viewed 24/08/2015.

¹⁹⁴⁶ Connick-Junior, H., 07/10/2009.

¹⁹⁴⁷ See online comments in Due, C., 2011, Op. Cit., pp. 44–48.

¹⁹⁴⁸ Due, C., 2011, pp. 44–48.

¹⁹⁴⁹ Due, C., 2011, pp. 38–41.

¹⁹⁵⁰ Due, C., 2011, pp. 39–40.

¹⁹⁵¹ Due, C., 2011, p. 40.

¹⁹⁵² Due, C., 2011, p. 41.

¹⁹⁵³ Rude has said of himself: "*I am the last man standing, the Lord of the Insult*" when it comes to Political Correctness. See: Staff Writers, 21/09/2013, 'Rodney Rude is back to shock' *Mt Druitt–St Marys Standard*, News Corp. Australia, Mt Druitt, NSW. Online at: <<http://www.dailytelegraph.com.au/newslocal/west/rodney-rude-is-back-to-shock/story-fngr8i5s-1226723621807>> viewed 11/08/2015. KBW has said of himself: "*I'm a total opponent to political correctness...[and] I know a lot of people that [like what I] do*". See Noakes, M., 09/04/2011, Op. Cit.

¹⁹⁵⁴ In justifying his use of racist words, KBW says: "... *give my audience some credit. They're just normal people like I am... [and] I can't see that what I do is racist.*" See: Denton interview on ABCTV, 13/10/2008, Op. Cit.

¹⁹⁵⁵ KBW recalls an incident in an Indigenous community in the NT where the Aboriginal people gave him artwork gifts in exchange for him making them laugh with songs like his 'Living Next Door to Allan'. See: ABCTV, 13/10/2008 Op. Cit. Beers justifies his character on the basis that Aboriginal people, like Ernie Dingo, are some of his greatest fans and the fact that he himself has an Aboriginal grandson. See: Coslovich, G., 10/07/2002, Op. Cit.

Rainbird recognises such racist humour as a form of ‘cultural’ racism that assists to maintain the status quo of Australian mainstream, and is reflective of a much larger mainstream identity crisis.¹⁹⁵⁶ Due, like him, ties Aussie humour to national identity.¹⁹⁵⁷ She says that such forms of symbolic racism can be seen as expressions of Australian nationalism that attempt to restrict national identity to a white majority in order to maintain the status quo of existing morals and values.¹⁹⁵⁸

Milner Davis concurs, proposing that it is actually the social effects – ‘how Australians *use* humour’, rather than its themes or structures, which enable us to make more decisive conclusions about Australian identity as revealed through our humour.¹⁹⁵⁹ Moreover, such defensive justifications confirm Milner Davis’s finding that in Australia mickey-taking can be understood as a form of ‘acculturating ritual’ used to level differences and facilitate people’s integration into mainstream culture.¹⁹⁶⁰

Rainbird tells us that whilst humour is ambiguous, never guaranteed to hit its intended mark, it is not meaningless.¹⁹⁶¹ What is ultimately important in humour is *authorship* and *context*. These two things play vital roles in stabilising and legitimising its meaning.¹⁹⁶² Rainbird says that if comedians like KBW (Rude and Beers) were actually Aboriginals, their un-PC jokes would have a completely different meaning, actually making fun of white racism, rather than denigrating Aboriginal people.¹⁹⁶³

Within a comedy environment where a significant element of disparaging humour continues to exist under the banner of ‘Aboriginal humour’, this thesis proposes that the speaking position of the humorist is of vital significance. This chapter now turns to the relatively recent involvement of Indigenous Australian people themselves within the field of stand-up comedy. Aboriginal participation in stand-up comedy has largely resulted from another hitherto unexplored, yet significant, aspect of comedy in Australia – that of the support of comedy festivals. Importantly, this review will show that although Aboriginal stand-ups also poke fun at some of the same stereotypes of Aboriginality and laugh at socially contentious issues, their authority as ethnic minorities who have faced a history of cultural disparagement provides their work with greater legitimacy and acceptability.

7. THE SUPPORT OF CULTURAL FESTIVALS

Stand-up comedy has been promoted the world over by large cultural festivals that continue to grow in popularity. And, like the comedy venues discussed above, many recognisable comedy celebrities began

¹⁹⁵⁶ Rainbird, M., 2004, Op. Cit., pp. 16–17.

¹⁹⁵⁷ Due, C., 2011, Op. Cit., p. 41.

¹⁹⁵⁸ Due, C., 2011, pp. 41–42.

¹⁹⁵⁹ Milner-Davis, J., 2009, Op. Cit, p. 33. Milner-Davis, J., 2007, Op. Cit., p. 22.

¹⁹⁶⁰ Milner-Davis, J., 2009, Op. Cit., p. 47.

¹⁹⁶¹ Rainbird, M., Op. Cit., p. 6.

¹⁹⁶² Rainbird, M., 2004, pp. 18–19.

¹⁹⁶³ Rainbird, M., 2004, p. 19.

their careers through these channels.¹⁹⁶⁴ The *Edinburgh Fringe Festival* is the world's biggest Arts festival that began in 1947 and has a long history of supporting and encouraging live comedy events, especially stand-up.¹⁹⁶⁵ The comedy element of the Edinburgh Festival grew in such popularity that, since 2008, it has run under the auspices of its own *Edinburgh Comedy Festival* banner.¹⁹⁶⁶ This is currently the second largest comedy festival in the world.¹⁹⁶⁷

Montreal, Canada, holds the world's largest specialty comedy festival, *Just for Laughs Comedy Festival*.¹⁹⁶⁸ It began in 1983 and now boasts attendances of over 2 million people viewing around 1500 shows, many of them of the stand-up genre.¹⁹⁶⁹ The festival has spawned 'sister' comedy events in Toronto, Chicago and Nantes – attesting to the current popularity of the comedy genre.¹⁹⁷⁰

Likewise, the annual *Melbourne International Comedy Festival* (MICF), which is currently Australia's largest cultural event, provides another important avenue for the growth of stand-up comedy.¹⁹⁷¹ It was launched in 1987, and has become the third-largest international comedy festival.¹⁹⁷² The 28th festival of 2014 saw attendances of over 700,000 people.¹⁹⁷³ It generated \$13.5 million in box office takings.¹⁹⁷⁴ An additional 4 million people viewed its nationally broadcasted TV specials.¹⁹⁷⁵ The careers of successful Australian stand-ups such as Sammy J, Josh Thomas, and Nazeem Hussain have all been launched via MICF.¹⁹⁷⁶ The festival continues to be a very significant supporter of stand-up comedy, most especially with its conception of new and innovative off-shoot comedy events such as the *RAW Comedy Awards*.¹⁹⁷⁷

¹⁹⁶⁴ For example the UK's Stephen Fry, Hugh Laurie, Tony Slattery & Emma Thomson were awarded the premier comedy prize in 1981. In 1983 Australia's own Neill Gladwin and Steve Kearney (*Los Trios Ringbarkus*) won this prize. See: Chortle UK, 2000–2016, 'Edinburgh Comedy Awards', online at: <http://www.chortle.co.uk/features_static/awards/perrier.php> viewed 09/04/2016.

¹⁹⁶⁵ Edinburgh-History.co.uk, 2014, 'The Edinburgh Fringe Festival', online at <<http://www.edinburgh-history.co.uk/edinburgh-fringe-festival.html>>, viewed 14/01/2015. Brown, G., 16/03/2007, 'Five Top Comedy Festivals around the World', Travel section of *Guardian News*, online at: <<http://www.theguardian.com/travel/2007/mar/16/scotland.canada.australia>> viewed 14/01/2015.

¹⁹⁶⁶ Edinburgh-History.co.uk, 2014, Op. Cit.

¹⁹⁶⁷ Edinburgh-History.co.uk, 2014.

¹⁹⁶⁸ Brown, G., 16/03/2007, Op. Cit.

¹⁹⁶⁹ Brown, G., 16/03/2007.

¹⁹⁷⁰ Reid, E., nd., 'Comedy Festival Montreal Just For Laughs (aka Festival juste pour rire)', online at: <http://montreal.about.com/od/montrealevents/a/comedy_festival_montreal_just_for_laughs_juste_pour_rire.htm> viewed 14/01/2015. Brown, G., 16/03/2007, Op. Cit.

¹⁹⁷¹ Melbourne International Comedy Festival, 2014, 'Our Story', online at: <<http://www.comedyfestival.com.au/2014/seaspm/about-us/background/>>, viewed 13/01/2015.

¹⁹⁷² MICF, 2014.

¹⁹⁷³ This figure includes attendances at free performances. 498,343 tickets were sold at the MICF. The 27th festival of 2013 saw attendances of over 638,000 people watching 459 shows at 130 venues throughout the greater Melbourne region. This festival also made a record-breaking \$13,331,162 in box office takings. See: Hodgkinson, D., MICF Executive Director, 22/01/2015, 'Our record-breaking year!' 'MICF Publicity Email sent to Karen.austin@flinders.edu.au.

¹⁹⁷⁴ Hodgkinson, D., 22/01/2015.

¹⁹⁷⁵ Hodgkinson, D., 22/01/2015.

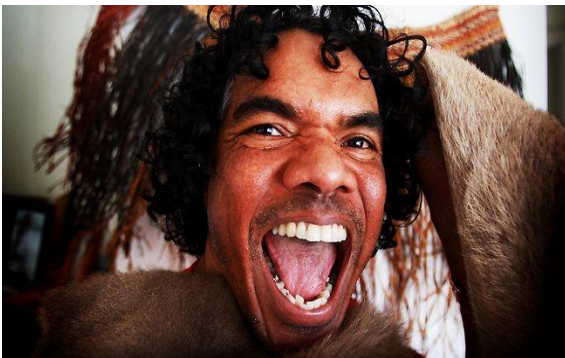
¹⁹⁷⁶ Squirrel Comedy, nd., 'History of Australian Award Winners', online at: <www.squirrelcomedy.com> viewed 13/01/2015.

¹⁹⁷⁷ RAW Comedy Awards are an open mic stand-up and sketch comedy competition for emerging comedians. See: MICF RAW Comedy, 2014-2015, 'Raw Comedy National Open Mic Comedy Competition Rules' at <<http://comedyfestival.com.au/raw/rules/>> viewed 13/01/2015.

7.1 RAW Comedy Awards

In 1996 MICF initiated an open-mic comedy competition known as the *RAW Comedy Awards* in an attempt to foster new comedic talent.¹⁹⁷⁸ RAW Awards are a series of comedy competitions held in all Australian capital cities and some larger regional centers.¹⁹⁷⁹ Contestants must be amateur comedians and over seventeen years of age. Finalists from each state play-off against each other in a national grand final held during the MICF each year.¹⁹⁸⁰ Contestants present a five-minute sketch of original live comedy material in music, sketch or stand-up style.¹⁹⁸¹ The ultimate prize-winner is sponsored to attend the *Edinburgh Fringe Festival* to compete in its annual competition, *So You Think You're Funny?*¹⁹⁸²

Past national winners have included Josh Thomas, Hannah Gadsby, and Ronny Chieng, all of whom have gone on to establish themselves in live comedy, radio and television careers.¹⁹⁸³ It was via winning the New South Wales state finals, and MICF grand final, in 2002 that Indigenous Australia's best known stand-up comedian, Sean Choolburra, launched his comedy career.¹⁹⁸⁴



(Image: Sean Choolburra)¹⁹⁸⁵

8. SEAN CHOOLBURRA

Indigenous Queenslander Choolburra's entrée into mainstream Australian comedy via the mainstream RAW comedy competition has been an exception for Indigenous comedians, but he was no stranger to public performance.¹⁹⁸⁶ In 1990 he moved from his home in Townsville to Sydney to study dance at the *Aboriginal and Islander Dance Theatre*.¹⁹⁸⁷ He established a successful career as a dancer with world renowned Indigenous dance company *Bangarra Dance Theatre* then formed *Ngaru Dance Company*

¹⁹⁷⁸ MICF RAW Comedy, 2014-2015.

¹⁹⁷⁹ MICF RAW Comedy, 2014-2015.

¹⁹⁸⁰ MICF RAW Comedy, 2014-2015.

¹⁹⁸¹ MICF RAW Comedy, 2014-2015.

¹⁹⁸² MICF RAW Comedy, 2014-2015.

¹⁹⁸³ MICF RAW Comedy, 2014-2015.

¹⁹⁸⁴ Artshub, 09/03/2012, 'Deadly Funny', online at: <<http://www.artshub.com.au/news-article/news/all-arts/artshub/deadly-funny-188126>>, viewed 13/01/2015. ICMI Speakers, 2015, 'Sean Choolburra', online at: <<http://www.icmi.com.au/sean-choolburra>>, viewed 15/01/2015.

¹⁹⁸⁵ Miller, M., 09/04/ 2012, 'The Poster Boy of Fresh Comedy', *Herald Sun*, Melbourne, Victoria. Online at: <<http://www.heraldsun.com.au/news/special-features/the-poster-boy-of-fresh-comedy-sean-choolburra/story-fncv4qq2-1226321815699?nk=35b38f4e1351f1d0a471f32be0847af3>>, viewed 21/08/2014.

¹⁹⁸⁶ Sean Choolburra associates his background to 3 Aboriginal language groups: his mother's 'Kalkadoon' from Mount Isa, his father's 'Girrama' from Tully, and his grandfather's 'Kuku-Yalanji' from Cook Town. See: Descendance Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Dance Theatre, nd., 'About Us', online at: <<http://descendance.com.au/about-us/>> viewed 11/04/2013

¹⁹⁸⁷ Choolburra, S., 07/04/2013, personal communication with Austin, K. Descendance, nd., Op. Cit.

himself in 1993.¹⁹⁸⁸ Choolburra won the RAW competition with his humorous fast talking, didgeridoo playing and dance moves – three of his strongest skills.¹⁹⁸⁹

8.1 The humour techniques used by Choolburra

Yarning

Choolburra staged his first one-person stand-up show, *Oil of Our Land*, at MICF in 2004.¹⁹⁹⁰ The show was based on traditional Indigenous storytelling about his family and growing up in Queensland.¹⁹⁹¹

Family is clearly important to Choolburra, and he makes constant (farical) references to them in his routines. He gives his mother credit for much of the observational material he weaves throughout many of his routines that relate to strong black women.¹⁹⁹² Carmel Choolburra is a single mother who raised 12 children – 8 boys and 4 girls; Sean was her ninth child.¹⁹⁹³ This focus on the importance of family is another element frequently recognisable in Aboriginal performance, and is often tied to intimate yarning techniques. Stand-up comedy is yet another genre used to pay homage to kin connections that are important to Aboriginal identity and further proof of their ongoing connections to country.

Choolburra himself recognises the traditional conversational style of storytelling in his and other Aboriginal comedians' routines.¹⁹⁹⁴ He says that Aboriginal people have been telling their stories for thousands of years, and stand-up comedy is just the latest manifestation of their ongoing living cultural heritage.¹⁹⁹⁵ Traditionally Aboriginal people use yarning techniques to impart cultural knowledge and information in a casual communication, ideally suited to a stand-up genre.¹⁹⁹⁶ Intimate yarning, coupled with humour's ability to encourage recognition of a shared worldview, draws audiences into the performer's confidence, convincing them to consider an alternative social perspective.¹⁹⁹⁷ Ethnic comedians, like Choolburra, have been compared to 'ancient storytellers' who make insightful cultural comments, as well as communicating common knowledge and shared values with their audiences.¹⁹⁹⁸

¹⁹⁸⁸ Bangarra Dance Theatre, nd., online at: <<http://bangarra.com.au/>> viewed 11/01/2013. Ngaru Dance Company is now known as Descendance Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Dance Theatre, Op. Cit.

¹⁹⁸⁹ Fox Studio's Comedy Store, nd., 'About Us', online at: <http://www.comedystore.com.au/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=46&Itemid=54> viewed 15/01/2015. Romeo, D., 14/12/2004, 'Interview of Sean Choolburra and Akmal Saleh' in *Stand and Deliver, the Observations, reviews and interviews of Don Romeo, a professional nerd*. Online at <http://standanddeliver.blogs.com/dombo/sean_choolburra/> viewed 15/01/2015.

