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Billy T. James - Te Thesis

Comedy, Hybridity & Mimicry in Post-colonial

Aotearoa New Zealand

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Abstract

Even decades after his passing in 1991, Billy T. James is a comedy icon of Aotearoa New Zealand (NZ). However, James was more than just an entertainer. He was a prominent and popular Māori figure in an era when colonial history and race-relations were brought to the fore, and the country was revisiting its identity as a colonial and postcolonial nation. By analysing a variety of examples from James' comedy with close reference to biographical details, popular comedy, scholarly literature, and sociological, historical, and post-colonial contexts, I investigate how James was able to work *both* with and against the coloniser (Pākehā). Drawing on Homi K. Bhabha's postcolonial theories of "Third Space", hybridity and mimicry (see chapter three), I situate James as a comic hybrid—who drew on distinct aspects of te ao Māori (see chapter one) and broader Western comedy conventions (see chapter two)—and a colonial mimic—who used his comedy as a constructive comic treatment of race and culture (see chapter four). Yet, the understanding of James' comic treatment of race and culture in its postcolonial context must also contend with the numerous possible interpretations of racial humour, which range from offence to the direct enjoyment of stereotyped material. To navigate these interpretations, I employ Dustin Goltz's discussion of 'intent, context, and audience response' of controversial humour to understand how James' potentially offensive comic treatment of Māori can be sufficiently debated through the concept of 'ironic performativity,' and how the plausible audience interpretations of James' comedy can be read in a more careful way. Accordingly, through the intertwining of textual analysis and a critical engagement with broader contexts and academic literature, I thus position James' comic hybridity and mimicry as a social critique of racism and colonial history, whereby he became a necessary arbiter of debate in post-colonial Aotearoa NZ.

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Billy T. James: Te Introduction

Humour is often treated as if it were a universal concept. Ironically, as humour and comedy have become more demographically vast, their subjective and contextual nature have become more apparent. In that, what one person might find humorous, another might find trite or even offensive (Lockyer and Pickering). This variance is because much of comedy relies on the ideological assumptions that underlay society, which are often linked to a person's culture, race, socioeconomic status, political philosophy, religious affiliation, and other closely held beliefs. Through shared comedy, humour can become a social mechanism to bring people closer together through laughter that affirms these common assumptions (Kramer; Kuipers). Equally, however, humour can reinforce prejudice and various inequalities towards people who are not included within the dominant assumptions of a society (Haggins; Weaver). In this regard, another thread in academic research places humour and comedy as a form of social critique. This critique occurs when the above ideological assumptions become oppressive to others, whereby humour can highlight the shortcomings and hypocrisies of these assumptions to undermine their power and provoke change (Billig; Holm; Morreall).

Given this latter function, comedy can be especially transformational and empowering for Indigenous communities when embedded with their references, culture, and lived experiences (Taylor). In the past few years, Indigenous peoples have emerged in popular media forms of humour and comedy to do just that. Locally, Jermaine Clement[1] (Ngāti Kahungunu) and Taika Waititi[2] (Te Whānau-ā-Apanui) are two of the most recognisable creators in Aotearoa NZ. In the U.S., media like *Rutherford Falls* (2021-present), *Reservation Dogs* (2021-present), and *Resident Alien* (2021-present) feature Indigenous comic performers in mainstream roles. These roles move beyond the prototypical 'Cowboys v. Indians'

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[1] *Flight of the Conchords* (1998-present), *What We Do in the Shadows* (2014), *Wellington Paranormal* (2018-2022).
[2] *Two Cars, One Night* (2003), *Boy* (2010), *Hunt for the Wilderpeople* (2016).

archetype of North American film and television, and into roles that, through humour, demonstrate a modicum of the Indigenous "way of life" to a broader North American (and International) audience[3] (Ferguson 136).

Nonetheless, characterising a distinct style of comedy as "Native" or Indigenous is far more elusive than it might sound – even for just one group of Indigenous peoples. First Nations writer, Thomas King (Cherokee) quips that "if I were threatened with bodily harm, I would probably find myself saying that Native humour is humour that makes Native people laugh, and hope that you didn't ask me to define a Native" (177). King's framing may be tongue-in-cheek, but his remarks reflect an ambiguity of definition in Indigenous performativity. An ambiguity that is further captured in his astute observation on the performance of and the audience response to Indigenous humour:

> I suspect that we will never find a good definition for Native humour, that the definition may lie in and change with performance, which is a fancy way of saying that, if there is such a thing as Native humour, it's like the wind. We can't see it. We don't know where it comes from. And the only time we feel it is when it's blowing in our face (177).

King's position on native humour suggests that the performance and audience responses to humour are highly contextual, ever-changing, and negotiated in their meanings (Goltz). However, as King's wind metaphor represents, there is something about the Indigenous performance of humour that is hard to ignore, even if it is equally as hard to define and conceptualise. This representation of "Native humour" as the "wind" is at the theoretical heart of this thesis, specifically, in terms of Māori humour.

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[3] *Rutherford Falls* is 92.9th and *Reservation Dogs* is 99.6th percentile in U.S. audience demand, within the Comedy genre. *Resident Alien* is 99.6th percentile in the Drama genre (Parrot Analytics).

Māori humour is typical among friends, whanau (family), and colleagues in Aotearoa NZ. Anecdotally, when we encounter Māori humour in these scenarios, it is an undeniable experience like the "wind … blowing in our face" (T. King 177). For me, Māori humour is a concept much more than laughter. I am Ngāpuhi, but I am White-passing. This lack of melanin meant that for most of my childhood, I did not understand I was Māori: since I looked Pākehā, I was treated like a Pākehā person. However, my Māori identity became undeniably apparent when I attended my grandfather's tangi (funeral) at age ten. I expected some sadness… and there was, but I did not expect laughter. The mealtimes were particularly gregarious. Not only were our bellies full of food, but they were also full of laughter. I met cousins who looked different from me, yet we always shared a laugh—though most of these jokes were about how easily my skin burnt in the Northland sun. These jokes never came across as mean-spirited, just good-natured teasing. It was in this joking that I felt a sense of community. These moments of humour will always stick with me and have helped affirm my identity as a Māori person.

However, beyond anecdotes, King's comment that "the definition [of native humour] may lie in and change with performance" is also valid for Māori humour. This framing is to say that the definition of Māori humour is in constant flux, in much the same way as Māoritanga (culture, traditions, and way of life). A flux further complicated by a range of Māori performances, values, and sub-cultures since Māori – and therefore their humour – are not a monolith. Nevertheless, there is one famous example of Māori humour in the broader Aotearoa NZ zeitgeist, and that is Billy T. James (Waikato-Tainui, Ngāi Te Rangi, Ngāti Ranginui).

Billy T. James MBE (1949-1991)

James arrived on the Aotearoa NZ comedy scene when it was in its infancy, where John Clarke (1948–2017) (Fred Dagg), Ginnette McDonald ONZM (Lynn from Tawa), David McPhail ONZM QSM (1945–2021), and Jon Gadsby QSM (1953–2015) were the few recognisable household names in the industry. Yet, James would eventually be described as Aotearoa NZ's "greatest humourist" (Dudding and Mead). To summarise his comic career: In 1975, James began as a musician in the *Māori Volcanics Showband* (1967-2002), where he quickly learnt not only the basics of performance but an array of comedic tools. After the *Volcanics*, he would continue mixing music and comedy elements on small stages overseas, around Aotearoa NZ, and on the television show *Radio Times* (1980-1983). Eventually, James fully entered the comedy world in the sketch programme *The Billy T. James Show* (1981-1988)—though his musical talent was still highly prominent. During its eight-year runtime, this show would reach television rating highs in Aotearoa NZ. Moreover, the show and James won numerous awards, including the 'Best Entertainment Programme,' 'Best Performance in a Non-Dramatic Role,' 'Entertainer of the Decade,' and eventually an MBE for his services to entertainment. However, James was not just a sketch comedian. As a comedy film actor, his most famous role was in his film debut as "the Tainuia kid, a crazed Māori who believes he is a Mexican bandito" in the 1984 comedy *Came a Hot Friday*[4]. As a sitcom actor and writer, the revised *The Billy T. James Show* (1990-1991) was a single 26-episode season, "inspired partly by *The Cosby Show*" (1984-1992) to make "comedy from [James'] experiences of 'being brown and white' [Māori and Pākehā]." As a stand-up comedian, he mixed his cabaret-style musical performances with more conventional stand-up comedy routines in the 1985 LP *Billy T Live! at Pips Cabaret, Whangarei*, and his 1990

[4] "Based on the over-the-top novel [of the same name] by Ronald Hugh Morrieson [1922-1972]".

variety special *Billy T James, Alive and Giggling.* Unfortunately, this special would become his last significant production as he became seriously ill and passed away on 7 August 1991 to a mass outpouring of grief around the country (NZ On Screen, "Billy T James").

Given the above career highlights, it has been said that James' ghost "still haunts Māori and Pasifika comedy" (*Funny As*). This sentiment may sound hyperbolic, but the degree of James' contribution to the Aotearoa NZ culture is evident in his inclusion as the only comedian mentioned in the 576 pages of Michael King's *The Penguin History of New Zealand.* In a passage about local "heroes and heroines," he is included in such esteem as Sir Edmund Hillary KG ONZ KBE (1919–2008); Kate Sheppard (1848-1934); and Dame Whina Cooper ONZ DBE (Te Rarawa; 1895-1994) (M. King 510-514). This company signifies the extent of his importance on Aotearoa NZ, as King writes:

> There was also in this context a continuing admiration for the 'Maui' figure, the trickster or lovable rascal who bluffed or charmed his or her way through life and was perhaps best represented in the late twentieth century by the comedian Billy T. James, whose popularity was nationwide, as was the sense of loss at his early death in 1991 (514).

King's portrayal of James seems apt as he had a remarkable ability to be incredibly lovable and charming thanks to his signature laugh and childlike naïveté. However, beyond this childishness, he had a rascal persona that was just as subversive and cynical as it was lovable and charming. For example, James' "New Zealanders at War" sketch epitomises his subversive rascal-ness (*The Billy T. James Show* S6E1, 14:35-15:14). In the sketch, a General inspects four Kiwi soldiers digging foxholes in 1944, France, and all goes as expected with the first three soldiers. However, James is caught off-guard when the General taps him on the head and asks, "digging a foxhole for the big push, ae?" To which James replies, "(laughing) Nah! Doubt it! It's a hangi for our tea, sir!" This subversion is met with thunderous laughter

by James' recorded audience, who are amused at the cheeky, loveable, and unexpected display of a rascal that puts food before anything else. Thus, it is through the dichotomous nature of James' performance ability, that he reflects an essential part of Māui the original trickster figure.

In Māori mythology, Māui used his grandmother's jawbone to fish up the North Island (Te Ika-a-Māui/The fish of Māui) of Aotearoa NZ, but he also turned his brother-in-law, Irawaru, into the first dog (Charles Royal; Tregear 107). After becoming annoyed with him during a fishing expedition, Māui stretched out Irawaru's limbs. When Hina asked Māui if he had seen her husband, Māui told her to call "Moi! Moi!" after which Irawaru, in dog form, came running. In grief, Hina threw herself into the ocean, never to be seen again (107). Māui's trickster nature is, therefore, both constructive and destructive. In one instance, he can create something of immense importance to many people; however, in another instance, he can conduct himself in ways that hurt others. Likewise, while James' rascal persona has brought immense joy to generations of Kiwis[5], his humour can also be offensive to others or satirical in other cases (see chapter four) (Horan and Matthews 195-196; Elliott). This likeness indicates that King's statement of James as a close representation of Māui is a fitting descriptor.

However, James' biographer, Matt Elliott, disagrees with King's assessment, countering with the following perspective:

> It is, sadly, a rather disingenuous view of a Māori man who, as a product of his times, spoke very little Māori and operated largely in a Pākehā world. His comic influence came not from Māori oral tradition but from watching English comedians on the stages of the United Kingdom in the 1970s and then the American Rockstar comedians of the 1980s (13).

[5] A demographic label for all Aotearoa New Zealanders.

Elliott is not technically wrong in this perspective. Due to colonisation, te ao and te reo (language) Māori have needed to adapt to colonial Aotearoa NZ—at no fault to James or any other Māori person. Again, he is not wrong to cite James' British and American influences, as their importance will be the subject of chapter two. Nevertheless, Elliott's argument has three significant problems that reflect more substantial concerns about Māoritanga, racism, and colonialism in Aotearoa NZ.

First, while the influences of British comedians on James' comedy were important for him to hone his craft, it is too reductive to say that this influence overrides any Māori elements in his comic performance and persona (as will be discussed in chapter one). Regarding Māori performers, James states that "['their flair for entertainment'] goes right back to the orators on the marae, … that's true of all of us [Māori] and why we have an adept[ness] towards [entertainment] because it has always been there" (Bourke; "Comic Genius" 0:19:16—0:19:37). In te ao Māori, these oratory traditions consist in the "genres of whakapapa, whakataukī, kōrero and waiata (genealogies, sayings, narratives and prose, songs, and chants)" (McRae 1). Comedy does not fit neatly into any one of the above genres; however, these oral traditions do evoke humour within its storytelling and wider performance (Derby). To elucidate this, historian Mark Derby provides the following example: "a military surgeon, John Savage, who visited the Bay of Islands in 1805 [and] reported that the local people found some of their songs so hilarious 'as, in many instances, to occasion a total suspension of the performance, by the laughter of the audience'" (Salmond 342, qtd. in Derby). The evocation of humour by these traditional performers suggests either an implicit or explicit reference for James' comedy to build upon. Therefore, contrary to Elliott's statement, it is entirely plausible for James' comedy to be reflective of oratory and a wider lineage of Māori entertainment, alongside his British comic influences (as will be discussed in chapter three).

Second, Elliott's claim narrows the definition of a Māori person. This narrowing is a colonial purity test, whereby Māori are considered a monolith. This sentiment suggests that to be part of this monolith, a Māori person must be fluent in te reo and well-versed in all things Māoritanga. However, whakapapa is the defining factor of a Māori person, not this monolith (Kukutai and Callister). On 17 January 1949, James was born to Sally Mary Smith (Waikato-Tainui) and Jimmy Te Mene Smith (Ngāi Te Rangi, Ngāti Ranginui) in the Waikato. Under the traditional Māori tikanga (custom) of whāngai, he was adopted at birth by Ruby (Waikato-Tainui) and Wiri Taitoko (Ngāti Maniapoto) and considered them his mother and father (Elliott 20). Since James' birth parents are Māori, James is, too. Nothing about his whāngai changes the fact that James can trace his whakapapa back to Māui[6] and beyond. Therefore, it is not for colonial thinking to define whether he is the best representation of Māui: it is the impeachability of his whakapapa that makes Billy T. James Māori and allows for such a comparison (M. King 514).

Thirdly, Elliott ignores the colonial pressures that made James "a product of his times" (13). In the early to mid-twentieth century, te reo Māori – and te ao Māori more generally – was on the precipice of extinction. This extinction was due to the legalised suppression of Māoritanga under the Native Schools Act 1867 (and other government policies[7]), whereby a 102-year-long colonial and systemically racist education system punished the use of te reo by students with corporal punishment (a punishment not legally abolished until 1990). Because of this policy, younger generations of Māori became less fluent in te reo and were alienated from their language, leaving generations of Māori stuck between two worlds (Mahuika, "Kōrero" 197-200). Systemic racism shaped early New Zealand, seeping into all elements of society, including the entertainment industry where

[6] Either as a mythical character or a historical person in Ngāti Porou traditions.

[7] The Tohunga Suppression Act 1907 that delegitimised traditional Māori mātauranga (knowledge), and the Manpower Act 1944 that sought to "integrate Māori families into non-Māori communities," through the policy of "pepper-potting" (Jones; Kingi 6).

James worked. When it came time to pitch for his show, *The Billy T. James Show*'s producer Tom Parkinson[8] explains that "there was this sort of feeling that you had to be very careful with Māori, that they wouldn't be able to have the shoulders to hold a show" (*Te Movie* 0:17:32—0:17:38). Such a blatant example of systemic racism meant that James working in the Pākehā world was a necessity, not a choice. Therefore, James being "a product of his times" does not make King's view of him as "the best representation of Māui" disingenuous (514). Rather, it is even more genuine because it shows how much he had to endure and overcome as he entered the industry.

The above three arguments are not intended to dismiss Elliott's knowledge about James. His biography *Billy T: The Life and Times of Billy T. James* provides many valuable anecdotes and points of investigation in this thesis. Instead, these arguments raise questions about James' Māori influences, Māori representation, and colonial pressures, which are examined within his comedy itself.

Such serious topics are not the first thing that comes to mind when one might reminisce about James' comedy. Simply, he is remembered as "the funniest person in New Zealand has ever produced [sic]" (McLeod and O' Meagher qtd. in Elliott 325). However, James was also one of the first and most popular representations of Māori on television. Through his comedy, James propelled Māori people, culture, and humour into entertainment and wider Aotearoa NZ society. As will be shown in chapters three and four, cultural, political, and racial meanings are present and sometimes necessary to the interpretation of James' comedy. These possible unintentional and intentional readings that can be inferred from James' comedy are symptomatic of what makes comedy such a complex and necessary subject of analysis. He may have evoked these topics in pursuit of a laugh; however, he (like comedians in most instances) is not entirely in command of the possible reasons for laughter

[8] These do not appear to be Parkinson's thoughts, just an observation about the industry on a whole.

because "the overall determination of [comedic] meaning resides in the audience" (Goltz 86). Thus, our understanding of James' impact on Aotearoa NZ culture should not be limited to his profound impact on the comic landscape and his comedic merit: it needs to account for the representations and histories—both positive and negative—of Māori that he portrayed to a broad Aotearoa NZ audience. Therefore, I believe that 30 years after his death, it is time to take James' comedy seriously.

Thesis Arguments

When I was thinking about undertaking a thesis[9] around Māori humour, it came to me as a great surprise that there is little academic writing about Billy T. James or his comedy. The reason I see behind James' absence is that humour studies in Aotearoa NZ is a small, niche discipline, with Māori humour being even more so. Earlier humour research tended around its sociolinguistic properties led by Professor Janet Holmes and Jennifer Hay in "Humour as an Ethnic Boundary Marker in New Zealand Interaction," and workplace humour led by Dr Barbara Anne Plester in *The Complexity of Workplace Humor: Laughter, Jokers and the Dark Side of Humour.* There are also more popular explorations of Aotearoa NZ comedy by Academics and comedy insiders: Matt Elliott's *Kiwi Jokers: the Rise and Rise of New Zealand Comedy*, and, of course, James' aforementioned biography; Erin Harrington's "Policing through Parody with Wellington Paranormal"; Nick Holm's "'Fred, It's a Mess': Fred Dagg and the Cultural Politics of the Laconic"; Mike Lloyd's "Show and Tell: Making Humour with a Naked Man"; and, Paul Horan and Philip Matthews' *Funny As: The Story of New Zealand Comedy* book and accompanying television series.

As seen by the above, Aotearoa NZ academic comedy research as entertainment is largely in its infancy, and this thesis will therefore be one of the first of its scope. This makes

[9] Late 2020

Billy T. James an excellent place to start. Whether it is an individual's memory of watching his performances live, revisiting his comedy later, or the cultural memory of newer generations being gradually exposed to Aotearoa NZ's cultural past, most Kiwis have an opinion on James' comedy. Nevertheless, there is one aspect of James' comedy that has not been fully articulated, and that is what it mean to understand James as a Māori comedian, who propelled Māori people, culture, and humour into a Pākehā-led entertainment industry. With that in mind, the presiding research question for this thesis is: 'How James' comedy can be understood as working *both* with and against the coloniser (Pākehā)?' To answer this question, it is necessary to further break it down into multiple and more manageable fronts.

In chapter one, I explore the importance of the Māori renaissance for making sense of James' ascension, his Māori roots in oral traditions, and his time with the *Māori Volcanics Showband.* This chapter will develop along three lines of argument. First, I explore how various Māori politics and activism helped benefit Māori representation in television. Secondly, I will situate comedy in the Māori oral traditions and explore how aspects of these can be seen in James' comedy through textual analysis. In the last section, I explore James' time with the *Māori Volcanics* to show how he follows a lineage of Māori performers and travelling shows.

In chapter two, I will delve deeper into James' comic repertoire, stylings, and how the comedy of Richard Pryor (1940-2005), Jim Davidson OBE, and Tommy Cooper (1922-1984) are some of his main comedy influences. Furthermore, James' comedy has been reduced to a few ill-defined comedy buzzwords without much more nuance. This chapter expands beyond this understanding, to follow James and where his comic style came from with further reference to elements of his biography and the textual analysis of his influences in comparison to James' comedy.

In chapter three, I then explore how the intersection of Māori and British/American influences established James as a comic hybrid and colonial mimic. To ascertain James as such, this chapter will begin by unpacking the concept of hybridity, and its sub-concept mimicry with close reference to Homi K. Bhabha's work. Second, it reframes hybridity to comic hybridity, and mimicry to comic mimicry with an adjustment of context. Finally, it applies these reframed theories to James' comedy through a textual analysis of the Te News sketch to illustrate how these theories work in action.

In chapter four, I delve into the accusations that James' humour uses offensive racial/cultural stereotypes. To do so, I use Dustin Goltz's intent, context, and audience response framework to analyse James' potentially offensive humour (57). This chapter begins by exploring the racial controversy surrounding James' comedy with close reference to broader examples of controversial humour in entertainment and scholarship. I then explore an alternative view of James' comic treatment of race and colonialism as a social critic by implementing Homi K. Bhabha's postcolonial theory of mimicry to understand the social function of James' racial and political comedy in a post-colonial Aotearoa NZ.

This thesis concludes with a summary and, once again, an example of James' comic hybridity and mimicry in the "Minister of Crown Lands" sketch. After this, I will provide an outlook on the future of Aotearoa NZ humour studies, specifically around Māori humour.

Caveats

Now that the thesis arguments have been introduced, two caveats are necessary to explain the limits of scope on this thesis and three caveats that will contextualise the arguments included. Most importantly, I am not trying to answer whether James' comedy has aged well. This endeavour would be pointless and frankly uninteresting because almost no comedy with social, cultural, or political content will age well. This is because the assumptions that give this comedy its context will inevitably age as people and society

change and, therefore, the meanings derived from comedy. In the second caveat for scope, the sources available to me in this thesis have been limited for three reasons. First, I will only be using the sketch version of *The Billy T. James Show*—and some of his stand-up comedy—since his sitcom of the same name lacks his comic authorial voice. Second, I am unable to use the full catalogue of this series because episodes in the first few seasons have been lost as TVNZ wiped all but one episode from each season. Similarly, I will primarily use the available sources via DVD and CDs due to copyright issues. However, these sources have been curated, edited, and published posthumously, which means they do not cover all of James' comic material as he might have envisioned. Therefore, this thesis is not about deciding whether James' comedy 'aged well.' It is about reckoning with the comic repertoire of Billy T. James, and how he worked *both* with and against the coloniser.

Moreover, it is important to caveat the lenses and reasonings used in this thesis. This is to contextualise the arguments that will help understand James' relationship with the coloniser. First and most importantly, James' comedy is *not* presented here as the sole representation of Māori humour; instead, he is an integral part to the understanding of what can be conceptualised as Māori humour. Many Māori loved him and shared his type of humour; however, some Māori did not like James' comedy and felt it was offensive – an entirely valid reaction. The point is that Māori are not a homogenous monolith to any degree, including their humour. Secondly, even though I use the argument around James being a representation of Māui in this introduction, this does not mean that an analysis of his comedy should be limited to a trickster lens. Even though his comedy can be trickster at times, it is so much more. Similarly, what can be conceptualised as Māori humour should not be limited to a trickster lens. Though not the subject of this thesis, within the realms of te ao Māori, there is a range of comedy: scatological, hyperbole, wit, clowning, physical, absurdity, wordplay, teasing, parody, mockery, irony, blue, and dark humour (Derby). Finally, the colonial/racial

subversion and social critique lens at the heart of this thesis is *not* automatic because James is Māori. Without enough substantiation, the positioning of Indigenous art and media in terms of the coloniser is limiting and reductive. Instead, a colonial/political lens is substantiated by interviews that James and his production team have done during his life and posthumously. Thus, this project is a considered way of looking at the combination of Indigenous and colonial/political lenses within James' comedy, and how this meant he could work *both* with and against the coloniser while also being a talented, intelligent, and daring comedian.

