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Creative Indigenous Self-Representation in Humorous Australian Popular Culture as a Vital Communication Channel for Refiguring Public Opinion

Introduction

There are countless narratives that have contributed in a myriad of ways to promoting the cause of Indigenous social justice in Australia. Aboriginal autobiographies such as Sally Morgan's *My Place* (1987) and Doris Pilkington's *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* (1996), for example, try to rectify traditional settler myths according to which the country's history began when James Cook claimed it for the British crown. Novels by non-Indigenous Australians – like David Malouf's *Remembering Babylon* (1993) and Andrew McGahan's *The White Earth* (2004) – on the other hand, critically deal with the psychological set-up of the white community both in the past and today. Some Indigenous novels (such as Alexis Wright's award-winning *Carpentaria* [2006]) have also broken into the public consciousness. However, it is clear that such prose narratives only reach a specific audience, unlike more popular cultural forms such as film and television that are easily accessible and widely discussed.[1] Increasingly, films about Indigenous history and questions of social justice have been created to appeal to a wider audience, including *Rabbit Proof Fence* (2002), *Bran Nue Dae* (2010), and *The Sapphires* (2012), and the new free-to-air television channel NITV (National Indigenous Television) was launched in December 2012, showcasing Indigenous films, documentaries and children's shows.

Yet negative stereotypes and constricting policies affecting Indigenous Australians have not improved over the past few decades, resulting in increased poverty in Indigenous communities and huge polarisation in the public eye around questions of race, entitlement and reparations for past injustices, despite Prime Minister Kevin Rudd's national apology in 2008.[2] Thus we would like to highlight the continuing vital importance of popular culture in Australia (and particularly those cultural productes created by and representing Indigenous Australians) for providing a channel through which post-colonial social justice issues such as racism and Indigenous socioeconomic inequality can be explored in ways that not only explore injustices of the past and the presentation of suppressed perspectives, but also creatively mobilise laughter, compassion and the overturning of popular expectations in order to destabilise old prejudices and construct new relationships between the settler culture and Indigenous Australians. Popular culture has an invaluable role to play in Australian society due to its capacity to communicate across a variety of platforms to large audiences, and to entertain while at the same time educating, provoking discussion and presenting alternative solutions.

[1] See Sally Morgan, *My Place* (London: Virago, 1988); Doris Pilkington, *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence* (Queensland: University of Queensland Press, 1996); David Malouf, *Remembering Babylon* (London: Vintage, 1994); Andrew McGahan, *The White Earth* (New York: Soho, 2006); and Alexis Wright, *Carpentaria* (Artarmon: Giramondo, 2006). For a discussion on the merits of literary and popular culture in post-colonial contexts see Bill Ashcroft, *Post-Colonial Transformation* (London: Routledge, 2001), 216-217.

[2] See "A Statistical Overview of Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander Peoples in Australia: Social Justice Report 2008", *Australian Human Rights Commission* (2008), http://www.humanrights.gov.au/publications/statistical-overview-aboriginal-and-torres-strait-islander-peoples-australia-social, 24 August 2013; and Kerryn Pholi, Dan Black and Craig Richards, "Is 'Close the Gap' a Useful Approach to Improving the Health and Wellbeing of Indigenous Australians?", *Australian Review of Public Affairs*, 9.2 (2009), 1-13, http://australianreview.net/journal/v9/n2/pholi_etal.pdf, 28 July 2013.

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Employing the lens of post-colonial humour theory,[3] we will use humorous examples from popular culture created by Indigenous Australians, such as the Chooky Dancers' 2007 YouTube video "Zorba the Greek Yolngu Style" as well as their 2009 performance at the Melbourne International Comedy Festival, and the internationally-selling mockumentary *Bush Mechanics* (2001), to show that such cultural productions appropriate the space of popular media, reconfiguring the perspectives through which Indigenous people are represented in the popular mind. Creativity in this case evokes a sense of creating new relationships between common concepts of Indigeneity and other ideas of identity, history and humanity, as well as deconstructing the established associations between Indigeneity and poverty, health inequality, land rights, and public resources, which are still being debated in Australia.