¹⁹⁹⁰ Low, L., 15/12/2004, 'Sean Choolburra, Akmal Saleh and Libbi Gorr', *Sydney Morning Herald, The Studio*, online at: <<http://www.smh.com.au/news/Review/Sean-Choolburra-Akmal-Saleh-and-Libbi-Gorr-The-Studio/2004/12/14/1102787072139.html>>, viewed 05/03/2015.

¹⁹⁹¹ Fresh And Funky Festival, 25/11/2011, 'Sean Choolburra at Cairns Centre for Performing Arts', at: <<http://www.cairnsevents.com/events/2011-11-25>>, viewed 05/03/2015.

¹⁹⁹² Choolburra, S. to K. Austin, 07/04/2013, Op. Cit.

¹⁹⁹³ Choolburra, S., 29/11/2009, 'Summer Series: Feelin' Kinda Deadly interview of Sean Choolburra', *ABC Messagstick* at <<http://www.abc.net.au/tv/messagstick/stories/s2755698.htm>> viewed 11/04/2013.

¹⁹⁹⁴ Miller, M., 09/04/ 2012, Op. Cit.

¹⁹⁹⁵ Miller, M., 09/04/ 2012.

¹⁹⁹⁶ Watson, C., 2000, 'Believe me: Acts of Witnessing in Aboriginal Women's Autobiographical Narratives', *Journal of Australian Studies*, vol. 24:64, p. 143. Online at: <<http://www.tandfonline.com.ezproxy.flinders.edu.au/doi/pdf/10.1080/14443050009387566>>, viewed 08/09/2014.

¹⁹⁹⁷ Brodie, I., 2008, Op. Cit., pp. 153–180.

¹⁹⁹⁸ Boskin, J., & J. Dorinson, 1985, 'Ethnic Humor: Subversion and Survival', *American Quarterly*, v. 37/1, *Special Issue: American Humour* (Spring 1985), The Johns Hopkins University Press, p. 95.

One of his more recent shows, *50 Shades of Black*, is a parody of successful 2011 British erotic romance novel *50 Shades of Grey*,¹⁹⁹⁹ but it is hardly salacious. Pretending to read from a little black book, Choolburra farcically yarns about his own romances whilst extolling funny advice on life and love.²⁰⁰⁰

Ironically, whereas he is sometimes flirtatious with his audience, simultaneously he evokes an inoffensive wholesome persona that, in my view, is a genuine reflection of his off-stage self. Choolburra often comments on his innocent looking face, and how both women *and* many men find him attractive!²⁰⁰¹ He has a cheeky and charming manner, with facial expressions to match. These physical attributes draw you in with their apparent sincerity, as you concentrate hard to take in his quick one-liners, which reference African-American stand-up comedy influences in his performance. Moreover, they point to the most distinctive aspect of his comedy style, his physical humour.

Physical Humour and Mimicry

Mimicry and dance are the most recognisable features of Choolburra's comedy performances. He consistently includes high energy bursts of hip-hop dancing in his routines that give them a feeling of fast-paced spontaneity. Professional dancing has given Choolburra the skills to incorporate clever physical moves into his routines in an effortless, upbeat manner. He also frequently uses the didgeridoo to give his routines a strong connection to a pan-Aboriginal identity.²⁰⁰² Bergson has claimed that physical humour of repetitive or exaggerated movements is inherently funny.²⁰⁰³ Bergson suggests that when a person is able to portray the illusion of a machine working inside of them, they produce a more striking comic effect.²⁰⁰⁴ Likewise, continual repetition helps to sustain that humour.²⁰⁰⁵ For example, in his performances Choolburra frequently 'moonwalks' to humorously suggest that an unseen force impedes his progress. This move also ties his dancing to iconic African-American singer/dancer Michael Jackson. In addition, physical humour and mimicry are also recognisable features of traditional Indigenous performances like corroborees that have been documented by Europeans since early colonial times.

Sean's appearance, slight and agile, with curly black hair, cannot help but evoke similarities to African-American superstar Michael Jackson. He often wears hats, suits, bibbed-braces and slim-legged pants that mimic Jackson's tailored image. And, like Jackson, Choolburra frequently calls out 'woo' in his acts, thrusting his hips forward in classic 1980s Jackson style, and egging his audience on to clap along. There are continual references to American popular cultural images, especially those from Choolburra's teens in

¹⁹⁹⁹ James, E.L., 2012, *50 Shades of Grey*, Vintage Books (Random House), UK.

²⁰⁰⁰ Choolburra, S., 3-14/4/2013, *Fifty Shades of Black*, MICEF, Melbourne Town Hall, Victoria.

²⁰⁰¹ Choolburra, S., 3-14/4/2013.

²⁰⁰² IndigenousX, 26/07/2013, 'Five Questions to Sean Choolburra', *The Guardian*, online at <<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/jul/26/sean-choolburra-indigenous-x>>, viewed 05/01/2015.

²⁰⁰³ Bergson, H., 2005 [1911], Brereton, C & F. Rothwell [trans.], *Laughter, An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, Dover Publications, Inc. New York, pp. 14–18.

²⁰⁰⁴ Bergson, H., 2005 [1911], p. 15.

²⁰⁰⁵ Bergson, H., 2005 [1911], p. 17.

the 1980s, in his words, movements and his choice of music, like Jackson's popular song *Billie Jean*²⁰⁰⁶ which he often plays.

Choolburra also mimics features of African-American comedy stars in his routines, from fast-talking speech to slick moves and a charming flirtation with his audience. He cites comedian Eddie Murphy as one of his greatest role models because he admires Murphy's ability to laugh at most things in life.²⁰⁰⁷ He also notes comedians Richard Pryor and Bill Cosby plus the oft-repeated 1970s African-American sitcom, *Good Times*, as other sources of inspiration.²⁰⁰⁸ Although Murphy's fast talking is recognisable, his tendency to use sexually explicit language is not present in Choolburra's routines. Nor is Pryor's use of obscenities and racial slurs to make shocking, political, anti-establishment points present.²⁰⁰⁹ In fact, another Aboriginal comedian, Kevin Kropinyeri, has said that Choolburra is one of the 'nice guys' of stand-up comedy.²⁰¹⁰ Nonetheless, other influences from these classic 1980s African-American comedians are evident in his work – Pryor's facial exaggerations, sham innocence and comic timing; a touch of Cosby's showmanship and reinforcement of traditional family values; and the slick, funky moves of the character JJ from *Good Times*. While these images are recognisable to audience members versed in 1980s American popular icons, the continual references could render much of his work dated and obsolete to a good proportion of people who are not familiar with them.

Choolburra contrasts quick flowing words with 'pregnant pauses' and dramatic facial expressions. Such phenomena combine to support Choolburra's overall comic timing. Comic-timing techniques relate to the ways comedians alter their speech rhythm, with changes of pace, tone, and pauses, to enhance the humour of their performances.²⁰¹¹ Overall, in Choolburra's opinion, African-American comedy really appeals to black Australia's sense of humour, with their jokes about family issues and living with racism.²⁰¹²

However, in *50 Shades of Black*, Australian Stage's Jane Canaway criticised Choolburra's dancing as somewhat 'disjointed' and hesitant when it gets 'too slick'.²⁰¹³ Perhaps contradictorily, she also acknowledges his 'good girl/bad girl' nightclub dance/dialogue routine as terrifically funny and 'spot on' with its ability to sum-up a whole (flirtatious) situation via dancing and facial expressions.²⁰¹⁴ This 'bit'²⁰¹⁵

²⁰⁰⁶ Jackson, M., 1983, 'Billie Jean' (Album: *Thriller*) at: <http://www.michaeljackson.com/au/billie-jean-video>>, viewed 18/05/2015.

²⁰⁰⁷ IndigenousX, 26/07/2013, Op. Cit.

²⁰⁰⁸ Behrendt, L., 2013, 'Aboriginal Comedy: the flip side of tragedy is comedy' online at: <<http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2013/jun/19/aboriginal-comedy-humour>>, viewed 16/01/2015.

²⁰⁰⁹ Early, G., 2010, 'Black Humor: Reflections on an American Tradition' online at: <<http://69.20.58.162/publications/bulletin/summer2010/humor.pdf>>, viewed 22/04/2015.

²⁰¹⁰ Kropinyeri, K., 07/04/2013, personal communication with K. Austin.

²⁰¹¹ Attardo, S., & L. Pickering, 2011, 'Timing in the performance of jokes', *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, 24/2, p. 233, p. 235.

²⁰¹² Wright, A., 07/01/2005, 'Laugh lines for a people's survival', *South China Morning Post* online at: <www.scmp.com/article/484504/laugh-lines-peoples-survival>, viewed 04/03/2015.

²⁰¹³ Canaway, J., 04/04/2013, '50 Shades of Black, Sean Choolburra', *Australian Stage*, TAFE online course, at <<http://www.australianstage.com.au/201304046244/reviews/melbourne/50-shades-of-black-%7C-sean-choolburra.html>> viewed 09/04/2015.

²⁰¹⁴ Canaway, J., 04/04/2013.

is a classic example of Choolburra's mimetic dance ability that tie his routines to traditional Indigenous dance which uses humorous mimicry as a primary performance technique.²⁰¹⁶

Billig notes several examples of successful physical humour in contemporary comedy, like Ricky Gervais's sitcom *The Office*,²⁰¹⁷ where comic gestures and expressions, more so than words, are relied on to produce the show's humour.²⁰¹⁸ Following Bergson, Billig says that language contains fixed labels and psychological terms that can hinder and distort the reality of a mental state.²⁰¹⁹ Physical humour and laughter go beyond the 'petty details' of language, touching on the truths of experience that are often missed in verbal interactions.²⁰²⁰

Mickey Taking

Choolburra often 'takes the mickey' out of non-Indigenous Australia's fascination with Aboriginality. An example is his yarn about a 'hippie girl' who asks him to give her dingo puppy a spiritual name. He replies in a mystical voice: "From now on you'll know that little dingo as Ladji." Thrilled, she asks: "What does 'Ladji' mean?" to which he replies "Little dingo puppy." Choolburra then notes that she skipped happily away, but left him feeling guilty. He says that he didn't really have a spiritual name for her dog, rather he was thinking of Lassie,²⁰²¹ and trying to make it sound 'Aboriginalish'. Although he suggests that things could have been worse. He could have said to her, "You want a real Aboriginal name for that little dingo? Call it Ernie."²⁰²² Subliminally, here Choolburra suggests that Aboriginal people are just like other, non-Indigenous Australians, and not 'spiritual others' able to impart a kind of mystical wisdom. Choolburra uses mickey-taking as a way of debunking ludicrous ideas of Aboriginal mysticism. Milner Davis records mickey-taking as an important (mainstream) Australian humour style that helps to define our humour character and is celebrated widely across the nation.²⁰²³ Milner Davis argues that it is the way that Australians use satirical mickey-taking, rather than the specific joke content, that sets mickey-taking apart as typically Australian humour.²⁰²⁴

Self-Deprecation

Canaway recognises that in *50 Shades of Black* Choolburra is being self-effacing in his polite mannerisms and feigned embarrassment. However, she states that she felt like screaming: "*Don't! That's what*

²⁰¹⁵ Stand-up comedians perform routines that contain a series of units commonly referred to as 'bits', see: ²⁰¹⁵ Brodie, I., 2008, Op. Cit., pp. 153–180.

²⁰¹⁶ Peters-Little, F., 2000, 'High Art and the Humour of the Ordinary' in Kleinert, S., & M. Neale, *The Oxford Companion to Aboriginal Art and Culture*, Oxford University Press, Melbourne, pp. 362–363.

²⁰¹⁷ British Broadcasting Commission, nd., 'Profiles – Ricky Gervais', at <http://www.bbc.co.uk/comedy/profiles/ricky_gervais.shtml>, viewed 24/04/2015.

²⁰¹⁸ Billig, M., 2005, *Laughter and Ridicule, Towards a Social Critique of Humour*, Sage Publications, London, UK, p. 136.

²⁰¹⁹ Billig, M., 2005, pp. 136–137.

²⁰²⁰ Billig, M., 2005, p. 137.

²⁰²¹ Lassie is a fictional collie dog character created by Eric Knight for book and television series. See: *Lassie* at <http://www.lassie.net/lassie.htm>, viewed 25/08/2015.

²⁰²² Choolburra, S., 29/11/2009, Op. Cit.

²⁰²³ Milner-Davis, J., 2007, Op. Cit., p. 20.

²⁰²⁴ Milner-Davis, J., 2007, Op. Cit., p. 22.

comedians are supposed to do!” when Choolburra apologises for making fun of others.²⁰²⁵ Yet, Kotthoff says that certain forms of humorous violation of one’s self-image suggest complexity and may even reveal self-confidence.²⁰²⁶ That is, Choolburra’s ‘nice-guy’ comedic persona is confirmed through such humorously ‘humble’ techniques.

Choolburra says that much of his comedy is based on how Aboriginal people laugh off mainstream (white) stereotypes about them, because humour has always helped Aboriginal people ‘survive’ the racism of colonial Australia.²⁰²⁷ Although he does make some political jibes, mostly Choolburra avoids contentious racial issues. His humour is generally cloaked in a mild manner that dissuades defensiveness in the non-Indigenous section of his audiences. For example, in one of his skits he talks about how his grandfather took him out to survey his traditional homelands.²⁰²⁸ Choolburra speaks in his family’s native Indigenous language, and then translates his grandfather’s words to say poignantly: “*Look out there at your forefather’s country* [an obvious pause]. *One day you won’t own that anymore.*”²⁰²⁹ Pausing during comedy dialogue gives the audience time to anticipate what the next line is going to be – or rather should be – then the incongruity of the alternative ending induces greater laughter.²⁰³⁰

Wordplay

In another routine, Choolburra tells a story about a white friend he had growing up who asked him if he was a racist, to whom he replied: “*No, I just run fast*”.²⁰³¹ This innocuous play on the word ‘racism’, although pointing to more sinister issues, is in keeping with the naïve comic persona created by Choolburra in his onstage presence.

Indeed, at times Choolburra’s jokes with word-play and double meanings are pretty obvious, but predominantly Aboriginal audiences respond well to his skits about Aboriginal English issues. For example, farcically Choolburra claims to have invented the Aboriginal English word for cool, being ‘deadly’.²⁰³² He says that in 1973 he and his brothers and sisters were crying at news of the death of martial-arts legend Bruce Lee. His grandma piped up with “*Hold on, he’s dead Lee now.*” Sean replied, “*Yeah, dead-Lee, dead-Lee, – Deadly!*” Choolburra jokingly boasts that whenever you hear that word you’ll know where it came from – him.²⁰³³

²⁰²⁵ Canaway, J., 04/04/2013.

²⁰²⁶ Kotthoff, H., 1999, ‘Gender and Joking: On the Complexities of Women’s Image Politics in Humorous Narratives’, *Journal of Pragmatics*, v.32, 2000, p. 62.

²⁰²⁷ Wright, A., 07/01/2005, Op. Cit.

²⁰²⁸ Choolburra, S., 29/11/2009, Op. Cit.

²⁰²⁹ Choolburra, S., 29/11/2009.

²⁰³⁰ Double, O., 1997, Op. Cit. pp. 252–253.

²⁰³¹ Choolburra, S., 29/11/2009.

²⁰³² Choolburra, S., 29/11/2009.

²⁰³³ Choolburra, S., 29/11/2009. Wright, A., 07/01/2005, Op. Cit.