Theoretical Framework

With the above caveats in mind, given the range of technical approaches, cultural, and historical contexts necessary to the academic understanding of James' comedy, I will now provide a theoretical framework for these approaches and contexts.

Sketch Comedy

Most of James' comedy that will be analysed throughout this thesis will come from his sketch comedy show, *The Billy T. James Show.* As his predominant style of comedy is a specific genre, the framework below will briefly explain how sketch comedy takes from and contributes to public discourse. The sketch comedy genre consists of either individual or a series of comic vignettes. Media and comedy theorist Steve Neale explains these vignettes:

> comprise a setting, one or more characters, and an internal time-frame within which the comic possibilities of a premise of one kind or another—a situation, a relationship, a conversation and its topics, a mode of language, speech or behaviour, or some other organising principle—are either pursued to a point of climax and conclusion (sometimes called a 'pay-off'), or else simply abandoned (qtd. in Marx 6).

To this framing, Nick Marx explains that sketch comedy's comic exploration has the advantage of being relevant to public discourse: "Live sketch shows like SNL [Saturday Night Live] regularly swap out guests, cast members, and subject matter in order to address

current events" (3). Sketch comedy is well placed to include many diverse perspectives and references that cover a range of topics and events, with the ability to adapt its modes of humour to stay current in near real-time. However, unlike SNL, *The Billy T. James Show* was not filmed live or weekly, so there is some delay with its comic exploration. Instead, James' comic exploration—particularly with the addition of co-writer and performer Peter Rowley—tends to mirror public discourse around noteworthy events of the past year or decade and historical events like colonisation.

Approaching Humour from a Sociological Lens

Given the cultural references and representations of Māori within James' comedy, it is essential to understand how the comic treatment of sociological assumptions works more generally. To do so, Sociology Professor Giselinde Kuipers' article "The Sociology of Humor" outlines six ways to study humour from a sociological lens. To begin, Kuipers states that, "humor is a quintessentially social phenomenon. Jokes and other humorous utterances are a form of communication that is usually shared in social interaction" (365). Such framing is the "functionalist approach to humour" that emphasises the communicative value of humour, **"**whereby a joke can serve the social functions of "joking relationships" (friendly teasing), "social control," and "social cohesion" to show "closeness among friends [or as] an effective way of forging social bonds" (368-372). These social functions of humour denote an effective interpersonal relationship between the joke-teller and the joke-hearer. However, for James' comedy, these social functions are less effective for his performed comedy since his jokes are told within the context of a performer-audience relationship on either stage or screen.

Indeed, Kuipers expands on humour as a "social interaction," which works best in close inter-personal relationships and into a "social phenomenon" that is reflective of the very underpinnings of a society:

> These humorous utterances are socially and culturally shaped, and open quite particular to a specific time and place. And the topics and themes people joke about are generally central to the social, cultural and moral order of a society or a social group (365).

This broader statement plays well into the performer-audience relationship of stage and screen comedy, given that humour's capacity for social critique is central to chapters three and four (Morreall; Holm). As Kupiers' description suggests, to be successful in social critique, humour must reflect the society and culture in which it circulates and be relevant to its audience's moral and societal assumptions. These assumptions range from a mundane understanding of cause-and-effect, to how a society's shared history and institutions shape individuals and a collective. For James, his critique focuses on depictions of Māori and colonial history through his comic hybridity. In this sense, Marx positions comedy[10] as "a uniquely intense site of cultural struggle [that] invites viewers to be reflexively flexible about [current issues and] their own identities" (3). Through the performer-audience relationship, a comedian like James can reframe and play with these assumptions so that his audience is shown a new perspective, which can be explained by the combination of the above functionalist approach and the following sociological approaches to humour.

This ability for humour to share new perspectives is crucial when there is a power dynamic within these histories and institutions. Especially, wherein the formation and preservation of a non-egalitarian society (or aspects thereof), the dominant peoples oppress peoples they deem lesser to secure their own financial, cultural, and physical power. Here lays the "conflict approach to humour," which "is clearly indebted to the Hobbesian tradition of humor as ''sudden glory' [from] hostility, aggression, superiority, and rivalry' against another" (Kuipers 372). Such "glory" of superiority plays out in the genres of racial, ethnic,

[10] sketch specifically

and bigot humour against minority peoples, where their perceived discrepancies are the subject of the joke (Holm 130). However, for minority peoples, some "authors have more faith in the subversive potential of humor," where this subversion allows them to "reflect critically on their situation, … to express hostility against those in power, create an alternative space of resistance, or even give people the courage to take up more concrete actions" (Kuipers 374). The above subversion plays out within James' comedy; but, as suggested earlier in this introduction, it is less about Māori reflecting critically and more on his Pākehā audience doing so.

One means for critical reflection by an audience is the **"**symbolic interactionist approach to humour" (Kuipers 377). This approach is predicated on both the interpersonal level of the functionalist approach and "the construction of meanings and social relations in social interaction" (377). Kuipers explains that "humor and joking are important in negotiations over the meaning of things: the construction of norms" (378). These norms are a social group's agreed-upon societal, cultural, and moral assumptions. Furthermore, humour has the capacity "to bring up and negotiate the meaning of a wide variety of other possibly sensitive topics," including taboos that would be otherwise inappropriate in other settings (378). This capacity is due to the negotiation of meanings through humour being an optional experience, whereby "both the joker and the audience can ignore any potential serious import of the joke" and just enjoy the laughter (378). As will be shown in chapter four, this can become problematic when the joke uses stereotypes as sources of humour. For now, the emphasis on constructed and negotiated meaning in humour shows just how subjective the art form of comedy can be.

The "phenomenological" approach takes humour's nuanced construction and negotiation of meaning and "conceptualizes humor as a specific 'outlook' or 'worldview' or 'mode' of perceiving and constructing the social world" (380). This approach is more

appropriate for the performer-audience relationship in which James' comedy operates, as it allows for the communication of more significant societal, cultural, and moral assumptions that underpin life in a society like Aotearoa NZ. As Kuipers states (with reference to Anton Zijderveld and Michael Mulkay), humour allows "us to look at the world and ourselves in a slightly distorted, and hence revealing, way … to expose and express the contradictory aspects of life, and to communicate and share this experience with others" (380-381). This framing is akin to Bhabha's theory of hybridity and mimicry, where he posits the ability of colonised peoples to expose contradictions and hypocrisies within the colonial process and the colonial state ("Signs"; "Mimicry"). Indeed, as will come to be shown in chapters three and four, James' comedy mirrors Bhabha's original theory by elucidating the colonial histories and racism within Aotearoa NZ through mimicry that communicates these facets to his Pākehā audience.

Finally, the last sociological approach to James' comedy is the "historical-comparative approach," which "attempts to understand the social role of humor through comparisons in time and place" (Kuipers 382). Throughout this thesis, I will be situating James as a comic hybrid of Māori and Western influence because humour "comparisons across time and space [and culture] generally show great variations as well as some universalities" (383). While there are variations in comedy, it is not as broad as the statement above might make it seem at first. Instead, as Kuipers continues to position later in her chapter, this variance is more a matter of perspective, treatment, and performativity rather than any substantial difference in the art form itself: "These standards are related more to style than to content, and they are linked with broader communication styles, taste cultures, and notions of personhood" (386). This cultural variance in style means that the hybridisation of humour in James' comedy allows for a familiar format of comedy, with added nuance in performativity to better reflect the performative contexts and taste of where they are told.

With the above theoretical frameworks, thesis arguments, and caveats established, there are now means to better understand how Billy T. James' comedy works *both* with and against the coloniser (Pākehā). Therefore, as Matt Elliott writes in James' biography, eventually, "it was time for [Aotearoa NZ] to see Billy as a singing and joking New Zealander, a Māori" (140).

Chapter One - Billy T. James: Te Māori

There is one essential fact about Billy T. James as both an entertainer and a person: he was Māori: Before James, there was William James Te Wehi Taitoko. Taitoko would not become Billy T. James until his mid-twenties, when he left the *Māori Volcanics Showband* and pursued a solo career in Australia. This was because he needed to make himself more marketable on the Australian comedy scene, so James "rearranged his birth names to 'something the Aussies could pronounce'" (Gifford in Elliott 104). Hence, Billy T. James, as Aotearoa NZ would soon know him, was born. He would become one of the country's most popular representations of Māori. Although Māori cannot, and should not, be considered a monolith, there is a recognisable shared history of colonisation, values, and traditions that have shaped many generations of Māori. This chapter will argue that James was acutely aware of this shared history and Māori influences, which he actively navigated and drew upon in his comedy.

To help introduce James' awareness of this shared Māori history, I will begin this chapter with his sketch about the historical figure, Ngāpuhi rangatira (chief) Hōne Heke (cir.1807-1850). In the aptly named sketch 'A History of NZ: The Legend of Hone Heke," James plays the titular role of Heke, replicating his actions as the main instigator of the Northern War 1845-1846[11] ("Billy T James History of Nz" 05:36—06:20). For context, Heke was the first signatory of Te Tiriti o Waitangi (The Treaty of Waitangi) but became increasingly unhappy with the British Crown and its practices. (Specifically, the introduction of customs duties, the application of English law that eventually superseded Māori tikanga, temporary bans on kauri forestry, and William Hobson's decision to move the national capital

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[11] This war was fought between the British colonial forces (with allied Māori led by Tāmati Wāka Nene [Ngāpuhi]) and Māori led by Heke and Te Ruki Kawiti (Ngāpuhi).

from Okiato [now mostly in Russell] in the Bay of Islands to Auckland). Given the economic implications of these practices, "Heke was incensed to see his people suffer in the ensuing depression" and saw "the British flag [as] a symbol of Māori despair." While Hōne Heke was only one rangatira for an iwi with their own history and traditions, he is symbolic of greater Māori distrust, grievances with Te Tiriti o Waitangi, and the British Crown Colony during this time (Rankin Kawharu).

In the 1840s, discontent was widespread in the Bay of Islands, where Māori felt they had been deceived by promises made in Te Tiriti o Waitangi, in that the Crown continually sought to "interfere in their sphere of [tino rangatiratanga (self-determination)]" (Belich 32). In response to this interference, Heke and "the [other] antigovernment forces in the Northern War" sought to provoke the colonial forces into war "without causing damage to economic relations" (32). Given its prominent placement over the area as a symbol of British sovereignty (therefore, opposing Māori tino rangatiratanga), the antigovernment forces' means of provocation was to cut down "the Union Jack [British flag] flying on a large flagstaff on Maiki Hill, above Kororareka" (33). On 8 July 1844, Heke sought to cut down this flagstaff, but Archdeacon William Williams persuaded him not to do so. Instead, Pakaraka rangatira, Te Haratua felled the flagstaff, for which the *Auckland Chronicle* reported, "they deliberately cut down, purposely with the intention of insulting the government, and of expressing their contempt of British authority" (qtd. in Moon and Biggs 405). However, on cir.9–10 and 19 January and 11 March 1845, further tensions between Heke and the remaining British authorities led him cutting down the flagstaff at Kororāreka on three occasions (Rankin Kawharu).

It is these instances in Māori history that James evokes in the "A History of NZ: The Legend of Hone Heke" sketch. Under cover of darkness, James (Heke) appears out of the bush and beckons two Māori warriors carrying an unknown object cloaked in canvas. The

scene shifts to a wide shot as he and the other men stand beside the flagstaff's base. However, as the sketch proceeds, the noise of a chainsaw starting up is surprising, given the historical and colonial expectations of the scene. Using a chainsaw, James as Heke cuts down the flagstaff with the technologically and historically incongruous machine. This incongruity becomes the basis of this sketch's humour due to its unexpectedness. Moreover, the sketch's laugh track and the sheer joy on the faces of James—and his fellow Māori actors—as the flagstaff falls, help to reinforce the sketch's comic nature.

On a superficial level, there would not appear to be anything comedic or humorous about the example of colonisation and conflict described above. These early Māori-Pākehā grievances are still being felt by generations of descendants with ongoing Māori-Crown settlements unresolved. They do not seem like an enjoyable form of comedy entertainment. Nevertheless, James and his production team chose not only to create a comedy sketch out of Heke's actions against the Crown administration, but the sketch and its' context were also televised in *The Billy T. James Show* to a broad audience. This inclusion suggests that James had a particular vision and set of priorities as a comedian, which went beyond the job requirement of making people laugh. As Sandi Anderson (James' Lawyer) suggests, James' humour enabled him "to cross over the cultural divide that was occurring between Maori and Europeans and do it with such grace that they actually were hearing things that they would otherwise not listen to" (qtd. in Elliott 289). This means James' Pākehā audience—who otherwise might not have been willing or given the opportunity—may learn about Māori history through his comedy. Indeed, James' ability to engage people through humour was significant to him having a platform as a Māori on television.

Such a platform was necessary for a sketch like 'The Legend of Hone Heke' because it could not have been done without Māori performers leading the way. This representation is not only because Hōne Heke was a historical Māori figure but because chopping down the

flagstaff epitomises post-Tiriti Māori resistance against the Crown. This conscious decision to bring Māori concerns to the fore, demonstrates the extent to which James understood himself as a Māori entertainer: who would emphatically and unapologetically bring his Māori identity, history, and traditions to a vast Aotearoa NZ audience.

To explain how James' comedy is rooted in distinct aspects of te ao Māori, this chapter will develop along three lines of argument. First, I will explore how various Māori protest movements helped to benefit Māori representation in television. I also outline James' ascension to *The Billy T. James Show* and how these shifts in politics and activism around Māori have influenced his comedy. In the second section of this chapter, I situate comedy in the Māori oral traditions. I then explore the adaptability of these traditions to place them in James' comedy. In the last section, I refer to James' time with the *Māori Volcanics Showband* to show how he and the *Māori Volcanics* themselves follow in a lineage of Māori performers and travelling shows. In doing so, this Māori lineage of entertainment will give insight into how James learned his comedy craft and persona in a tradition several centuries old.

The 1970s Māori Renaissance

Before the 1970s, there were few Māori on television. Racist assumptions in the industry meant that Māori were considered incapable of shouldering the burden of leading a television show (Parkinson qtd. in *Te Movie* 0:17:32—0:17:38). These assumptions would have been particularly limiting for a young Māori entertainer like Billy T. James. However, as is well evident by now, he would become one of the most recognisable people of his era in Aotearoa NZ. Nevertheless, these assumptions remained in place during the beginning of James' career and were obstacles that he had to endure through and succeeded despite of them.

The Māori renaissance of the 1970s led to a substantial shift in politics, race relations, and activism. These changes were the result of a campaign of concerted political action by a range of politicians and activists that worked to benefit future generations of Māori:

> Armed with strident analyses of autonomy, self-determination, sovereignty, mana motuhake and rangatiratanga, Māori would challenge the state as they had before, setting their sights more and more on te Tiriti o Waitangi promises of rangatiratanga. They would also challenge New Zealand society, … publicly dismantling the myths of nationhood and one-peopleism (Anderson et al. 358-360).

Most famous among these challenges were the Māori Land March in 1975, and the "506-day occupation" of Bastion Point (Takaparawhā) protest (5 January 1977 and 25 May 1978) (Keane). The first of these was a hīkoi (march) "from Te Hāpua in the far north to Parliament in Wellington" led by Dame Whina Cooper, alongside "many Māori organisations" to present then Prime Minister Bill Rowling with "a memorial of rights signed by 60,000 people" (Keane). The second was a protest against a private housing development project on historically confiscated Ngāti Whātua land, led by Joe Hawke MNZM (Ngāti Whātua; 1940–2022) and the "Ōrākei Māori Action Group"[12]. The scale of these protests provided the necessary media attention to cause the substantial shift of race-relations necessary for the growing acceptance of Māoritanga in Aotearoa NZ (Horan and Matthews 186-191).

This acceptance has been seen in multiple sectors of society, including, but certainly not limited to: Waitangi day becoming a public holiday in 1974, which would have helped to promote public awareness about Te Tiriti o Waitangi, and its unkept promises (Ministry for Culture and Heritage, "Waitangi Day 1970s"); the establishment of the Waitangi Tribunal in 1975, which "remed[ied] some of the more unsettling aspects of New Zealand's colonial

[12] This land would eventually be returned to Ngāti Whātua in 1988 via the Treaty settlements process.

legacy" (Ministry for Culture and Heritage, "Waitangi Tribunal created"); and government investments in te reo Māori radio in 1978 with the first iwi radio stations under Te Reo o Aotearoa, which helped to promote the use of te reo Māori in the Aotearoa NZ media space (Walker). Therefore, the massive cultural shift of the Māori renaissance showed Aotearoa NZ that Māori and their grievances could not be ignored or swept under the proverbial rug.

Beyond its immediate political consequences, the 1970s Māori renaissance also impacted multiple private and public industries in Aotearoa NZ, including James' domain of television comedy and entertainment. In 1975, Producer Tom Parkinson was "surprised that the number of Māori at the Avalon television centre was in the single digits" (NZ On Screen, "Don Selwyn"). To partially amend this systemic issue, Parkinson enlisted Don Selwyn ONZM (Ngāti Kurī, Te Aupōuri; 1935-2007), who would become a champion of the Māori Film and television industry, a "mentor to many Māori actors, writers and directors," and a highly influential actor and director in his own right. Eventually, it would be James' turn. In 1978, Tom Parkinson welcomed James' entrance into the television comedy world after watching him "win over a drunken, rowdy sports club crowd. [Parkinson] was astonished by [James'] timing and talent" (NZ On Screen, "Billy T. James"). Given James' previous singing performances on *The Ray Woolf Show*, "Parkinson felt there was a lot more [he] could bring to the medium." Subsequently, in 1980, James became a key performer on "*Radio Times*, a variety show that [imitated] old pre-50s radios shows" as the "dashing and very English host, Dexter Fitzgibbons". James would thrive as one of the first Māori men in a mainstream role, as he helped win the show "rave reviews" for *Radio Times* (NZ On Screen, "Radio Times"). After this performance, it was clear that James had potential and mass appeal. This sentiment would eventuate in James leading six seasons of the self-titled sketch comedy programme *The Billy T. James Show,* which debuted in July 1981.

With the above in mind, James' ascension to Aotearoa NZ's comic scene and subsequent career, can be understood as an indirect beneficiary of these broader political movements. Between James' youth to his rise to television in the early-1980s, there was a massive cultural and political shift in Aotearoa NZ (Horan and Matthews 186-191). Events like the Māori land march, the Bastion point occupation, the establishment of the Waitangi Tribunal, and numerous others made Māori more visible. This visibility led to producers like Tom Parkinson recognising an absence of Māori representation in the entertainment industry and giving the likes of Don Selwyn and James well overdue opportunities to thrive and succeed. In that context, James managed to carve out a space for himself as a Māori, where he became a necessary Māori representation on television at a time when there was a dire need for more Māori exposure. Thus, the rest of this chapter will explore how James was a representative of Māori, entrenched in broader aspects of te ao Māori.

Māori Oral Traditions

Billy T. James' awareness of shared Māori traditions is no more evident than in his relationship to the Māori oral traditions. In "Māori culture," these oral forms are "the primary means of transmitting knowledge, the vehicles through which ancient concepts and belief have been passed to us today" (Mikaere 128). As mentioned in the introduction, James himself argued that the Māori "flair for entertainment" goes "right back to "the orators on the marae [which is] why we have an adeptness towards that because it has always been there" (Bourke; qtd. in "Comic Genius" 0:19:16—0:19:37). In this sense, James' framing of the Māori "flair for entertainment" is an all-encompassing connection between the oral traditions and modern forms of entertainment like music, arts, and, most relevantly, comedy. However, this is not mere conjecture by James. Jane McRae echoes James' account, when she argues that "when Māori gather on their tribal marae (ceremonial meeting-grounds), the oral legacy

can be heard in speeches, songs and prayers, and in the performative, metaphorical and esoteric character of their language" (1).

These traditions are highly performative: They are expressive, dynamic, and spirited in their delivery— be they, whaikōrero, whakataukī, or waiata (Ware et al. 46). Orators capture their audience members' attention because the "oral traditions [are] rhetorical; they were designed to inform but also to impress or persuade, to engage the heart and mind" (McRae 39). By engaging the heart and mind, the Māori oral traditions elucidate metaphorical and analogic connections between known concepts to unlock their emotional (heart) and intellectual (mind) qualities. Moreover, the Māori oral traditions are esoteric, not only because they would have been passed down in te reo to a select few tohunga (experts), but because they can be highly individualised (44-45). As McRae emphasises, these traditions are "relational, narrative and allusive; they are always about connections – to people, the land, the past" (45). In doing so, these traditions invoke the whakapapa connections to the tūpuna, whenua (land/placenta), and the history of specific listeners to create a familiar and distinguishable mātauranga (knowledge) base. Therefore, the Māori "oral legacy" is one of performance, engagement, and familiar connections (1).

The Māori oral traditions are still alive and well in kapa haka, waiata, on the marae, and other forms of Māori performativity. This longevity suggests that the Māori oral traditions can adapt to multiple contexts and mediums across centuries to support knowledge for future generations with more flexible, reflective, and accessible methods - one of which is comedy. Mark Derby argues that "humour has always been an important part of Māori culture." One such instance of early humour in the oral traditions revolves around "Kahungunu …, a legendary lover, and the founder of [the iwi] Ngāti Kahungunu," who "hoped to win the favours of the high-born and beautiful Rongomaiwahine, although she was already married to the chief Tama-Takutai." The event that follows is incongruous with

Kahungunu's status as "a legendary lover" and moves into scatological absurdity, when he "ate a large meal of pāua (abalone) [but] during the night the [meal] produced a succession of odorous farts, for which the married couple blamed each other and squabbled fiercely." However, this story has a positive ending for Kahungunu, as he "soon succeeded in marrying Rongomaiwahine, who bore him four children" (Derby). Humour was therefore well-established in Māori culture and the oral traditions before colonisation. Though, as Thomas King stated in the introduction, "the definition [of Native humour] may lie in and change with performance" (177). This dynamic means that the importance of humour in te ao Māori can be understood as something to be adapted by the performer, rather than a fixed mode of performance (Derby). For James, this meant that the oral traditions were not only a reference but something he could build upon within his comedy.

Māori Oral Traditions and Indigenous Stand-up Comedy

To help situate James' comedy in the Māori oral traditions, I turn to the broader connection between Indigenous story-telling traditions and comedy as a form of communication. To do so, I will rely on previous research on the connection between First Nations' oral traditions and stand-up comedy, with knowledgeable insights into Māori oral traditions. This is not to conflate First Nations' culture with Māori culture and create a general framework for all Indigenous peoples. Instead, as to my knowledge there is little research on the potential relationship between humour and the Māori oral traditions (a task too great for the scope of this thesis to fulfil), this approach is to facilitate a conversation around Māori story-telling traditions and James' comedy that I began above and will further explore in the next sub-section.

With that being said, First Nations stand-up comedian Don Kelly (Ojibway) explains that some Indigenous peoples have turned to perform stand-up as a means of public storytelling (Kelly 70). This shift is because stand-up comedy "is a form of public address—

one speaker speaking directly to a live audience with a variety of intents and purposes" (French 57). These span from the most benign and trivial concepts, observations, and random thoughts "to the most potent political and social issues of the larger culture" (57). However, regardless of whether it is the multi-faceted observations of Daniel Sloss, or the witty, sometimes non-sequitur one-liners of Mitch Hedberg, stand-up comedians all need to tell some kind of story that captivates an audience enough to evoke laughter. This is to say, that "intrinsic to the role of both 'storyteller' and stand-up is the notion of performance … Both are vernacular art forms, requiring fluency with locally situated knowledges that are particular to the culture in which they operate" (Brodie 8). Here, Ian Brodie highlights that to entertain somebody with a story or to make a person laugh, it is essential to ensure the performance of either stories or comedy is familiar to their audience. By playing into familiar societal aspects, a storyteller or a comedian can increase the audience's "reaction, participation, and engagement" to or with their performance, which is now "performed not *to* but *with* an audience" (5). It is this shared basis of stories and comedy in performance and cultural fluency (familiarity) that makes stand-up comedy a well-suited starting point to situate James' comedy in the Māori oral tradition.