Humour and laughter have long been explored by academics who attempt to explain its significance as, for instance, an expression of superiority over another person or group, as resulting from an incongruous or unexpected comparison, as a source of satire and criticism, or as a form of cathartic release.[4] We believe that humour contains all of these functions and more, but most importantly for our purposes we wish to explore the potentiality of humour as a tool for self-reflection and transformation, in that laughter forces one to confront one's own prejudices and expectations, while also opening an entertaining yet critical conceptual space for communicating alternative visions of reality. Humour can be seen as a form of universal language; yet as Andrew Horton has shown, there are also culturally and locally unique forms of humour.[5] Specifically, this investigation will explore the role of humour in popular culture as a creative bridge between Indigenous Australian cultures and the broader Australian public.

Post-Colonial Creativity and Humour

An influential aspect of the Australian self-image is the idea that the nation shares a unique sense of humour. This is, of course, a problematic notion, as nations comprise many different groups and subsystems with different backgrounds and experiences. Even though it seems to be impossible to formally define 'Australian' humour, academics and social commentators have tried to come up with such a definition. In one scholarly collection on Australian humour, the editors acknowledge these difficulties, but also suggest that Australian humour might have to do with a kind of irony that expresses a people unable to control their destiny.[6] Essays in the book deal with humour as a strategy for coping with hardship; an expression of larrikinism or a way to subvert authority; a unifying device; a legacy of Australia's convict and working-class (settler) history; an expression of perceived egalitarianism; a reflection of masculine stereotypes that still pervade Australian culture; and a form of satire or criticism.

Perhaps all of these have their place in Australian culture(s). Yet for our purposes we wish to consider the *self-image* of Australian humour (and Indigenous

[3] For more on the relationships between post-colonial studies and humour theory, see Mark Stein and Susanne Reichl, eds., *Cheeky Fictions: Laughter and the Postcolonial* (Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2005). The classic Western theorists in the field of humour are Sigmund Freud and Henri Bergson: see Henri Bergson, *Laughter: An Essay on the Meaning of the Comic* (London: Macmillan & Co., [1900] 1911); and Sigmund Freud, *The Joke and Its Relation to the Unconscious* (London: Penguin, [1905] 2002).

[4] See, respectively, Antony J. Chapman, *Humour and Laughter: Theory, Research and Applications* (London: Wiley, 1976); Simon Critchley, *On Humour* (London: Routledge 2002); Paul Simpson, *On the Discourse of Satire: Towards a Stylistic Model of Satirical Humour* (Amsterdam: Benjamins, 2003); and Eric Weitz, *The Cambridge Introduction to Comedy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009).

[5] Andrew Horton, "Introduction", in Andrew Horton, ed., *Comedy/Cinema/Theory* (Berkeley: University of California Press 1991), 9.

[6] Fran de Groen and Peter Kirkpatrick, eds., *A Serious Frolic: Essays on Australian Humour* (St. Lucia: University of Queensland Press, 2009), xviii-xix.

humour) in Australian popular culture, for how a nation represents itself can be very telling. An Australian Government website describes Australian humour as "dry, full of extremes, anti-authoritarian, self-mocking and ironic",[7] and this is supported by articles on popular websites which identify Australia's convict history, among other things, as a probable source of this type of humour.[8] Regardless of how one understands Australian humour, it is pertinent to note that the topic of colonialism, and particularly the continuing oppression of Indigenous peoples over hundreds of years, is not a humorous topic. Nevertheless, humour when explored creatively might be a means of confronting the Australian past and present from a fresh perspective.

[7] Australian Government, *Australian Humour* (2007), http://australia.gov.au/about-australia/australian-story/austn-humour, 23 July 2013.

[8] See "Australian Comedy", *Wikipedia*, http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Australian_comedy, 6 April 2014; and "Australian Humour", *Convict Creations*, http://www.convictcreations.com/culture/comedy.htm, 6 April 2014.

Indigenous humour (as well as the Indigenous appropriation of Western comedic media) is particularly interesting for the ways in which it relates to national self-images. The case studies to follow will consider whether Indigenous Australian peoples appropriate and transform (or even expose as constructed) the Australian self-image of humour, or rather insert their own image onto the national self-perception, destabilising its centrality. Indigenous academic Lillian Holt argues in her study of Aboriginal humour that humour is significant for Aboriginal people because it forms not only as an aspect of their everyday culture but is even important for their survival.[9] She describes how once a non-Indigenous person approached her and suggested she make a documentary about Aboriginal humour, claiming that non-Indigenous viewers would find such a topic fascinating, as it is not something that they would commonly associate with Aboriginal people.[10] This suggestion shocked Holt, as in her experience humour was an integral part of Aboriginal culture.[11] She suggests that humour "is a brilliant vehicle for conveying those unpalatable truths that we all would prefer not to confront in ourselves", and that to her, humour may even have a role in alleviating racism or its effects.[12]

[9] Lillian Holt, "Aboriginal Humour: A Conversational Corroborree", in de Groen and Kirkpatrick, *A Serious Frolic*, 81.