Choolburra is also a cultural ambassador for his people. He's in demand as an emcee, comedian, dancer, musician and educator.²⁰³⁴ He also supports other fledgling Aboriginal dancers and music acts by incorporating them into his shows.²⁰³⁵ He appeared on television's *NRL Footy Show* in 2006, and 'Thank God You're Here' in 2007.²⁰³⁶ In 2008 he performed at the *Edinburgh Fringe Festival*, at the Perth and Adelaide fringe festivals, and on the nationally televised, MICF Gala Event (which he also appeared on in 2013).²⁰³⁷ In 2009, Choolburra performed at the *Scottish Storytelling Festival*, and made television appearances on ABCTV's *Message Stick* and ABC2's *Comedy Up Late*.²⁰³⁸

Additionally, he has starred in several comedy advertising campaigns, including a series promoting Aboriginal job-seeking,²⁰³⁹ and another encouraging Aboriginal people to quit smoking.²⁰⁴⁰ In the latter campaign Choolburra is daringly dressed in a skimpy imitative leotard as he parodies a song and dance from the *Beyoncé* single, *All the Single Ladies*, with his *All the Cigarettes*.²⁰⁴¹ Smoking remains one of the biggest causes of death amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people,²⁰⁴² and YouTube campaigns like this one have the potential to reach many 'at risk' young people.²⁰⁴³ This video has been viewed over 19,000 times with 79% of viewers marking it as 'liked'.²⁰⁴⁴ Comedy, Choolburra believes, is the best medicine that Aboriginal people have and he is a strong advocate for the profession.²⁰⁴⁵

Choolburra is also busy performing stand-up and running workshops through the MICF *Deadly Roadshow*, and at schools and prisons throughout the country.²⁰⁴⁶ Along with non-Indigenous comedian Sammy-J he ran the coaching workshops for state finalists in the lead-up to Melbourne's 2015 *Deadly Funnies*.²⁰⁴⁷ Certainly, Choolburra's personable manner made him the obvious choice as inaugural host of Indigenous Australia's stand-up comedy awards, *Deadly Funny Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander National Final*

²⁰³⁴ ICMI Speakers and Entertainers, nd., 'Sean Choolburra Biography' online at: <<http://www.icmi.com.au/sean-choolburra>>, viewed 11/04/2013.

²⁰³⁵ See for example: Gamut Enterprises, 2006, DVD— *Sean Choolburra, Best of the Deadly's*. Choolburra, S., 28/3-21/4/2013, 50 *Shades of Black*, MICF, Melbourne Town Hall, Victoria.

²⁰³⁶ Sean Choolburra Website, nd. 'Comedy Biography' at <<http://www.seanchoolburra.com.au/comedy.html>>, viewed 05/01/2015.

²⁰³⁷ Sean Choolburra Website, nd.

²⁰³⁸ Sean Choolburra Website, nd.

²⁰³⁹ Indigenous Jobs Australia.com.au, 2009, online at:

<http://www.indigenousjobsaustralia.com.au/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=45&Itemid=35> viewed 16/01/2015.

²⁰⁴⁰ No Smokes.com.au, 26/07/2011, 'Beyonce – All The Cigarettes' online at:

<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=A5nRwft1Ys>> viewed 16/01/2015.

²⁰⁴¹ No Smokes.com.au, 26/07/2011.

²⁰⁴² Smoking is responsible for approximately 1 in 5 deaths amongst Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people. Australian Government, Department of Health, 17/12/2015, 'Tackling Indigenous Smoking Campaign (TIS)' online at:

<<http://www.health.gov.au/internet/main/publishing.nsf/Content/indigenous-tis-lp>>, viewed 07/04/2016.

²⁰⁴³ No Smokes.com.au, 26/07/2011.

²⁰⁴⁴ No Smokes.com.au, 07/04/2016.

²⁰⁴⁵ Choolburra, S., 29/11/2009, Op. Cit.

²⁰⁴⁶ IndigenousX, 26/07/2013, Op. Cit. Kennedy, J., 15/02/2012, 'Indigenous comedy teaches cultural acceptance', *ACB Mid West WA* online at: <www.abc.net.au/local/photos/2012/02/15/3431557.htm> viewed 11/04/2013. Spirit Festival, 2015, 'Deadly Funny', online at: <<http://www.thespiritfestival.com/deadly-funny/>> viewed 20/04/2015.

²⁰⁴⁷ Timeout Melbourne, nd., 'What's Happening in Melbourne – Applications Now Open for Deadly Funny 2015', online at: <<http://www.au.timeout.com/melbourne/comedy/events/13342/deadly-funny>>, viewed 21/04/2015.

and Showcase. This event has been held yearly as part of the MICF since its inception in 2007.²⁰⁴⁸ Choolburra has either hosted, or performed at, the showcase most years since.

9. DEADLY FUNNY NATIONAL FINAL AND SHOWCASE

The *Deadly Funnies* were the brainchild of Victorian Yorta Yorta man Jason Tamiru in 2006 whilst he undertook a mentorship with Toby Sullivan, producer of the biggest, Australia-wide, open-mic *RAW Comedy Competition*.²⁰⁴⁹ Being new to comedy, Tamiru believes that seeing it performed live at the MICF for the first time ‘blew his mind’.²⁰⁵⁰ He saw how responsive the large crowd was to the performance, and he recognised just how important comedy is to Australia’s cultural identity.²⁰⁵¹ However, he was saddened by the fact that he couldn’t see any Aboriginal faces in the large crowd. Frustrated, he believed that this important cultural space wasn’t inviting to Aboriginal people, and so he decided to do something about it.²⁰⁵² In response, he conceived a parallel open-mic competition to *RAW* just for Aboriginal people. He envisaged that Aboriginal comedy heats would be held in each Australian state with a grand final show to be held as part of the MICF.²⁰⁵³ His idea was received enthusiastically by Sullivan and by MICF director Susan Provan, and also supported financially by the *Australia Council* and the *City of Melbourne*.²⁰⁵⁴

As stand-up was such a new concept for Aboriginal people, Tamiru held a series of workshops run by MICF professional comedians to which Aboriginal participants could bring their funny material and learn how to transform it into a stand-up routine.²⁰⁵⁵ The competition was initially restricted to Victorian Indigenous communities as a ‘testing-ground’ for the idea.²⁰⁵⁶ Tamiru says that at first, Kooris were hesitant to join in.²⁰⁵⁷ He made phone calls to people he knew were funny and who he believed would have the courage to get up on stage in front of a live audience.²⁰⁵⁸ Nine participants entered the inaugural *Deadly Funnies* that were held at the prestigious Melbourne Town Hall.²⁰⁵⁹

The lead-up to the premier in April 2007 saw a very nervous Tamiru, worried that Kooris might not support the show.²⁰⁶⁰ His worries were unnecessary because the Aboriginal community came out in droves. The audience queue, Tamiru recalls, went right down Swanston Street.²⁰⁶¹ And they were a fantastically

²⁰⁴⁸ Tamiru, J., 15/01/2015, personal communication with K. Austin.

²⁰⁴⁹ Tamiru, J., to K. Austin, 15/01/2015. RAW Comedy Competition is a quest to find new novice stand-up comedians throughout Australia, see: MICF, 2015, ‘Raw Comedy Competition’, online at: <<http://comedyfestival.com.au/raw/rules/>> viewed 12/02/2015.

²⁰⁵⁰ Tamiru, J., to K. Austin, 15/01/2015, Op. Cit.

²⁰⁵¹ Tamiru, J., to K. Austin, 15/01/2015.

²⁰⁵² Tamiru, J., to K. Austin, 15/01/2015.

²⁰⁵³ Tamiru, J., to K. Austin, 15/01/2015.

²⁰⁵⁴ Tamiru, J., to K. Austin, 15/01/2015.

²⁰⁵⁵ Tamiru, J., to K. Austin, 15/01/2015.

²⁰⁵⁶ Tamiru, J., to K. Austin, 15/01/2015.

²⁰⁵⁷ Tamiru, J., to K. Austin, 15/01/2015.

²⁰⁵⁸ Tamiru, J., to K. Austin, 15/01/2015.

²⁰⁵⁹ Tamiru, J., to K. Austin, 15/01/2015.

²⁰⁶⁰ Tamiru, J., to K. Austin, 15/01/2015.

²⁰⁶¹ Tamiru, J., to K. Austin, 15/01/2015.

responsive bunch, clapping and cheering enthusiastically. Tamiru says that his people love to get dressed up and to go out to see their own perform.²⁰⁶² The event was, and still is, a successful venture, supported by many Aboriginal and some non-Aboriginal audience members. Sean Choolburra was emcee for the premiere and remains a loyal supporter.²⁰⁶³ The first competition winner was Kungarakan woman Mia Stanford, originally from the Northern Territory.²⁰⁶⁴



(Image: Mia Stanford)²⁰⁶⁵

10. MIA STANFORD

Although Stanford grew up outside of Darwin along with her (church) minister father, community-minded Aboriginal mother, and 27 foster brothers and sisters, at the time of the competition she was living in Melbourne.²⁰⁶⁶ She had just returned from overseas, studying, travelling and working in Thailand and Europe (teaching in Romania) for 3 years.²⁰⁶⁷

Things were difficult for Stanford, away from family, with no job and few belongings, and she found herself living in a woman's refuge.²⁰⁶⁸ She was acquainted with Tamiru, who, in 2006, encouraged her to participate in a series of stand-up comedy workshops that he had organised along with several professional comedians from the MICF.²⁰⁶⁹ The workshops were run in order to prepare the Indigenous participants to enter the first *Deadly Funnies* with their routines, devised over the four day period.²⁰⁷⁰

²⁰⁶² Tamiru, J., to K. Austin, 15/01/2015.

²⁰⁶³ Tamiru, J., to K. Austin, 15/01/2015.

²⁰⁶⁴ Stanford, M., 26/02/2015, personal communication with K. Austin. Auslit, nd., 'Mia Stanford' online at: <<http://www.auslit.edu.au/auslit/page/A134502>>, viewed 05/01/2015.

²⁰⁶⁵ Artshub Australia, 09/08/2011, 'Mia Stanford', online at: <<http://www.artshub.com.au/news-article/people/performing-arts/mia-stanford-185125>> viewed 10/01/2015.

²⁰⁶⁶ Foote, N., & C. Rawlinson, 18/08/2011, 'Mia Stanford is unclassifiable', *ABC Radio, Darwin, 105.7fm*, at: <<http://www.abc.net.au/local/audio/2011/08/18/3296711.htm>>, viewed 05/01/2015.

²⁰⁶⁷ Beat Magazine, 30/03/2011, 'Mia Stanford Performs Unclassifiable' online at: <<http://www.beat.com.au/comedy-festival/2011/03/30/mia-stanford-performs-unclassifiable/arts-centre-comedienne-mia-stanford-comedy-footscray-community->>>, viewed 05/01/2015.

²⁰⁶⁸ Stanford, M., to K. Austin, 26/02/2015.

²⁰⁶⁹ Stanford, M., to K. Austin, 26/02/2015.

²⁰⁷⁰ Stanford, M., to K. Austin, 26/02/2015.

Stanford says that when it came time for the *Deadly Funnies* event, she was terrified.²⁰⁷¹ She had never been on stage before in front of a large audience, and she had always struggled with confidence in her own performance abilities.²⁰⁷² She recalls that Tamiru was terrific, telling her that she didn't have to participate if she didn't want to, but that she really knew her stuff, so she should just do it!²⁰⁷³ This encouragement led Stanford to 'throw caution to the wind' and have a go.²⁰⁷⁴ She went on stage for her first performance in bare feet, and won the event.²⁰⁷⁵

Winning the *Deadly Funnies* provided Stanford with comedy performance opportunities.²⁰⁷⁶ She was invited to tour on the national comedy circuit and to perform at various Arts festivals around the country.²⁰⁷⁷ Stanford was the first Indigenous female to have her own solo show at the MICF, producing *Under the Rug*, in 2010.²⁰⁷⁸ She won the Melbourne Fringe Festival's *Award for an Outstanding Indigenous Performing Artist* for this show, and it also provided her with a mentorship with *Ilbjerri Theatre Company*.²⁰⁷⁹ That same year she also won the Victorian Indigenous Arts, *Aunty Eleanor Harding Award*; an award designed to support and encourage emerging Indigenous people in the performing arts.²⁰⁸⁰

In addition to her comedy work, from 2007, Stanford undertook a Bachelor of Arts in professional writing and Indigenous studies at Victoria University, Footscray.²⁰⁸¹ She successfully completed her undergraduate degree in 2011.²⁰⁸² These achievements and accolades, coupled with the support of mentor and director, non-Indigenous comedian John Burgos,²⁰⁸³ led to the 2011 production of her one hour long solo show, *Mia Stanford: Unclassifiable*.²⁰⁸⁴ This played in the 25th MICF for five performances at the Footscray Arts Centre to audiences in excess of 250 people.²⁰⁸⁵

²⁰⁷¹ Stanford, M., to K. Austin, 26/02/2015.

²⁰⁷² Stanford, M., to K. Austin, 26/02/2015.

²⁰⁷³ Stanford, M., to K. Austin, 26/02/2015.

²⁰⁷⁴ Stanford, M., to K. Austin, 26/02/2015.

²⁰⁷⁵ Stanford, M., to K. Austin, 26/02/2015.

²⁰⁷⁶ Stanford, M., to K. Austin, 26/02/2015.

²⁰⁷⁷ Stanford, M., to K. Austin, 26/02/2015.

²⁰⁷⁸ Stanford, M., to K. Austin, 26/02/2015. Adjrun, R., 02/04/2011, 'Interview with Mia Stanford and John Burgos, – Mia Stanford: Unclassifiable', *ABC Radio National AWAYE!*, online at:

<http://mpegmedia.abc.net.au/rn/podcast/2011/04/aye_20110402_1840.mp3>, viewed 02/03/2015.

²⁰⁷⁹ Melbourne Fringe Festival, 2010, 'Professional Development Awards', online at: <<http://www.melbournefringe.com.au/fringe-festival/past-award-winners>>, viewed 02/03/2015.

²⁰⁸⁰ Victoria Indigenous Performing Arts Awards, 2010, 'VIPA Awards', online at:

<<http://ilbjerri.com.au/productions/project/vipa-awards/>> viewed 02/03/2015.

²⁰⁸¹ Stanford, M., to K. Austin, 26/02/2015. Adjrun, R., 02/04/2011, Op. Cit.

²⁰⁸² Stanford, M., to K. Austin, 26/02/2015.

²⁰⁸³ IMDb, nd., 'John Burgos', online at: <<http://www.imdb.com/name/nm4702419/>> viewed 02/02/2015.

²⁰⁸⁴ Adjrun, R., 02/04/2011, Op. Cit.

²⁰⁸⁵ MICF, 2011, '25th Melbourne International Comedy Festival presents Mia Stanford: Unclassifiable at Footscray Art Community Arts Centre, 5–16 April', online at: <<http://www.comedyfestival.com.au/corporate/shows/mia-stanford-unclassifiable/>> viewed 02/03/2015. Stanford, M., 26/02/2015.

10.1 The humour techniques used by Stanford

Yarning

Unclassifiable was a personal journey of humorous yarns from Stanford's childhood in the Northern Territory, through her international travels, to her current life in Melbourne.²⁰⁸⁶ In one routine she talks about how she was a bit of a whinger as a child and her mother found the perfect way of stopping it.²⁰⁸⁷ One day she was complaining and her mother popped out her breast ('titty') and tried to force it into Mia's mouth in front of all of her friends. Stanford suggests that from that day onwards, all her mother needed to do to 'shut her up' was to pat her breast and point – it worked a treat.

Self-Deprecation

Stanford's routines are frequently self-deprecating and focused on her identity as a fair-skinned Aboriginal person. She notes that she was teased mercilessly at school for 'looking like a white person'.²⁰⁸⁸ She jokes about her thin nose being a terrible 'genetic defect'; and how, as a child, her Indigenous relatives would try to send her home from family gatherings thinking that she didn't belong.²⁰⁸⁹ Here Stanford's humour references a well-recognised issue for Aboriginal people, who are frequently discriminated against because of their mixed heritage and physical appearances. Turning the table on this issue, and suggesting that Aboriginal people have a problem with the appearance of white people, is a way of re-empowering those who have often been made to feel like illegitimate members of their cultural and family affiliations.