Kristina Fagan (Labrador) echoes this communicative value of humour, whereby the storytelling properties of stand-up comedy allow a performer to "indirectly explore troublesome or contradictory areas of life" with the listener (38-39); or, as Don Kelly puts it: "If you can keep them laughing, they'll keep listening. People who would never walk into a lecture on Native history will walk into a comedy club. … We need to start preaching to the pagans. Do a little converting of our own" (66). Though Kelly's quip about converting pagans may be in jest, he does suggest how humour can "impress … persuade, [and] engage the heart and mind" of its listener in the same manner as the oral traditions (McRae 39). In this sense, Kelly parallels the oral tradition as he argues that a stand-up comedian "can stretch

the story, change the emphasis or revise it based on the audience reaction" (70). In terms of te ao Māori, Ngāti Pōrou leader Dr Apirana Mahuika (1934–2015) echoes this aspect of performativity:

> When you get two people reporting on the same incident they will have different emphases, and different aspects of the story they will tell, and they forget other aspects of the story, not that those other aspects did not occur, but because of their particular interest in what they are observing (qtd. in N. Mahuika, "Closing" 23).

Apirana Mahuika highlights the esoteric nature of the Māori oral tradition, whereby these traditions have a distinct lack of any formal, pre-described structure; yet, if there is any pre-set structure to a story, an orator - much like a stand-up – is free to improvise to expand upon certain aspects of that structure to entertain both themselves and their audience. Be it (stand-up) comedy or oral traditions, both are therefore means for Indigenous cultures to tell their stories in ways that engage audiences and add relevance to what entertains them.

Like the oral traditions, comedy is an essential performative and communicative means to explore many aspects of life. This exploration is even more assisted by the storyteller's ability to bring a story to life. As mentioned previously, Māori oral traditions are highly performative. They are expressive, dynamic, and spirited in their delivery (Ware et al. 46). In this sense, the 'Keeper of Stories' from the First Nation of Na-Cho Nyak Dun (Big River People) Louise Profeit-LeBlanc emphasises that Indigenous stories "are meant to be told, spoken, shared with a listener, with many nuances, sound effects and cadences of language and much pointing of the mouth, the chin and the nose. … all these faces of the one storyteller bring each scene of the story to life" (153). Though resoundingly an oral form, Profeit-LeBlanc's description of native storytelling suggests a high degree of physicality in their oral performance. It is therefore in the spirited and expressively arresting performance

of a storyteller—be they in the oral tradition, on a comedy club stage, or on a television screen—that captures an audience's collective and individual imagination to make them audience laugh.

The 'Shearing Gang - Desert Dream' Sketch

Although James primarily worked in television and successfully embraced the visual possibilities of that form, at its core, his comedy was concerned with storytelling. Consequently, orality was intrinsic to his performance. Indeed, they are still stories, which, as Profeit-LeBlanc suggests are best told aloud, where a written script would fail to do them comedic justice (153). To illustrate how these elements of the Māori oral tradition informed James' comedy and were part of his repertoire, I now turn to the sketch Shearing Gang Tall Story #4 – here on referred to as the 'Desert Dream' sketch ("The Legend" 0:49:30—0:51:17).

The 'Desert Dream' sketch takes place in a wool shed breakroom, where James plays the part of a character recounting a comic story to his co-workers. Although simplistic in its premise, the sketch's oral narrative follows a few fundamentals of storytelling. One of the shearers insists that James "tell us the one about the man in the desert?" He enthusiastically agrees, "Ooh yeah, yeah!" as he wriggles in his chair in anticipation of the story about to be told. At this moment, James' enthusiastic wriggling invites the audience to anticipate the story with the same enthusiasm as he does. This performer-audience dynamic is because there is a shared basis of audience "reaction, participation, and engagement" for storytelling, even on television (Brodie 5). A basis that James plays on in his comedy. Indeed, James outlines for his audience, the setting of the story, a few basic character prototypes within, and the story's main conflict: "There are these three fellas there in the desert during the war. There was this Māori fella, this Pommy fella, and this Yankee. Anyway, they only had one mouthful of water between the lot of them…see, and there was only enough for one fella."

These details may be sparse, but there is enough to evoke a compelling story and, more importantly, the audiences' imagination of what is to come.

James' ability to tell an engaging story is evident as he builds this tension for the inevitable comic closure by expanding on a solution to the soldier's dilemma: "They decided to go to sleep, and the guy who had the best dream, in the morning would get the water." As with any captivating story, the dream's solution plays on the audience's imagination. In this case, the audience's imagination is again anticipatory for both the reveal of each character's dream and James' comedic twist. Such an effect is more likely in oratory forms as they leave far more to the audience's imagination than film or television. However, as the 'Desert Dream' sketch is both an oral story and a televised performance, the visuality of the sketch shows the intimacy of James' oral expression as he shifts eye-contact between the on-screen actors and his at-home audience. This added intimacy allows his audience to feel as if they are in the room, engaging with James as he tells his story. In this way, James successfully engages his audience by incorporating the expressive nature of the oral traditions into his comedy, with the added intimacy permitted by the televisual medium.

In this sense, James adds additional character to his oral performance with "nuances, sound effects and cadences of language and much pointing of the mouth, the chin and the nose," which are representative of the 'Pommy' and 'Yankee' fellas (Profeit-LeBlanc 153). First, he puts on a cockney accent for comic effect when describing the Pommy fella's dream about his favourite London pub: "I had six pints of my favourite beer, ate eight pork pies, spent the night with Cynthia, the barmaid, and generally had an all-round bloody good time, you know what I mean?" During this cockney accent, James' facial structure scrunches as he morphs into this cockney accent, pointing his chin slightly upwards as he takes apparent joy in his portrayal of a cockney man. Moreover, James' oral narrative has an added comedic

element because he exaggerates certain syllables as he slows and speeds up his cadence to enhance the comic degree of his cockney accent.

At the end of the "Pommy" segment, James slightly chuckles to represent how the soldiers of his story reacted, "They all laughed at that one, ae. They thought it was all right." He then continues his story by narrating the "Yankee" dream with a Texan accent: "They had beeves on a spit. They had Coors Beer. They had Willie Nelson playing in the god-damned band, would you believe?" Like the preceding dream, the Yankee's dream adds further characterisation to James' story with the Southern American tropes of barbeque, beer and country music delivered with a drawling accent. Again, this is more than just a matter of vocal tone: James alters his facial structure, relaxing his neck and jaw into his chest as he extends his cadence to reflect the Yankee's Southern drawl and slight overenunciation. James' "Pommy" and "Yankee" accents add to his characters and their respective backgrounds while also reflecting the oral tradition's tendency to add many nuances and facial expressions to the storytelling process.

In the depiction of the above dreams, James ensures his audience is engaged in the story by asking rhetorical questions: "you know what I mean?" and "would you believe?" His invitation to his audience on camera and off, echoes the Māori oral traditions, whereby orators seek to illicit an emotional or physical response to their story. These invitations continue as James returns to his narrator voice, where he again emphasises and reinforces the comic elements of his oral narrative by chuckling when he describes that all the soldiers "laughed at that one, [and] thought it was pretty good, ae." This further rhetorical remark bolsters the feeling of being in the room with James as he readies his audience for the reveal of the Māori Soldier's dream and his comic twist. At this point, James reveals the comic climax of the 'Desert Dream' sketch. The Māori Soldier's dream, or the lack thereof: "Ooo, I never had a dream. I knew you fellas were having a good time, so I got up and drank the

water." James ends his story with an exaggerated chuckle as the other shearers, the taped audience, and, hopefully, the at-home audience laugh at his story. He continues to chuckle until he exclaims, "that crazy Bloody Māori," in a performative state of disbelief at the character's "trickster" cunning as the sketch fades to black.

As seen above, James' argument that the Māori "flair for entertainment" "goes right back to the orators on the marae" is a highly apt description of his comedy (Bourke; qtd in "Comic Genius" 0:19:16—0:19:37). By being full of rich oral narrative, the 'Desert Dream' sketch echoes the storytelling components of the oral legacy (McRae 1). In doing so, it highlights how James' comedy could harness the television medium's efficient means of communication and storytelling and incorporates aspects of these traditions in a highly performative and engaging fashion. James' comedy can therefore be acknowledged as following an important Māori tradition while also being appreciated for making his comic vision his own. However, the oral traditions were not the only Māori traditions within his comedy. In the following section, I will show how James inherited the Māori linage of entertainment during his time with the *Māori Volcanics Showband*.

The Lineage of Māori Entertainment

While Billy T. James is considered one of the greatest Māori entertainers in the history of Aotearoa NZ, he was in no way the first. Even before the televised variety show spectacles were broadcast into homes around Aotearoa NZ, Māori variety acts toured the country. These travelling shows were highly prominent, particularly musical acts, with many popular groups[13] touring during the late 1800s and early to mid-1900s (Charles Royal). These acts—and subsequent future entertainers—have their roots in the whare tapere (house of entertainment): a site of "storytelling, dance, music, and games" (Derby and Grace-Smith).

[13] The Rotorua Māori Choir, the Māori Opera Company, and the Māori Concert Party.

Te Ahukaramū Charles Royal explains that the whare tapere dated back to ancient Polynesia and was a prominent "feature of iwi life" from "the 12th to the 19th century". Though the whare tapere was not necessarily its own "special structure … almost every pā had one," whereby "the [entire] community could meet together and enjoy themselves." Charles Royal expresses the purpose of the whare tapere with the following whakataukī: Kia kawea tātou e te rēhia (Let us be taken by the spirit of joy, of entertainment[14]). Regarding Māori performatives, this whakataukī conveys the importance of entertainment in te ao Māori. Entertainment in the whare tapere is not merely about a means to pass the time, it is instead a means to replenish the spirit with the very performatives – kapa haka, music, the oral tradition - seen in these community spaces. Therefore, Māori entertainment is entrenched in the whare tapere that helped build Māori entertainers' proficiency as they expanded into the many touring troupes that frequented communities around Aotearoa NZ, Australia, and the UK in the late 19th century (Charles Royal).

Accounting for the entire catalogue of Māori touring groups of the era would be a near impossible task. Instead, the tourist guide and entertainer[15] 'Guide Maggie' AKA Margaret Pattison Thom or Mākereti (Maggie) Papakura (Te Arawa, Tūhourangi; 1873-1930) can provide an informative example, not least because she was connected to many of the other Māori performance groups. These include friendships and professional relationships with Sir Apirana Ngata (Ngāti Porou; 1874-1950), who was instrumental in the *Māori Concert Party* that "travelled throughout the countryside to entertain at various villages," and Bishop Frederick Bennett CMG (Ngāti Whakaue; 1871-1950), who led the *Māori Opera Company* that Papakura toured with and drew big crowds overseas (Charles Royal).

[14] Also translated as "Let us be taken by joy and entertainment."
[15] Also, an ethnographer, scholar, Tūhourangi woman of mana.

In her own right, Papakura was a tourist attraction, noted for “[leading] her fellow villagers in performing concert programs at the Geyser Hotel in Whakarewarewa or the Assembly Hall, … often entertaining guests deep into the evening with song, [dance], story, and conversation” (Werry 51-64). Papakura’s performance was as versatile in its form as it was entertaining for her audience (Charles Royal). Therefore, Papakura—and the likes of Ngata and Bennett—signify a shared proficiency for Māori performatives in the early 20th century. An adeptness that would prove true in other Māori performers in the following century to come including Stan Wineera (Ngāti Toa; 1916-1963), Sir Howard Morrison OBE (Te Arawa; 1935–2009), Ana Hato (Ngāti Whakaue, Tūhourangi; 1907–1953), Tui Uru (Ngāi Tahu; 1926–2013), and the *Māori Volcanics Showband*, who had entertained Kiwi audiences for decades before James entered the public eye. This prior history informed James’ reception as a Māori entertainer and provided a lineage he could refer to and build upon.

The *Māori Volcanics Showband*

The *Māori Volcanics* were “renowned for espousing pride in their cultural heritage” as they toured Aotearoa NZ, Australia, and the UK (Karini 11). This pride is emphasised by one of the founding members, Mahora Peters (Ngāti Wai):

> We could have been just called the volcanics, or could have just been the New Zealand volcanics but when you put Māori in it, to us well we always figured that’s really important, we’re saying who we are, where we are from and as ambassadors for the country even a bigger thing (from Higgins qtd. in Karini 11).

Such a deliberate identity marker reinforces the ‘bigger’ idea of a strong lineage of Māori entertainment and entertainers, as seen above with Guide Maggie, the *Māori Concert Party*, and the *Māori Opera Company*. This lineage established a viable platform for Māori performers like the *Māori Volcanics* to share te ao Māori with their audiences and help other up-and-coming talents find their platform. Indeed, “showbands such as the *Māori Volcanics*

were training grounds for talent, and they had to keep their acts refreshed with current material as well as the popular standards and impersonations" (Reid). The *Māori Volcanics* would also prove to be highly influential to Billy T. James' career when he joined them in 1975.

Before James' recruitment, comedy was already central to the *Māori Volcanics*' musical variety act. As *Māori Volcanics*' co-founder Nuki Waaka understood, comedy would create "surprise by changing the pace and changing the rhythm" and make the act more sellable with a more variable and refreshed act (Peters and George 90). The most successful example of the *Māori Volcanics*' comedy prowess was the self-named 'Prince' Tui Teka (Tūhoe; 1937-1985), who became one "of the most renowned comedians of the Māori show band era" (Waretini-Karena 24). Teka would:

> ham it up on stage, his humour - which he, almost self-effacingly, called 'dry' - would sometimes fall flat on purpose. Sometimes it was funny only to him ('hello Butcher, thanks for meating me') but this was part of the set-up [to his musical performance].

This silly, corny humour seemed to rub off on James during his time with the *Māori Volcanics*. While I will expand more on his corniness in the upcoming second chapter, for now, Teka, like James, "had character, personality.… He never tried to hide one ounce of who he was; he was proud - because it was who he was" ("The Great…"). Teka and James would have spent considerable time near one another while touring Australia and Britain with the *Māori Volcanics*. Given this time and proximity, it is not a stretch to say that James would have had the opportunity to learn how to charm an audience like Teka and play into a comic persona. The very same persona that would become the representation of the Trickster Māui "who bluffed charmed his or her way through life" (M. King 514).

Overall, James' time with the *Māori Volcanics Showband* linked him to a lineage of Māori entertainment that dates to the 12th century, which encompasses Māori entertainers, old

and new. As an inheritor of this lineage, James, the *Māori Volcanics*, and other Māori performers have benefitted from the likes of Maggie Papakura, the *Māori Concert Party*, and the *Māori Opera Company.* These early entertainers and troupes helped to forge a viable entertainment form in the Aotearoa NZ, market for Māori on the stage and screen – as the *Māori Volcanics* and James have done for subsequent generations of musicians and comedians. The platform given to the *Māori Volcanics Showband* by this lineage allowed James to learn his craft and "routines intricately. Every inflection, every pause, every chuckle, every step had been honed in hundreds of performances offshore" (Elliott 114).

Te Māori

I opened this chapter with the statement, "there is one essential fact about Billy T. James as both an entertainer and a person: he was Māori." After everything said in the previous sections, I hope this simple statement is much clearer. As a Māori entertainer, James navigated and shared his cultural history, lineage, and most resonating, his humour with a broad audience. He began his career at a time when Aotearoa NZ, needed and was ready for a superstar Māori entertainer to capture the country's hearts and minds.

The Māori renaissance of the 1970s proved to be pivotal to the beginnings of James' career as a comedian. The Māori Land March, Bastion Point, and the Waitangi Tribunal forever changed Aotearoa NZ's cultural and political landscape. Māori became more visible and viable in entertainment, with Don Selwyn being one of the clearest examples. Selwyn paved the way for someone like James to thrive and reach new heights for Māori in entertainment. Moreover, James understood that his comedy and "flair for entertainment" was indebted to the Māori oral traditions, given their shared performative and expressive nature and the reflexivity and adaptability of these traditions (Bourke). As seen in the Desert Dream sketch, he does so in a highly performative, communicative, engaging manner that is

reflective of the oral legacy of Māori (McRae 1). James did all the above with the benefit of introducing visual elements to the mix while ensuring the 'Desert Dream' sketch was still intrinsically oral-focused to place te ao Māori front and centre in his comedy.

James also inherited the Māori lineage of entertainment during his time with the *Māori Volcanics Showband*, which informed his reception as a Māori entertainer. Māori entertainment dates to the whare tapere on the pā, where communities would gather to "meet together and enjoy themselves" with kapa haka, music, and the oral tradition (Charles Royal). However, as of the early 19th century, Māori entertainment expanded to extremely popular and world-travelling touring troupes with the likes of 'Guide Maggie' Papakura. Further expansion of Māori entertainment would occur throughout the early 20th century, the most relevant being the *Māori Volcanics Showband*. James' time with the *Māori Volcanics* also benefitted him as it gave him an opportunity to gain experience in his comedy craft before he entered the public eye, which meant his comic repertoire was more than ready to entertain masses of Kiwis with the silly, corny humour that would follow him throughout his comedy career.

Chapter Two - Billy T. James: Te Comedian

Throughout Billy T. James' career, he was lauded for a comic persona that was as lovable and inviting as it was cheeky and irreverent. Writing about one of James' comic performances, Colin Moore of the *NZ Herald* suggested that "his jokes are so outrageously corny as to be particularly funny" (qtd. in Elliott 150). Moore's review suggests that part of James' persona is a corny (now synonymous with dad jokes) comic style, but he does not expand beyond this vague definition. Concerning humour, the word corny (when regarding jokes) can be defined as "mawkishly old-fashioned: tiresomely simple and sentimental" (Merriam-Webster). This definition suggests that corny humour relies on the tired overuse of a simplistic punchline to create comic relief. With this definition established, the second part of Moore's review becomes even more critical: "Try relating [these jokes] to your friends, however, and you are not likely to get much of a laugh. The jokes need the James' style to succeed" (qtd. in Elliott 150). Unfortunately for comedy scholarship, this is where Moore stops, and he does not elaborate on any specifics of James' style. As Elliott argues, "media criticism of [James] was ignorant of the field in which he operated, and that has been an ongoing problem with the reportage of comedy in New Zealand" (277). Elliott hits on the very crux of this thesis: James is well-remembered even today, but his comedy was often spoken of superficially (even at its peak) and reduced to ill-defined comedy buzzwords, such as corny, cheeky, clown, and comic genius. While these buzzwords do well to describe his comedy—I too will use some of these buzzwords alongside my analysis—their shallowness becomes problematic when they oversimplify James as a comedian.

As such, this chapter will expand beyond the previous reportage of James' comedy to understand his comic style with respect to the broader comedy world. To do so, I will begin with an analysis of the "Morning Talk – The Paper" sketch, a representative example of his

comedy. I then explore James's comic influences—Richard Pryor, Jim Davidson, and Tommy Cooper—to understand how James' persona and comic stylings are rooted in Western comedy conventions, through textual analysis of his sketches situated in their broader biographical context. In doing so, this chapter will characterise James' comic style and account for the comic influences of style and persona that made James and his comedy so beloved by generations of Kiwis in Aotearoa NZ.

The "Morning Talk – The Paper" Sketch

Billy T. James' "Morning Talk - The Paper" ("The Paper") sketch is particularly representative of his style of comedy (*Te Movie* 0:43:29—0:45:42). This sketch is part of the series 'Morning Talk,' a parody of Saturday morning children's television programmes like *Play School* (1972-1990). It adopts this aesthetic with a bold purple title card accompanied by chime-like xylophone music to welcome its audience. The evocation of a children's television programme aesthetic creates a point of reference central to the humour of the sketch, which is largely improvised. In an interview for *Billy T: Te Movie,* Rowley explains that "There isn't [a script], we have got a beginning, middle, and end in our heads…just whack one camera on the two-shot and tell the other two dudes to get ready" (0:44:00—0:44:13). Yet, with the established children's television reference, the overall direction of the sketch's humour and the smaller comic instances in between, can play within and built off this reference for comic effect. Indeed, the overarching comedy of "The Paper" sketch is premised on an exploration of two children's television presenters, Ashley (Rowley) and John (James), trying to obtain marijuana. The comedy here lies in the incongruity between the children's television programme aesthetic and a desire to acquire illicit drugs.

The sketch opens with soft toys and giant dice surrounding James and Rowley. The camera then slowly zooms in as they are sitting on the floor at a coffee table and introduce themselves:

Rowley (red dress shirt): “Hello, I’m Ashley.”

James (black shirt with white Tractor patterns): “Hello, I’m John.”

Rowley: “Hello! (To James cheerily).”

James: “Hello! (To Rowley cheerily).”

(Both turn towards the audience)

Prior, the audience was not aware of Ashley (Rowley) and John’s (James) intentions, but this is quickly and intentionally given away to those with knowledge about marijuana:

Rowley: “Right! What have we got today then, John?” (Turns to James).

James: “Well (clears throat), I’ve brought along some papers.”

Rowley (to audience): “some papers!” (Raises eyebrows with higher-pitched voice)

James: “Yes, here they are (camera zooms in on a yellow pack of Zig-Zag rolling papers) They are sort of special papers. You’ll probably find them on the coffee table in the lounge” (faces audience).

This reveal of the Zig-Zag papers means that an adult audience member of *The Billy T. James Show* should be aware that something is wrong, since cigarette papers are not a prop for children’s television. A knowledgeable audience member, who understands the codes of drug usage to these small in-jokes[16], should be cued in on the final climax of the sketch. This climax is that Ashley (Rowley) and John (James) are using the naïveté of children to acquire marijuana through their children’s television presenter personas.

As the sketch continues, Rowley and James echo the bright and welcoming persona of children’s television to play into the naïveté of children:

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[16] Those who don’t understand these codes and practices may be lost to the escalatory nature of the in-joke.

Rowley (to audience): "Or you can ask Daddy?"

James (to Rowley): "Or Mummy?"

Rowley (shift from Audience to James): "Yes, or Mummy?" (Bright chuckled voice) However, James and Rowley's audience of *The Billy T. James Show* are not children, but adults watching comedy. Herein lies the multi-layered parody of "Morning Talk - The Paper," whereby repetition and audience inclusion are signatures of both comedy (more apparent in certain styles) and various children's television programmes. These shared features make it possible for James and Rowley's comedy to play off the juxtaposition between an adult awareness of drug cues and childhood naïveté to create the necessary escalation for the sketch's eventual comic climax.

The comedy of "The Paper" sketch further escalates as James and Rowley maintain the children's television programme aesthetic and their personas. Rowley introduces the activity as a kid's DIY project: "Right! What are you gonna do with the *papers*? [to audience]." Rowley's inflection on the word "papers" is not only a euphemistic nod to his knowledgeable audience about the true nature of the sketch's illicit premise, but it also reflects how children's television presenters might create a sense of mystery. After which, James (whose presenter persona begins slightly more strait-laced than Rowley's sillier persona) picks up the papers and explains that the first step is to stick two papers together: "They have licky bits, sticky bits on them." However, Rowley interrupts and amplifies his sillier persona for the audience: "Gooey. Sticky, licky bits," with extra emphasis on the final syllables of each word. These juxtaposed personas create incongruity, where the sheer difference between the more strait-man James and the clowning Rowley works to amplify the silliness of Rowley's persona, creating a comic moment for his audience. Moreover, for the knowledgeable audience, these sketch details establish that James and Rowley are going to roll a joint; however, for those not aware, there is still enough incongruity between James, the

comedian, and James, the strait-laced television presenter, to cue them to expect a potential ruse.

The improvisational nature of the sketch becomes more apparent in the penultimate moments. Although James starts out playing his children's presenter persona as the straight man, as the sketch progresses, he sinks deeper into his trademark cheekiness as he improvises the sketch's comic climax:

> Rowley (asking James): "what will you do with it now?"
>
> James (Camera zooms on James' hands): "Well, I'm going to…" (folds joint into a v shape) "…make a little hat" (puts joint on his head and smiles).
>
> (Boisterous background laughter from the recorded studio audience).

As evident by the audience's laughter, James and Rowley have successfully escalated the sketch to comedic heights by turning the central prop of "The Paper" sketch—the joint—into a hat. On a visual level, the mere image of James placing something so small on his head has shifted the comedy of the sketch into the realm of the absurd. As for the sketch's premise—the television presenters obtaining marijuana—the creation of the little hat is a cheeky and unexpected escalation that plays into the naïveté of children. Most children are naïve about the desirability and illicit nature of marijuana, so they will see the joint as only a hat.