[10] Ibid., 81-82.

[11] Ibid., 83.

[12] Ibid., 86.

Holt even entertains the possibility that "the most oppressed people have the best sense of humour", although she acknowledges that she does not know if this is true: her claim that Aboriginal humour is difficult to categorise and even to control will also inform our analysis, as will her suggestion that humour also highlights how "in our arrogance of all-knowing, all-controlling, all-defining, we are not always in command".[13] Thus we will not attempt to define Indigenous Australian humour, but rather explore its plural outputs in Aboriginal popular cultural representations, and especially its creative role in reorienting (largely non-Indigenous) audiences from positions of command to positions of exploration, negotiation and self-questioning.

[13] Ibid., 93.

In Australia, humour is an extremely effective cultural vessel for conveying a message or idea, partly due to the connotations of shared experience and 'Australianness' that using humour evokes. Although these connotations could also be seen as problematic because they play into a patriotic discourse, when in the hands of Indigenous Australians and other minority groups they can take on different meanings. We argue that humour makes one ask what exactly one is

laughing at and therefore provides a mirror which, more often than not, allows people to question their own ideas and to potentially detect sameness within difference.

The Chooky Dancers: The Parodic Transformation of Hegemony

The 2007 YouTube video "Zorba the Greek Yolngu Style" by the Chooky Dancers[14] shows how nine Yolngu dancers from Elcho Island in Australia's north, who wear traditional cloth and body paint, mimic and simultaneously subvert the sirtaki dance from the film *Zorba the Greek* (1964) – which is an extremely successful Western movie.[15] The Indigenous Australians perform a traditional-style dance at an evening disco in their hometown Galiwin'ku for an enthusiastic crowd of local onlookers, which is accompanied by a modern pop version of the film music composed by Mikis Theodorakis.

For Denise Varney, this performance presents "spectators with intelligent and articulate bodies whose movement vocabularies refuse the systematic dehumanisation and othering of Indigenous peoples by hegemonic white cultures".[16] The term 'spectators' here of course comprises different groups: the spectators in the YouTube video itself, that is, the local Indigenous people on Elcho Island who witnessed the first performance and laughed at their friends' and relatives' antics (and probably also the incongruity of the music with the dance, as well as the parodic element of the show), could be viewed as coming from a vastly different background and experience to the average YouTube spectator in Australia and overseas who would not know much about the young men or their circumstances living in such a remote place as Elcho Island. Yet what connects these spectators on both levels is laughter. Within weeks, the video had hundreds of thousands of hits online.

On the Chooky Dancers' website, the origin of the dance is explained as a tribute to a woman from Greece who cared for lead choreographer Lionel Dulmanawuy's sister. Dulmanawuy points out that such humorous dances are commonly included as part of the initiation ceremonies for youths: "[y]ou make up stupid dances and do them at the ceremony to make it more of a fun day for the young boy. *Zorba the Greek* is an extension of that".[17] This use of humour at an initiation ceremony may surprise non-Indigenous viewers who might initially view the video as a satire of non-Indigenous music and dance styles. Yet it also becomes apparent to non-Indigenous viewers that Aboriginal peoples creatively appropriate non-Indigenous cultures just as Western cultures appropriate local Australian Indigenous cultural products for touristic or economic purposes.

Varney is, however, quite critical of later televised performances of the same dance by the Chooky Dancers, including the performance at the 2009 Melbourne International Comedy Festival, which she sees as an example of "domestication and exploitation" in that such a performance "cynically reinstates the colonial stare at the other" as the Aboriginal dancers are "co-opted for white-controlled

[14] The Chooky Dancers, "Zorba the Greek Yolngu Style", *YouTube*, uploaded 20 October 2007, http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=O-MucVWo-Pw, 23 August 2013. The video can also be viewed on the Chooky Dancers' website, *The Chooky Dancers,* http://thechookydancers.com, 1 April 2014.