Freud was very familiar with the anti-Semitic culture of Europe of the early 1900s, and said that a particularly clever form of joke is made when a criticism is directed at oneself or at one's own people.²⁰⁹⁰ Freud suggests that insiders are the best ones to really know both the good and the bad points about their own group, and this knowledge leads to the wittiest humour.²⁰⁹¹ Critchley has said that jokes have a way of challenging the status quo – the real is rendered surreal – and so we laugh with a kind of 'transient physiological delight'.²⁰⁹² He says that the incongruities of humour point out the 'massive' congruence between joke structures and social structures, and speak against those structures by showing us that they are largely unnecessary.²⁰⁹³ Moreover, by referencing a particular contingency, humour can play a critical social function, exposing a situation that *should* be mocked and ridiculed.²⁰⁹⁴ Stanford's self-deprecation provides mocking challenge to the social status quo that bases its comprehension of Aboriginality solely on physical appearance. In laughing at herself, Stanford highlights a common misconception about her own identity based on her fair complexion.

²⁰⁸⁶ Adjrun, R., 02/04/2011, Op. Cit.

²⁰⁸⁷ Miapiawania, 10/04/2010, 'Mia Stanford Stand-up Dreaming Festival Queensland, 2009', online at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=CEAVHVuUwJ8>> viewed 02/03/2015.

²⁰⁸⁸ Adjrun, R., 02/04/2011, Op. Cit.

²⁰⁸⁹ Adjrun, R., 02/04/2011.

²⁰⁹⁰ Freud, S., 2002 [1905], *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, Penguin Books, London and New York, pp. 108–109.

²⁰⁹¹ Freud, S., 2002 [1905], p. 109.

²⁰⁹² Critchley, S., 2010 (2002), *On Humour*, Routledge, London and New York, p. 10.

²⁰⁹³ Critchley, S., 2010 (2002), p. 10.

²⁰⁹⁴ Critchley, S., 2010 (2002), pp. 10–11.

A UK critic suggested that Stanford's show was a 'must see' and gave it a 4/5 star review.²⁰⁹⁵ However, another (Australian) reviewer was more critical, and gave it 3 stars, stating that it was more of a one-woman monologue than a genuine stand-up comedy routine.²⁰⁹⁶ Burgos acknowledges that it was quite an achievement for a stand-up performer to hold her own show early on in her career; yet her real coup lies in the fact that she had produced a 'committed, funded, well-rounded, well researched, and ... really professional piece...[of work].'²⁰⁹⁷

Stanford herself believes that her show was not really well supported by the local Indigenous community, whom she felt had been overly critical of her performance; especially with her noticeable lack of mickey-taking humour about non-Indigenous people.²⁰⁹⁸ She believes that she put her 'heart and soul' into its production, and this negativity hit her hard.²⁰⁹⁹ Double talks about how stand-up comedians can find audience responses very hurtful.²¹⁰⁰ He suggests that one of the reasons that stand-ups fear being disliked by audiences is because stand-up is a form of self-expression.²¹⁰¹ If the personal is being expressed via their performance, then it is they who are being rejected – the more authentic the self-expression, the more hurtful the negative reception.²¹⁰²

Wordplay

There is an inclination to verbal incongruity, focusing on word-play, noticeable in Stanford's early routines, that is very apparent in her more recent work. Her 2014 *Deadly Funnies* routine was a fast-paced play on bird language and bird metaphors that are prevalent in the English language.²¹⁰³ From long-neck bird/beer images, to popular culture references ('twitter'), and the sexual innuendo of a 'black cock' and 'spread eagle', Stanford's set is fast-paced and witty. Her routine is not generally focused on her Aboriginal identity and issues of concern to the Aboriginal community. Stanford concedes that her current comedy is not limited to the stereotype of the Aboriginal person from the mission, or from the urban ghetto, with politically harsh and critical material knocking mainstream colonial imperialism.²¹⁰⁴ Nor does she do what she terms a 'hamming up' style of dancing and slap-stick comedy.²¹⁰⁵ In her comedy she tries to undress both Australian, and global social issues, attempting to make sense of the world.²¹⁰⁶ Stanford believes that many audience members, who attend Indigenous performances, don't really understand what she is trying

²⁰⁹⁵ Stanford, M., to K. Austin, 26/02/2015. Bern, M., 2008, 'Matt Bern talks to Mia Stanford', *Territory FM, 104.IfM*, online at: <<http://www.territoryfm.com/podcasts/mia-stanford-talks-matt-bern>>, podcast accessed 05/01/2015.

²⁰⁹⁶ Stanford, M., to K. Austin, 26/02/2015. Bern M., 2008.

²⁰⁹⁷ Adjrun, R., 02/04/2011, Op. Cit.

²⁰⁹⁸ Stanford, M., to K. Austin, 26/02/2015.

²⁰⁹⁹ Stanford, M., to K. Austin, 26/02/2015.

²¹⁰⁰ Double, O., 2014, Op. Cit., 114.

²¹⁰¹ Double, O., 2014, 114.

²¹⁰² Double, O., 2014, p. 114.

²¹⁰³ Deadly Funny, 27/05/2014, 'Mia Stanford – Deadly Funny 2014', Youtube online at:

<<http://www.bing.com/videos/search?q=mia+stanford+on+youtube&FORM=VIRE6#view=detail&mid=1D69F581313466B2D7A51D69F581313466B2D7A5>> viewed 03/03/2015.

²¹⁰⁴ Stanford, M., to K. Austin, 26/02/2015.

²¹⁰⁵ Stanford, M., to K. Austin, 26/02/2015.

²¹⁰⁶ Stanford, M., to K. Austin, 26/02/2015.

to do in her routines.²¹⁰⁷ She says: “*I am an Aboriginal girl with fair skin, I am educated, well-travelled and worldly, and my [comedy] style reflects these things.*”²¹⁰⁸

Kuipers’ studies of the social differences of humour styles reveal that the variances in people’s use and appreciation of humour are related to their background.²¹⁰⁹ Following Bourdieu, she notes that issues of gender, education, age, ethnicity and nationality all affect one’s sense of humour.²¹¹⁰ People’s humour is an expression of themselves and what they believe is important in others and in society more broadly.²¹¹¹ These background differences form people’s ‘tastes’ that are demarcations of symbolic social boundaries where people are classified (either included or excluded) in a social group by their taste categories.²¹¹² Humour appreciation is based on the culturally-specific knowledge that is required to understand it and, as a result, humour can expose outsiders more than other forms of communication.²¹¹³ Moreover, Kuipers says that ‘people prefer cultural products produced in their own culture because of the added identification with familiar themes, places and people’.²¹¹⁴ This finding is pertinent to Aboriginal comedy shows, where audiences are mostly made up of Aboriginal people. Perhaps as Stanford strays from themes with Indigenous familiarity to more mainstream appeal, (Aboriginal) audience appreciation wanes.

Stanford’s propensity to use humour featuring verbal wit and word play points to the fact that, since her 2007 win, she has forged a fairly successful career as a writer and performer. In 2012 after the birth of her daughter she took a break from performing.²¹¹⁵ In 2013 she completed a post-graduate course in Arts Management at Melbourne University that gave her the skills and qualifications to move into Arts production work.²¹¹⁶ In December 2014 she directed the Wangaratta *Folk, Rhythm and Life Festival*, in country Victoria, another ‘feather in her cap’ of creative expression in her developing Arts career.²¹¹⁷ Stanford continued to perform in the 2015 *Deadly Funnies*, and in 2015 she participated in a Sydney writing workshop for production of the second season of *Black Comedy*.²¹¹⁸

²¹⁰⁷ Stanford, M., to K. Austin, 26/02/2015.

²¹⁰⁸ Stanford, M., to K. Austin, 26/02/2015.

²¹⁰⁹ Kuipers, G, 2009, ‘Humor Styles and Symbolic Boundaries’, *Journal of Literary Theory*, 3(2), p. 219.

²¹¹⁰ Kuipers, G, 2009, pp. 219–220.

²¹¹¹ Kuipers, G, 2009, pp. 219–220.

²¹¹² Kuipers, G, 2009, p. 223.

²¹¹³ Kuipers, G, 2009, pp. 224–225.

²¹¹⁴ Kuipers, G, 2009, p. 232.

²¹¹⁵ Stanford, M., to K. Austin, 26/02/2015, Op. Cit.

²¹¹⁶ Stanford, M., to K. Austin, 26/02/2015.

²¹¹⁷ Stanford, M., to K. Austin, 26/02/2015. Bilyana, 2014, ‘The 15th Annual Folk, Rhythm & Life Festival’ online at: <<http://frl2014.bilyana.com/about/>> viewed 02/03/2015.

²¹¹⁸ *Black Comedy* is a television comedy skit show written and produced by Indigenous artists Fa’aoso, A, Oliver, S, Bell, J, Wymarra, E, Lui, N, & B. Stewart. Scarlett Pictures, 11–12/2014, *Black Comedy Series One*, ABCTV. At: <<http://www.abc.net.au/tv/programs/black-comedy/>> viewed 05/01/2015. Stanford, M., to K. Austin, 11/03/2015, personal communication.



(Image: Kevin Kropinyeri)²¹¹⁹

11. KEVIN KROPINYERI

Today *Deadly Funny* heats are held around the country.²¹²⁰ Tamiru believes that they remain a wonderful support for Indigenous artists who hope to break into the mainstream stand-up world.²¹²¹ In fact, comedian Keven Kropinyeri, a Ngarrindjeri man, originally from Murray Bridge in South Australia, has done just that. In early 2008, whilst working as an Aboriginal case worker, he received an email about the South Australian *Deadly Funny* heats.²¹²² Many of Kropinyeri's family and friends believed him to be 'the life of the party' and had been encouraging him to move into comedy for a long time before he actually did.²¹²³ His wife registered him for the workshops, yet it wasn't until the night before the finals that he came up with his 'super-freak' comedy-dance routine and managed to finish third in the heat.²¹²⁴ However, he was still sent through to the MICF finals on a wild card entry and was talented enough to win the finals.²¹²⁵

Kropinyeri concedes that his comedy career has been inspired by other Australian stand-ups, Russell Gilbert, Carl Barron, Mick Molloy, and, in particular, Sean Choolburra.²¹²⁶ He says:

Sean is the reason I got into comedy in the first place. I saw him perform at the 2007 Deadly Awards, warming up the crowd – he had them in stitches and I thought, I can do that.²¹²⁷

By 2009 Kevin produced his own stand-up show – *The Fat and the Furious*, a play on the popular street car-racing action movie series, *The Fast and the Furious*.²¹²⁸ This show set the foundations for many of the bits Kropinyeri still performs in his acts, intermingling them with new routines.

²¹¹⁹ Linden, R, 12/12/2011, 'Kevin Kropinyeri – Guess Who', *Sydney Morning Herald*, online at:

<<http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/comedy/kevin-kropinyeri--guess-who-20120412-1wvzl.html>> viewed 19/01/2015.

²¹²⁰ Deadly Funny state heats are held in South Australia, New South Wales, Queensland and Western Australia MICF, 2015, 'Deadly Funny Competition', online at: <<http://www.comedyfestival.com.au/2015/season/deadly-funny/>> viewed 15/05/2015.

²¹²¹ Tamiru, J., to K. Austin, 15/01/2015, Op. Cit.

²¹²² K. Kropinyeri, to K. Austin, 05/04/2013, Op. Cit.

²¹²³ K. Kropinyeri, to K. Austin, 05/04/2013.

²¹²⁴ K. Kropinyeri, to K. Austin, 05/04/2013.

²¹²⁵ SBS2, 27/04/2014, 'Standup @ The Bella Union: Kevin Kropinyeri Extended Interview Part 2', online at: <<http://www.sbs.com.au/comedy/video/240315971565/Stand-Up-The-Bella-Union-Kevin-Kropinyeri-Extended>> viewed 20/01/2015.

²¹²⁶ National Aboriginal & Torres Strait Islander Music, Sport, Entertainment & Community Awards, (ATSI Awards) 15/08/2013, 'Deadly's News: Deadly's Comedy Gala', online at: <<http://www.deadlys.com.au/2013/08/deadlys-comedy-gala-2/>>, viewed 05/03/2015.

²¹²⁷ ATSI Awards, 15/08/2013.

11.1 *The humour techniques used by Kropinyeri*

Physical Humour and Mimicry

Throughout many of Kropinyeri's shows he paces up and down the stage, sometimes dancing and requesting his audience to respond by clapping along. His use of music, like the 1970s band Chic's disco song *Everybody Dance – Clap Your Hands*, enhances many of his up-beat skits. Music, Kropinyeri says, sets an atmosphere, and he uses it continuously to enhance the comedy of his routines – sometimes dancing along, other times playing an air-guitar. Physical comedy is less emotionally demanding of audiences than words that can be politically controversial.²¹²⁹ Kropinyeri believes that physical comedy especially connects with younger audiences.²¹³⁰ Primarily his comedy is about 'building bridges' between Indigenous and non-Indigenous people.²¹³¹ He recognises that many of his non-Aboriginal audience members have never actually met an Aboriginal person before, and comedy is a means of 'pulling back the curtains' so that they can get to know each other better.²¹³²

Using the kind of physical humour that Bergson valorised, Kropinyeri often relies on physical slapstick and facial exaggerations to make himself appear more comical.²¹³³ The comic, Bergson says, is someone who is readily able to give his audience the impression of being a 'thing' with involuntary movements, like a machine or a puppet, because comedy is a game that merely imitates life.²¹³⁴

Sometimes Kropinyeri has two Aboriginal female backup dancers in his performances who help to support his physical dancing and buffoonery. In his slap-slick prancing and break-dancing moves the influence of Choolburra on his humour style is most obvious; however, I would suggest that Choolburra's dancing is more reflective of his professional training whereas Kropinyeri's persona and movement are generally more gregarious and self-deprecating.

Self-Deprecation

Self-deprecation is particularly noteworthy in Kropinyeri's routines– he is never afraid to make himself look silly for a laugh, especially in relation to his own voluptuous figure. Turning side-on, Kropinyeri jokes that his stomach resembles the 'D' in deadly, or more realistically the 'D' in doona!²¹³⁵ He dresses up in ballet tutus, or G-strings and tights, prancing around the stage eliciting laughter. Kropinyeri often

²¹²⁸ K-Mak Aboriginal Art & Sempre Media, 2011, *Kevin Kropinyeri, The Fat and the Furious Comedy Show* DVD, Australia. Cohen, R., 2001, *The Fast and the Furious*, Universal Pictures, Los Angeles, USA. At <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0232500/>> viewed 20/01/2015.

²¹²⁹ SBS2, 27/04/2014, 'Standup @ The Bella Union: Kevin Kropinyeri Extended Interview Part 3', online at: <<http://www.sbs.com.au/comedy/video/240315971566/Stand-Up-The-Bella-Union-Kevin-Kropinyeri-Extended>>, viewed 20/01/2015.

²¹³⁰ SBS2, 27/04/2014, 'Standup @ The Bella Union: Kevin Kropinyeri Extended Interview Part 3'.

²¹³¹ SBS2, 27/04/2014, 'Standup @ The Bella Union: Kevin Kropinyeri Extended Interview Part 3'.

²¹³² SBS2, 27/04/2014, 'Standup @ The Bella Union: Kevin Kropinyeri Extended Interview Part 2', Op. Cit.

²¹³³ Bergson, H., 2005 [1911], pp. 33–64.

²¹³⁴ Bergson, H., 2005 [1911], p. 38.