James and Rowley's characters understand this naïveté and exploit it as they sign-off the children's television show, which also concludes the sketch's premise:

> Rowley (to the audience [some more intermittent laughter]): "Now, if you think your hats are as good as John's (James), why don't you send them into John and Ashley here at Morning Talk, Piha, Auckland."
>
> James (grinning): "there's a prize for the biggest hat" (Boisterous laugh).
>
> Rowley: "okay, bye" (Title music plays them out as the camera pans backwards).

The "prize for the biggest hat" is not only the most logical incentive James and Rowley's childhood presenters can use to capitalise on the naïveté of children. It is also cheeky. James emphasises this cheekiness with a grin as he revels in the sheer tenacity of their grand ruse to obtain marijuana, and the likelihood that it will work. It is a grin not just for James himself. but a grin that is shared by Rowley, their production staff, and most importantly, the in-the-know audience of *The Billy T. James Show*.

Comedian Jan Maree explains that the sketch "is very New Zealand. We're Pot smokers. … A joint is very Kiwi, and it is very Kiwi for us to make things out of something that they are not, so it appeals to everything Kiwi about us" (*Te Movie* 0:45:49—0:46:02). In this sense, James and Rowley have created a cheeky Kiwi in-joke that encapsulates the ingenuity and drug use that Maree attributes to Aotearoa NZ culture. Therefore, James' comedy in the "Morning Talk - The Paper" sketch is charmingly cheeky and escalates to an absurdist climax, which reflects a childhood naïveté in both his performance and humour. Although "The Paper" is one sketch out of the numerous James would have been part of in *The Billy T. James Show*, it does provide an illustrative introductory example to his style of comedy.

James' Western Comic Influences

With an introductory example of James' comedy established, it is imperative to explore his comic influences. As mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, Matt Elliott argues that Billy T. James' "comic influence came not from Māori oral tradition but from watching English[17] comedians on the stages of the United Kingdom in the 1970s and then the American Rockstar comedians of the 1980s" (Elliott 13). While the first part of Elliott's statement is disproven because of my exploration of James' comedy and the Māori oral

[17] Tommy Cooper is Welsh-born of Anglo-Welsh parentage.

traditions in chapter one, Elliott is correct in noting the UK and US influences on Billy T. James' comedy. In particular, he (with reference to James' interviews) mentions three comedians of influence: Richard Pryor, Jim Davidson, and Tommy Cooper. Although these three comedians do not encompass the scope of James' comic influences, these comedians do provide good insight into his Western influences.

Richard Pryor: The Issue-based Rockstar Comedian

Given the juggernaut that is *Saturday Night Live* (1975-Present) and the international popularisation of stand-up comedy, Billy T. James considers Richard Pryor as a reference point for his comedy. Specifically, Pryor's socially conscious style of "issue-based stand-up" comedy (Elliott 270). This should not come as a surprise, as Pryor received much acclaim, awards, and honours[18] throughout his lifetime, and was one of the most influential comedians of his time and influenced future generations of comedians around the world. For example, Jerry Seinfeld considers him "the Picasso of our profession" (qtd. in Love). Dave Chappelle makes an analogy to the "evolution charts of man, [whereby Pryor] was the dude walking upright. Richard was the highest evolution of comedy" (*Inside the Actor's Studio*). Even British comedian, Eddie Izzard often cites Pryor's influence on her stream-of-consciousness, multiple-persona comedy (qtd. in DeMara). Therefore, this high regard from fellow comedians and the public makes Pryor a significant comic influence for James to incorporate into his comic repertoire and style.

It is hard to sum up Richard Pryor with just one excerpt; however, the first half of his "N**gers vs. the Police" routine can provide an insight into his influence on James' comedy. As the title of this routine suggests, Pryor speaks to the mistreatment of African American people by the police: "Cops put a hurtin' on yo' ass, man, you know? They really degrade

[18] These include the first Mark Twain Prize for American Humor, number one on Comedy Central's list of the one hundred Greatest stand-ups of All Time, one Primetime Emmy, and five Grammy Awards.

you.” Even more so, Pryor highlights how White Americans dismiss this mistreatment: “White folks don't believe that shit, don't believe cops degrade.” This issue is a serious topic, but it is not one Pryor ever shied away from in his comedy. Yet, he still could make his comic treatment of race funny. In this instance, Pryor’s means to create humour was one of his most well-known comedy motifs— his ability to impersonate White America: "Ah, come on, those beatings, those people were resisting arrest! I'm tired of this harassment of police officers!" Here, Pryor slows his cadence, over-enunciates, and ends with a modest amount of hysteria that conveys a strait-laced White woman as they dismiss the possibility of police brutality. While this is an unfortunately common dismissal, this impersonation is so uncanny in its recognisable character portrayal and sentiment within, it becomes comical and therefore humorous.

Moving forward, Pryor highlights how the very same strait-laced White woman above would act if she were pulled over by the police:

White Woman: ‘Hello, Officer Timpson, going bowling tonight?’

Officer Timpson: ‘Yes, nice Pinto you have, hahaha.’

Given the cordial nature of this interaction, Pryor’s above impersonation emphasises that the police are not seen as a threat to the average White American. This cordial nature makes Pryor’s next comparison to how African Americans need to interact with the police even more apparent: “N*gga got to be talkin' 'bout: ‘I am reaching into my pocket for my license.’” There is no cordiality in this interaction. Pryor’s character fears they will be shot, beaten, and potentially killed by the police if they make any sudden movements. A fear that Pryor performs with his slow, purposeful drawn-out delivery. Nevertheless, Pryor still makes this serious routine comic with his character’s final line: “‘cause I don't wanna be no muthaf*ckin' accident!” It is not merely the harshness of the expletive that is funny, but

Pryor's pinpoint comic timing with the suddenness of his delivery compared to the last drawn-out line. Therefore, Pryor's comic treatment of race is both serious in highlighting police brutality against African Americans and its subsequent dismissal by White America, and comic through his varied impersonation, delivery, and articulations.

Pryor's inclusion of oppression, racism, and violence in his comedy is a social critique on the positions, inequalities, and assumptions that face African American people in American society. This position resonated with people as "some of his concert audiences reacted … by yelling back to him affirmations such as, 'that's right, Rich!'" with ruckus applause and loud whoops (Elliott 271). While he was not the first to do so, Pryor's willingness to address race through societal critique was revolutionary for the comedy form. This revolution was for his immediate audience, who would have been able to see representations in his comedy that were previously unseen, thought of as taboo, or risqué. Moreover, Pryor inspired comedians in the same state of oppression, racism, and violence, whereby his comedy became a blueprint to inform comedians like James on how they might develop a comic treatment of race for their own comedic purposes.

The influence of Pryor's comic treatment of race on James' comedy can be seen in the 'Phone Bill' routine, where he compares how a Pākehā person might deal with an unexpected telephone bill versus how a Māori person would do so. To begin, James mimics the voice of a very strait-laced Pākehā man: "Excuse me, there seems to be a minor discrepancy with my account. Can you help fix it?" The Customer Serviceperson simply replies, "Yes, certainly." Here, James' vocal mimicry is remarkably like Pryor's depiction of "very strait-laced white" people in "N**gers v. The Police," where both slow their cadence and over-enunciate in a prim and proper fashion. Moreover, like Pryor, the comic nature behind James' mimicry lays in "the ridiculousness of [his White audience members'] own seriousness … being thrown back at them" (Elliott 271). James then compares the above ridiculous seriousness of the

Pākehā man's call with an adamant Māori man's call: "I didn't make any damn phone calls to Rotorua." This routine's comic nature lies in the sheer difference between the Pākehā man's strait-laced seriousness and the Māori man's adamant defiance. Even more so, James adds a further layer of unexpectedness to his comedy with the emphasis that both the Pākehā and Māori man will get the same result, which further undermines the Pākehā man's seriousness by comically highlighting that sometimes the end does justify the means.

However, James' comparison of Pākehā and Māori is much more than a comedy routine, as he moves beyond the set-up to his greater point that there are two distinct cultures in Aotearoa NZ, and they do things differently—like laughter. First, a Māori laugh, where James chuckles with his whole body and exclaims, "shut up ow!" in response to a hypothetical joke. He then explains to his audience that Māori gets physical when they laugh. While in comparison, James mimics a Pākehā laugh, "HA, HA, HA," with a stunted but loud cadence that emphasises each "HA," and both the 'H' and 'A' sounds with equal emphasis. Again, the sheer difference in the physicality and cadence of laughs make the end to this routine comic. Equally, James' impression here creates humour to end the 'Phone Bill' routine due to the Māori laugh being endearing and accurately true to his comic laugh. Thus, James' mirroring of Pryor's impressions (mimicry) and comic treatment of race as a reoccurring motif in his comedy suggests he saw a valuable means for using comedy as social commentary.

Jim Davidson OBE: The Black and Blue London Pub Comedian

While touring with the *Māori Volcanics* in the mid-1970s, James would have had the opportunity to watch and learn from numerous comedians in the United Kingdom (Elliott 13). During this time, the UK comedy landscape was thriving with the likes of *The Two Ronnies*

(1971-87), *Monty Python's Flying Circus*[19] (1969-74), *Night Out at the London Casino* (1977), and *The Morecambe and Wise Show* (1968-77), among others (Reast). Nevertheless, of all those possible British influences, the Cockney Black/Blue comedian Jim Davidson and the English/Welsh prop comedian/magician Tommy Cooper would prove to be two of the most influential sources on James' comedy.

Jim Davidson rose to prominence as a pub comedian on the London comedy circuit, where he was well-known for his controversial use of vocal mimicry and was regularly accused of relying on racial stereotypes and other offensive sources of humour. Davidson's West-Indian character Chalky White is a striking example of his offensiveness. Indeed, Martyn Wade called out Davidson's appearance in the BBC series *Seaside Special* for using this character. Wade commented that Davidson "had already won first prize for lack of taste with crude racist jokes tracing the adventures of a black [West-Indies] man whose nickname was Chalky." Regardless, Davidson was still prominent on BBC when James was touring the UK with the *Māori Volcanics*. James himself states, "I find that cockney humour funnier than the northern stuff. Davidson can get a bit rough, but he really appeals to me." (Elliott 90–91). With such a comment, James suggests admiration for Davidson's more offensive comedy, but also an understanding of the possible caused offence.

One of Jim Davidson's infamous Chalky White routines is 'Chalky's Motor,' where he depicts this character after a night out in the pub:

> Chalky White (bad West-Indies accent): 'Alright, no. Hi Everybody' (Davidson mimes, smoking a joint and drunkenly wobbling).
>
> Davidson (as self): He lays down in the middle of the road, making out he was ill, so some nice kind English gentleman would stop and give him a lift home. Woah oh!

[19] As well as *And Now for Something Completely Different* (1971) and *Monty Python and the Holy Grail* (1975)

> Mistake! He's laying there in the road. A car came around the corner like this: 'vvv vrrrm vrrrm *BADUM BADUM* vvv mmm.'
>
> Chalky White: 'I've been run over in stereo.'
>
> Davidson: "A Car came the other way 'vvv vrrrm vrrrm *BADUM BADUM* vvv mmm.'"
>
> Chalky White: 'I said, I'm getting fed up with this.'
>
> Davidson: "A witness said: 'it is the first time the road's tarmac and the cat's eyes have been put in at the same time there.'"

There are three problematic aspects of Davidson's comedy in this routine: He is putting on a bad West-Indies accent while perpetuating a negative West-Indian stereotype about heavy drug use and mocking the darkness of the West-Indian skin tone. This offensive nature of the 'Chalky's Motor' routine follows Davidson's career, even up to 2018 on *Piers Morgan's Life Stories*: "When I did that Chalky stuff, it was about an accent. The only reason he was black was because I could do the accent.' … It was all about accents. It was not about black people. It was about watching people" (qtd. in Deen). Davidson's defence aside, what can be said about Davidson and James is that they both share the performative techniques of mimicry and character comedy— regardless of potential offence—and this is where we can best see Davidson's influence on James.

James' use of Davidson-esque mimicry and character comedy can be seen in the sketch *New York Requests,* where he demonstrates a gloomier side of his comic repertoire ("The Legend" 0:00:07—0:01:20). As the sketch opens, James is facing a brick wall in a nice suit with a rose on his lapel. As music begins to play, he shows off his singing prowess that earned him his spot in the *Māori Volcanics*, with a rendition of *'New York, New York'* by Frank Sinatra. However, after he finishes singing, his face becomes more serious as he is

given a military-style hat by a sad-looking man who begins a dejected slow clap. While taking off his suit jacket, James remarks (in a Mexican accent), "I tell you what, Diego, these damn last requests are starting to become a pain in the bunt, you know what I mean." He then wields a revolver as Diego aims a Gatling gun at the man. James, still in character, orders the execution of the sad-looking man: "Ready! Aim!" as the scene fades to black.

What makes *New York Requests* comic is the simple but effective shift from a popular song to a Mexican firing-squad execution. This tone-shift comes with such "brevity and speed" that any audience expectation will burst into "sudden bathos," whereby their only valid form of response to this incongruent shift to gallows humour will be comic relief (Critchley 4-6). Moreover, James adds to the comedy of *New York Requests,* with his vocal mimicry of a Mexican General. This sketch would have been just as comic if James were only dressed up in character. However, James shows off his multi-discipline talent by putting on a Mexican accent that further engrosses his audience in the sketch. His accent is highly caricatured but recognisable enough to convey the character he sought to embody. Nevertheless, it pushes the boundaries of what is comic and what is offensive. Thus, Davidson's influence can be seen in James' tendency for mimicry in his character comedy, and his willingness to lean on offensive materials in these characters for comic purposes.

As seen by the above, both Richard Pryor and Jim Davidson influenced James' comic treatment of race. Yet, they dealt with the comic treatment of race in vastly distinct ways. Pryor uses his humour to explore racial and societal issues that faced the African American people at that time. When he chose to deal with White Americans, his comedy was conscious of highlighting inequalities and other societal assumptions between them and various minority peoples. In contrast, Davidson uses his humour to poke fun at various people indiscriminately, ironically being discriminatory in the process. Davidson relies on racial stereotypes to make other people 'the butt' of his jokes, highlighting differences that further

act to reinforce these stereotypes. Nevertheless, both still significantly influenced James' comic treatment of race. In one sketch, James' comedy can mirror Pryor's socially conscious issue-based comedy; however, in another, his comedy can mirror Davidson's reliance on stereotypes for a laugh (this discussion of James' comedy will be shown in more detail in chapter four).

Tommy Cooper: The Larger than Life Fail Magician

By the time James would have encountered the fail-magician and comedian Tommy Cooper, Cooper was well-established as one of the UK's most beloved comedians. So much so, that public figures from Sir Lenny Henry CBE to the 'Iron Lady' Margaret Thatcher (1925-2013) would mimic his acts and catchphrases (*Tommy Cooper: In His Own Words*). Cooper had a commanding presence on the stage and screen with his massive frame and even more boisterous persona, made more comic with the "trademark fez." Cooper would perform "studiedly inept magic [with] an air of impending anti-climax if not outright catastrophe" of hilarious proportions (Hanks). Despite the apparent chaos and disorganisation of Tommy Cooper's magic set, this chaos was very much by design. Cooper was, in fact, a member of the prestigious Magic Circle and drew upon his talents to meticulously design his chaos down to every minute detail. He would practise his tricks on his children to ensure those tricks had a sense of childlike wonder to them, and he treated the studio camera like the at-home audience. All of which ensured his persona, chaos, and failed magic were conveyed accurately and humorously.

Cooper's persona, controlled chaos, and skilled magician-ship are on display in the 'Egg in a Bag' trick ("Tommy Cooper"). This trick opens with Cooper foreshadowing its anti-climax, "there is a very famous egg in bag trick (showing the audience an egg, the bag, and then checks his nails). Now, this trick starts very slowly, and it gradually peters out." By design, Cooper chuckles at first, his whole body bouncing until, at last, his laugh vocalises,

and he exclaims, "Oh, dear, oh, dear" as he laughs at his own undermining of the trick. However, as Cooper and his audience know, he will certainly fail at the 'Egg' magic trick because this is in keeping with his comedy shtick. As the trick is about to performed, Cooper leans into the audience's knowledge of his schtick and routine by delaying what they expect—a dreadfully funny display of failure. He goes on a long-winded tangent about himself walking down the street[20], meeting a chicken, ba-gawking at one another, and both being arrested for 'fowl' language. This tangent and its lousy pun are obviously to the chagrin of his audience, as a heckler yells something unintelligible at him.

After this intentional tangent, Cooper finally starts the 'egg' trick in earnest by reiterating the notability of the trick as he holds the egg up in his right hand, and the bag at his waist in his left hand. He then emphasises the need for the audience to pay attention to the egg: "Watch it very closely (puffing up bag with the egg in hand, then quickly pulling it out). This egg will vanish before your very eyes (panning the egg to his right then to centre), and you won't have the slightest clue where it's gone." What Cooper has set up here is a classic misdirection trick that is common in any magician's arsenal. In this trick, a magician should make the egg "vanish before your very eyes," by distracting the audience with hand movement and patter to focus on where the egg should be but move it elsewhere. However, as Cooper is fumbling and overworking the bag, he un-stealthily 'hides' the egg under his left armpit in the clear view of his audience. He feigns befuddled shock at the sudden uproar of audience laughter as he looks around for answers. However, very quickly, Cooper pipes up with childlike excitement:

> Look, it has gone (turning the bag inside out), and you don't know where it has gone, do you? Where? Under my arm? (Flapping his right arm) Nooo! Other one? (Turns

[20] Also, some meta-comedy in the set-up by pointing out the comedy trope.

his back on the audience and again flaps his right arm) No, look at that. This one (flaps his left hand by his waist). How's that?

Cooper holds out his left arm outwards, and, to the audience's disappointed groans, the egg does not fall from under his arm. Nevertheless, to Cooper's triumphant glee "Aha" and an overconfident grin, he had tricked the audience with his successful magic that is incongruent with the audience's expectation of failure. The audience is still delighted, giving Cooper a worthy round of applause for successfully disappearing the egg. However, it is now time for Cooper to reveal the egg: "And, you put your hand inside the bag, and you bring the egg out to a thunderous applause," but as much as Cooper fumbles with the bag, no egg is found. He awkwardly chuckles and finishes the trick in expected catastrophe as he is still fumbling with the bag and looking around the stage for the egg: "It is not my night, is it? I've always been unlucky. Even as a little boy, I was unlucky. I had a rocking horse once, and it died." An ending that receives the signposted "thunderous applause" as Cooper laughs. As evident in the 'Egg in the Bag' trick, Cooper revels in catastrophe with such triumphant childlike glee that it is hard not to laugh, and this is where we can best see Cooper's influence on James.

The influence of Tommy Cooper's revelling in chaos is frequently seen in *The Billy T. James Show* and his rascal persona. In the "Guide to Duck Shooting" sketch, James revels in a catastrophe that does not truly occur till the end of the scene ("Duck Hunting"). Before this catastrophe, the sketch opens with a picturesque shot akin to Aotearoa NZ's longest-running television series *Country Calendar* (1966-present). The camera then pans from a wide bird's-eye view and onto James—kitted out in full hunters' gear with a single-barrelled shotgun over his shoulder—as he monologues: "Oh, Kia ora, Kia ora! … I'm going to clue you, fellas, into the art of getting a feed with the least amount of work – Duck Shooting!" These opening few sentences and appearance are quick and efficient in setting up the simple premise of the sketch. In the meantime, James gives the sketch time to build up comic tension with a series

of tips that are smaller jokes to maintain audience interest as he delays the inevitable catastrophe. The first tip is, “Now, first you gotta know when the shooting season starts, which is about now, I suppose.” In the latter half of this line, James’ delivery is foolish, as if he only realises it is shooting season at that moment. He then reinforces his character’s foolishness with his second tip: “Oh! And you also gotta have a licence.” In a silent, physically visual gag, James pats down his jacket to try to find his licence, but to no avail, so he just shrugs his shoulders and continues with his duck shooting. The folly James displays here is much the same as when Cooper bumbles his way through the set-up to his magic tricks. Even though there is relentless silliness to both Cooper’s tricks and James’ sketch, the audience is still held in a state of tension as it is apparent in the premise of the sketch that their fool character will further make a fool of themselves (or others).

The “Duck Shooting” sketch continues with more tips meant to outwit other hunters to get their spot and alcohol. At one point, James’ hunting dog is revealed to be a tiny chihuahua shaking in his rucksack. All these moments enhance the comic tension James holds over his audience, until he reveals and revels in the inevitable catastrophe they know is coming (through prior experience of watching James’ comedy). However, before this reveal, he again heightens the comic tension by complaining about hunters who retrieve their kills with thigh-waders, which means other hunters must stop shooting. In turn, James’ rascal persona comes to the fore, as his character shares a tip to prevent thigh-wading hunters from interrupting further. Rowley is dressed in thigh-waders and calls out to James while he wades into the lake:

“Oh, Hi there! I say…is the pond very deep?”

James (in a kayak/canoe): “Nah, nah! You’ll be all right!”

Rowley replies: “Thanks very much!”

Rowley takes one step forward, and, in a very catastrophic and slapstick fashion, he falls face-forward into the pond and is completely submerged in the chorus of both the recorded studio audience and James' laughter. Rowley then sits back up in the water, spitting water out of his mouth, until he yells at James:

"I thought you said the pond wasn't really deep!"

James replies: "It only comes up to here (Miming to his stomach) on the ducks."

James' one-to-one comparison of a duck's anatomy to a human being's stomach is an absurdist joke that allows him and his audience to revel in the catastrophic slapstick nature of his rascal persona; however, the joke itself is delivered quite wryly in a prototypical corny 'dad-joke' fashion. Indeed, James has a similar triumphant glee on his face to Cooper, as he is "amused by the ridiculousness of him and his audience finding it funny in the first place" (Elliott 102). This amusement underlines his charming rascal persona as he pulls one over Rowley's character and, more importantly, his at-home audience. He makes people laugh at corny jokes that are not funny themselves, but the idea that they are funny makes them funny. Therefore, Cooper's influence on James can be seen throughout his sketch in his embrace of chaos and triumphant glee at his own rascal persona.

Beyond the comparison with Tommy Cooper's "Egg in a bag trick' and Billy T. James' "Guide to Duck Shooting" sketch, Cooper and James also share one other important attribute: an exaggerated and distinct laugh for comic effect. For James, his signature and iconic laugh was the most recognisable aspect of his comic persona. James states that he "learned from [Cooper] that people could get away with anything if it was done in the right way… he had such a versatile face, he could make people laugh without any dialogue at all" (Elliott 90-91). Cooper's laugh is very much part of this versatility and suggests this James' laugh for comic effect may have come from him watching Tommy Cooper. In a similar

means to Cooper, Peter Rowley emphasises that James "could just do that laugh, and people would crack up. … No words, just a laugh" (Funny As (S1E3) 02:46—02:50).

However, as James points out "a lot of people don't understand why the laugh is so funny. Most Maori have it, especially where I come from" (qtd. in Elliott 253). As Lynn Matthews (James' partner) reveals, "The laugh ... that wasn't Bill's. He didn't laugh like that off stage. That came from Charlie Te Hau" (102). Te Hau was a fellow member of the *Māori Volcanics* during James' time with them, and as Matthews states, they were not only bandmates but "they [also] spent a lot of time as roommates and Bill picked [the laugh] up from there" (102). Elliott notes that, while Te Hau's laugh was the basis for James' signature laugh, he did use "some comic exaggeration to make it his own [and] It would become Billy's greatest onstage asset" (102). James' chuckle was a valuable means to build rapport because it was "irresistibly infectious, [and] he would use the laugh to break the ice of audiences or elevate his antics to greater heights of hilarity" (102). Like Cooper, the mere sound of James' chuckle became a quick and highly efficient means of creating audience laughter. In turn, he could get his audience to laugh almost immediately, taking his audience along with him through even the most absurd or serious subjects (Brodie 5). Therefore, following Cooper's example, James' adapted laugh was his way of making "people laugh without any dialogue at all," allowing him to build rapport with his infectious laughter.

Moreover, by adapting Charlie Te Hau's laugh, James could define his comic persona. Stand-up comedy director Chris Head explains that "audiences don't laugh at material, they laugh with or sometimes at, the person who is performing" (4). As Elliott explains, it was James' adapted chuckle that "gave his developing comedy persona a combination of cheekiness and naïveté, simplifying his enjoyment of a corny joke [by] being amused by the ridiculousness of him and his audience finding it funny in the first place"

(102). As such, James established his comic persona well before he reached the heights of *Radio Times* and *The Billy T. James Show.* The laugh helped to create a persona that was non-threatening in its almost youthful cheekiness, naïveté, and corny ridiculousness. In much the same way as Cooper, James' adaptation of Te Hau's laugh helped characterise his 'infectious' comic persona that would prove omnipresent throughout his successful television sketch-comedy career.