[15] The sirtaki is based on the *hasapiko* dance and is not a traditional Greek folk dance.

[16] Denise Varney, "New and Liquid Modernities in the Regions of Australia: Reading *Ngurrumilmarrmiriyu* [Wrong Skin]", *Australasian Drama Studies*, 58 (2011), 214. See her article for an informative analysis of the YouTube video, as well as her thoughts on a later theatre production which was in part inspired by the Zorba dance.

[17] Lionel Dulmanawuy, quoted in "History", *The Chooky Dancers*, http://thechookydancers.com/content/history/, 24 July 2013.

showcasing of Indigenous culture".[18] While it might be difficult to avoid the colonial stare in this case, one can also identify a certain element of critical reflection in the sense that non-Indigenous audiences may also feel the Indigenous gaze falling upon their own culture as a construction and stereotype, and thus we argue that both performances in fact constitute cultural practices which seek to undermine white hegemony as well as the Eurocentric narrative of modernity through the deliberate hybridisation of culture and the employment of a strategic utopianism.

The major difference between the 2007 and the 2009 performance is that the latter was specifically designed for a non-Indigenous audience – but as we will show in what follows, this does not necessarily lead to a relapse into the Othering of Indigenous Australians. In contrast to the earlier "Zorba the Greek Yolngu Style", the performance at the Comedy Festival begins with a traditional Yolngu dance, accompanied by a didgeridoo, music sticks, and singing. This 'Aboriginal' sequence may have a disorienting effect for non-Indigenous spectators who do not know what the dance moves, sounds and lyrics mean, whereas for the majority Australian population it is presumably a repetition of the touristic, mythical associations very often made with Indigenous peoples in media representations. This sequence is then followed by the Zorba dance, during the course of which the Aboriginal dancers mock and ridicule Western self-representations by mimicking and slightly exaggerating the sirtaki dance moves.[19]

For much of the audience, the Yolngu version of Zorba's dance has an estranging or defamiliarising effect; it notably makes the Western cultural heritage strange.[20] In contrast to Varney's argument that the context of later performances in commodified, Western public spaces such as galleries and on television weakened the parodic element to an extent that disempowered the performance,[21] we feel that in combination with the disorienting effect of the 'Aboriginal' beginning of the performance, the Zorba dance as televised from the Melbourne Comedy Festival indeed possesses a major function of parody in that it deconstructs the hierarchical relationship between Indigenous and white cultures. The Chooky Dancers demonstrate that cultural practices are always already strange, and in this sense, they are all located at the same level. The performance presents Indigenous and non-Indigenous cultures as being equal (or at least equally extraordinary). Perhaps this was not the original intention of the first performance, which was simply a creative, humorous appropriation of the sirtaki dance, but the dance has certainly moved beyond this purpose towards an influential frontier.[22] The Yolngu performance constitutes an example of cultural hybridity insofar as it creatively fuses Aboriginal and Western-European culture. It is neither one nor the other and thus both at the same time. Indeed, in the words of Homi K. Bhabha, the "interstitial passage between fixed identifications opens up the possibility of a cultural hybridity that entertains difference without an assumed or imposed hierarchy".[23]

The resulting humour of the second part of the performance clearly has to do with the incongruity of the previously unrelated styles of dancing, but more

[18] Varney, "New and Liquid Modernities", 218-19.

[19] The Zorba dance is thus a paradigmatic example of parody in Linda Hutcheon's understanding of the term. For Hutcheon, parody involves the playful transformation of tradition through mocking references to earlier styles. Linda Hutcheon, *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction* (New York: Routledge, 1988), 26 and 129.

[20] Viktor Shklovsky, "Art as Technique [1921]", in Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis, eds., *Russian Formalist Criticism* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1965), 12.

[21] Varney, "New and Liquid Modernities", 218.

[22] Varney acknowledges that the original YouTube performance already surpasses the performers' aims in that the self-representation of Indigenous identity functions to reinterpret Western culture while parodying it, however she argues that this is not the case for the subsequent televised performances (ibid., 218).