²¹³⁵ K-Mak Aboriginal Art & Sempre Media, 2011, Op. Cit.

introduces forms of self-deprecation into his routines before he turns his attention to mickey-taking others perhaps because making oneself the butt of a joke is a great ‘ice breaker’.²¹³⁶ Moreover, self-deprecation assists comedians to ease tensions about potentially stressful issues that might be raised in their routines and to project themselves with greater courage and assertiveness.²¹³⁷

With regards to self-deprecation, Chafe queries whether this non-serious form of joking, by attacking one’s own inadequacies, might be a way of mitigating low self-esteem.²¹³⁸ On the other hand, he also points to Kotthoff’s findings on self-mockery.²¹³⁹ Kotthoff says that ... ‘people laugh more *with* humorists who tell stories at their own expense than *at* them’ because such speakers present themselves as people who really understand humour and can see that there is a funny side to embarrassing situations.²¹⁴⁰

However, self-deprecation also assists non-Indigenous audience members to see that Aboriginal people are comfortable in sending themselves up too, not just taking-the-mickey out of non-Indigenous faults and hypocrisies. Here self-deprecation is an ‘equalising tool’ that allows minority comedians to show audiences that they are all much the same.²¹⁴¹ Ellithorpe et al suggest that generally the humour used and appreciated by minority comedians tends to be less aggressive than the humour used by powerful majorities.²¹⁴² Minority comedians often use self-deprecation as a method of reducing tensions surrounding the power differentials between groups.²¹⁴³ Recent research also suggests that the use of self-deprecating humour by comedians may create positive feelings towards them in the audience too.²¹⁴⁴

Self-Duplicating Humour

Nor is Kropinyeri afraid to laugh at Indigenous people. Oshima calls this self-referential style of humour that involves laughing at one’s own ethnicity ‘self-duplicating’ humour.²¹⁴⁵ For example, in one routine Kropinyeri takes-the-mickey out of generalisations about Aboriginal people who take drugs. He also frequently makes fun of Aboriginal alcoholism and high incarceration rates. Oshima argues that the ability to laugh about one’s own ethnicity actually demonstrates a pride that they have in their cultural heritage, rather than genuine denigration.²¹⁴⁶

²¹³⁶ Oshima, K., 2000, ‘Ethnic Jokes in Hawai’I’, *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, vol. 13(4), Walter de Gruyter, Berlin, p. 55.

²¹³⁷ Oshima, K., 2000, p. 55.

²¹³⁸ Chafe, W., 2007, *The Importance of Not Being Earnest, the feeling behind laughter and humour*, John Benjamins Publishing Company, Amsterdam & Philadelphia, p. 154.

²¹³⁹ Chafe, W., 2007, p. 154.

²¹⁴⁰ Kotthoff, H., 1999, Op. Cit., p. 62, p. 74.

²¹⁴¹ Ellithorpe, M., Esralew, S., & L. Holbert, 2014, ‘Putting the “self” in self-deprecation: when deprecating humor about minorities is acceptable’, *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, 27(3), Walter de Gruyter, Berlin, Germany, pp. 403–404.

²¹⁴² Ellithorpe, M., Esralew, S & L. Holbert, 2014, p. 403.

²¹⁴³ Ellithorpe, M., Esralew, S & L. Holbert, 2014, p. 403.

²¹⁴⁴ Janes, L., & J. Olson, 2015, ‘Humor as an abrasive or a lubricant in social situations: Martineau revisited’, *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, 28(2), Walter de Gruyter, Berlin, Germany, p. 276.

²¹⁴⁵ Oshima, K., 2000, p. 41.

²¹⁴⁶ Oshima, K., 2000, p. 52.

In his 2015 *Comedy All-Stars Roadshow* performance, Kropinyeri likens prison to a holiday resort for Aboriginal people.²¹⁴⁷ Referring to a farcical cousin, he tells a yarn about how healthy and buff his ‘cuz’ looked after taking an extended ‘holiday’ (and family reunion) in Yatala prison.²¹⁴⁸ Such digs at his own culture are ‘equalisers’, giving Kropinyeri tacit consent to also laugh at non-Indigenous culture because he is willing to laugh at the shortcomings of his own.²¹⁴⁹ Certainly he offers himself to audiences as someone who understands what it is to be the recipient of racism.²¹⁵⁰ Quickly he moves from humorous jibe to a surprising sober acknowledgement that in South Australia Aboriginal people make up approximately 45% of the prison population, even though they constitute only approximately 2.3% of the state’s total population.²¹⁵¹ Kropinyeri’s routine seeks to diffuse the contentious nature of this topic by ‘bringing it out in the open’ to be discussed in the public space of a comedy performance. Boskin and Dorinson suggest that ethnic comedians like Kropinyeri, take on the role of ‘cultural anthropologist’, with the cultural authority to make insightful commentary on the injustices and incongruities of the world in which they live.²¹⁵² Such merging of socially unpalatable issues with humour continues the modern tradition of self-deprecation recognised in Aboriginal theatrical performances like Chi’s *Bran Nue Dae* and Purcell’s *Box the Pony*.

Arguably, this type of cultural-deprecation allows those non-Indigenous members of the audience (who might never have considered such shamefully disproportionate statistics) to process this fact in a less guilt-laden manner; hopefully they will retain the knowledge and later give greater consideration to the difficulties faced by many Indigenous people. Norrick suggests that comedians pose ‘tests’ for audiences to get them to discover data on the attitudes, beliefs and group membership conveyed in their jokes.²¹⁵³ Ellithorpe et al believe that discussion of difficult issues in humour can lead to solidarity between comedian and audience because acceptance of the comedian’s message relies on shared knowledge.²¹⁵⁴ Audience laughter ‘at the right moment’ reveals that they have recognised the source text and ‘get’ the joke.²¹⁵⁵ Moreover, at their best, racially contentious issues provide Aboriginal audiences an opportunity to laugh at themselves in the camaraderie of a shared joke.²¹⁵⁶

Such humour can also be considered as an in-group humorous release that serves to strengthen bonds of social cohesion between an ethnic comedian and his or her Indigenous audience via shared recognition.²¹⁵⁷

²¹⁴⁷ Personal Attendance at *Aboriginal Comedy Allstars*, 05/03/2015, Tuxedo Cat, Hyde Street, Adelaide, SA.

²¹⁴⁸ Yatala Prison is located in Northfield, a suburb of Adelaide, South Australia. *Aboriginal Comedy Allstars*, 05/03/2015.

²¹⁴⁹ Hirji, F., 2009, ‘Somebody Going to Get Hurt Real Bad: the Race-based Comedy of Russell Peters’, *Canadian Journal of Communication*, v. 34, p. 576.

²¹⁵⁰ Hirji, F., 2009, p. 576.

²¹⁵¹ *Aboriginal Comedy Allstars*, 05/03/2015. ABS, 2011, ‘Estimates of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Australians, June 2011’, online at: <<http://www.abs.gov.au/ausstats/abs@.nsf/mf/3238.0.55.001>>, viewed 10/03/2015.

²¹⁵² Boskin, J., & J. Dorinson, 1985, ‘Ethnic Humor: Subversion and Survival’, *American Quarterly*, v. 37/1, *Special Issue: American Humour* (Spring 1985), The Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 94–95.

²¹⁵³ Norrick, N., 1989, ‘Intertextuality in humor’, *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, v.2(2), p. 118.

²¹⁵⁴ Ellithorpe, M, Esralew, S & L. Holbert, 2014, Op. Cit., p. 403.

²¹⁵⁵ Norrick, N., 1989, Op. Cit., p. 118.

²¹⁵⁶ Friedman, L., & H. Friedman, 2009, ‘Jewish? You Must be Joking! The Jewish Take on Humor’, *Social Science Network*, 27/07/09, pp. 22–23.

²¹⁵⁷ Boskin, J. & J. Dorinson, 1985, Op. Cit., p. 92.

However, some commentators contend that the practice of minority comedians evoking negative racial stereotypes of their own race is highly problematic.²¹⁵⁸ The fact that audiences generally don't find their racial jokes offensive, but rather mostly enjoyable, can mean that they are actually validating differences, rendering them 'essential and natural', and therefore not critically engaging with them.²¹⁵⁹ Comedy can control and limit audiences' challenges of racist characterisations, assisting them to believe that they are recognising 'truth' in the stereotypes, rather than acknowledging that they are just confronting culturally constructed images.²¹⁶⁰ Additionally, Park et al contend that whilst Indigenous audience members might find pleasure in negative humorous portrayals of their own culture, this is not an indication of comedy's potential to subversively 'disrupt the racial status quo.'²¹⁶¹ Audience pleasure is actually constructed on existing beliefs in racial differences, because 'there would be little pleasure if viewers perceived racial stereotypes in comedy as unreal or false.'²¹⁶² As Monro points out in his discussion of incongruity humour theories that are reliant on well-known social assumptions, reaffirmed by popular media, no matter who evokes them, comedy stereotypes can conjure up negative images that already exist within the discursive confines of society's racial ideologies.²¹⁶³

Perhaps recognising this potentially 'dangerous' emotional nature of ethnic humour, Kropinyeri frequently makes the point to his non-Indigenous audiences that it is ok for them to laugh *with* their Indigenous fellows, and not *at* them.²¹⁶⁴ One gets the feeling that he is subliminally demarcating the performance space alone as permissible for laughter at issues that might ordinarily cause offence or consternation for Aboriginal people. Citing classic relief theories, Chafe suggests that feelings of 'not serious' produced in humour are a type of safety valve whose purpose is to distract us psychologically from 'serious' (guilty) thoughts by the accompanying euphoria expressed in laughter.²¹⁶⁵ When we are in this state, we are incapable of entering our 'serious cognitive repertoire... [our] knowledge of how the world really is'.²¹⁶⁶ Therefore, although not necessarily a seriously subversive challenge to status quo assumptions, stand-up can at least offer a public space where racial dialogue can be raised where all audience members share in the common experience of hearing racially contentious issues voiced in a culturally permissive arena.²¹⁶⁷

Primarily, Kropinyeri's playful jokes are about Aboriginal people mostly because that is who he is, and his life gives inspiration for his material.²¹⁶⁸ Moreover, he says that Aboriginal audiences are generous and

²¹⁵⁸ Park, J., Gabbadon, N., & A. Chernin, 2006, 'Naturalizing racial differences through comedy: Asian, black and white views on racial stereotypes in Rush Hour 2', *Journal of Communication*, v. 56, pp. 157–177. Hirji, F, 2009, Op. Cit., pp. 567–586.

²¹⁵⁹ Park, J., Gabbadon, N. & A. Chernin, 2006, Op. Cit., pp. 173–174.

²¹⁶⁰ Park, J., Gabbadon, N. & A. Chernin, 2006, pp. 173–174.

²¹⁶¹ Park, J., Gabbadon, N. & A. Chernin, 2006, p. 174.

²¹⁶² Park, J., Gabbadon, N. & A. Chernin, 2006, p. 174.

²¹⁶³ Monro, D., 1951, *Argument of Laughter*, Melbourne University Press, Melbourne, Victoria. Park, J., N. Gabbadon & A. Chernin, 2006, Op. Cit., p. 174.

²¹⁶⁴ *Aboriginal Comedy Allstars*, 05/03/2015, Op. Cit.

²¹⁶⁵ Chafe, W., 2007, Op. Cit., p. 11.

²¹⁶⁶ Chafe, W., 2007, Op. Cit., p. 11.

²¹⁶⁷ Hirji, F., 2009, Op. Cit., p. 581.

²¹⁶⁸ SBS2, 27/04/2014, 'Standup @ The Bella Union: Kevin Kropinyeri Extended Interview Part 3', online at: <<http://www.sbs.com.au/comedy/video/240315971566/Stand-Up-The-Bella-Union-Kevin-Kropinyeri-Extended>> viewed 21/01/2015.

they love a good laugh at themselves.²¹⁶⁹ Billig has noted that Freud's Jewish audience, when listening to one of his Jewish jokes, would just know that certain limits of meaning were in place and that any stereotypes could be enjoyed as mere stereotype, and not as insulting remarks.²¹⁷⁰ Certainly, Lockyer and Pickering recognise that the line between humour and offensiveness is drawn depending on context and consequence.²¹⁷¹ Additionally, knowing that the comedian is himself a member of a minority group also favourably influences how deprecating humour is received by audiences.²¹⁷²

Many of Kropinyeri's jokes relate to his Koori wife, her family, their courting and relationship. Kropinyeri tells farcical stories about their first meeting, mocking her preposterous drinking habits and slurred speech (eg. "*Kebin you lubly*").²¹⁷³ Here Kropinyeri identifies with, and openly mocks, socially sensitive issues of Aboriginal drunkenness and violence. Additionally, he paints Aboriginal woman as fierce, strong people; yet his humour is tinged with love and pride. Laughter and applause from predominantly Aboriginal audiences reveals their great appreciation for Kropinyeri's work. Kuipers notes that such responses produce strong emotional connections of solidarity and trust, reinforcing group identification.²¹⁷⁴ Often what is malicious on one level can also be pleasurable and crucially this depends on the context in which it is spoken and received.²¹⁷⁵

Mickey-Taking

Kropinyeri's humour, which often borders on the plain silly, frequently relates to the differences in attitudes and behaviours between black and white Australians, referencing sober issues of racism, hypocrisy and injustice along the way. Holt has said that Aboriginal humour is 'a spontaneous spoofing of the stereotypes, both black and white ... [i]t's about laughing at ourselves and at others and then letting it go.'²¹⁷⁶ Both cultures are ridiculed mercilessly for their quirky mannerisms. One skit relates to a whitefella asking Kropinyeri about his nationality to which he proudly replies that he is Aboriginal.²¹⁷⁷ In response, the white man says (in an exaggerated, pompous voice): 'that's funny you don't *look* Aboriginal'.²¹⁷⁸ This story leads into Kropinyeri's oft repeated anecdote about black-fellas coming in all different colours, just like coffee – his mother really is a 'short black' he jokes.²¹⁷⁹

In his routines he often includes stereotypical references to non-Indigenous attitudes and arrogance about Aboriginal people's lived experiences and social concerns. This mockery points out white hypocrisy, ignorance and racism in a manner that suggests all people are fair game for ridicule in the stand-up

²¹⁶⁹ SBS2, 27/04/2014.

²¹⁷⁰ Billig, M., 2005, Op. Cit., p. 165.

²¹⁷¹ Lockyer, S. & M. Pickering, (eds.), 2009, Op. Cit., p. 3.

²¹⁷² Janes, L., & J. Olson, 2015, Op. Cit., p. 276. Ellithorpe, M, Esralew, S & L. Holbert, 2014, Op. Cit., pp. 401–422.

²¹⁷³ K-Mak Aboriginal Art & Sempre Media, 2011, Op. Cit.

²¹⁷⁴ Kuipers, G., 2009, Op. Cit., p. 231.

²¹⁷⁵ Lockyer, S., & M. Pickering, (eds.), 2009, Op. Cit., p. 19.

²¹⁷⁶ Holt, L., 2009, 'Aboriginal humour: A conversational corroboree' in De Groen, F & P. Kirkpatrick (eds.) *Serious Frolic, Essays on Australian Humour*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, p. 83.

²¹⁷⁷ K-Mak Aboriginal Art & Sempre Media, 2011, Op. Cit.

²¹⁷⁸ K-Mak Aboriginal Art & Sempre Media, 2011.