Te Comedian

By situating James in his wider comic context, we can come to better understand his comic style, and how he operated as an observer and performer of comedy. Elliott's suggestion that James was influenced by comedians from America (Richard Pryor) and the United Kingdom (Jim Davidson and Tommy Cooper) is astute. James was a student of comedy, and, by watching comedians like Pryor, Davidson, and Cooper, he came to understand what made their acts comic while adding certain aspects of their acts to his comedy pursuits: from Pryor's socially aware comic treatment of race, Davidson's offensive racial stereotypes, and Cooper's chaotic cheekiness, each of these influences helped to pave James' style of comedy seen in "The Paper," "Phone Bill," "New York Requests," "Duck Shooting," and other sketches in *The Billy T. James Show*. Indeed, some of the most definable characteristics of his comedy style— treatment of race, signature laugh, and charmingly corny, rascal persona— can be understood as influenced by a trio of previously established comedians representing a broader school of Western comedy and humour. This indicates the comic style that makes James' jokes succeed is nothing new. He was simply an incredibly talented comedian, who mastered his repertoire and had an indelible charm that captivated his audience. It is therefore apparent from the previous chapters that James has definable Western influences and definable Māori influences. Each influence exists

independently in James’ comedy but also has underlying intersectionality that helps his comedy speak across race and cultures. This comedy intersectionality can best be described as comic hybridity—with James, a comic hybrid.

Chapter Three - Billy T. James: Te Comic Hybrid

As the product of multiple comic traditions and conventions (Māori culture and Aotearoa NZ more generally, American culture, the U.K., and Irish[21] cultures), James' comedy can be considered a form of comic hybridity: a specific form of hybridity that focuses on the integration of multiple culture's comedy into one. For James, his comic hybridity is centred on how the comic influences noted above interplay with one another and the way he uses the resulting comedy to comment on a post-colonial Aotearoa NZ. This interplay is most evident within his comic treatment of race and culture, given that James' influences are from both his direct coloniser (Pākehā) and colonised (Māori) groups. To establish what it means to think of James as a comic hybrid, this chapter will begin by unpacking the postcolonial concepts of third space, hybridity, and mimicry with close reference to Homi K. Bhabha. Second, it will reframe hybridity in terms of comic hybridity and mimicry in terms of comic mimicry. Finally, it will apply these reframed theories to the' "Te News" sketch to understand how comic hybridity and comic mimicry encapsulate James' relationship with the coloniser (Pākehā), through humour.

Homi K. Bhabha's Theory of Hybridity and Mimicry

Bhabha's theory of hybridity denotes a cultural phenomenon (within a colonial context), whereby one culture incrementally adopts the cultural aspects of another culture they co-exist with, translating these aspects into the terms of their own culture to form a new cultural hybrid ("Signs" 160). Specifically, he articulates this hybridity in the postcolonial

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[21] Though not included in this thesis, James' comedy included some depictions of Irish people, mostly rooted around their accent, the Troubles, and stereotypes around alcohol use.

sphere, where colonised peoples become a hybrid of their own cultural identity and the cultural identity of the coloniser. To elucidate this point, Bhabha provides the example of colonised peoples' conversion to Christianity as a cultural hybrid:

> It is the scenario, played out in the wild and wordless wastes of colonial India, Africa, the Caribbean, of the sudden, fortuitous discovery of the English book [The Bible]. It is, like all myths of origin, memorable for its balance between epiphany and enunciation. The discovery of the book is, at once, a moment of originality and authority, as well as a process of displacement (144).

Throughout colonial states, the Bible was read and disseminated into multiple languages, with Missionaries attempting (and mostly succeeding) to convert colonised peoples to Christianity. This conversion "make[s the Bible's] presence culturally and politically authoritative" in colonial states, whereby converted colonised peoples will more readily accept colonial law (161). However, as Bhabha emphasises with a quote from a Missionary, colonised people's conversion to Christianity was not always complete and overriding: "In embracing the Christian religion they never entirely renounce their superstitions towards which they always keep a secret bent...there is no *unfeigned, undisguised* Christian among these Indians" (163). By retaining these beliefs, Indian people who did convert to Christianity kept "some elements of [their] Indian/Hindu tradition[s, which] would linger on in these communities for generations" (Singh 9). Therefore, Bhabha's example of Indian Christian converts[22] shows how a cultural hybrid can form when two cultures collide in a post-colonial state.

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[22] The Christian-convert cultural hybrid is also present among Māori: i.e., the Rātana Church is a Christian denomination founded by "Tahupōtiki Wiremu Rātana brought together the dispossessed remnant of many Māori tribes and inspired them with his religion – and his politics" (Newman).

As seen by the above, the process of hybridisation requires the cultural hybrid to negotiate themselves between two cultures, whereby they retain aspects of both. Indeed, Bhabha posits that “the cutting edge of translation and negotiation” between the colonised and coloniser cultures occurs in an “in-between…space,” which he labels as “a Third Space” (“Cultural Diversity and Cultural Differences”). This space “makes the structure of meaning and reference an ambivalent process”. As Bhabha argues, “all cultural statements and systems are constructed in this contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation,” and it is the “Third Space…which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized, and read anew”. In other words, “Third Space” intervenes, disrupts, and challenges “the historical identity of culture” that is maintained “in the national tradition of [a] Western nation” and allows for colonised cultures to “construct their culture from the national text” and translate them into “liberatory signs of a free people.” Thus, Bhabha’s “Third Space” is the translatory site of hybridisation and its vital negotiations of cultural meaning, and, in doing so, this space positions hybridity and mimicry as mechanisms for resistance and empowerment in a post-colonial state.

One such instance of colonial resistance through hybridity in the “Third Space” is evident by the West Indies Cricket team. After independence from colonisation and “in the inevitable integration [of the West Indies] into a national community, one of the most urgent needs, sport, and particularly cricket, has played and will play a great role” in creating the modern West Indies nation (Bhabha “Cultural Diversity”; James 251). The West Indies[23] were heavily colonised by European nations (France, Great Britain, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Spain) from the 17th through the 19th century. Of all these European colonisers, the British had a near consistent presence from the 1600s until 1963, when the

[23] Composed of thirteen independent island countries and eighteen dependencies and other territories.

West Indies Federation was dissolved by the British. Such was the British presence, that the distinctly British sport of cricket became widely popular in the West Indies, and a point of positive race relations and racial integration. However, soon the West Indies team dominated world cricket in the 1970s and 80s. During a fifteen-year-span, the West Indies did not lose a test series and beat their former colonial masters, England, in the 1980-81, 1985-86, and 1989-90 tours (Lister). The success of the West Indies Cricket team became a source of cultural pride for the West Indies people, bringing "a nation of cricket lovers … to its feet [and allowed them] to stop apologising for being West Indian" (Lister 257). As such, by "clearing their way with bat and ball, West Indians at that moment had made a public entry into the comity of nations" (James 261). As seen in the West Indies, creating a cultural hybrid does not mean colonised peoples have successfully been 'dominated.' Instead, it is a means to exert symbolic power over their former colonial masters. Hybridity, therefore, allows the adopting culture to adapt and strengthen their own cultures' identity with "some crystallization of national ethics, mode and code of behaviour [that] will emerge" in the face of the challenges of living in a post-colonial society (254).

In terms of the adaptation of one's culture through cultural hybridisation, Bhabha positions hybridity as a tool for "the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal (that is, the production of discriminatory identities that secure the 'pure' and original identity of authority)" ("Signs" 154). In this sense, hybridity allows oppressed peoples to disavow the myths of purity, race, religion, and hierarchal cultural assumptions that colonial authorities use to justify the colonisation and subsequent domination of Indigenous peoples. These hierarchal assumptions are essential to creating the identity behind colonial powers, in that they create the supposed superiority of the coloniser that differentiates them from the colonised (154). However, Bhabha explains that hybridity allows Indigenous peoples to replicate the same hierarchical "meaning and symbols" that enunciate

this supposed superiority ("Cultural Diversity"). In the case of the West Indies cricket team, they repeated a sporting hierarchy in cricket with multiple tour wins against England, which forced the World to re-evaluate the national standing of the West Indies on the global stage (James 261). This re-evaluation occurs because the repetition of the coloniser by the colonised "unsettles the mimetic and narcissistic demands of colonial power" by re-implicating the same colonial "identifications," normalisation, and hierarchal assumptions used to justify oppression and colonisation (Bhabha, "Signs" 154). In doing so, this re-implication calls into question the very justification and authority for colonisation "in strategies of subversion that turn the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power" (154). By turning this gaze back on the colonial powers, colonised peoples can force a conversation about the validity of colonial powers and reject colonial authorities' hierarchal assumptions. Bhabha's theory of hybridity thus describes a "strategic" tool for Indigenous peoples to disavow, undermine, re-implicate, and subvert the colonial powers that oppress them, and the assumptions used to justify this oppression (154).

Building on the notion of hybridity, Bhabha's theory of mimicry is even more relevant to James' comedy. Mimicry is an effect of hybridity – and therefore an extension of "Third Space" – where colonised peoples imitate the cultural markers, the "language, dress, politics, or cultural attitude of their colonisers" (Bhabha "Cultural Diversity"; Singh 1). These markers distinguish specific cultures from one another even within a single country or state, i.e., the Welsh, Scots, Gaelic, and English languages within the United Kingdom. Bhabha positions mimicry as a subversive strategy that "problematizes the signs of racial and cultural priority [cultural markers], so that the 'national' is no longer naturalizable" ("Mimicry" 128). In the context of colonial states, the naturalisable is the "pure and original identity of authority" that create a racial and cultural hierarchy (Bhabha, "Signs" 154). By naturalising the national, these colonial states present dominant and oppressive frameworks of their law,

common good, and religious beliefs as 'Natural law.' This naturalisation allows them to maintain an authority over "all human beings" that functions as if it were unimpeachable (Murphy). Therefore, it is of the utmost importance for Indigenous peoples to denaturalise the national because their beliefs are seen as unnatural by their colonisers, who would suppress these beliefs to further their colonial authority as 'Natural law.'

Given the oppressive and dominant frameworks within the coloniser-colonised relationship, Bhabha explains that Indigenous peoples can unsettle these frameworks by becoming a mimic of their colonisers. This unsettling occurs when a mimic imitates the dominant cultural markers ("language, dress, politics, or cultural attitude") behind the national framework, which makes them "a reformed, recognizable Other, as *a subject of a difference that is almost the same, but not quite"* (Singh 1; Bhabha, "Mimicry" 126). It is this othering in a "same, but not quite" fashion that allows the mimic to mirror the ambivalence of these cultural markers by "continually produc[ing] its slippage, its excess, its difference" (126). In this sense, the mimic exposes the contradictions of the coloniser by becoming a mirror of them to mock and undermine their inconsistencies. It is "from this area between mimicry and mockery" that the coloniser can become "threatened by the displacing gaze of its disciplinary double" (127). This threat is because the "almost the same, but not quite" doubling of colonial power "transform[s this power] into an uncertainty" by exposing the ease of its imitability (127). By demonstrating how the processes and behaviours of colonial power are imitable, mimicry refutes power's claim to be natural by demonstrating how those frameworks belong to the realm of historical contingency that "can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricized, and read anew," rather than a fixed universal 'Natural law' (Bhabha "Cultural Diversity"). In doing so, mimicry undermines the foundations of colonisation by "mock[ing] its power to be a model" of unimpeachable authority and thereby exposes the "artificiality of all symbolic expressions of power" (129; 128; Singh 1). By replicating the

cultural markers of the colonial framework, acts of mimicry expose the shortcomings, oversights, and contradictions of dominant colonial frameworks to undermine the very existence of the colonial model itself.

In addition to highlighting the shortcomings of dominant frameworks, mimicry can expose the coloniser's role in creating the colonial discourses that become dominant frameworks. Bhabha posits that mimicry creates "figures of a doubling, the part-objects of a metonymy of colonial desire which alienates the modality and normality of those dominant discourses" ("Mimicry" 129). In other words, the mimic's doubling brings into question the normalisation of the assumptions that underlay authoritarian colonial discourses (129). Bhabha emphasises that through this mimicry and subsequent questioning of colonial discourse, Indigenous peoples will "emerge as 'inappropriate' colonial subjects," in that they become a mirror of the coloniser (129). To this end, Bhabha explains that it is mimicry's "repetition of [the] *partial presence*" of the coloniser that "articulates those disturbances of cultural, racial, and historical difference that menace the narcissistic demand of colonial authority" (129). It is the "same, but not quite" repetition within mimicry that allows the mimic to become an uncanny mirror of the coloniser and expose the coloniser's presence in the creation of the "cultural, racial, and historical difference[s]" that they base their authority on. Within Bhabha's theory of "Third Space," this exposure emphasises that "all cultural statements and systems are constructed in [a] contradictory and ambivalent space of enunciation" ("Cultural Diversity"). In doing so, this emphasis articulates that the differences that justify colonisation are constructed by colonial frameworks to validate the oppression of others, while being filled with contradictions and hypocrisies. Therefore, through mimicry and "Third Space", Indigenous peoples can reveal the coloniser's presence in informing colonial discourses and emphasise the need to examine the validity and normalcy of these dominant frameworks.

Bhabha's theory of hybridity and mimicry is a strategic tool for Indigenous peoples in the postcolonial realm. Of course, Bhabha's theories may run into other variables that may reduce their practicality in every post-colonial state. However, for Māori scholar, Paul Meredith (Ngāti Kaputuhi, Ngāti Maniapoto, Pākehā), Bhabha's above theory of hybridity within "Third Space" has:

> considerable implications for any future reinventing of Aotearoa/New Zealand and any reconstructed sense of nationhood and identity. They offer the possibility of a cultural politics that avoids a 'politics of polarity' (Bhabha 1994) between Maori and Pakeha. Instead, they are centered on the adaptation and transformation of culture and identity predicated within a new inclusive postcolonial Aotearoa/New Zealand community that seeks to reconcile and overcome the embeddedness of past antagonisms (3-5).

This is to say, Bhabha's theory of hybridity (and mimicry) is a resource for Indigenous peoples to adjust to a post-colonial society with aspects of their culture, custom, and practices not only intact but potentially empowered. This potential empowering of traditional aspects is essential for keeping Indigenous communities alive and well in an ever-changing world by adding resistance and opposition to the historically oppressive frameworks within the colonised and coloniser's relationship. In doing so, as Meredith contends, "postcolonial Aotearoa/New Zealand" can become a hybridised society that equally value te ao Māori and Pākehā ideals, but to do so, our colonial history must be reconciled with, through the treaty settlement process, and legislation to fulfil the promises set out in Te Tiriti o Waitangi. However, before the reconciliation process is possible, Pākehā must first become aware of this colonial history in a manner that they understand, which I contend was a component of James' comedy. With the above in mind, for James' comedy, the target of his hybridity, mimicry—and their capacity to disavow and undermine— is firmly on the British colonial

complex that oppressed Māori and colonised Aotearoa NZ. However, to fully understand how James uses Bhabha's postcolonial theory of hybridity and mimicry, it is necessary to reframe it in terms of comedy.

Reframing Hybridity to Comic Hybridity and Mimicry to Comic Mimicry

Following Bhabha, comic hybridity can be understood as the creation of a comic identity that mixes multiple comic stylings and influences into one comedy repertoire. For James, this was the combination of his Māori and Western influences. With that in mind, there is one phrase of Bhabha's theory of hybridity, "discriminatory identity effects," that needs to be rethought in terms of comedy ("Signs" 154). This necessary rethinking is because "discriminatory identity" denotes the negative connotation of prejudice and bigotry by which colonial powers enact their authority in Bhabha's initial theory (154). While the comic treatment of discrimination in this sense is present in various comedy stylings, the key to comic hybridity is slightly different. It is concerned with how distinct cultures used different stylings of comedy in different combinations and contexts to reflect their local conditions and make their respective audience's laugh. These stylings are a point of differentiation that adds a specific local and cultural "flavour"[24] to their comedy while also being marketable globally (Taylor 9).

With hybridity reframed as comic hybridity, it is now possible to apply Bhabha's theory of mimicry to understand James' comedy. Bhabha's original theory of mimicry involves Indigenous peoples mimicking the cultural markers of their colonisers to undermine colonial authority. In comedy, this mimicry is often greatly exaggerated for comic effect, where it satirically mirrors specific markers and behaviours of a subject to highlight their inconsistencies. In this way, comedians like James can satirically imitate specific markers and

[24] "It's as if chicken is the joke, but the sauce or the unique flavours of the joke's humour come from various cultures. You've got tandoori chicken vs. chicken cacciatore vs. a McChicken" (Taylor 9).

behaviours to undermine powerful entities through humour (Bhabha, "Mimicry" 128; Morreall 94-95). This capability is particularly true of sketch comedy (James' main field of comedy). As Marx explains, sketch comedy shows "like Chappelle's Show 'experiment with formal conventions and comedy taboos that critique dominant representations of race and gender'" and subvert specific power structures and cultural, political, and personal representations (3). The ability to critique makes sketch comedy of particular use to underrepresented peoples to explore their experiences through comedy and make their voices heard.

Indeed, within James' comedy and critique, one use of his mimicry focuses on the markers of the coloniser. In these scenarios, he imitates specific cultural markers of Pākehā, such as their "language, dress, politics, or cultural attitude," as well as, systems and institutions with a satirical edge (Singh 1). Through this satirical mimicry, James' humour can expose the realities of colonialism, racism, and other forms of power to his Pākehā audience (Bhabha, "Mimicry" 126). This exposure is done through mimicry by continually producing the inconsistencies, quirks, and hypocrisies of the above markers, systems, and institutions of power (126). For example, James' Dexter Fitzgibbons character from *Radio Times* (1980-1983) is a hyper-mimicked "oh-so British compere," who highlights the self-serious snootiness of the posh accent in a wide-lapel tuxedo, while residing over un-serious comic-proceedings (NZ On Screen, "Radio Times"). In this sense, James' satire and mimicry are "the displacing gaze of [a] disciplinary double" because of his ability to make his Pākehā audience members laugh at their own inconsistencies, quirks, and hypocrisies (Bhabha, "Mimicry" 126-127).

Moreover, James' mimicry of the coloniser also involves a second layer that addresses how colonial powers represent Indigenous peoples. This application of mimicry in James' comedy invokes the prejudiced context and intentions of colonial representations of

Indigenous peoples through topics such as substance abuse, criminality, poverty, and laziness. Such representations are overwhelmingly demeaning and damaging and lead to racial biases and oppression. However, the process of mimicry exaggerates these stereotypes to such a degree that it “articulates those disturbances of cultural, racial, and historical difference” that predicate their creation and normalisation (Bhabha, “Mimicry” 129). As Marx emphasises, "comedy lays bare the process of identity formation, pokes fun at its contradictions, and invites us to debate its terms” (3). It is through this exposure to debate that stereotypes are undermined as anything naturalisable, which means they lose their “power to be a model” (128). Indeed, by nullifying the power of stereotypes to control and demean Indigenous peoples, mimicry allows these peoples to not only explore the processes that led to the contradictory identities but also undermine, subvert, and control these processes. In doing so, minority and Indigenous peoples can move past the previously established terms of their identity and share their representations to help define their future identity. Therefore, having reframed Bhabha’s theory of hybridity and mimicry in terms of comedy, it is now possible to understand the comic treatment of colonisation and post-colonialism in a culturally hybridised state with more nuance.

Comic Hybridity, Mimicry, and James’ “Te News” sketch

In *Te News,* Billy T. James’ comic hybridity is in full effect as he combines satire and wordplay, with the Māori acuity for storytelling. The comic premise of *Te News* is quite simple. It is James as a Newsreader, Abe Pakatewhainau (when spoken, it sounds like F**k-it-if-I-know), reading multiple comically absurd headlines in a satirical fashion (Best Of, 36:21). However, James’ satire goes far beyond the Indigenous News and Current Affairs show *Te Karere* (1982), which is cited as the principal reference for this sketch series (NZ On Screen, “Billy T. James”). The sketch can be understood as an instance of mimicry, whereby

James satirises the seriousness of evening news and current affairs programmes. It opens on James as Pakatewhainau sitting behind a news desk but not in a suit and tie as most of the audience would expect of a male newsreader. Instead, he is dressed in what would become his most iconic costume: a black singlet, stubbies (shorts), a yellow towel around his neck, and gumboots (though hidden behind the desk in this instance). The informality of James' newsreader costume—when juxtaposed to a stuffy suit jacket, dress pants, tie, and dress shoes of a standard male newsreader—denotes a level of relaxedness that undermines any sense of seriousness in his newsreader character.

The complete lack of seriousness in James' satire is further confirmed when he delivers the headlines of the day in an exaggerated Māori accent, with the first headline being:

> Oh, Tēnā Koutou! Last night, up North, somebody pinched all the toilet seats out of the Kaikohe police station. Now the cops have nothing to go on. (James laughs and rears back slightly) Yeah, they just left a big hole there, but that is all right 'cause the cops are looking into it. (James laughs again).

Although James' use of a distinctive Māori accent is vital to the humour of this scene, it is not the only source of humour: just as important is the sheer joy on James' face and in his delivery. This joy comes from the distinct lack of anything serious in this segment. The punchlines are simple, obvious, and premised on tired wordplay, which he then doubles down and then triples down with even more cringe-worthy puns. It is not hard to imagine a collective groan from his audience. However, James' chuckle after he revels in his delivery of the joke's ridiculous and cringe-worthy punchlines makes a joke that would otherwise fall flat, succeed. His newsreader character is endearingly corny in these moments as he belly-laughs. Indeed, it is his lovability and charm that makes the corniness of Pakatewhainau even more humorous, sapping any seriousness out of the newsreader and the evening news

programme. James' comedy in this Te News sketch is precipitated by his use of satire and wordplay, his animated storytelling, and impeccable comic charm; all of which, are foregrounded in the Western and Māori influences that make him a comic hybrid.

James' above comic hybridity helps to strengthen his own identity as a Māori comedian working in the post-colonial Aotearoa NZ society. This strength is because following Bhabha's positioning of hybridity as a tool for "the strategic reversal of the process of domination through disavowal," his use of satire is a powerful tool to disavow the power of cultural and societal assumptions that affect Māori ("Signs" 154). With that in mind, on a cultural/political aesthetic level, James' performance in this sketch can be seen as de-normalising Māori stereotypes.

Specifically, the exaggerated Māori accent he uses throughout this sketch becomes even more important, since it leans into the 'hori' Māori stereotype (Horan and Matthews 191). The term 'hori' is a derogatory slur used against Māori[25], encompassing multiple stereotypes that include being overweight, poor, lazy, or uneducated. A notable use of the slur was by Pākehā writer Wingate Norman McCallum who published several bestselling comedic books, which depicted negative Māori stereotypes under the pseudonym Hori. Hori was not only McCullum's pseudonym but also the slovenly overweight, self-indulgent, and alcohol-abusing Māori narrator of the series (Harker). Beyond the Hori character's appearance and characterisation, McCallum's purposefully incorrect syntax and diction in his books characterise Hori as uneducated and illiterate: "the husband don't have to worry about what to get to drink 'cause the Maori only drink the two kinds of grog [sic]" (qtd. in Hutt 78). Since the characterisation of Hori generalises all Māori (men) as the same, the incorrect syntax and diction within McCallum's racist motto are an example of the stereotyped markers

[25] Not to be confused with Hōri, a Māori translation of the name George.

and assumptions used to represent Māori in popular entertainment. As a child of the late 1940s, James would have been a teenager when 'Hori and the Half-Gallon Jar' was published in 1962. These stereotypes encompass the similar portrayals of racist and damaging stereotypes of Māori that James would have faced growing up, and, in the "Te News" sketch, they are the same stereotypes he was trying to de-normalise and de-naturalise through comic mimicry.