[23] Homi K. Bhabha, *The Location of Culture* (London: Routledge, 1994), 5.

interesting for our context is the popular reaction to this dance as Australians and viewers worldwide who find the video on YouTube are at first not sure whether it is acceptable to laugh while watching a dance performance by Indigenous Australians (given the violent history of Australia and the disadvantages Aborigines suffer today).[24] From our perspective, the Zorba dance does not invite the audience to laugh *at* the Yolngu performers; rather, it invites the spectators to laugh *with* the performers as they appropriate and mock dance moves from a Western film.

Both performances by the Chooky Dancers involve a strategic utopianism insofar as they project a situation in which the hegemony of Western cultures is subverted. These performances both speak from what Bhabha calls the "Third Space", an "in-between space" which "makes it possible to begin envisaging national, anti-nationalist histories of the 'people'".[25] And by exploring the Third Space, the Chooky Dancers deliberately elude the politics of polarity, which still dominates today's Australia. Furthermore, since the Chooky Dancers develop what Bill Ashcroft calls "hybridized cultural forms through the appropriation of those of Western modernity", they actively construct an "alternative or non-Western modernity". Like many post-colonial literatures, these dance performances constitute "a specific practice, an enterprise engaged by agents who locate themselves within a discourse in a resistant, counter-discursive way through the transformation of dominant technologies".[26]

And this is a crucial point: instead of arguing that the Yolngu men place themselves into Australia's modernity (as countless past policies have tried to do), we suggest that they use humour to displace Western culture, such as particular dances and musical styles, but also the apparent settler-culture monopoly on definitions of Australian humour, into a Yolngu worldview in which different cultures and traditions can co-exist and laugh together, thus not necessarily making *them* belong to us ('us' being in this case non-Indigenous audiences), but rather making *us* belong to them. In doing so, the Chooky Dancers construct an alternative modernity which is clearly *ahead* of the Western modernity that continues to form Australia, while also presenting a glimpse of the future. They call attention to the comparatively fleeting existence of this hierarchical modernity and the constructed nature of cultural forms by the fact that they are portrayed as obscure and thus hilarious in the context of much greater time horizons. Populist understandings of Australian humour are represented as not merely springing from Australia's convict origins and other settler myths; rather, these myths form just one interpretation of Australia's comedic history and present.

Varney employs Zygmunt Bauman's concept of "liquid modernity" in her analysis of the video and a later, related theatre performance entitled *Ngurrumilmarrmiriyu* (Wrong Skin) to argue that the Yolngu performance embodies an alternative experience of modernity that combines both cultural tradition and modern technology, and she suggests that tradition is presented in this way as "preferable to the rootlessness and fluidity of liquid modernity", which Bauman describes as the changing, unstable identities and constantly evolving relationships

[24] In the 1930s, Indigenous Australians argued that the goal behind the policies of the Australian government (including the work of the Aboriginal Protection Boards) was the extermination of the Aborigines: "The purpose of your legislation has been, and now is, to exterminate the Aborigines completely so that no trace of them or their descendants remain"; quoted in Anne Brewster, "Aboriginal Life Writing and Globalisation: Doris Pilkington's *Follow the Rabbit-Proof Fence*", *Southerly*, 62.2 (2002), 161 fn 5.

[25] Bhabha, *The Location of Culture*, 38-39.

[26] Bill Ashcroft, "Alternative Modernities: Globalization and the Post-Colonial", *ARIEL*, 40.1 (2009), 83 and 93.

of the modern, globalising world.[27] Moreover, this post-colonial move involves a kind of laughter of a second order. The two dance performances expose the idea of difference that informed colonial practices for such a long time as something to be laughed at (albeit painfully), and highlight society's continuing focus on difference and stereotypes in contemporary society. This laughter results from our uneasiness as to how to deal with these differences and similarities that are being rewritten before our eyes and created into new configurations.

[27] Varney, "New and Liquid Modernities", 215. See also Zygmunt Bauman, *Liquid Modernity* (Cambridge: Polity Press, 2000).

The Bush Mechanics: Creativity and Humour in the Face of Disadvantage

The 2001 *Bush Mechanics* series,[28] in its portrayal of an Aboriginal community at Yuendumu who use inventive methods to repair old cars, focuses on humorous portrayals of the consequences of contingency in the context of post-colonial disadvantage. Not only humour is produced as a by-product of this contingency, but also new perspectives on issues such as recycling, the importance of spirituality, of community support, and even climate issues such as lack of rainfall and drinking water. The solutions provided by the bush mechanics may provoke laughter, but they also suggest alternatives to our throw-away society while highlighting the resourcefulness of living in difficult circumstances, and bring Indigenous poverty into the public eye in a way which is focused on creating solutions and mobilising a shared humanity.