²¹⁷⁹ K-Mak Aboriginal Art & Sempre Media, 2011. *Aboriginal Comedy Allstars*, 05/03/2015.

environment. Lynch-Morris says that emphasis on stereotypes in stand-up can help to overturn audiences' (unquestioned) assumptions.²¹⁸⁰ It acts as a bridge between reality and fantasy, challenging them on misconceptions about Aboriginal peoples' lives.²¹⁸¹

Kropinyeri's outspoken dislike of racism is matched by his frustration at the lack of government consultation with Aboriginal communities. One of his skits relates to an expensive anti-drug campaign that didn't include consultation with the local Indigenous community. As a result, he takes-the-mickey out of the government for stupidly advertising drugs in the Aboriginal community as 'deadly', ironically sending the opposite message.²¹⁸²

Wordplay

Like many other Indigenous performers, Kropinyeri uses Aboriginal English to help to situate his stand-up as an Indigenous work. His humorous anecdotes refer to his 'deadly mob' (his excellent people/kin), those who are married-up (married) or charged-up (drunk). Often Kropinyeri gives explanation of these words to his audience, to nods of acknowledgement from Indigenous members, and nods of appreciation for the information from those who are not.²¹⁸³ Kropinyeri specifically recognises the cultural differences between black and white audiences.²¹⁸⁴ He believes that he needs to give non-Indigenous audiences explanations of Aboriginal peoples' language and ways in order for them to understand their humour,²¹⁸⁵ and a joke explained generally falls flat.²¹⁸⁶

For example, there is Kropinyeri's oft-told skit about the meaning and use of the word 'deadly' in Aboriginal communities.²¹⁸⁷ To Indigenous people the word 'deadly' means awesome, wicked, or excellent. However, he suggests that Aboriginal people never tell their kids that snakes are deadly because it might just encourage them to grab one!²¹⁸⁸ This is not unlike Native American stand-up Vaughn Eaglebear's performances, where he tailors certain jokes to the dominant make-up of his audiences.²¹⁸⁹ Like Kropinyeri, Eaglebear believes topics that are specific to Native Americans' lived experiences seem funnier to insider audiences and can be difficult for mainstream audiences to comprehend.²¹⁹⁰ Kropinyeri believes that it is much easier for him to perform to a predominantly Indigenous audience because he

²¹⁸⁰ Lynch Morris, A., 2010, 'Native American Stand-Up Comedy: Epideictic Strategies in the Contact Zone', *Rhetoric Review*, v. 30(1), pp. 37-53, DOI: 10.1080/07350198.2011.530108, p. 47.

²¹⁸¹ Lynch-Morris, A., 2010, 'Native American Stand-Up Comedy: Epideictic Strategies in the Contact Zone', *Rhetoric Review*, 30(1), p. 47.

²¹⁸² Kropinyeri had previously explained the Aboriginal positive understanding of the term 'deadly' to his audience. See: K-Mak Aboriginal Art & Sempre Media, 2011, Op. Cit.

²¹⁸³ Personal observations at Kropinyeri's comedy shows in 2013–2015. Kropinyeri, K., 2015, 'Welcome to My World' stand-up show in *Aboriginal Comedy Allstars*, 05/03/2015, Op. Cit.

²¹⁸⁴ SBS2, 27/04/2014, 'Standup @ The Bella Union: Kevin Kropinyeri Extended Interview Part 3', Op. Cit. Kropinyeri, K., 5/04/2013, Op. Cit.

²¹⁸⁵ SBS2, 27/04/2014, Part 3, Op. Cit.

²¹⁸⁶ Simon Critchley also recognises this point and says that "[a] joke explained is a joke misunderstood." See: Critchley, S., 2002, *On Humour*, Routledge, Abingdon, Oxon, UK, p. 2.

²¹⁸⁷ K-Mak Aboriginal Art & Sempre Media, 2011, Op. Cit.

²¹⁸⁸ K-Mak Aboriginal Art & Sempre Media, 2011.

²¹⁸⁹ Lynch-Morris, A., 2010, Op. Cit., p. 39.

²¹⁹⁰ Lynch-Morris, A., 2010, p. 39.

doesn't need to explain stuff to them.²¹⁹¹ For example, in one South Australian gig he spoke in language and his Aboriginal audience laughed out loud, but his white audience went: 'what was that all about?'²¹⁹² Kropinyeri says that he really has to map things out for his non-Indigenous audiences at times.²¹⁹³ Consequently, some of his non-Indigenous audience members tell him that they learn a lot about Aboriginal communities from attending his shows.²¹⁹⁴

Yarning

Brodie recognises that a hallmark of stand-up is the genre's ability to provide an 'illusion of intimacy' and that the performance is a joint creation of both performer and audience.²¹⁹⁵ Kropinyeri, like Choolburra, successfully negotiates much of his performance as an intimate yarn in which he consistently evokes a shared worldview with that of his audiences, and primarily this is with his Aboriginal kin.²¹⁹⁶

And again, like Choolburra, Kropinyeri, is also a staunch supporter of other young Indigenous artists. Many of his shows include short segments by them, like 2009 *Deadly Awards* break dancer of the year, Isaac Parsons.²¹⁹⁷ Both comedians take their comedy careers seriously and conduct themselves as cultural ambassadors for their people, as if 'on display' to mainstream culture, and arguably much more so than non-Indigenous Australian comedians.

In addition to his relentless round of touring on the regional comedy circuit for MIFC's *Deadly Funny Roadshow*, especially to regional and remote Australian communities, Kropinyeri supports many charitable organisations. An example is his appearance on the 2013 television gala *No Laughing Matter* raising money for and awareness of youth suicide.²¹⁹⁸ He has also performed in mainstream Australian television programmes like Channel 7's *Weekend Sunrise* 2012, ABCTV's *Comedy Up Late* 2013, Foxtel's *No Laughing Matter* 2013, the Channel 10 *Comedy Allstars Supershow* 2014, SBS2's *Stand-up @ Bella Union* 2014.²¹⁹⁹ His mainstream presence continues as MIFC's 2015 (non-Indigenous) *Comedy Roadshow* (Queensland) host, and as host of ABCTV's *Comedy Up Late* 2015.²²⁰⁰

²¹⁹¹ SBS2, 27/04/2014, 'Standup @ The Bella Union: Kevin Kropinyeri Extended Interview Part 3', Op. Cit.

²¹⁹² SBS2, 27/04/2014, 'Standup @ The Bella Union: Kevin Kropinyeri Extended Interview Part 3', Op. Cit.

²¹⁹³ SBS2, 27/04/2014, 'Standup @ The Bella Union: Kevin Kropinyeri Extended Interview Part 3', Op. Cit.

²¹⁹⁴ SBS2, 27/04/2014, 'Standup @ The Bella Union: Kevin Kropinyeri Extended Interview Part 2', Op. Cit.

²¹⁹⁵ Brodie, I., 2008, Op. Cit., np.

²¹⁹⁶ Brodie, I., 2008, np.

²¹⁹⁷ '2009 Deadly Awards – Dancer of the Year- Isaac Parsons aka Bboy2ezy', online at:

<<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NC9aBSMrXGk>> viewed 22/01/2015.

²¹⁹⁸ Suicide Prevention Australia, 2013, 'No Laughing Matter' at <<http://www.nolaughingmatter.org.au/>> viewed 22/01/2015.

²¹⁹⁹ Kevin Kropinyeri Website, nd., 'Biography' at <<http://kevinkropinyeri.com.au/bio.htm>>, viewed 05/01/2015.

²²⁰⁰ MIFC, 2015, *Comedy Road Show*, online at: <<http://www.comedyfestival.com.au/2015/season/roadshow/>> viewed 16/03/2015.

ABCTV, 13&20/05/2015, 'Kevin Kropinyeri hosts Comedy Up Late (Series 3, Episodes 5 & 6)' online at:

<<http://www.abc.net.au/tv/programs/comedy-up-late/>>, viewed 18/05/2015.



(Image: Andrew Saunders)²²⁰¹

12. ANDREW SAUNDERS

Although Saunders did not come to stand-up fame via the *Deadly Funnies*, his participation in the awards has been significant, and he hosted the event, alongside established comic Judith Lucy, in April 2015.²²⁰² Comedy is Saunders' passion and he has been writing and performing it for most of his life.²²⁰³ He, like Choolburra, was a finalist in the NSW RAW Comedy competition (2000), and since then has performed stand-up regularly at Sydney's *Comedy Store*.²²⁰⁴ His sense of humour led him, along with his brother and cousin, Grant Saunders and Jay Davis, to create the television comedy pilot, turned internet YouTube skit series, *WhiteBLACKatcha*,²²⁰⁵ in 2011. This was achieved with financial support through OTAD,²²⁰⁶ Metro Screen and Screen NSW.²²⁰⁷ *WhiteBLACKatcha* delivers a satirical look at contemporary Australian culture and its predilection for things like reality-tv cooking shows, exercise fads, racism and stereotypes of Indigenous and non-Indigenous peoples alike. The five-part series was posted to YouTube in July and August 2012.²²⁰⁸ Early episodes especially have generated significant viewing hits,²²⁰⁹ and a loyal following of fans on the team's Facebook page.²²¹⁰

²²⁰¹ SBS2, 09/03/2014, 'Standup @ The Bella Union: Andrew Saunders Interview' online at: <<http://www.sbs.com.au/comedy/video/177661507974/Stand-Up-The-Bella-Union-Andy-Saunders-Unseen-joke>> viewed 16/03/2015.

²²⁰² Eventfinda, 'Deadly Funny National Final & Showcase 18/04/2015', at: <<http://www.eventfinda.com.au/2015/deadly-funny-national-final-showcase2/melbourne/southbank>>, viewed 16/03/2015.

²²⁰³ WhiteBLACKatcha Homepage, nd., 'Andrew Saunders – Writer/Actor/Comedian' online at: <<http://www.whiteblackatcha.com/theteam.html>>, viewed 16/03/2015.

²²⁰⁴ WhiteBLACKatcha Homepage, nd., 'Andrew Saunders – Writer/Actor/Comedian'.

²²⁰⁵ WhiteBLACKatcha is a humorous play on the colloquial American phrase 'right-back-at-ya' that implies Aboriginal people can give as good as they take in relation to Australian humour.

²²⁰⁶ OATD is an acronym for the 'Out There and Deadly' initiative of the Lester Bostock Indigenous Mentorship program. See: <www.whiteblackatcha.com/theteam.html> viewed 16/03/2015.

²²⁰⁷ WhiteBLACKatcha, nd. 'The Team – David Opiz, Executive Producer' at: <www.whiteblackatcha.com/theteam.html> viewed 16/03/2015.

²²⁰⁸ WhiteBLACKatcha, 2012, 'WhiteBLACKatcha videos', Youtube, at: <<https://www.youtube.com/user/grantly003/videos>>, viewed 16/03/2015.

²²⁰⁹ WhiteBLACKatcha, 2012, Series Part 1 has 30,758 viewer hits, Part 2 has 24,471 hits, and Part 3 has 24,889 hits. Online: <<https://www.youtube.com/user/grantly003/videos>>, viewed 07/04/2016.

²²¹⁰ WhiteBLACKatcha, 2012. Facebook, 2012, 'WhiteBLACKatcha Facebook page', online at: <<https://www.facebook.com/Whiteblackatcha>>, viewed 16/03/2015.

12.1 *The humour techniques used by Saunders*

Mimicry

WhiteBLACKatcha has provided Saunders with an outlet to develop some of the funny characters that he has transferred to live performance and stand-up. These include his camp Koori Zumba ('Komba') instructor, Ray Ray Boy (RRB), with his exaggerated mannerisms and effeminate Aboriginal English speech. Saunders presented RRB at the *Deadly Funny National Showcase* in Melbourne in 2013.²²¹¹ Parading around the stage in a skimpy yellow crop-top with *KKK Komba* emblazoned in black letters, red shorts, black leggings, and a large afro wig with a yellow sweat band, slim-built Saunders cut a funny, theatrical presence.

Self-Deprecation

Furthermore, by calling out "*look at me, look at me*" Saunders parallels RRB to the narcissistic Kim, a popular comedy character played by Gina Riley in the television comedy series *Kath & Kim*.²²¹² RRB draws self-deprecating comic attention to his 'gorgeous' bony legs, suggesting that he looks like an antique chair – bow legged with a big gap!²²¹³ Kotthoff says that self-deprecating humour does not always indicate a weak sense of self-respect as many psychologists suggest, rather sometimes a sense of self-respect.²²¹⁴ Humorists who laugh and tell jokes at their own expense project a complexity of image, often revealing self-confidence.²²¹⁵ Ellithorpe et al find that audiences accept comedians and their message in a more positive light when they recognise that the humour produced is self-deprecating.²²¹⁶ A further benefit of dressing in ridiculous attire and performing in caricature is the fact that comedians, like Saunders, can remove themselves from the often outrageous, sometimes insulting, things they say in their act. This parallels the tradition of male cross-dressing that has been recognised as a significant aspect of Australian humour that allows the comedian greater license to raise potentially contentious topics.

Mickey-Taking

Moreover, there is an unstated expectation that a certain level of derision will occur in a specific comedy environment, and audience members appear mostly prepared not to take offence to the stand-up comedian's routine that they have chosen to attend. Saunders notes that an essential part of his routines is '[t]esting his audience... [and thus] ...provoking thought...'²²¹⁷ At times, through his jokes he attempts to address

²²¹¹ Austin, K., 07/04/2013, personal attendance at *Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Deadly Funny National Showcase*, Melbourne Town Hall, Victoria.

²²¹² Riley, G., Turner, J., & M., Szubanski, 2002-2007, 'Kath & Kim', ABC TV series, <<http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0272397/fullcredits/>>, viewed 17/03/2015.

²²¹³ Austin, K., 07/04/2013, Op. Cit.

²²¹⁴ Kotthoff, H., 1999, 'Gender and Joking: On the Complexities of Women's Image Politics in Humorous Narratives', *Journal of Pragmatics*, v.32, 2000, pp. 55–80 at p. 75.

²²¹⁵ Kotthoff, H., 1999, p. 62.

²²¹⁶ Ellithorpe, M., Esralew, S., & L. Holbert, 2014, Op. Cit., p. 419.

²²¹⁷ Taylor, A., 18/11/2014, 'Andy Saunders brings black humour to Sydney', *Sydney Morning Herald* online at: <http://www.smh.com.au/entertainment/comedy/andy-saunders-brings-black-humour-to-corroboree-sydney-20141118-11of91.html> viewed 16/03/2015.

injustices; however, above all else, he states: “I joke because I love seeing people laugh and sometimes, I really get a kick out of people thinking [about] whether it is appropriate to laugh [or not].”²²¹⁸

Using a familiar advertising phrase, ‘the dance sensation that’s sweeping the nation’, RRB informs the audience that he is going to teach them some komba moves; emphatically stating: “*I’m gonna make weight drop off ya easier than the words outta Kevin Rudd’s mouth when he says I hate that fuckin’ red-headed bitch.*” Humorously mocking the political tensions in the Federal Labor leadership between former PM Rudd and the then-current (red-headed) PM Julia Gillard, is not solely a topic of Aboriginal significance. Such satire appeals to a wider audience. Seirlis says that stand-up comedy’s ‘potency depends on [the audience’s] ... immediate understanding of these local allusions’.²²¹⁹ And, at the time, Australian audiences were well and truly aware of the scandalous rift in the Federal Government’s leadership.

Comedy is powerful because it is often able to tell more profound truths about the actual state of affairs than the official rhetoric of mainstream media reporting.²²²⁰ RRB asks for volunteers from his audience, and then he mockingly suggests that he quite likes the ‘white’ ones, but that these days you can’t tell who’s white or black. Taking the mickey further, he adds that you can usually only tell who’s white because of their ‘orange’ skin due to their ‘fucked up spray tan’. This line gets a huge laugh of recognition from Saunderson’s predominantly Koori audience.²²²¹ This was a mocking reference to white Australians’ obsession with tanning their skin, and patchy attempts of at-home spray tans, which are a familiar sight during Australian summers. Chafe says that humour works in part by setting up dialogue in a ‘non-serious’ manner.²²²² By referencing something that is pseudo-plausible, but absurd, comedians can signify that what they are about to say is not something that should be taken seriously.²²²³ Thus what could be construed as a negative is not generally offensive and receives a good-natured laugh. Laughter is another phenomenon which Chafe suggests can help to distract listeners from thinking seriously (and being insulted) about a subject.²²²⁴

More recognisable than in other noted Indigenous stand-up comedians’ routines, Saunderson ‘tests the boundaries’ of appropriateness in his jibes that relate to current political behaviours and social attitudes from an Aboriginal perspective. He believes that “[i]t’s important to say some politically contentious things because I think that people really want to hear you say it– to say out loud what they are actually thinking– it’s important not to be afraid to do this.”²²²⁵

²²¹⁸ Taylor, A., 18/11/2014.