To do so, James' mimicry adopts the same markers McCullum employs in the Hori series: costume (singlet and shorts), accent, and syntax/comprehension (uneducated). As the newsreader, James reads: "A Fella was held in contem…con...con, got told off by a judge in Henderson today. When the judge said: 'I fine you one hundred dollars,' the fella replied: 'Yeah! Where did you find it?' (James chuckles)." While the comedic punchline of this sketch is just another instance of cringe-worthy wordplay, James' struggle to pronounce the word contempt in the set-up to the joke mirrors the incorrect syntax and diction[26] of McCallum's Hori. Through purposeful and aggressively unsubtle pronunciation and grammar errors, both McCullum and James infer a lack of education in their characters—a negative Māori stereotype. However, for James, this stereotype is entangled[27] with the lovable comic charm of his chuckle that makes his comedy popular to a broader (Pākehā) audience, but this chuckle also "helped him exploit the [Māori] stereotype[s] with sly effectiveness" (Horan and Matthews 191; Derby). It is this popularity that disguises James' comic treatment of Māori stereotypes as a subversive strategy that "problematizes the signs of racial and cultural priority" through comic mimicry (Bhabha, "Mimicry" 128).

[26] In *The Billy T. James Show,* there are also Pākehā characters who also struggle to pronounce certain words. This indicates that incorrect syntax and diction etc, was a comedic troupe James and his writers came back to in many iterations; however, this trait is most seen in James' explicitly Māori characters.
[27] This entanglement also represents the interplay within James' comic hybridity.

Stereotypes themselves reflect a supposed "racial priority" and hierarchy, whereby they are used to look down on and oppress people deemed lesser (128). James problematises this priority and hierarchy by disavowing and undermining the hierarchal assumptions within the 'hori' stereotype by mirroring it alongside tired cringe-worthy puns ("cops have nothing to go on" and "the cops are looking into it") and satirical comic exaggeration. In doing so, he continually produces the same "excess" and "difference" within these stereotypes that generalise and harm Māori. However, he also emphasises their "slippage": the ambivalence of the coloniser's stereotyped markers for Māori (126). It is through this expression of "slippage" with humour that James creates the "same, but not quite" aspect of mimicry by "emerg[ing as an] 'inappropriate' colonial subject" (129). This inappropriateness lies in the rejection of any innate racial priority or hierarchy by exposing the coloniser's ambivalence and presence in fabricating these stereotypes, through comic satire. Thus, through comic mimicry and exaggeration of the 'hori' stereotype, James mocks these representations' "power to be a model" (129).

Te Comic Hybrid

Homi K. Bhabha's postcolonial theory of hybridity and mimicry is well-placed to help explain the cultural phenomenon of comedy adoption and adaption. Comic hybridity underscores the comedic and cultural influences of a comedian performing in a post-colonial landscape. It is in the interplay of these influences that a comedian can perform within and against the post-colonial state. Indeed, Billy T. James was ready and willing to tackle racial stereotypes about Māori in the Aotearoa NZ comic landscape. His grace in traversing cultural divides as a comic hybrid made his mimicry work as it should (Elliott 289). He was mimicking Pākehā stereotypes about 'hori' Māori (colonial modes of representation), but he also used a level of cheekiness and charm familiar to his mostly Pākehā audience and,

therefore, making his criticism more palatable. When James does so, his "eyes sparkle in these sketches. He is completely sure of what he is doing, and he is enjoying it" (Elliott 166). His assurance in these moments gave credence to James' comic performances, as a comic hybrid, occupying a necessary platform of Māori creativity and representation in entertainment.

Chapter Four - Billy T. James: Te Problematic or Te Colonial Mimic?

Certain styles of humour—particularly those that deal with certain taboos, such as race—can make one person laugh while causing great offence to another person. Yet, despite of this humour's potential for offence, there is something about these jokes that makes comedians of multiple generations keep coming back to the comic treatment of race. They are jokes told by budding young comedians at an open mic night, household names in televised appearances, and by those considered geniuses of their craft with decades of experience. Some of these jokes are told with great nuance, irony, and subversion. Other jokes come across as ignorant or edgy; while the worst jokes are steeped in offence, even malice. It is this variance that makes the co-founder of Media Action Network for Asian Americans (MANAA), Guy Aoki, argue that "When you are playing with racial slurs, you are playing with fire, and if you are playing with fire, expect to get burned" (qtd. in Goltz 54).

As Dustin Goltz notes, Aoki's argument was initially offered on *Politically Incorrect* (1993-2002), surrounding an appearance by comedian Sarah Silverman on *Late Night with Conan O'Brien* (1993-2009) in 2001. Controversially, during this appearance, Silverman used the racial slur "Ch*nk" in an interview with Conan O'Brien (Goltz 53-54). To summarise Goltz's description of events: Silverman was telling a pre-scripted joke, about how she tried to get out of jury duty with a suggestion by a friend: "My friend is like, 'why don't you write something, like, really inappropriate on the form, like 'I hate Ch*nks'" (54). Silverman's utterance of the slur an uneasiness filled the room, and she cannot follow the rhythm of her joke. Eventually, Silverman reached her punchline: "'I wanted to do it, but then I'm like, I don't want people to think I'm racist or something, I just want to get out of jury duty, … So I just filled out the form and I wrote, I love Ch*nks,'" which got an "uneas[y] and

negotiated" laugh by the studio audience (54). There was a consequent uproar on social media and television about Silverman's use of a racial slur, but, as Goltz indicates, the controversy around Silverman's joke suggests a greater discussion about "what [a] joke is doing (or trying to do)" (57).

Following Goltz, I argue that there are three essential elements when seeking to determine "what [a] joke is doing (or trying to do)": the comedian's intent, the broader context, and the audience response (57). Regarding a comedian's intent, Goltz notes that in the fallout of Silverman's controversy, she apologised to Aoki via email for any offence taken, "stating this was not her intention" (54-55). Instead, she positions the "I hate Ch*nks" turn to "I love Ch*nks" as an act of comedic irony that "examine[s] racism in the social unconscious" of her audience (55). However, regardless of her intent, Silverman's use of a racial slur "brings it explicitly and intentionally into the narrative … in order to engage it (though not necessarily to support it)" (Goltz 76). Yet, this begs the question: Are comedians the people that should be entrusted to engage with complex social issues between "Fart and Wiener Jokes"? (Posehn). Comedians like Silverman, Richard Pryor, George Carlin, and Frankie Boyle would suggest yes, but it is also clear that Aoki and a wider community of Asian-Americans were offended by Silverman's joke: Why would this be the case if Silverman's intent were so noble?

Silverman partially answers this question in the same email to Aoki: "Some people react to buzzwords before listening to the context of those words" (qtd. in Goltz 55). Despite her trivialisation of racial slurs as buzzwords, Silverman does highlight the importance of context. Jokes rely on the context of "who's telling it, where and when it is told, and to whom" (Bitterly and Woods Brooks). The where and when of this context extends beyond the room where a joke is told, and into the broader societal, cultural, and demographic contexts. In the case of Silverman's controversy, the context was a Jewish woman, telling a

joke that relies on an Asian racial slur for its humour. Even Aoki admits that it would be more acceptable for Silverman to make a similar joke with Jewish people as the punchline and not Asians ("Guy Aoki vs. Sarah Silverman"). Aoki's offence to Asian slurs but acceptance of potential Jewish slurs, signal that an audience's response to comedy is just as crucial for a joke to succeed in what it is "trying to do," as intent and context (Goltz 57).

To understand the variance of audience responses to comedy, Goltz moves beyond Silverman's controversy and onto HBO's *Talking Funny* with Chris Rock, Jerry Seinfeld, Louis C.K., and Ricky Gervais (85). During this discussion, C.K. recounts "his memory of a comic on stage, 'bombing,' while strumming his guitar, singing the song, 'Sitting on a cock cause I'm gay' (to the tune of 'Sitting on The Dock of the Bay')" (85). While all four of these comedians have made significant contributions to the comedy world, and all interpret the material as comic, they have different responses and reasonings to why or what makes C.K.'s joke funny (85). Gervais ironically laughs because he believes the joke is funny because it was not supposed to be funny. He insists C.K must be doing the same, but C.K insists he is laughing because it is "'*just* funny'" (qtd. in Goltz 85). This argument is the crux of the discussion around "what [a] joke is doing (or trying to do)" when intent, context, and response are taken together (57). As Goltz explains, Gervais and C.K.'s dialogue on *Talking Funny*:

> encapsulates the subjectivity of audiencing humor and how context and the audience produce meanings [since] everyone was laughing, yet there remained disagreement about what was funny, what (or who) was being laughed at, and what this comedian was doing (86).

These are the many variables of potential disagreement regarding what needs to go right for a joke to be successful, even among those whose job is to create and tell jokes. This success is

even more complicated when the subject of the joke (racial humour), teeters on the limits of humour and what is potentially offensive to an audience, regardless of the comedian's intent. Therefore, as stated by Goltz, the discussion covering intent, context, and audience response provides a helpful framework to understand how comedy is successful, a failure, or just offensive (57).

As such, in this chapter Goltz's above framework is used to analyse Billy T. James' potentially offensive humour. James has been subject to many accusations of racism throughout his career, with critics, academics, and activists arguing he reinforced negative Māori stereotypes (Elliott). Equally, he (and others) defended his use of stereotypes, arguing that he did not reinforce them but critiqued their underpinnings and assumptions. To honestly reckon with James, both elements of offence and social critique must be acknowledged and understood within his comedy. To do so, this chapter will first explore the racial controversy surrounding James' comedy with close reference to broader examples of controversial humour in scholarship and entertainment. It will then explore an alternative view of James' comic treatment of race: an expression of social criticism that challenged the assumptions behind Māori stereotypes in post-colonial Aotearoa NZ. As was established in the previous chapter, to do so, I will closely reference Homi K. Bhabha's postcolonial theory, in which James' comic hybridity (his Māori and Western influences) enabled him to re-implicate colonial history and structures through the subversive strategy of mimicry that "mock[ed their] power to be a model" (128).

Te Problematic

Throughout this thesis, much of James' comedy uses racial and cultural stereotypes about Māori to create humour. However, to James, this was part of why he is successful in the Aotearoa NZ comic landscape:

> I may have hit on a formula which appeals to Kiwis. Every race has a characteristic and foibles, and I get right down in with mine [Māori]. People are able to recognize my characters in their neighbour, their brother-in-law, their cousin or someone down the road. And I think that's what appealed to them (qtd. in Elliott 325-326).

James' claim indicates that he sought to show recognisable portrayals of Māori people as he does in the shearer Desert Dream and the Paper sketch. However, comedians are not the sole judges of the social, cultural, and political assumptions that underline their work. In fact, James' humour did not appeal to some Māori: some of whom were activists, academics, and so-called "Maori radicals," who felt his comedy used "racist material" in its depiction of gambling, criminal mischief, poverty, unemployment, alcoholism, and other harmful, offensive Māori stereotypes (Horan and Matthews 195-196; Elliott 257; 252; 268). While there are Māori with these lived experiences, given the accusations of racism against James it is clear his use of stereotypes did offend some members of his audience. This offence is the complex nature of racial humour in practice. The same joke that can be considered offensive by some can be met with raucous laughter and applause from others. Thus, this distinction between offence and laughter suggests that regardless of the comedian's intent, comedy is "a performance frame where meanings are multiple, negotiated, and contextual, the overall determination of meaning resides in the audience" (Goltz 86).

What are Audiences Laughing at?

To help understand the responses to James' comic treatment of race, it is helpful to discuss this ambiguity of audience response concerning other instances of racial humour in popular media (Goltz 86). Dave Chappelle's titular sketch comedy *Chappelle's Show* (2003-2006) is one of the most critically acclaimed instances of racial humour. Throughout this programme, Chappelle's humour was often explicitly reliant on racial stereotypes, epithets, and slurs. So much so, that it called into question what his audience members are laughing at

in these moments. Indeed, this question was at the heart of "Chappelle's infamous and abrupt departure during the filming of the show's third season," after he became progressively more uncomfortable with the "reception of the show's humour" (Holm 129). The sketch at the heart of Chappelle's departure was "The African-American Pixie" sketch[28] in "The Stereotype Pixies" series (Haggins 229). This sketch series entails "Chappelle playing the part of racially coded 'pixies' ["Caucasian, Asian, Hispanic, and African American"] who, decked out in stereotypical garb, would appear to [men of the same race] and encourage them to act in a manner in accordance with racial stereotypes" (Holm 129).

Specifically, "The African-American Pixie" sketch centres around Chappelle (playing himself) being asked by an air-steward if he would like the fish or the chicken as his in-flight meal (Haggins 229; "Chappelle Show (The Black Pixie)"). At the mention of chicken, the titular 'Pixie' (also Chappelle) appears "'clad in the costuming of minstrelsy[29]'—what he would later describe as 'the visual personification of the N-word'" (229). The 'Pixie' exclaims, "Woooooowee! I just heard a magic word! Chicken! Go on and order you a big bucket, N*gga and take a bite…You black motherf*cker!" and begins to dance in excitement. Chappelle (as himself) tries to ignore his pixie and orders the fish. Nevertheless, it turns out that option is no longer available, and Chappelle must reluctantly order the chicken. When he does so, the 'Pixie' proceeds to dance excitedly to minstrel era music: "Fried Chicken! I need some music for this (Banjo music begins) Make way for the Bird! Make way for the bird!" until Chappelle's meal arrives. However, the passenger in the seat in front turns back and offers Chappelle his fish. The 'Pixie' reacts with dismay: "God Damn!" but Chappelle accepts it with gratitude. Still dismayed, the 'Pixie' taunts Chappelle by singing and dancing

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[28] Also known as the 'N**ger' Pixie sketch (Haggins 229).
[29] "Blackface, white lips, gloves, red vest, and a Pullman Porter's cap" (Haggins 229).

to the same minstrel music: "Have fish, have fish." Chappelle becomes noticeably annoyed at these taunts and says something that becomes inaudible as he walks away from the 'Pixie.'

After Chappelle departed from the *Chappelle's Show*, he explained that "the premise of the sketch was that every race had this . . . pixie, this racial complex" (Haggins 229). This explanation suggests that Chappelle was attempting to critique the internalisation of racial stereotypes. Indeed, Bambi Haggins states, "The pixie exhorted them to react 'naturally' and perform the stereotypical tropes of black masculinity" (229). What Haggins describes is a personal internalisation of struggle, whereby the eating of fried chicken is what an oppressive society deems 'natural' for Chappelle's character and other African American men. Instead, the character's decision to get the fish meal and eventually walk away from his 'Pixie' can be read as rejecting "this racial complex" and his internalised oppression (229). Such a reading suggests a broader discourse of racial politics beneath Chappelle's "The African-American Pixie" sketch: A discourse that Chappelle explored with comedy to provoke both thought and laughter in his audience.

However, during the filming of "The African-American Pixie" sketch, a "loud and long laughter from one of the white crew members gave [Chappelle] a moment of pause" (Haggins 229). While it is unknown what the crew member was laughing at, Chappelle had his own reaction to this laughter: "'I know the difference of people laughing with me and people laughing at me—and it was the first time I had ever gotten a laugh that I was uncomfortable with.… 'I felt like it had gotten me in touch with my inner 'coon'" (qtd. in Haggins 229). Chappelle's final sentence signals that the "crew members" laughter made him feel that he was reaffirming the same stereotypes (both performed and real-world), he sought to critique in the first place. The "white crew members" laugh represents the ambiguity of laughter and meanings derived from racial humour: Are audiences laughing *with* Chappelle's

critique about an internalised racial complex? Or laughing "*at*[30] the uttering of racial slurs," performed racial stereotypes, and blackface? (Holm 130).

As Nick Holm explains, this ambiguity is the conundrum of working with stereotyped material, whereby both the comedian and audience "fall victim to the interpretive pitfalls of such humour" (130). These pitfalls encompass the "multiple, negotiated, and contextual" meanings of racial humour, whereby a comedy audience is expected "both to respect a set of standards" of good taste "and to find [a comedian's] disruption to [this same good taste] comic" (Goltz 86; Holm 130): "Too much respect [for these standards], and the material is offensive to the audience without being comic. Not enough respect [for these standards], and the humour becomes enjoyment at the uttering of racial slurs," and other racist material (130). Therefore, Chappelle's infamous exit from the *Chappelle's Show* (2003-2006) is a salient example in popular media around the ambiguity of laughter, and the variance of meanings derived from the comic treatment of race.

With an example of racial humour's inherent ambiguity and variance established, it is more feasible to understand the same aspects of racial humour within James' comedy. To do so, I will analyse the sketch "The Beginner's Guide to Finding a Job," which is premised on James' 'Rugby T-shirt character' presenting four important job-finding tips to his viewers[31] ("Comic Genius" 0:26:35—0:31:03). James opens this sketch in front of a blackboard as he introduces himself and his intent: "Oh, Kia ora! Kia ora! Kia ora! As you fellas can see, I am gonna show you, fellas, how to get out of a job…I mean how to find a job." Before he corrects himself, James' purposeful 'Freudian slip' cues his audience to the comic mischief at the heart of this sketch and its comic irony. The irony is that James' character presents these

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[30] My emphasis.

[31] There is an added reading of class to this sketch, but given the intersectionality of race and class during the economic restructures of the 70s and 80s, where Māori unemployment rate climbed significantly "from 5,000 in 1976 to 48,000 in 1981 [whereby] in 1981 they made up 10.4% of the workforce, but 31% of the total unemployed" this sketch undeniably evokes race (Locke).

tips as a means for employment, but these tips are a grandiose façade to support oneself on social welfare payments (unemployment benefits) through criminal behaviour, which I will explain at the conclusion of the sketch (see table 1). In the meantime, I will outline the comedy basis of the four tips that disguise the sketch's irony and subversion.

To begin, James explains the importance of dressing appropriately for a job interview. Then, the sketch cuts to him seated on one side of an executive desk, opposite him a department store boss played by Laurie Dee:

> Dee: "What makes you think you are the right person for the job?"
>
> James (in a fancy Women's hat): "Yeah, well. Because my missus used to work in a Girls wear Department."
>
> Dee (interrupting): "But, but the position is for a Diesel Fitter?"
>
> James: "Yeah, yeah! That is what she used to say to the kids' mum. Here (miming holding up clothes), Dez 'ill-fit 'er (chuckle)," while Dee holds his head in his hands.

Within this short gag, James' utilises his charming and corny wordplay for a simple but efficient punchline. However, this gag concludes with his character struggling to pronounce the word, misinterpret: "Sorry, I misintepre…misinteprit...mis, so I got it wrong." This struggle with word comprehension evokes a negative Māori stereotype of being uneducated and is potentially offensive. Yet, James plays off this stereotype with a quick dismissal "but you know what I mean, ae!" that does nothing to debate it and further reinforces this stereotype.

Moving forward in the comedy of the sketch, James gives his second tip, "Organisation!" where he emphasises the importance to "find out what the job is all about, so

you can have the right answers! Like this!" Again, the sketch cuts to James seated opposite Dee, surrounded by knots, boats, and other naval equipment:

> Dee (naval recruiter): "So, you want to join the Navy, Mr Halsey? … Can you Swim?"
>
> James (wearing a Sailor hat): "Why, did you run out of ships?" to which Dee is notably annoyed.

Once again, James utilises a cheeky and corny joke to create the humour in this sketch, while he dismisses it as over-excitement: "Yeah, well, sometimes you can get a bit carried away, ae!" that is reminiscent of his infectiously charming comic style. Likewise, James stipulates that not getting "carried away" is "why the next step is ultra-important: Learning! Learn exactly what the job is all about, so that you can say the right things, and do the right things, and know what *you* are talking about."

Accordingly, Dee is an Air-Force recruiter and playing with a model plane and verbalising engine noises. James, sitting opposite him, then takes the plane from Dee and shows off the meticulous details he has learnt about fighter planes, specifically for this interview:

> James (wearing an Air Force-style hat): "ughh, the old P47 Mustang, ae! Twelve-cylinder side-valve, Holliston engine, top speed about four-hundred miles-per-hour – Excellent aeroplane that! (James continues to explain the TB Devastator and Spitfire in detail [~ 25 seconds of screen time] to the 'Mouth-A-Gape' bewilderment of Dee).

James buries this scenario with aircraft details, but the next interaction is an instance of honesty that comically undermines the meticulously long-winded nature of the above:

> Dee: "Well, you certainly know your aircraft: You must have been a pilot, ae? Ha Ha"

James: "Nah, nah! Actually, I was a painter. I just saw *Reach for the Sky,* ten times."

James' honesty comes across as authentic (largely because he was a sign-writer before his entertainment career), in a moment that echoes a child who can only tell the truth, even when the best option is not to do so[32]. Moreover, James adds another comic layer to his childlike honesty, with a sniggering chuckle as he gives the following advice "You uh…also got to learn when to shut your mouth!" His chuckle is a distinctive element of his rascal persona, which further reinforces that his honesty was something he should not have done but was comically appropriate to his 'bluffing' rascal nature (M. King 514).

In the final tip, James explicitly reveals the greater subversion at play in the sketch, under the guise of the tip, "Experience! Find a job you have some experience with, then, you can't go wrong." This scene is aesthetically the same to the previous scenes with James opposite Dee, who this time is a Bank Manager surrounded by paperwork:

Interviewer (Dee in suit): "Well, then, Mr James, you wish to open an account?"

James (no hat this time): "Na!"

Dee: "You'd like to make a deposit?"

James "Na!"

Dee: "Oh, you are here for a job!"

James: "Yeah, yeah."

Dee: "Have you had any experience?"

James: "Ohh, yes!"

…

Dee: "Well, perhaps you would like to show me?"

[32] i.e., when given an unwanted present from a relative: "'I don't want this present, it's ugly'" (Brimbal and Crossman 1).

James: “Right! Yeah! (Reaching into a bag below his seat off-screen, then wearing pantyhose over his head, he throws that bag at Dee and points a gun at him) Fill this up, turkey! This is a hold-up!”

Even though this scene is comic because of the unexpectedness of the robbery and the visual of a distorted face under the pantyhose, James’ bank robbery elucidates the sketch's premise of criminal welfare fraud. As signalled by his cues throughout:

“As you fellas can see, I am gonna show you, fellas, how to get out of a job…I mean how to find a job” (see pp.81-82).	James’ purposeful ‘Freudian slip’ to begin the sketch that cues his audience to the comic irony at the heart of this sketch.
“But you know what I mean, ae!” (see p.82)	Another cue to make sure his audience understand the comic irony in the sketch.
“Yeah, well, sometimes you can get a bit carried away, ae!” (see p.83)	This cue is not a cautionary tale to avoid in a job interview, but ironic advice to avoid getting hired and stay on the social benefit. Moreover, James’ emphasis on “you” is another signal to make sure his audience understands the true nature of the sketch
“(sniggering chuckle) You uh…also got to learn when to shut your mouth!” (see p.83)	An instance of subversion: it is not about learning details to get a job but learning to overshare to not get a job. Given the true nature of this sketch is about supporting oneself on unemployment through crime, there is also the added element of keeping

	one's criminality a secret. Both smaller points of subversion work to elevate the greater subversion at play, as underlined with his 'bluffing' rascal persona.

Table 1 James' Cues to the Comic Irony of "The Beginner's Guide to Finding a Job"

James' remark, "then you go out and buy some new threads and try for those other jobs again. Piece cake, ae!" is a subversive suggestion to get a new disguise and rob a bank or place of business for income, while they still get income from unemployment benefits. This is the logical conclusion to the sketch's comic irony as James' four tips: dress, organisation, learning, and experience lend themselves to committing a successful robbery—'Dress' in a disguise to hide one's identity, 'Organise' the steps of the heist process, 'Learn' the heist process in meticulous detail, and gain 'Experience' on small scale jobs before the 'big score'—just as much as employment advice.

In James' sign-off, he reiterates the subversive and ironic nature of "The Beginner's Guide to Finding a Job" sketch once again: "Now, to go other those points again. (Drawing on blackboard) Number One: Dress; Number Two: Organisation; Number Three: Learning; Number Four: Experience. E noho ora mai rā (look after yourself) and Good Hunting (mimes pulling a bow and arrow)." While the reveal of the word D.O.L.E. is unexpected enough to be comic, its combination with the te reo Māori sign-off and *Robin Hood*-esque mime, explicate James' treatment of race, unemployment, and criminality in his subversive comic irony: a grand ruse to show his audience (especially Māori) how to support oneself on the unemployment benefit through criminal behaviour. This can be read as reinforcing negative stereotypes about Māori being criminals and welfare cheats to create humour in this sketch. (Beyond the sketch's more conventional means of comedy: corniness, irony, wordplay, unexpectedness, and physical humour). He draws directly on these negative Māori

stereotypes without saying much beyond the stereotype itself, and the sketch's irony and subversion hold no apparent critique. Therefore, this routine can be read as relying on offensive Māori stereotypes for comedy, potentially normalising these negative representations of Māori.