[28] *Bush Mechanics*, dir. David Batty and Francis Jupurrula Kelly, produced by Jeni McMahon, Film Australia in association with Warlpiri Media Association, broadcast by ABC Television, 2001.

The popular 2001 miniseries produced by Film Australia is based on an original documentary from 1998 by the Warlpiri Media Association created together with Francis Jupurrula Kelly and Simba Nelson, which won an Australian Film Institute Award and received international recognition. It employs humour and magic realism combined with a documentary style in order to portray Aboriginal men who are able to repair broken vehicles using creative methods that make use of naturally occurring objects and discarded car parts. These men are described by Georgine Clarsen as highlighting the power of alternative approaches to problems,[29] as they live in the remote town of Yuendumu where everyday products and services are not readily available. The humour often comes from the unexpected ways in which the men repair their broken vehicles, the situations that arise to derail their plans, and the banter between friends. Yet there also exists an element of underlying 'superiority' laughter for some sections of the audience, in that these men always find themselves in ridiculous situations that would be almost unimaginable for more privileged members of the Australian public.

[29] Georgine Clarsen, "Still Moving: Bush Mechanics in the Central Desert", *Australian Humanities Review* (March 2002), http://www.australianhumanitiesreview.org/archive/Issue-March-2002/clarsen.html, 3 April 2014. Clarsen provides an enlightening discussion on colonial legacies explored in the series as well as background information.

This series is particularly interesting for the way in which the men's activities are subordinated to contingent events as they occur, such as the need to travel to Broome to collect pearl shells for a rainmaking ceremony. The *Bush Mechanics* series emphasises two facets of contingent creativity: it embodies the moment of creativity in which one is forced to make fast decisions based both on one's own needs and the expectations of others, but also the moment of forced negotiation

brought about by the circumstances of poverty, racism and disadvantage. As Clarsen suggests, the way in which these contingent responses seem to be a part of normal life in Yuendemu illustrates "[s]omething of the random and inexplicable logic – or illogic – of colonialism".[30]

[30] Ibid.

On one level, humour is created through the seemingly unbelievable way in which old cars can still function and even be driven over hundreds of kilometres of dirt track despite lacking a wheel, windows or a roof, and important parts of the motor being replaced with tin cans, branches, grass and water bottles. On another level, however, this humour is soured through the realisation that the cars also function, in a way, as metaphors for life in Yuendemu. The cars are discarded and forgotten in the desert, to be kept alive through desperate but creative do-it-yourself methods brought into force through local knowledge that is passed down through generations and due to necessity. The people obviously love cars, and they also make a point regarding how many of the vehicles were originally used by non-Indigenous oppressors before they were deemed useless and disposed of. The men in the series have an approach to vehicles that sees them as a tool for closing distances, but also as mechanical challenges to be faced positively: cars are at the same time reduced to their mechanical parts as well as seen as beings that have futures, if only they can be patched up by their occupants. Post-colonial creativity becomes obvious as a result of continuing post-colonial oppression.

Not every moment in the series is optimistic. The men complain of the heat, of their hunger while on the move, and they must often barter goods such as paintings in order to buy clothes and petrol. One older man extols the virtues of sharing instead of buying. Local conceptions of ownership (of cars, houses, food), of borrowing, of what is broken or useless, and of fortune/abundance challenge Western notions of possession, functionality and wealth. While rivalry still exists in Yuendumu, the lines are much more blurred, and helping others in one's community is portrayed as being an important trait. In her analysis, Clarsen suggests that as the series continues, the cars become less central, while everyday issues of real life such as the need for clean water, or levels of violence and crime in outback communities, take the foreground.[31] She concludes, therefore, that very serious topics, including forms of economy and survival required for living in remote areas, and the importance of continuing cultural traditions and beliefs, are explicitly explored in this otherwise humorous, entertaining series.[32] Thus mechanics are only one aspect in which the Yapa people must be creative.

[31] Ibid.

[32] Ibid.