²²¹⁹ Seirlis, J. K., 2011, ‘Laughing all the way to freedom? Contemporary stand-up comedy and democracy in South Africa’, *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, 24(4), p. 514.

²²²⁰ Seirlis, J. K., 2011, pp. 513–514.

²²²¹ Austin, K., 07/04/2013, Op. Cit.

²²²² Chafe, W., 2007, Op. Cit., p.73.

²²²³ Chafe, W., 2007, pp. 137–138.

²²²⁴ Chafe, W., 2007, p. 137.

²²²⁵ Saunderson, A., to K. Austin, 29/05/2015, personal communication.

Additionally, he jokingly suggests that he is writing a musical parody of The Pussycat Dolls' song *Don't Cha* with the lines: '*Don't cha wish the PM was not Tony*', humorously expressing disdain for the then current Prime Minister.²²²⁶ In the guise of his (WhiteBLACKatya) Aboriginal character, Frankie Jackson, Saunders had previously created a parody of pop-group 'One Direction's' song *What Makes You Beautiful* with his own *Coz I'm Aboriginal*.²²²⁷ This film-clip humorously reveals the everyday racism faced by Aboriginal people, like Jackson, in a supermarket as he attempts to purchase devon and tomato sauce for his 'signature dish' sandwiches; it has become a popular internet site.²²²⁸ Saunders can be seen again testing the boundaries of social acceptability, mocking political issues and racism, albeit without too aggressive or an accusatory undertone. He directly challenges non-Indigenous audiences on controversial matters that go to the heart of contentious Indigenous/Non-Indigenous Australian relationships, bigotry and injustice. He believes that it is important to make an audience trust you as a performer.²²²⁹ If they like and trust you, "*you can take them almost anywhere*."²²³⁰

13. SUMMARY OF THE HUMOUR TECHNIQUES IN ABORIGINAL STAND-UP

From this admittedly limited survey of current Indigenous standup comedy, it appears that physical comedy and mimicry are amongst the most significant humour techniques found. Self-deprecation seems to be a further important aspect of routines, that include some self-duplicating laughter at Aboriginal people themselves.²²³¹ Self-deprecation is certainly more obvious in stand-up than it is in current theatre humour; however, this introspective humour quickly turns into mickey-taking of majority 'white' Australians, an important element of theatre comedy too. Yarning techniques that soften social commentary are also present, although black humour is not as recognisable as it is in Aboriginal drama. Additionally, witty wordplay, also present intermittently, seems less significant to stand-up than it does to the current theatrical performances reviewed in the previous chapter.

As in theatrical humour, topics of socio-political importance to Indigenous people remain the dominant themes of most jokes and yarns. It is this political function of much Indigenous comedy that provides it with strong interdisciplinary connections across artistic boundaries and gives it a distinctive Indigenous Australian nature. Indigenous stand-up, like theatrical comedy, allows Indigenous artists to voice publically their current socio-political observations and criticisms, providing their own opinions to mainstream discourse in various humorous ways and to varying degrees of intensity.

²²²⁶ Taylor, A., 18/11/2014, Op. Cit.

²²²⁷ WhiteBLACKatya, 23/12/2012, *Cos I'm Aboriginal*, at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Dbkvoj6SC0w>>, viewed 24/05/2014.

²²²⁸ Known in South Australia as 'fritz and sauce sandwiches' they are iconic Australian working class cuisine! See online at: <<http://allrecipes.com.au/recipe/22442/fritz-and-sauce-sandwich.aspx>>, viewed 28/08/2015. WhiteBLACKatya, 23/12/2012, Op. Cit.

²²²⁹ Saunders, A. to K. Austin, 29/05/2015, Op. Cit.

²²³⁰ Saunders, A. to K. Austin, 29/05/2015.

²²³¹ Oshima, K., 2000, Op. Cit., p. 41.

14. ARE THERE UNDERLYING PURPOSES TO ABORIGINAL STAND-UP?

Regardless of the intensity of social criticism, there is an inclination in Aboriginal stand-up comedy to focus on differences between Indigenous and non-Indigenous Australians, often using mocking stereotypes to raise incongruence within relationships, and to challenge majority assumptions and mis-conceptions about Indigenous cultures, celebrating the things that make Indigenous cultures distinctive. These are certainly recognisable, ongoing, topics and forms found across much contemporary Aboriginal live performance.

Mintz argues that the final stage in the continuum of minority group humour relates to this; where a traditionally oppressed minority obtains ‘revenge’ on a majority culture via a form of reverse racism – assailing them with humorous hostility.²²³² This revenge deflects the history of mockery against them with a form of ‘ritualistic punishment’ that serves to inflict symbolic violence and asserts superiority.²²³³

Lillis says that the ideal final step in the development of the comedy of Indigenous people relates to when... ‘an Aboriginal comedian tells humorous stories and jokes... and the material isn’t necessarily pro-black or anti-white – it’s just funny.’²²³⁴ Though Lillis’ ideal is admirable, is this something that should be expected from contemporary Aboriginal Australian stand-up comedians? Are they (or even, should they be) in a position to move beyond Aboriginal material simply to matters of more universal appeal?

Ultimately the answers to such questions are best left up to Aboriginal people themselves to decide; but humour is frequently touted as a key indicator of our national identity, reflective of social attitudes and priorities.²²³⁵ It marks cultural boundaries of national identity that reflect the typical configuration of attitudes and norms found in mainstream Australian society.²²³⁶ Aboriginal comedy should therefore be considered in the light of its position in Australia’s broader humour identity and ongoing socio-political relationship with mainstream.

Moreover, Park et al. suggest that race-based joking is more acceptable when made by ethnic minorities who have experienced negative racial stereotyping themselves.²²³⁷ Aboriginal comedians bring a level of cultural authority/acceptability to comedy performances, as members of cultures who have experienced denigration first-hand; whereas the same (stereotyped) jokes told by non-Indigenous comedians are more

²²³² Mintz, L., 1977, ‘Jewish Humor: A Continuum of Sources, Motives and Functions’, *American Humor*, v.4 (Spring 1977), p. 4. Boskin, J., & J. Dorinson, 1985, Op. Cit. p. 88.

²²³³ Mintz, L., 1977, Op. Cit., p. 4. Boskin, J & J Dorinson, 1985, p. 88.

²²³⁴ Lillis, R., 2007, ‘Black Comedy, Indigenous Humour in Australia and New Zealand’, *Metro*, 155, p. 77.

²²³⁵ Rainbird, M., 2004, ‘Humour, Multiculturalism and Political Correctness’, referred paper presented to the Australasian Political Studies Association Conference, University of Adelaide, 29/09–01/10/2000, p. 2.

²²³⁶ Jones, D., 1997, ‘Setting Limits: Humour and Australian National Identity’, *Australian Journal of Comedy*, p. 35. Milner-Davis, J., 2009, ‘Aussie humour and laughter: Joking as an acculturating ritual’ in De Groen, F., & P. Kirkpatrick, 2009, *Serious Frolic, Essays on Australian Humour*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, QLD, p. 31, p. 33.

²²³⁷ Park, J., Gabbadon, N. & A. Chernin, 2006, Op. Cit., p. 167.

readily interpreted as acts of racism given the historical stigma of white oppression.²²³⁸ Such findings highlight an important point about the legitimacy of current humour performed by Aboriginal people. Lillis' ideal that these comedians should move on from their race-centered topics is rendered rather obsolete in light of mis-information and the strength of Anglo-Australian identity located in so much Australian humour that denies the legitimacy of their differences. In fact Kropinyeri says that once a non-Indigenous person told him to stop doing so many Aboriginal-themed jokes.²²³⁹ In response, he said:

But I am from an Aboriginal community, I have Aboriginal parents and I grew up with Aboriginal people all my life [sic], it's who I am.

Aboriginal comedians present their own personal observations and experiences of living in this nation. Their presence and cultural authority makes their humour a powerful tool in educating white audiences in the current realities of life for Aboriginal people in this nation.

Additionally, their use of race-based humour shows mainstream audiences that Aboriginal people can laugh at themselves, and then let issues go.²²⁴⁰ Their self-deprecation reveals people who can see the funny side of some socially distasteful, embarrassing situations;²²⁴¹ and puts Aboriginal comedians in a better position to laugh at the dominant culture because of it. Their humour is a 'lubricant', oiling communications with mainstream audiences.²²⁴² Aboriginal stand-ups are indeed authoritative 'cultural anthropologists' performing in a more socially accepting (comedy) space in which they can raise contentious and disdainful issues that may induce hostility and defensiveness in others.²²⁴³

Even those humour scholars who acknowledge positive attributes of (racially) disparaging humour also recognise its potential dangers. Cundall points out that 'it is important to be aware of one's surroundings', to recognise the context in which this humour is generated because it may have 'serious consequences', causing offence, most especially if it occurs outside in-group boundaries.²²⁴⁴ Cohen cautions, just because you can't easily prove whether something is immoral, doesn't mean that you have to like it!²²⁴⁵ And Neu notes that '[w]ords are what matter'— they can be sharper than any sword, cutting at cultural dignity and self-worth.²²⁴⁶

In the end, stereotypes are dehumanising. Stereotype comedy can be problematic, rendering racism natural and dissuading critical engagement.²²⁴⁷ When we encourage negative generalisations in humour, on the one hand, we mitigate qualities about that group that rob us of our compassionate perspective. On the other, we

²²³⁸ Park, J., Gabbadon, N. & A. Chernin, 2006, p. 167.

²²³⁹ SBS2, 27/04/2014, 'Standup @ The Bella Union: Kevin Kropinyeri Extended Interview Part 3', Op. Cit.

²²⁴⁰ Holt, L., 2009, Op. Cit., p. 83.

²²⁴¹ Kotthoff, H., 2000, Op. Cit., p. 62, p. 74.

²²⁴² Oshima, K., 2000, Op. Cit., p. 41.

²²⁴³ Boskin, J., & J. Dorinson, 1985, Op. Cit, pp. 94–95.

²²⁴⁴ Cundall, M., 2012, Op. Cit, p. 174.

²²⁴⁵ Cohen, T., 1999, Op. Cit, p. 83.

²²⁴⁶ Neu, J., 2008, Op. Cit, p. 58, p. 269.

²²⁴⁷ Park, J., Gabbadon, N. & A. Chernin, 2006, Op. Cit, pp. 173–174.

allow for cathartic release and open acknowledgement of social issues. Here we hit the morally grey area where comedy sits. It is comedy's authorship and context that give us a helpful yard-stick in which to measure its appropriateness. By owning and acknowledging their frailties, as well as positive attributes, Aboriginal comedians gives us more balanced perspectives on themselves and their communities. And the best comedy manages to do just this.

15. CONCLUSION

The biggest problem with negative humour about Aboriginal people is not that it exists, but that so many Australian people like and support it.²²⁴⁸ To counter this, avenues like *Deadly Funny* allow Aboriginal people to project their own distinctive identities in the mainstream, challenging unquestioned beliefs and revealing their cultures' complexities with the power of their comedic words.

It is something of a double-edged sword that Aboriginal stand-up comedians probably feel that they have to be honourable cultural ambassadors too, on public display for their people.²²⁴⁹ However, as numbers of Indigenous comedians increase, making a stronger mark on mainstream Australian comedy, hopefully the burden of this responsibility will diminish. In fact, although specific Aboriginal issues are still mostly canvassed in performances, this is not now always the case. The 2014 *Deadly Funny* showcase was an all-female line-up for the very first time.²²⁵⁰ Winner, 21 year old Stephanie Tidswell, gave a routine of funny observances about soap, car parts, breasts, and men, without referencing classical Aboriginal issues. She is reflective of young Indigenous comedians who don't necessarily feel the need to assert their Aboriginal identity continuously throughout their set. This confidence will only increase as Indigenous people strengthen their positions of authority and legitimacy in bastions of mainstream culture like MICF. Yet the potential for waning popularity, as felt by Stanford when she moved away from Indigenous issues, is a constant peril. Audiences, both black and white, will need to accustom themselves to the diversity of materials that Aboriginal comedians will inevitably produce. The most important thing is not necessarily the material, it is the fact that finally Australia is beginning to offer Aboriginal people the opportunities to create and sustain their own comedy, in which ever way they choose to perform it. And the growing acceptance of Aboriginal humour within the mainstream signifies a social shift on the part of the dominant culture away from disdain to one of commonality with Aboriginal people and shared laughter. Greater diversity in public performance arenas is an important. It brings a richness to Australia's limited cultural identity, creating what Putnam calls ... 'a new, broader sense of 'we'' with greater social appreciation, inclusivity and a more cohesive shared world view.²²⁵¹

²²⁴⁸ Lillis, R., 2007, 'Black comedy: Indigenous Humour in Australian and New Zealand', *Metro Magazine: Media & Education Magazine*, No. 155, p. 78.

²²⁴⁹ This idea that Aboriginal stand-up comedians are in part cultural representatives for all Aboriginal people, and with a need to support other fledgling Aboriginal artists in their performances, is seen most pointedly in the shows of two of the most established Indigenous stand-ups, Sean Choolburra and Kevin Kropinyeri as discussed previously in this chapter.

²²⁵⁰ Bennett, S., 04/04/2014, 'Deadly funny ladies to shine at Comedy Festival', *Herald Sun*, Victoria at: <<http://www.heraldsun.com.au/entertainment/comedy-festival/deadly-funny-ladies-to-shine-at-comedy-festival/story-fni0fdi2-1226874845099>>, viewed 13/01/2015.

²²⁵¹ Putnam, R., 2007, p. 139.

OVERALL CONCLUSION

*[W]e only become what we are by the radical and deep-seated refusal of that which others have made of us.*²²⁵²

Jean-Paul Sartre

A PROLOGUE

In his preface to Fanon's classical diagnosis of the failure of European colonialism, Sartre recognises an arrogant western superiority that has systematically sought to 'dehumanise' native people around the world.²²⁵³ This includes what Sartre calls colonialism's 'psychological services' that have cemented stereotypes of Indigenous people in settler imaginations, 'white-washing' and destroying their languages and cultural practices.²²⁵⁴

whether he's black, yellow or white, always the same traits of character: he's a sly-boots, a lazybones and a thief, who lives on nothing, and who understands only violence.²²⁵⁵

This thesis has shown how in Australia's mainstream, humour has played a significant role in supporting this imperialist psychological 'disease', creating and sustaining negative images of Aboriginal people in visual and verbal cartoons and jokes.

Fanon's essay radically argues that native people must 'cure' themselves of their 'colonial neuroses'²²⁵⁶ by thrusting the settler out through (violent) revolution.²²⁵⁷ In a less extreme manner than that proposed by Fanon, this thesis recognises that today comedy is one of the weapons in Indigenous people's armament that serves a similar curative purpose to revolution. Humour allows Indigenous Australians to fight back against 'deep-seated' negative stereotypes, helping them to refute the mainstream's devaluing of their cultural significance to the nation.

B OVERVIEW AND FINDINGS REGARDING THE NATURE & PURPOSE OF INDIGENOUS HUMOUR

Initially this thesis discusses some of the noteworthy forms of humour used by Indigenous people within more traditional communities and ties them to the major academic humour theories about the nature and

²²⁵² Sartre, JP., [1961] 1978, 'Preface' to Fanon, F. [1961] 1978, *The Wretched of the Earth*, Penguin Books Ltd., Harmondsworth, Middlesex, England and New York, USA, p. 15.

²²⁵³ Sartre, JP., [1961] 1978, pp. 7–26, esp. P. 13.

²²⁵⁴ Sartre, JP., [1961] 1978, p. 7, p. 13.

²²⁵⁵ Sartre, JP., [1961] 1978, p. 14.

²²⁵⁶ Sartre, JP., [1961] 1978, p. 18.

²²⁵⁷ Fanon, F. [1961] 1978, Op. Cit., 'Concerning Violence', pp. 27–74.

purposes of humour – superiority, incongruity and relief/release. Superiority theories can see humour as a social tool of correction that motivates people into conforming behaviour by the public embarrassment that it can inspire. Incongruity theories recognise cerebral pleasure in the discordant and surprising elements of humour; whereas relief theories focus on the physiological release and emotional respite that humour can generate.