However, as was emphasised above by Chappelle's "The African-African Pixie" sketch and his departure from his television show, there is ambiguity in an audience's laughter at comedy and the meanings derived from the comic treatment of race (Haggins 229). In the above example, the recorded studio audience laughed at all of James' problematic stereotypes with no sense of reservation about their context or potential offence. Considering the previous discussion, I therefore suggest that there are five plausible interpretations when seeking to account for James' audience's laughter—four of which can be considered problematic responses to racial humour, and one, a non-problematic alternative:

Interpretation One	His audience could have only recognised his sketch's corniness, wordplay, unexpectedness, physical humour, and, therefore, something funny worth laughing over. In this interpretation, the audience is unaware of its racial stereotypes or other derogatory meanings. This first meaning is the most convenient for pure comedy audiences, whereby laughter is the only response they are interested in but becomes problematic not in the sense of offence but in the case that they fail to recognise the stereotypes at play due to their ignorance, privilege, or naïveté.
Interpretation Two	The audience misses the possibility of more serious aesthetics within James' work, but not due to naïveté. Instead, his audiences recognise

	the stereotypes of ignorance, lack of reading comprehension, deceit, laziness, unemployment, and criminality within this sketch, but they choose to forgive these stereotypes to laugh unreservedly at the jokes' corniness, wordplay, and unexpectedness. This second meaning expands on the convenience of the first, but it involves an explicit decision of an audience member to overlook the problematic issues within James' work for the sake of laughter.
Interpretation Three	James' audience recognises *both* the stereotypes and humour devices attached to them, finding them *both* worthy of laughter. The parity of the audience's laughter denotes a lack of understanding of the assumptions behind these stereotypes, whereby their comic amusement at this sketch is also based on the utterance of potentially offensive racial material that airs certain taboos (Holm 130). This third meaning denotes some convenience like the previous, but the audience's enjoyment is not purely based on comedy; instead, enjoyment in saying/hearing things that are considered 'politically incorrect.'
Interpretation Four	This meaning is the most extreme, and it is an occurrence that would be the most problematic of the four meanings, in that his audience found only amusement in James' various racial stereotypes about Māori. This enjoyment goes beyond taboo and into laughter "predicated on amusement at the deficiencies and deviations attributed to racial groups through those stereotypes" (130). This final meaning is less about racial humour, and more about racism and the sense of racial superiority gained by laughing, "disparaging, or degrading" a person deemed lesser based solely on their race and certain racial assumptions (Hobbes 54;

	Billig 39).
Alternative Reading	The subversion and irony in the sketch do enough to signal that the stereotypes are also being used ironically for subversive purposes. This purpose is a moment of social commentary to show systemic biases against Māori in employment that make them over-reliant on the social welfare system and/or illegal means. Within this reading, an interpretation of the audiences' laughter would be that his audience recognised both the stereotypes and humour devices attached to them, and they found the sketch both worthy of laughter on a comedy basis and valuable for the greater political, cultural, and racial aesthetics within the sketch. This is the optimum and non-problematic interpretation of provocative humour, but it must also contend with the four interpretations above and numerous others not listed.

Table 2 Four Problematic Interpretations of Racial Humour, and a Non-problematic Alternative

Given the absence of scope for empirical audience research in this thesis, the above four meanings derived from racial humour will be presumed as theoretically plausible within any audience. Furthermore, it can be presumed that these interpretations are happening across a spectrum, where between individual members of a specific comedy audience the same joke can be read as offensive, or non-problematic. It can also be presumed that a single audience member can have polar-opposite interpretations of different jokes in a comedy performance: i.e. A person may respond differently to black (dark) humour versus blue (sexual) humour.

The above interpretations (including the alternative) of James' sketch emphasise the burgeoning precipice of offence that provocative humour constantly teeters on. To be provocative, humour with greater political, cultural, and racial aesthetics, must conduct itself "uneasily between the simultaneous building up and tearing down of social expectations"

(Holm 130). Indeed, it is the interplay of social expectation and the audience's interpretation of the meaning of provocative humour, which determines whether laughter is an appropriate response, or if they will be offended[33]. Laughter is more likely to occur if the derived meaning of humour is agreeable with the direction of their expectations. In the case of the 'Beginner's Guide to Finding a Job' sketch, if the audience member laughed, the meaning they put on James' comedy is agreeable with the reinforcement of these Māori stereotypes. This laughter can be either predicated on the ignoring or enjoyment of negative assumptions that are associated with these stereotypes (interpretations two to four above), or a recognition of its comic and greater political, cultural, and racial aesthetics in the alternative reading. However, the reaction of offence is more likely if the derived meaning is disagreeable with the direction of their expectations, whereby an offended audience member will find either reading, and their reinforcement of negative stereotypes about Māori, disagreeable.

This is a balance that comedians such as Chappelle and James must strike. There will always be those who enjoy this racial humour for its social critique, its taboo (politically incorrect) nature, or are offended by its stereotyped material or simply do not enjoy it. Therefore, the audience's laughter at provocative humour (like racial humour) is very much ambiguous, and the meanings derived from this humour open to many interpretations: greater political, cultural, and racial aesthetics of social commentary, or offensive and pushing the limits of humour.

The Limits of Humour

The conceptual limits of humour have been subject to many academic and cultural debates, covering such taboos as murder, rape, abortion, genocide, and, most relevantly to James, racial humour (Young; Kramer; Kovacs; Friedman; Weaver). The limits to the comic

[33] There is also the chance that an audience member finds this style of humour not worthy of laughter, but they are not offended.

treatment of these topics are not simply a question of whether the jokes should be made, though, but also the reaction to such humour and what it means to find them funny in the first place. This was the same question Elise Kramer sought to answer, regarding the controversial audiencing of rape humour. Kramer states that “there is an unmistakable moral dimension to these arguments—they are about whether people SHOULD find rape jokes funny, not whether they do—and yet they are framed in terms of whether rape jokes are funny at all” (138). Kramer’s framing suggests comedy and the reaction to it, can be overly focused on the superficiality of laughter and being funny. However, for survivors of rape (and other instances of violence, discrimination, and abuse), it does not matter if a potentially offensive joke told by “real and hypothetical joke-tellers” to “real and hypothetical … joke-hearers” provokes laughter or fails horribly (138).

Instead, Kramer suggests there is a “moral weight” to creating and consuming comedy and humour. This weight is because humour:

> requires a shared set of beliefs in order to be socially meaningful [whereby] telling, laughing at, or disapproving of [potentially offensive humour] becomes a socially significant act through which one can index one’s identity as a ‘type’ of interlocutor, person, and citizen (138).

In this sense, how people react to taboo types of humour is often interpreted as being reflective of their own beliefs on various social and moral issues: “Telling, laughing at, or disapproving of … joke” can reveal one’s limits of entertaining taboos to others, who may then index the identity and morality of that individual based on their ‘sense of humour’ (138). Extending on Kramer’s statement, Marx emphasises that “comedy lays bare the process of identity formation, pokes fun at its contradictions, and invites us to debate its terms” (3). By poking fun at these contradictions, comedy can not only explore the political, cultural, and

social assumptions that led to the formation of these identities, but it can also undermine, subvert, and control these assumptions and their creation process. Marx emphasises that it is through the combination of reflexive and flexible properties that "comedy [becomes] a uniquely intense site of cultural struggle" (3). This struggle not only addresses current issues and identity formation that the comedy creators want to explore comically, but it also "invites viewers to be reflexively flexible about their own identities too" (3). Therefore, the creation and consumption of comedy evokes the morality and identity of both parties to mark their limits of what should and should not be found funny.

Within James' comedy, the importance of a joke-teller's identity within the conceptual limits of humour is evident in his routine "Speaking Japanese" (*Billy T: Te Movie* 0:05:16—0:07:35). James opens the routine by explaining he is learning to speak Japanese from the American/Japanese made-for-television samurai movie *Shōgun* (1980) because of Japanese immigration to Aotearoa NZ. James' racial humour in this routine is much different to his comic treatment of Māori, where there is an intrinsic irony in his performance as a Māori man. Instead, James is a Māori man intending to mimic not just a single Japanese person, but the Japanese people and their language. This routine is akin to the offensive nature of Englishman Jim Davidson's mimicry of a Caribbean man with his Chalky White character, where both mimic people not of their culture in ways that can be read as egregiously offensive and stereotyped. As such, James, in his trademark black singlet and yellow towel costume, explains how he learnt 'Japanese':

> So I went to this old Japanese fella, and he said: 'there are three [*things*] you must [*learn*] in [*order*] to speak Japanese properly. (mumbles) First, you must learn how to [*feel*] the cold.' All right, this is so you can get that: (James grunts and mumbles with increasing vibrato). [*'Secondly*], you must have experienced constipation' (audience laugh) … Constipation! This is so you can get that: (James

> grunts, groans, and strains with exaggerated anguish) (audience loudly applause and laugh) Right! Yes! ‘And then thirdly! You must have experienced amnesia. So, you forget everything you’ve ever learned (snap fingers) like that! You have perfect Japanese’[34].

James’ above noises (with some vaguely Japanese syllables) are offensive because they compare the Japanese language to constipation and other gratuitous sounds. As Angela Chia-Yi Pao explains, “imitating a dialect or accent without genuine familiarity with the corresponding cultural milieu … carries the potential of ethnic stereotyping [akin to] performing in blackface or yellowface” (355). Therefore, James’ performance is a form of ethnic stereotyping because it is a purely superficial depiction, which relies on scatological humour to be funny and not a “genuine familiarity” with the Japanese language.

Moreover, James’ “neutralization of the phonemic distinction between /r/ and /l/” in his depiction of the Japanese language is even more potentially offensive (Chun 268). Elaine Chun explains that this “Mock Asian” comedic trope is one of a few “stereotyping language practices [that] not only typically derogate the speakers who are mocked but also simultaneously elevate the personas of those who do the mocking” (273). For James, the elevation from his mocking is a comic one, which “indexes and constructs racial and national difference” (274). However, he posits:

> A theory that if you're doing something really well, even if you're not Chinese, or a Samoan, or a Dallie[35], but get right into the nationality, they don't get offended. In fact they appreciate it, laugh at it, because they recognize them. … And not a caricature – then they’ll appreciate it’ (qtd. in Elliot 326).

[34] The asterisks are where James uses offensive phonetic changes (as explained by Chun below).
[35] Croatian Kiwis (Dalmatians) – a generally neutral term but also used as a pejorative.

At first, James' theory seems like a rebuttal to Pao's sentiment, in that, he intended to laugh at the ways samurai characters speak in movies instead of laughing directly at a generalised Japanese accent. It must be said, he does accurately mimic the diction, emphasis, and delivery of Furankî Sakai (1929-1996), Toshirô Mifune (1920-1997), and other Japanese actors from *Shōgun*; however, it is James' extrapolation of the theatrical performances of Sakai and Mifune into a caricature of an entire populace that is offensive.

Unfortunately, James' caricature of Japanese language and culture becomes more offensive when he puts the above cold, constipation, and amnesia sounds together:

> (James sheathes his mic stand like a katana) Hhuuuu ooo mmm (drone) iirriammmaiadajo (with vibrato) Ha, ha, ha! Hojimodu suumamjinn huRRJUGHhumiDRRU zzuUdo (continuing strained constipation sounds with vague Japanese vowels and consonants) Haaay. Hiii (high pitched).

At this point, "the Oriental riff" is played over the concert hall speakers as James continues speaking 'Japanese' (Solomon 142). This riff is "a cliché melody that has become a sonic representation of East Asia[36] in Western popular music and media," most prominently in the song "Kung-Fu Fighting" (1974) by Carl Douglas, and more offensively in Disney's *Lady and the Tramp* (1955)[37] (Liu 28; Solomon 150-153). The racist history and stereotyped images attached to the "Oriental riff" indicates that James' comedy was reinforcing the stereotypes he portrayed in the above sketch, whereby he and his audience laughed at an offensive portrayal of Japanese people, culture, and language (142). It is, therefore, possible to read his comedy in this sketch, as drawing "amusement [from the] deviations attributed to

[36] Particularly in relation to peoples and culture in China, Japan, Korea, Vietnam.
[37] This melody in the "Siamese Cat Song" accompanies the insulting animated stereotypes of "upper front 'buck' teeth," "Narrow slitted shape and slanted angle … eyes" in the Siamese cat twins Si and Am (Solomon 150-153).

racial groups through those stereotypes" (Holm 130). Thus, James' "Speaking Japanese sketch" is egregiously stereotyped enough to be unambiguously and indefensibly offensive.

In the above sketch, James intended to make a humorous observation on how Japanese samurai sound in film. For comic effect, he used absurdist comparisons to mostly familiar situations (feeling the cold and forgetfulness) with added scatological imagery (constipation). However, even if this joke has no sense of malice, it is still an insensitive and offensive depiction of people not of his culture. James is not portraying "comedy [that] lays bare the process of identity formation, pokes fun at its contradictions, and invites us to debate its terms" (Marx 3). There is no inherent irony in his performance of the Japanese culture and language to spark debate. James does not have the same "genuine familiarity" with the culture and dialect as a Japanese performer, nor is there any valuable satirical criticism (Pao 355). Instead, he is poking fun at Japanese stereotypes without debate, which only reinforces these stereotypes. With that being said, the offensive nature of James' depiction of Japanese people should not immediately prejudice the understanding of his comic treatment of Māori. This is because the above sketch does give us the means of "ironic performativity" to sufficiently debate this comic treatment of Māori and its interpretations in a more careful way (Goltz 35).

Not Jokes, In Jokes, and Our Jokes

With an example of "ironic performativity" established above, it is necessary to place this concept in Billy T. James' comic treatment of Māori as it relates to both a Māori and non-Māori audience. One such means is Ian Ferguson's typology of "Not Jokes, In Jokes, and Our Jokes," which refers to separate ways of understanding First Nations humour as it emerges between natives and non-natives (132). In this typology, Ferguson categorises jokes by and about First Nations peoples into three distinct categories:

“Not Jokes”	Non-natives tell humour towards First Nations peoples that are deemed offensive and “much worse: They aren’t funny” (132).
“In Jokes”	Humour is “told by Indians when non-Natives (and this again refers primarily to White People) are in the room … and they allow the listener to feel in on the joke” (132-133).
“Our Jokes”	Humour whereby First Nations Peoples’ “tell the truth. The humour is less directed outward, towards the dominant culture, than it is focussed on the specificity of the Aboriginal way of life” (136).

Table 3 Ian Ferguson’s "Not Jokes, In Jokes, and Our Jokes" Typology of First Nations Humour

Ferguson’s conceptual framework of Indigenous humour is important as it centres Indigenous perspectives at the heart of its discourse. This centring means that Indigenous peoples lead the debate on the assumptions, representations, and aesthetics within the comic treatment of indigeneity, regardless of who is telling the joke. Therefore, for James’ comedy and relationship with the coloniser, Ferguson’s concept of Indigenous humour can work as a basis to understand the intent, context, and audience response within his comic treatment of Māori.

Firstly, Ferguson’s “Not Jokes” is less relevant to James’ comedy as it encompasses humour by non-native people. Ferguson equates these jokes to “Bigot Humour,” with such punchlines like as “Oh, no, it’s the Breathalyzer again,” which evokes negative stereotypes around alcoholism (132). However, “Not Jokes” do propose a restriction to humour, whereby certain aspects of Indigenous life can be considered off-limits for comedy (especially by non-Indigenous peoples). For James, he sets the limits of his humour, when replying to one of many accusations of racism:

> They say, black singlets and gumboots is attacking our culture. I say, hang on a minute, that's bullshit. Black singlets and gumboots and football jerseys certainly

> aren't our culture... to me our culture is the marae etiquette and that whole thing, which I never touch on or make fun of (qtd. in Elliot 253).

James' framing of what is and is not Māori culture relates to tikanga (customs) Māori, for which he conveys a level of respect to "not make fun of" them. This respect places such jokes in the realm of "Not Jokes," subjects not to be made "fun of" because of their importance in te ao Māori. This importance does not mean tikanga Māori (and similar aspects that are tapu [with restriction]) cannot be included in James' comedy or comedy in general with appropriate knowledge and respect, but these aspects are subjects he chooses to leave out of his comic treatment of Māori.

Secondly, "In Jokes" may be the most crucial framing of James' comedy since they are jokes shared across cultures, "a little self-deprecating and they often have a political edge to them" (132). This edge allows Indigenous comedians (and peoples) to convey to their listeners more critical feats of "social commentary," such as "What were Custer's last words? These Siouxs are killing me" (133). This example is an "In Joke" because to appreciate it fully, "it's helpful if you already know that many First Nations people have difficulty pronouncing the 'sh' sound and would say 'shoe' and 'Sioux' the same way" [38] (133). Regarding James' comedy, an "In Joke" under Ferguson's framework is evident in the "Te News" segment "Māori language teacher," whereby James (as Abe Pakatewhainau) reads the following headline:

> The cops in Auckland are on the lookout for someone deemed to be masquerading as a Māori language teacher, one of his students became suspicious when he told her that the Māori word for food is 'takeaway' (Chuckle), 'coat hanger' was Māori for car aerial. (Chuckle) Hard case, ae! (*Te Movie* 0:25:10—0:25:32).

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[38] Though the wordplay is more noticeable when spoken aloud, than on the proverbial paper.

This segment is accessible to both Māori and Pākehā because it is absurd that a teacher would claim the English words 'takeaway' and 'coat hanger' are anything close to te reo Māori. However, the joke has a political edge as it highlights two Māori stereotypes— obesity (food is takeaway) and poverty (coat hanger is car aerial)— but also teases the over-generalisation of these stereotypes by the teacher (and Pākehā) through the same absurdity above. This teasing towards Pākehā is a subtle but essential social commentary, which invites them to laugh at their own absurd over-generalisations about Māori. As Ferguson emphasises, in "in-jokes, … everyone is allowed to laugh, and everybody is supposed to get the joke … no one is meant to feel uncomfortable" (133). Within James' comedy, "In Jokes" can therefore be seen as accessible jokes for both Māori and Pākehā but with a small amount of satirical social commentary behind them.

Finally, Ferguson contends that "Our Jokes" emphasise "what White People do when they encounter Aboriginal humour. They take it the wrong way. That is, they take it way too serious[ly]" (138). These are jokes "less directed outward" and more so on the Indigenous "way of life" (136); though, they can still hide a little cynicism within them to disguise greater political interpretations of the joke (colonial and political aesthetics):

> "What's in that paper bag?"
>
> "Bottle of wine for my wife."
>
> "Good trade" (137).

Ferguson's "Our Joke" is multi-faceted. On the one hand, the first two lines suggest some joke work on First Nations Peoples' relationship with alcohol. However, the punchline is a quip on native-colonial trade using a riff on a classic vaudeville gag "take my Wife…Please," which take the word "for," literally (Youngman). This quip within the "Our Jokes" format is

a humorous way for First Nations people to make light of colonialism in a not particularly serious fashion.

Nevertheless, for James' comedy, his version of Māori "Our Jokes" are shared on mainstream television with a resoundingly Pākehā audience. This sharing leaves "Our Jokes" open to interpretation, which may seem like a mistake (And, to some, this is still the case). For example, James ends the above Te News segment by chugging a beer and proclaiming, "Ka kite, don't forget…hide (cupping hands) the burp until after work (releases hands)" (*Te Movie* 0:26:23—0:26:39). At first, this joke seems to normalise and perpetuate offensive stereotypes about Māori and the substance abuse of alcohol; however, as a Māori comedian, there is an intrinsic irony to James' performance of these stereotypes that changes the possible interpretations of the meaning between his Māori and Pākehā audience (Goltz 35). For a Māori audience (who enjoy this brand of humour), James explains, "that character on the Māori news … is an example of sort of the very subtle and cynical Māori humour that I run into" (qtd. in Elliott 166). The relative bounds of this apparent "subtle and cynical Māori humour" can be understood as a sort of teasing, mockery, and 'taking the mickey' out of each other[39]. Given James' prior explanations on his racial humour— "Every race has a characteristic and foibles, and I get right down in with mine"— this teasing can be seen as a mechanism to share "laughter [that] acts to relieve pressure" from the negative assumptions behind this material (qtd. in Elliott 325-326; Billig 101). This mechanism is supported by James' producer and director Tony Holden, who explains "Billy did a hell of a lot of shows and Maoris loved it. They love to take the mickey out of themselves, mercilessly" (qtd. in Elliott 234-235). In this sense, James, and his production's approach to the merciless mickey-taking of Māori is the very epitome of "Our Jokes" (Ferguson 132).

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[39] AKA. the Commonwealth colloquial term 'Taking the Piss'.

However, for James' Pākehā audience, the "ironic performativity" of him performing offensive Māori stereotypes, "draws attention to a range of aesthetic and discursive factors to be negotiated in constructions of meaning" (Goltz 35). This again brings into question what audiences are laughing in the joke and the interpretations of racial humour, given these interpretations range from an ignorance to laughter predicated in amusement at racial stereotypes (see table 2). Yet, James "implicate[s] the audience['s]" own laughter, to make Pākehā second-guess why they are laughing at this sort of material and the meanings they derive from James' comic treatment of Māori (35). Subsequently, this opens a conversation on the coloniser's role (and therefore Pākehā) in these oppressive histories, and the creation of stereotyped representations of Māori and the negative racial and cultural assumptions behind them. Therefore, "Our Jokes" as they relate to James, uses an "ironic performativity" that implicates his Pākehā audience's laughter to provoke necessary conversations about the assumptions behind this stereotyped racial material (Ferguson 132; Goltz 35; James qtd. in Elliott 166).

Even though Ferguson's concept of "Not Jokes, In Jokes, and Our Jokes" was formed with North American First Nations peoples in mind, it can still be insightful to the understanding of James' practice and politics as a Māori comedian (132). Through a combination of these different forms of humour, James combined the aesthetics of offence, satire, and subtle cynicism with his "ironic performativity" to implicate the oppressive histories between Māori and Pākehā in a manner they understand (Goltz 35). In doing so, James' comic treatment of race turns the same cultural and racial assumptions that were formerly thought of as offensive ("Our Jokes"), into something empowering for Māori. This empowerment is that James' comedy "brings [the colonial history of Aotearoa NZ and racism] explicitly and intentionally into the narrative" consciousness of his audience (76). It is by bringing these aspects into conversation, James creates the means to debate the

coloniser’s role (and therefore Pākehā) in oppressive histories of colonisation, their stereotyped representations of Māori, and the negative racial and cultural assumptions behind colonialism and racism. Thus, “Not Jokes, In Jokes, and Our Jokes” in James’ comedy, position him as a colonial mimic, who can work against the coloniser (Pākehā) and their assumptions about Māori.

Te Colonial Mimic of “Te Pākehā”

Through colonial mimicry and comic hybridity, Billy T. James’ comedy was a valuable social critique for Māori issues, while feeling harmless enough to provoke laughter. In this sense, academic Margaret Mutu (Ngāti Kahu, Te Rarawa, Ngāti Whātua) reasons that “James was poking fun ‘at the racism of Pākehā. He’d turn it into a joke but underlying it he was deadly serious’” (qtd. in Horan and Matthews 192). This is a framing that James supports, when he explains his experience of performing racial humour to Pākehā in less-diverse areas of Aotearoa NZ:

> I have done these things, and they have laughed like hell at them, *thinking* that they are laughing at me because I’m being this silly Māori character, and then all of a sudden, they realise they’re laughing at me laugh at them. But it is too late, because I have already done it (“Comic Genius” 0:00:00—0:00:20).

An example of this relationship, can be seen through a joke from James’ stand-up routine that he told after he and his wife Lynn Matthews were denied a flat because he was Māori: “We got any poms here? (Crowd jeers and boos) Hang on, leave the poms alone; they’re okay. I tell you what, if it wasn't for the poms, you'd be the same colour as me, mate. You won't like that. You can't get a bloody flat or anything” (qtd. in Elliott 59-60). James’ joke is set up as typical crowd work to gauge the demographic of his audience; however, it is a complex and

well-built joke that is a serious interrogation of the reality of racism and colonisation in Aotearoa NZ.