Clarsen's analysis of the show's representation of innovation in the face of continuing colonial oppression provides a basis for our interrogation of the creative use of humour in the series. Although the major source of humour comes from the relationship between the men and their cars, this humour merely provides a psychological gateway that gives a glimpse into Yuendumu people's lives. Instead the series manipulates the influence that 'humour through adversity' has in the Australian media as well as in patriotic ideas about mateship and community. As Lillian Holt points out (quoted earlier), Indigenous humour often comes

unexpected to Australian audiences, providing a form of relief when exploring serious issues, but also a fresh perspective on and interest in Indigenous lives, a possibility that can be appropriated in many creative ways despite the problematic notion that this humour is unexpected in the first place. We do not wish to suggest that humour is a necessary tool required to make Australian audiences feel sympathy through the lightening of a serious situation. Instead, humour is creatively expressed as a human emotion that not only helps the people in the television series to overcome difficult situations, but which forms a backdrop to any human situation, allowing audiences to relate to each other.

In the Press Kit for the series, producer Jeni McMahon attests to the power of the creative process in overcoming adversity when she describes the difficulties of filming in a remote location, where simple tasks such as shopping or acquiring cash necessitate a long trip to Alice Springs, and the water supply is a constant cause for concern.[33] This issue is taken up in the final episode entitled "The Rainmakers", where elder Thomas Jungala Rice asks some of the younger men to take a 'Napa' car (a car he has painted with the Rain Dreaming) to Broome in order to exchange it for pearl shells that will bring more rain to central Australia. Several episodes feature traditional lore, including references to the Dreaming and therefore aspects of life that non-Indigenous viewers might consider elements of myth or fantasy. Yet these aspects of the series also reference Indigenous creativity in the capacity to be more open-minded as well as the ability to combine more traditional methods and beliefs with what one might consider 'modern' technological methods.

[33] Jeni McMahon et al., "Bush Mechanics Press Kit", *National Film and Sound Archive*, http://sa-staging.com/search-programs/program/?sn=8209, 20 July 2013.

Whenever the Dreaming spirit Jupurrula appears to help the men repair their car with traditional bush methods, all figures on the screen move in fast motion, adding a comedic, cartoon-like visual effect to the already amusing methods of car-repair. While the sceptical viewer may argue that in a real mechanical emergency in the desert no spirit mechanic will appear to aid stranded travellers, one could see this televisual technique as reinforcing the fact that in Yuendumu, traditions and lore are still an important part of the creative process of dealing with adverse post-colonial situations. Cars are re-appropriated from their signification as vehicles of Western modernity (and colonialism), and instead they become important, albeit humorous, aspects of indigenous survival. As Clarsen argues, technology can be interpreted in multiple ways, and the creators of the series "presume to tell non-Aborigines that we have much to learn about a technology we thought was our own".[34] For us, humour here functions to challenge Western ideas about use value, recycling and modernity. The audience laughs at the fact that the cars are rarely allowed to die, yet is also surprised by the fact that they can run with such simple repairs, even if a little spiritual help is sometimes involved. The funny situations thus criticise the waste of modern capitalism, yet at the same time optimistically stress that nothing – whether car or culture or people – is beyond survival, if everyone pitches in. Interestingly, in the Press Kit for the series, the producer notes that shortly after

[34] Clarsen, "Still Moving".

the Napa car was painted with the Rain Dreaming and driven to the coast in search of the pearlshells that would bring about rain, "Central Australia was hit by six weeks of non-stop rain and there were severe hailstorms in the Tanami Desert. Yuendumu mob are convinced that the Napa car and the pearlshells are responsible".[35]

[35] McMahon, "Bush Mechanics Press Kit", 7.

By leaving it up to the viewer to decide if the Napa car is really responsible for bringing rain to Yuendumu, the show's creators allow the audience to glimpse unexplored possibilities – and not merely those hinging on the mythical. The Bush Mechanics present us with an alternative way of facing adversity and of dealing with contingent events, while at the same time indirectly criticising those methods possible in 'reality' which have, in fact, not improved their circumstances for the better. Stephen Slemon has identified magic realism, a term which could describe the appearance of the spirit mechanic Jupurrula and the role of the Dreaming in the series, as a strategy for resisting the ideologies of imperial culture.[36] The inclusion of the mythical in *Bush Mechanics* may be a creative way of pointing out the irrationality of Indigenous poverty in their own country. Much of the laughter in the series results from the fact that the bush mechanics can repair what other Australians cannot fix, and they can survive in places that many would consider inhospitable, making jokes about the heat or the need to find a windscreen for the car in case it rains. Where the 'rational', western, modern world has failed them, irrationality (from a Western point of view) might provide some answers. This in turn provokes us to ask if we are indeed laughing at irrationality and incongruity, or instead reacting physiologically, in a compulsive and even defensive manner, at the failures of post-colonial Australian society.