The historical examples of humour produced by Aboriginal people and discussed in this thesis point to some of the more common forms and functions of humour traditionally used by Aboriginal people in tight-knit communities. These include the use of humorous verse in songs and stories that taught community laws and mocked transgressions to help define social customs, expectations, and to enhance community cohesion.²²⁵⁸ Humour can often be seen to be used in a superiority manner, policing the cultural boundaries of communities.²²⁵⁹

Humour is also seen in performances that serve social, legal and religious purposes.²²⁶⁰ Physical humour and mimicry are part of complex performance rituals followed at such times as initiation, in worship, and in other community situations.²²⁶¹ Humour in movements, gestures and expressions can take communications beyond language limitations to the essence of issues and to the commonality of shared experiences.²²⁶² Traditionally, community responses to performances were collaborative expression of emotions that allowed for both group and individual expression of emotions, uniting performers and audience in the tension release of public productions.²²⁶³

Although some early examples of Indigenous people mocking and imitating British colonists exist,²²⁶⁴ colonialism challenged and changed the nature of traditional Indigenous social structures and practices. Humour was (and still is) used by the dominant culture to belittle and dismiss Indigenous subjectivities, pitting them as the alien ‘other’ in the face of the western customs and behaviours. Making fun of alternative behaviours is a way that dominant social groups clarify social boundaries and impose disciplinary measures on those who deviate from the mainstream status quo.²²⁶⁵ In Australia mickey-taking humour has been central to such conforming socialisation.²²⁶⁶ Historically many jokes and cartoons produced by Anglo-Australians have taken the mickey out of Indigenous people, creating negative stereotypes that remain fixed in Australia’s national imagination. Even in more recent times this mickey-

²²⁵⁸ See the ‘love songs’ recorded by R. & C. Berndt. Berndt, R., 1976, *Love Songs of Arnhem Land*, Thomas Nelson (Australia) Ltd., Melbourne.

²²⁵⁹ Bergson, H., 2005, [1911], *Laughter An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic*, (trans. Brereton, C & F. Rothwell), Dover Publications, Inc., Mineola, New York, pp. 9–11.

²²⁶⁰ Berndt, R., 1976, *Love Songs of Arnhem Land*, Thomas Nelson (Australia) Ltd., p.12.

²²⁶¹ Strehlow, T.G.H., 1971, Op. Cit., p. 679.

²²⁶² Billig, M., *Laughter and Ridicule, Towards a Social Critique of Humour*, Sage Publications, London, UK, pp. 136–137.

²²⁶³ Strehlow, T.G.H., 1971, Op. Cit., 408.

²²⁶⁴ Clendinnen, I., 2003, *Dancing with Strangers*, Text Publishing, Melbourne, pp. 202–203.

²²⁶⁵ Davies, C., 1982, ‘Ethnic Jokes, Moral Values and Social Boundaries’ in *The British Journal of Sociology*, v. 33(3), p. 383.

²²⁶⁶ Milner-Davis, J., 2009, ‘Aussie humour and laughter: Joking as an acculturating ritual’ in De Groen, F., & P. Kirkpatrick, (eds.), 2009, *Serious Frolic, Essays on Australian Humour*, University of Queensland Press, St Lucia, Queensland, p. 32, p.

taking disparagement is still often expressed by humorous means. Australia has supported the careers of some long-standing ocker comedians who have each dedicated a portion of their work to perpetuating poor Indigenous stereotypes. This thesis discusses the complex role that humour plays in limiting and defining Indigenous people and how it helps to sustain Australia's cultural identity that is often seen as Anglo-centric, aggressive, offensive and racially intolerant.²²⁶⁷

While academic debate surrounds the benefits of negative (racist) humour, in relation to Indigenous Australians it can be a way for non-Indigenous people to vent their frustrations about them in a socially permissible and safe play environment.²²⁶⁸ Additionally, it cannot be proven that disparaging jokes cause their targets any 'real harm'.²²⁶⁹ Racial stereotypes and satire can raise public awareness about certain social hypocrisies and injustices.²²⁷⁰ In Australia racial humour is often used as defiance to 'moralising' socio-political and legal restrictions that attempt to curtail freedom of speech in the name of 'political correctness' – which is an ambiguous and disputed term.²²⁷¹

These types of justifications of the potential benefits of racist humour have long served to sustain a non-Indigenous humour identity in Australia; however, disparaging racial humour about Indigenous people neglects to acknowledge the long history of injustice and abuse faced by them in this country and the legitimacy of their experiences.²²⁷² Denigrating humour can further marginalise already disadvantaged people by supporting an exclusionary status quo and justifying a limited Anglo-centered nationalism.²²⁷³ But most significantly, negative humour about Indigenous Australians helps to sustain an uncritical tolerance of discrimination that sees racism as 'an implicit injunctive norm', especially for people who might already be racially prejudiced.²²⁷⁴

The greater role that Aboriginal Australians have forged for themselves within Australia's cultural environment is one of the ways in which they are countering mainstream exclusionary tendencies. Especially from the late 1960s, and in line with modern political activism, Aboriginal people began to reclaim their own subjectivities, often using humour in public artistic expressions, to 'strike-back',²²⁷⁵

²²⁶⁷ Milner-Davis, J., 2009, Op. Cit., p. 32, p. 37.

²²⁶⁸ Gruner, C., 1997, *The Game of Humor – A Comprehensive Theory of Why We Laugh*, Transaction Publishers, New Jersey, USA, pp. 18–19.

²²⁶⁹ Cohen, T., 1999, *Jokes: Philosophical thoughts on joking matters*, University of Chicago Press, Chicago, USA, p. 162.

²²⁷⁰ Cundall, M., 2012, 'Towards a better understanding of racist and ethnic humor', *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, 25(2), Berlin, Germany, p. 174.

²²⁷¹ Smilovici, G., 1996, 'Comedy and Political Correctness– Are they compatible?' *Australian Journal of Comedy*, v. 2(1), Melbourne, Victoria p. 16. Hughes, C., 2010, 'Defining Political Correctness', *Political Correctness: A History of Semantic and Culture*.

²²⁷² Rainbird, M., 2004, 'Humour Multiculturalism and Political Correctness'. Refereed paper presented to the *Australasian Political Studies Association Conference*, University of Adelaide 29/09/2004 – 01/10/2004, Adelaide, South Australia, p. 12.

²²⁷³ Due, C., 2011, 'Aussie Humour or Racism? Hey Hey It's Saturday and the Denial of Racism in Online Responses to News Media Articles', *PLATFORM: Journal of Media and Communication* v.3 (1)(March), pp. 38–41.

²²⁷⁴ Ford, T., & M. Ferguson, 2004, 'Social Consequences of Disparagement Humor: A Prejudiced Norm Theory', *Personality and Social Psychology Review*, 2004, v. 8/1, p. 84.

²²⁷⁵ In 1987 a diverse group of Indigenous artists formed an Arts cooperative in Sydney that they called 'Boomalli' in order to support each other in their (political) urban artistic endeavours. Boomalli means 'to strike, to make a mark, to fight back, to light

telling their own stories of injustice and inequality to the mainstream's audiences. Today, innovative theatre and stand-up comedy provide exciting avenues through which Aboriginal artists perform their 'revolutionary' comedic works, continuing this modern tradition of using humour in their fights to be heard in Australia's mainstream.

Although generalisations about the humour forms used in these Indigenous performances, are just that – generalisations, this thesis suggests that some of the techniques located in traditional Indigenous performances can be seen as recognisable techniques still in use in contemporary Indigenous performances. Mimicry and other forms of physical comedy are important humour techniques found in both theatrical and stand-up comedy performances today. These humour styles continue to reference humour's incongruous nature where physical imitation can surprise and challenge our understanding of social norms and beliefs.²²⁷⁶ Amiable story-telling techniques also remain recognisable humour devices. Yarning sets up a direct rapport between Indigenous performers and audiences in order for them to tell stories that combine the use of humour with other sombre issues. Humorous yarns provide cathartic relief; they allow Indigenous artists to say things to non-Indigenous audiences that might otherwise be considered socially threatening and judgmental.²²⁷⁷ Yarns challenge non-Indigenous audiences to consider and sympathise with Indigenous experiences that include injustice, racism and violence whilst reinforcing camaraderie and group identification amongst Indigenous people.²²⁷⁸ Additionally, superiority styled mickey-taking that functions as an acculturating device to quash pretensions and reconfirm Indigenous cultural authority can still be seen in many Indigenous humour performances. This technique connects Indigenous artists' humour to their positions as members of a colonised nation, reflecting a humour technique that is readily recognised within the mainstream.

Common Aboriginal humour techniques also include the reclamation of racist terms; as well as the liberal use of Aboriginal and Aboriginal English words and phrases that help give legitimacy and authenticity to their performances. Black humour is another recognisable technique of Aboriginal theatre from the 1970s, although it is less apparent in contemporary performances. It has been used by Aboriginal artists to help make light of socially tragic issues pertaining to Aboriginality including alcoholism, criminality and sexual promiscuity. Making humour out of taboo subject matter can produce an affirming 'existential' outlook that helps audiences to see that Aboriginal people are well aware of their communities' own problems.²²⁷⁹ Self-deprecating and self-duplicating humour are important recent humour techniques found more in contemporary stand-up performances than in theatre. These techniques tie Aboriginal humour to the

up' in the languages of the Kamilaroi, Wiradjuri and Bundjalung of NSW; See online: Boomalli Aboriginal Artists Cooperative, nd., 'History', online at: <<http://www.boomalli.com.au/history.html>>, viewed 17/5/2013.

²²⁷⁶ Keith-Spiegel, P., 1972, 'Early Conceptions of Humor: Varieties and Issues in the Psychology of Humor', in Goldstein, J., & P. McGhee (eds.), 1972, *The Psychology of Humor*, Academic Press Inc., New York, p. 7.

²²⁷⁷ Billig, M., 2005, *Laughter and Ridicule. Towards a Social Critique of Humour*, Sage Publications, London, UK, pp. 123–124.

²²⁷⁸ Billig, M., 2005, pp. 123–124.

²²⁷⁹ O'Neil, P., 1983, 'The Comedy of Entropy: The Contexts of Black Humour', *Canadian Review of Comparative Literature*, vol. 10/2, pp. 157–158. Online at: <<https://ejournals.library.ualberta.ca/index.php/crcj/article/view/2606/2001>>, viewed 09/09/2014.

humour used by other world ethnic minorities.²²⁸⁰ On the surface these techniques could be considered self-defiling; yet current literature on ethnic minority humorists actually considered this an important and positive identity marker.²²⁸¹ This humour is a way for Aboriginal comedians to show mainstream audiences that they have a healthy sense of humour, being able to laugh at themselves.²²⁸² Ethnic groups know themselves so much better than outsiders ever could and therefore they are able to produce the best kind of self-critical humour.²²⁸³

However, what really sets Indigenous performance humour apart from other humour forms found in use in Australia are its political aims that focus on changing the perceptions of Indigenous people within the nation. Socio-political topics dominate much Indigenous performance humour in theatre and in stand-up comedy, enabling Indigenous artists to draw awareness to issues that they deem important. It is the unique mix of recognisably common forms of humour in conjunction with specific political purposes that makes Indigenous humour such a distinctive aspect of Australia's humour identity.

Humour is an important aspect of Australia's popular culture and the popularity of comedy events like Melbourne's International Comedy Festival attest to this. Moreover, comedy performances have become excellent avenues for the expression of Australia's greater social heterogeneity. At times Aboriginal comedy traits readily parallel those forms of humour found within the mainstream, revealing how far Aboriginal people have moved towards greater social inclusion and acceptance in the nation. While this greater embeddedness occurs at the expense of the more collaborative expressions of humour, recognised in early Aboriginal humour examples, on balance this loss of its communal nature can be considered a good thing for Aboriginal people. It allows for increased engagement with mainstream audiences, in turn, strengthening bonds of 'reciprocity and trustworthiness' amongst historically misaligned groups.²²⁸⁴ Greater diversity in Australia's cultural environments can increase a shared world view amongst people and broaden its sense of social inclusion, producing a more unified sense of identity.²²⁸⁵

C A FINAL NOTE

Recently, Wiradjuri media reporter and social commentator Stan Grant asked mainstream Australians to stop and to ask some important questions of themselves, such as: *Who are we?* and *What sort of country*

²²⁸⁰ Lynch-Morris, A., 2010, 'Native American Stand-Up Comedy: Epideictic Strategies in the Contact Zone', *Rhetoric Review*, 30(1). Oshima, K., 2000, 'Ethnic jokes and social function in Hawi'i', *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, De Gruyter Mouton, Berlin.

²²⁸¹ Ellithorpe, M. et al, 2014, 'Putting the "self" in self-deprecation: When deprecating humor about minorities is acceptable', *Humor: International Journal of Humor Research*, De Gruyter Mouton, Berlin, pp. 401–422; Oshima, K., 2000, Op. Cit., pp. 41–57.

²²⁸² Oshima, K., 2000, Op. Cit., pp. 52–53.

²²⁸³ Freud, S., [1905] 2002, *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious*, Crick, J., (trans.), Penguin Books, London, UK, pp. 108–109.

²²⁸⁴ Putnam, R., 2007, 'E Pluribus Unum: Diversity and Community in the Twenty-first Century.' The 2006 Johan Skytte Prize Lecture, *Scandinavian Political Studies*, vol. 30/2, p. 137.

²²⁸⁵ Putnam, R., 2007, pp. 138–139.

*do we want to be seen as?*²²⁸⁶ Grant argues that in Australia these fundamental identity questions continue to be answered by acts of racism that tell Aboriginal people that they are not welcome citizens.²²⁸⁷ A good deal of humour in Australia bears out Grant's position, telling Aboriginal Australians that they are not valued citizens by means of mockery and the perpetuation of negative stereotypes. Nonetheless, this thesis shows that humour can also be a tool for positive change.

The use of humour is one of the ways that Indigenous Australians attempt to challenge Australia's mainstream socio-political discourse, increasingly on terms that they create for themselves. By humorous means Indigenous artists have especially used their public performances to challenge non-Indigenous audiences to consider matters from their perspectives. This is particularly important in a country that prizes humour as a means of incorporating people into its cultural ideologies.²²⁸⁸

Overall greater recognition of Aboriginal Australians' ongoing contributions to our national humour identity helps to support change towards a more diverse national culture and inclusive identity, diluting racist trends. Moreover, as Aboriginal comedians become more recognised and esteemed within the mainstream, their publically voiced socio-political observations will be more widely recognised as positive symbols of the need for greater racial tolerance and complexity of opinions. Lui says that humour is Aboriginal people's most powerful tool when it comes to creating social change because if you can get someone to laugh with you, you can get them to care about you.²²⁸⁹ And caring about someone, she believes, is the first step to getting people to care about your stories.²²⁹⁰ Indigenous Australian people use humour as a way of convincing non-Indigenous people to listen to and respect their cultural contributions to Australia's national discourse. Optimistically this dissertation ends in hope that one day all Australians might feel that they can appreciate the nuances of a shared humour tradition that owes much of its character to the contributions made to it by Aboriginal Australians.

²²⁸⁶ Grant, S., (27/10/2015) 19/01/2016, 'Grant's speech arguing for the statement: Racism is Destroying the Australian Dream', *IQ2 Racism Debate*, The Ethics Centre, Sydney, Australia. Grant's speech can be heard on Youtube at: <<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uEOssW1rw0I>> viewed 20/03/2016.

²²⁸⁷ Grant, S., (27/10/2015) 19/01/2016.

²²⁸⁸ Milner-Davis, J., 2009, *Op. Cit.*, pp. 31–47.

²²⁸⁹ Lui, N., to Shafter, M., 26/04/2016, 'Interview of Nakkiah Lui on 7.30 Report', *ABC Television*, Sydney, Australia.

²²⁹⁰ Lui, N. to Shafter, M., 26/04/2016.

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