[36] Stephen Slemon, "Magic Realism as Post-Colonial Discourse", *Canadian Literature*, 116 (1988), 9-24.

The series is an important example of reorienting the self-constructed, iconic Australian sense of humour as a mentality brought about from the convict's necessity to laugh at one's circumstances (as problematic a category as that is), and instead demonstrating that not only does Indigenous humour share similar survivalist and community-building traits brought about by oppressive conditions, but also holds up a mirror at the Australian audience who allows such depraved circumstances to exist, as we realise that many of the situations in the series are, in fact, not something one can generally laugh about, but instead should inspire us to bring about real change. In this vein, Clarsen argues that *Bush Mechanics* functions to provide "challenges to non-Aboriginal Australia".[37] This, we feel, is where the creative use of humour on the part of the Indigenous protagonists and text-creators can be most effective. The humorous exploration of these issues provides an unexpected sense of hope for audiences in that these issues are being explored in optimistic, creative ways that do not focus only on the past (which often unfortunately brings about only defensive and even racist reactions) but also solutions in the present and future, and thus non-Indigenous viewers are challenged to revise how they understand Indigenous Australia and post-colonial inequality.

[37] Clarsen, "Still Moving".

That the *Bush Mechanics* still resonates with audiences over a decade later is demonstrated by the creation of a short clay animation version in 2014.[38] Humour provides a bridge of shared humanity and emotion, presenting a world of difference and sameness through a lens that is thought-provoking and reflective. The audience's laughter becomes a realisation that these are national issues that can be approached by either using the tools at hand or creatively constructing new approaches that involve reconciling with the past but also looking forward to a shared future. To communicate this is the most important role of popular culture in Australia today.

[38] See the video report by Sally Bothroyd, "Clay Mechanics Keep the Dream Alive", *ABC News*, 24 March 2014, http://www.abc.net.au/news/2014-03-24/clay-mechanics-keep-the-dream-alive/5339944?section=nt, 8 April 2014.

Concluding Remarks

The problematic role that humour plays in cultural texts that deal with post-colonial injustice is a significant issue in post-colonial studies, especially considering the serious subject matter. In their work on laughter and the post-colonial, Stein and Reichl write that every type of laughter can "reflect a struggle for agency, an imbalance of power, and a need, a desire, for release".[39] Yet they also suggest that it is not enough to simply laugh "back at the coloniser", as this could reinforce colonial power, and they ask whether laughter can indeed promote agency or even "gesture toward a new world order".[40] It is also not enough, as Varney suggests of the Chooky dancers, that humorous Aboriginal cultural products function to portray Aboriginal communities in a positive light despite difficult material circumstances, thus circumventing stereotypes of colonial disadvantage.[41]

As Ashcroft argues, post-colonial cultural productions possess a transformative power which is partially realised in the re-appropriation of Western products, including popular culture.[42] Increased support is needed for this creative area of cultural production in Australian mainstream culture, where Indigenous Australians can represent themselves and highlight the constructed nature of cultural difference, but also give non-Indigenous Australians the opportunity to share their experiences through the emotional connection provided by humour, as well as using channels that are accessible to all. Humour is obviously not the only element that can provoke an exploration of shared concerns and lives, as the acclaimed and well-received ABC Television drama series *Redfern Now* (2012 and 2013) has demonstrated. Therefore, we are not arguing that Indigenous cultural production should *conform* to populist ideas of Australian humour, but rather that ideas surrounding 'typically Australian' humour such as survival, mateship and convict wit can be creatively mobilised and subverted by text-producers to highlight post-colonial issues and present unique solutions for questions of social justice, as well as new possibilities for Australia as a whole.

[39] Stein and Reichl, "Cheeky Fictions", 9.

[40] Ibid., 10-12.

[41] Varney, "New and Liquid Modernities", 217.

[42] Ashcroft, *Post-Colonial Transformations*.