James' joke is a very dry, sardonic subversion of his audience's expectation that he will insult the poms. Through this subversion, James highlights his racially predicated rejection of owning property based on the colour of his skin. His insertion that his Pākehā audience should "leave the poms alone" because without them, they would be brown is also a wonderfully droll way of saying that Pākehā are actually just British. James' joke, therefore, directly pokes "fun at the racism of Pākehā" (and others), who would impose the same act of institutional racial barriers on Māori predicated in colonial racism from the eighteenth to the nineteenth century (Mutu qtd. in Horan and Matthews 192). Because, if they were not white in skin-colour, they would be subject to the same racist assumptions and stereotypes ("poor, risky, unclean tenants") used against Māori to reject them for rentals and homeownership (Houkamau and Sibley 11): the same acts of racism that mean Pākehā can get a flat and Māori cannot. This indicates that Mutu's claim "[he] was poking fun 'at the racism of Pākehā," is indeed a viable approach to understanding his comedy and, most importantly, James' relationship with the coloniser through colonial mimicry (qtd. in Horan and Matthews 192).

Moreover, Mutu's claim is supported by Tony Holden (James' producer and director), who explains how James and his production team approached more risqué comedy about Māori: "'We'll take the mickey out of Māori, at the same time as undercutting Pakeha, to have a release of white guilt about their relationship with Māori. So much of it was undercutting white racist attitudes, quite deliberately" (qtd. in Elliott 234-235). The "white guilt" that Holden mentions here is "a sense of shame when confronted with the legacies of oppressive histories" (234-235; Holm 130). This is a similar recognition that encapsulates Homi K. Bhabha's theory of hybridity and mimicry, in which colonisers are confronted with

an "almost the same, but not quite" figure of their oppression through the colonial process (Bhabha, "Mimicry" 126). For James, as a colonial mimic, he satirically mocks the coloniser (Pākehā), their racial assumptions, and the colonial influence on Māori stereotypes. It is through comic mimicry and the satirical treatment of these subjects that James "problematizes the signs of racial and cultural priority [i.e., stereotypes]" (128). This problematisation is achieved through the "same, but not quite" aspect of mimicry, whereby James' comedy utilises stereotypes and assumptions about Māori in subtlety different and ironic contexts—beyond just his innate ironic performativity.

To fulfil the "same" function of the "same, but not quite" aspect of mimicry, however, James' comic treatment of race must also push the envelope of offence as he satirically "pokes fun at [the stereotypes and assumptions'] contradictions and invites us [the audience] to debate [their] terms" (126; Marx 3). Indeed, it is through this mixture of potential offence and humour that James "tangles people up in their own racial euphemisms, platitudes, and postures," which traps the laughter of his Pākehā audience within "a sense of shame" and "white guilt" (Hill qtd. in Elliott 245; Bhabha, "Mimicry" 128; Holden qtd. in Elliott 234-235). It is within this entrapment of shame and guilt, Pākehā can realise their presence in the creation of these racial assumptions and their subsequent normalisation. Therefore, James' colonial mimicry undercuts the "racism of Pākehā" through a release of shame and guilt that undermines the "power [of these representations] to be a model" of "racial and cultural priority" (Mutu qtd. in Horan and Matthews 192; Bhabha, "Mimicry" 128).

James' colonial mimicry, in this sense, is particularly evident in the sketch "Te Pākehā," a satirical take on the 1984-1986 Te Māori exhibition[40] in New York, USA ("The Legend" 0:21:26—0:28:17); Ministry for Culture and Heritage, 'Te Maori exhibition opens

[40] The Te Māori exhibition "was a milestone in the Māori cultural renaissance. [It] was the first time Māori were actively involved in the process of exhibiting their taonga overseas."

in New York’). The basis for this satire is a museum exhibition showing various aspects of Pākehā culture to an American audience. This satire is a form of colonial mimicry because many museums were founded as colonial institutions to exhibit the culturally significant items of their colonial subjects. Often, these items are stolen through the “colonial exploitation of people and resources” and exhibited in the Capital city of a colonial empires like the British Museum in London, UK (“Collecting and Empire Trail”). Instead, James in “Te Pākehā” focuses on the ‘culturally significant’ items of his coloniser (Pākehā) that are used against Māori in the colonisation process.

Accordingly, in an Aloha (Hawaiian) shirt, James walks from behind two Air NZ luggage trollies labelled “TE PAKEHA” and introduces himself (as another News reporter character) with a nasal accent: “Kia ora, I’m Armin Ngata, and this is Worldwide.” He explains that the relics behind him are going to America after the successful Te Māori exhibition. Then, James (Ngata) proclaims the satirical heart of this sketch by replacing Māori with Anglo-Saxon (White/Pākehā) people, when he suggests we (the audience) must “ask the questions: Are these relics a true representation of Anglo-Saxonic interplay with North Sea gypsies during the 6th and 7th centuries? Or… *is it just bullshit*?*”* This question indicates that the intent of James’ colonial mimicry, and the allegorical social commentary within, is to question what is and is not a “true representation of” Māori. Specifically, James seeks to highlight how the items in the Te Pākehā exhibition are intrinsically involved in the process of colonisation and have created the discriminatory assumptions behind the colonial modes of representation (stereotypes) of Māori.

Once James (Ngata) is in the “Te Pākehā” exhibit itself, his colonial mimicry of the colonial process and representations becomes more evident as he explains the various “relics,” and their impact on Māori. He walks over to an exhibition case labelled 'Beer',

which contains cans, euro-style bottles, and a pint in a glass case[41], and explains that the beer on exhibit was:

> mainly used to pacify the Indig...indi...dd… to quiet down the locals. You see, it wasn't quite so much a killing weapon, ae. Ooh, no, no, no, it was more a stun weapon, putting the victim into a total state of submission. Cause, cases of death have occurred through excessive use, both by the victim and the user, too. See, here is another nifty feature (taps glass with a fingernail). See, it is hollow, ae. So, if you get hot after all that agro, you can have a drink (James chuckles).

On a formal level, James' comedy here is based on punning wordplay that, in one sense, emphasises drunken debauchery to the point of incapacitation, death, and violence. However, within the alternative meaning of his wordplay, James' colonial mimicry explicitly highlights the introduction of alcohol by Pākehā colonialists. This mimicry is amplified by James' metaphorical comparison of alcohol to a weapon. The metaphor suggests that beer can be seen as a form of weaponised colonialism, which creates the consequent inequalities in Māori health, substance abuse, and violence problems. Consequently, James highlights how the assumptions that have influenced the stereotypical representations of Māori masculinity that surround alcoholism were created through the process of colonialisation.

Moving forward[42], James continues his colonial mimicry with an exhibition on the 'Killer Diseases' that contains various lab equipment. He explains "Yeah! Before the introduction of the condom, and the pill, the most effective way of maintaining population control and keeping the locals in check was by the introduction of these little beauties here." There is a significant shift in James' humour, where his colonial mimicry becomes less comic and more cynical towards the consequences of colonisation on Māori health and wellbeing.

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[41] James first showed taxes, which is an inside joke about his IRD issues.
[42] Prior to this relic, he showed guns, takeaways, and glue as colonial 'weapons' of harm towards Māori.

His “little beauties” quip alludes to the “venereal infections [“gonorrhoea and syphilis”], measles, influenza, typhoid fever (enteric fever), dysentery and tuberculosis,” which Europeans first introduced to Aotearoa NZ, and “Māori had no immunity against.” With his darkly sardonic comparison to modern birth control, James indicates that these diseases had a massive consequence on the Māori population—which declined from about 100,000 in 1769 to as low as 42,000 by 1896[43] (Lange). Beyond the sardonic comparison, James quite darkly chuckles at the fact that diseases can infect people indiscriminately, “but as usual ae, things got out of hand, next thing [inaudible] anyone could get it (chuckle),” ending with a contemplative and disapproving “rude ae! Mmmm.” While not ostensibly humorous, this juxtaposition highlights an ironic cynicism within James’ character and colonial mimicry. In that, the topic of ‘Killer diseases’ is gravely dark, but his chuckle is still the most charming part of his repertoire. In this irony, James’ colonial mimicry elucidates the fatal consequences of colonialism in Aotearoa NZ to a broad audience, who would not listen to such a topic if it were not for his impeccable charm.

If there were any doubt about the subject of James’ colonial mimicry in the “Te Pākehā” sketch, he summarises much of its cynicism by directly explicating the colonial history of Pākehā against Māori in his sign-off: “There we are…the exhibition that has captured the hearts of thousands, not to mention the liver, lungs, kidneys, *land*, or anything else these ancient peoples have influenced.” Here, James once again explicates the effects of alcohol and killer diseases as he did above, but he also implicates the influence of Pākehā on land within this list. In doing so, his sardonic cynicism of his sign-off, highlights how the process of colonial land confiscation and alienation by Pākehā has affected Māori. Of all the influences aspects of Pākehā colonial history, the loss and confiscation of Māori land to

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[43] This statistic includes disease but also internal and external warfare, and “dislocation from lands that were important for agriculture” (Lange).

settlers and colonial government interests is by far the most egregious. In 1860, the North Island was 80% Māori owned; however, by 1865 "the Crown and the New Zealand Company had purchased nearly 99% of the South Island," and, in 2000, Māori owned as little as four-to-five percent of land in Aotearoa NZ (Ministry for Culture and Heritage "Māori land loss, 1860-2000"). Given this explicit act of colonialism, James' audience should now understand that the "Te Pākehā" museum exhibition is a form of colonial mimicry to elucidate the consequences of colonialism on Māori through humour.

Now, that James' audience are aware of the colonial history and consequences in Aotearoa NZ, he finishes his sign-off with an ominous reference: "This exhibition has been unique in that it has given us a glimpse not only of the past but also of the future. Armin Ngata saying…good night!" This sign-off affirms to his audience that colonisation is not a phenomenon that occurred in the 17th and 18th centuries, but an ongoing process of "coloniality [that] is still the most general form of domination in the world today" (Quijano 170). In doing so, James traps the audience's laughter at the humorous elements (irony, wordplay, and cheekiness) in the "Te Pākehā" sketch within "a sense of shame when confronted with the legacies of oppressive histories" (Holm 130). It is this recognition of shame that "problematizes the signs of racial and cultural priority" within a post-colonial state by making the Pākehā presence explicitly known in the ongoing process of colonisation (Bhabha, "Mimicry" 126-128). Thus, James' "Te Pākehā" sketch is an exercise in colonial mimicry to explicate the assumptive representations of Māori masculinity via the violent alcoholic stereotype, and the ongoing process and consequences of colonialism to a broad (Pākehā) audience. With James' colonial mimicry established regarding the "Te Pākehā" sketch, it is pertinent to see how this mimicry further elucidates Aotearoa NZ's colonial history through the "A History of New Zealand" sketch series.

Te Colonial Mimic's History of Aotearoa NZ

As shown throughout this chapter, James was willing to make comedy out of the idiosyncrasies and stereotypes of various ethnic groups, even to the point of offence. This willingness is evident in the "Ethnics Jokes" routine where he exclaims, "I don't do any ethnic jokes, anymore" and his audience groans in disappointment (*Funny As* (S1E3), 01:15—01:37). However, James immediately jumps on this audible disappointment, "Ah, shut up" and promotes a message of national unity: "Cause, to me, there is no such thing as ethnic groups in this country, right? If you are living here, everybody is a New Zealander: We are all Kiwis. (Crowd cheers) New Zealand… best country in the world? Am I right, or what? (Louder Cheer)." The subtext to this message is that there is an acceptance of all cultures and backgrounds in Aotearoa NZ, and, therefore, there is no such thing as racism, prejudice, and oppression. More notably, his audience audibly agrees with such a sentiment, which is an absurdly unrealistic premise. However, James quickly subverts his framing of Aotearoa NZ, as racism, prejudice, and oppression-free with the very cynical: "Ha, yeah!.......*Bullshit*!" James' emphatic and deeply cynical "Bullshit" ridicules his audience's cheers for being blissfully naïve of the entrenched aspects of racism, prejudice, and oppression in the colonial formation of Aotearoa NZ.

Indeed, James stresses that within his comic treatment of race and colonialism: "All I am really doing is bringing something out of the woodwork and exposing it…to the people, you know! And everyone goes, yeah that's right, but they do it embarrassingly" (*Te Movie* 0:05:02—0:05:13). Such a framing positions James' comic treatment and mimicry as a serious interruption to the colonial lineage that underpins race-relations between Māori and Pākehā. As mentioned in Chapter three, this interruption lays in James' comic hybridity, which invites people of diverse backgrounds to view his comedy while he shares the colonial history and racial and cultural assumptions behind the Māori-Pākehā relationship. James'

colonial mimicry is therefore not only a means to elucidate colonial history, but a means to critique aspects of the colonial formation of Aotearoa NZ.

To help position James' comic treatment of colonisation as a form of social critique, it is useful in closing, to turn to the "A History of New Zealand – The Signing of The Treaty" sketch (*Billy T & Me* 0:24:50—0:25:09). This is because the signing of Te Tiriti o Waitangi underpins the colonial and contemporary Māori-Pākehā relationship as Aotearoa NZ's "founding document" (Ministry for Culture and Heritage "The Treaty in brief"). Before looking at this specific sketch, it is important to note that before its appearance on *The Billy T. James Show,* there was preceded by a similarly premised sketch in *McPhail and Gadsby* (1980–1987, 1998), starring David McPhail and Peter Rowley, with writing assistance[44] by Jon Gadsby. This indicates that as writer and co-star, Gadsby and Rowley brought the idea to make comedy out of colonial history to the show. In the version without James, the Lieutenant-Governor of NZ, William Hobson (McPhail), takes immense pleasure in pranking the Māori signees with slapstick gags: whoopie cushions, electric joy-buzzers, squirting ink pens, and firecracker cigars. At the same time, Rowley (Arthur Paget) manically laughs in harlequin fashion. After all these slapstick pranks and gags, Hobson exclaims to Paget "you know what the best bit was? The Treaty! They actually signed it! (Both laugh loudly) I mean guaranteed lands! (Gregarious laughter) Guaranteed Fishing Rights! (Laughter) Oh, wait until they hear about this in London!" (*Billy T & Me* 0:21:35—0:24:42). While this sketch does satirise the misinterpretations and failures to uphold Te Tiriti o Waitangi, Māori become 'the butt' of the sketch's humour by being made to look ridiculous by Hobson's pranks.

However, with James present, the comic treatment of colonial history takes on a whole new political and cultural meaning. This is because his Chief character is not 'the butt

[44] Not necessarily accredited.

of the joke' as it was in the Pākehā-led iteration. Instead, the "A History of New Zealand – The Signing of The Treaty" sketch challenges the very process behind the colonial founding of Aotearoa NZ. To do so, the sketch is much the same until Captain James Cook (Rowley) over annunciates in a smarmy manner, "Are... We… All… Agreed… Upon… The... Pro…ce...dure?" In reply, James (as a Māori rangatira) states in a posh English accent, "Yes! It is quite simple really. Look! All you gotta do is sign here…here, here, and here," James' mimicry of an overly posh accent is massively incongruous with the uncivilised savage portrayal that Cook, colonial history, and his audience expected. This is because, in the "A History of New Zealand" sketch series, Cook often called Māori savages, which is common colonial representation of native peoples and a colonial justification for their oppression (Sorrenson). Moreover, James adds 'insult to injury' by following up his mimicry with an added slur to further mock Cook: "You got that Honky?" as he hands the quill back to Cook who acts bewildered. To return to Bhabha, it is this combination of mimicry and usage of derogatory language that turns "the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power," the coloniser ("Signs" 154). In doing so, this gaze stigmatises the coloniser through mockery, which works to implicate the discriminatory colonial process that succeeds by othering peoples they deem less civilised as savages (Sorrenson 97). In comparison to the Gadsby and Rowley iteration, the version with James challenges the discriminatory colonial modes of representation that classed Māori as savages, who needed enlightenment and colonisation.

Within James' comedy, a further challenge to the colonial processes and representations can be seen in the "Cook Would Like to Buy the Beach" sketch (*Billy T & Me* 1:14:49—1:15:17). In this sketch, James undermines and ridicules the colonial trade/barter system that bought many vices to Aotearoa NZ. Captain James Cook (Rowley) approaches a group of Māori on a beach and offers them a trade deal to "buy the beach." The components of Cook's trade deal begin with prototypical objects of colonial trade: "Now, would you

accept twenty-six muskets. Uhh, six barrels of gunpowder, twenty-four axes, some beads for your women, a quantity of tobacco for your men." However, Cook's offer quickly descends into a negative Māori stereotype: "and some glue for your children? (Audience laughter) Now, how say you savage?" which proposes substance abuse in exchange for land. It is notable that James' audience chose to laugh[45] at the expense of Māori children and their substance abuse, with no apparent shame. This distinct lack of shame from his audience is problematic as it means their laughter is "predicated on amusement at the deficiencies and deviations attributed to" Māori substance abuse (Holm 130). However, James and his writer's inclusion of this stereotype is an intentional form of colonial mimicry to entrap his audience's laughter in James' cheeky but cynical reply to Cook's trade deal: "Haven't you got any money?" Indeed, James' audience laughs on cue at this remark; however, the audience's original laughter at "some glue for your children?" is still present in the space of this sketch. The presence of this previous laughter entangles his audience's laughter at the punchline in the same assumptions that made them laugh at glue-sniffing Māori children in the first place. As a result of James' colonial mimicry, this entanglement makes his audience recognise the influence of colonial trade in bringing substances of abuse to Māori, and these substances' effect on stereotyped colonial modes of representations.

In another instance of colonial mimicry, James' "Sophisticated Weaponry" sketch is an overt comic treatment of the coloniser's oppression and alienation of Māori-owned land through force, during the colonial process ("Billy T James History of Nz," 04:01—04:42). Indeed, the sketch begins with Cook (Rowley) talking to his ship crew:

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[45] Another problematic situation is that in the editing process of this sketch, a laugh-track was placed here to reinforce this stereotype.

> Men, obviously, these… *natives* haven't seen White men like us before, so acquiring vast tracks of land should be a piece of cake. Especially if we use a little *persuasion* (lifts musket), sophisticated British Weaponry (Cook and his crew laugh maniacally).

Cook's emphasis on land and weaponry—alongside a tropey evil laugh— implicates the British colonial power's confiscations and alienation of Māori land through oppressive force. Captain Cook orders a Chief (James): "I say savage! Sophisticated British Weaponry (loads and aims musket at James) Perhaps now, you will sell?" However, the Chief and his men do not succumb to this threat of violence. Instead, they trade knowing glances at one another, before laughing at the British colonialists. Then, James exclaims "Nah!" and, in a moment that subverts colonial and audience expectations, he pulls out an anachronistic AK47 and points it at Cook, who is noticeably bewildered at these unexpected circumstances. Accordingly, James laughs with his signature chuckle as he outsmarted and out-gunned Cook and his men's colonial goal to obtain land and power. Therefore, James' colonial mimicry explicates the forceful colonial land alienation through comic subversion and historical incongruity.

Finally, James' "A History of New Zealand: Captain Cook's arrival" sketch from 1986, explicitly brings his comic treatment of colonial history into the broader public zeitgeist (*Billy T & Me* 0:57:24—0:57:45). In this sketch, Captain Cook (Rowley) wants to dock his ship in the local harbour; however, the Chief (James) refuses to Cook's bewilderment: "You say no to the greatest power in the world (James nods) Why?" with some exasperated disbelief. To the comic amusement of his audience, James taps one of the crew's taiaha (staff weapon) with a pounamu mere (leaf-shaped jade/greenstone club) that is then rotated to reveal a nuclear-weapon-free zone sticker on its rau (flat smooth blade). James' visual punchline refers to the 1980s anti-nuclear protest of US and French nuclear testing in South Pacific waters, which, at the time, were at the forefront of the Aotearoa NZ's

consciousness. This movement was an instant where Kiwis of various backgrounds banded together to successfully take a stand against[46] two powerful countries, USA, and France. Indeed, James is creating "a unique … site of cultural struggle" by comparing the above imperialistic events of the US and France to the colonial desires of the British that were enacted against Māori (Marx 3). This comparison turns colonial history into a modern discussion centred around the need for sovereignty in an unbalanced power situation—one country with powerful geo-political allies and the other with a colonial-settler relationship in a post-colonial state. Therefore, by relating colonial history with modern history, James' mimicry provokes his audience to think about the power imbalance within the Māori-Pākehā relationship, potentially opening the discussion for what Māori sovereignty looks like post-colonisation[47].

Thus, James' comic treatment of colonialism through comic mimicry is a serious interruption to the colonial lineage between Māori and Pākehā in Aotearoa NZ. The sketch series "A History of New Zealand" epitomises this interruption by being both humorous and cynical in its treatment of Te Tiriti o Waitangi, colonial trade, warfare, land alienation, and imperialism. Through his comic treatment, James could move beyond the previous Pākehā-led iterations of humour around colonisation and gave a Māori perspective to this history. By explicating this colonial history in broader public discourse, James turned "the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of [colonial] power" (Bhabha, "Signs" 154). A gaze that "invites [his audience] to debate [the] terms" of colonial history and processes, which encompasses the creation of stereotypes and the Māori-Pākehā relationship (Marx 3).

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[46] This was done through the 1985 Treaty of Rarotonga - South Pacific Nuclear Free Zone, and the 1987 New Zealand Nuclear Free Zone, Disarmament, and Arms Control Act.

[47] i.e., Te Aka Whai Ora | Māori Health Authority, an independent Public Health agency.

Te Problematic or Te Colonial Mimic?

James' comic treatment of race and colonialism epitomises the "multiple, negotiated, and contextual" readings within racial humour (Goltz 86). His comedy genuinely offended people in the 1980s, and it still has the potential to offend people today. James' "Speaking Japanese" routine oversteps the limits of humour to become egregiously offensive, with his "Mock Asian" performance akin to "Yellowface" (Chun 273; Pao 355). Even within his comic treatment of Māori in the "Beginner's Guide to Finding a Job" sketch, James' comedy can be read as offensive and primarily working to reinforce Māori stereotypes—unemployment and criminality. This is because the stereotypes he uses within these sketches are only used as comedic punchlines, and not sufficiently debated.

However, when James' comedy successfully teeters on being provocative to some but not offensive to all, he invites his audience to debate the terms of his racial humour (Marx 3). Specifically, this invitation is in the form of colonial mimicry, which is a multi-faceted mechanism of "disavowal" that implicates and "implicate[s] the audience['s]" own laughter at the racist assumptions and colonial history that underpin the Māori-Pākehā relationship (Bhabha, "Signs" 154; Goltz 35). In "Te News – Māori Language Teacher," this colonial mimicry is in the form of "ironic performativity," which "draws attention" to the "constructions" of racial, cultural, and colonial representations of Māori around alcohol (Goltz 35). Similarly, in the "Te Pākehā" sketch, James' colonial mimicry "problematizes the signs of racial and cultural priority" by explicating the ongoing process and consequences of colonialism and coloniality on Māori to a wider Pākehā audience (Bhabha, "Mimicry" 128). Finally, in the sketch series "A History of New Zealand," James' mimicry is a serious interruption to the colonial lineage behind the Māori-Pākehā relationship by being both humorous and cynical in the comic treatment of colonialism. Given that all of James' colonial

mimicry is shared with a broader (Pākehā) audience, this mimicry must be heralded for its irony, subversion, and cynicism, which challenge and critique assumptions and representations of Māori through popular humour.

Thus, the instances of offence within James' comedy in the "Beginner's Guide to Finding a Job sketch and the "Speaking Japanese" routine *must* be read in conversation with the instances of nuance, irony, and subversion in "Te News – Māori Language Teacher," "Te Pākehā", the "A History of New Zealand" sketch series, and his wider comedy. By design, racial humour teeters on being provocative to some but not offensive to all: James' humour is no different. This teetering is the 'double-edged sword' that James balanced throughout his career, and, therefore, it *must* be how we understand his comedy, today.

Billy T. James: Te Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, the research question has been: 'How can James' comedy be understood as working *both* with and against the coloniser (Pākehā)?' This question was born from James' immense popularity, but a superficial understanding of his comedy as a Māori entertainer (CH.1), a comedian in the broader sense of the art form (CH.2), a comic hybrid (CH.3), and his comic treatment of race (CH.4). Now, with the many sketches, arguments, and references discussed in this project, there is a greater nuance to the understanding of James' comedy and his relationship with the coloniser, in all these regards.

In terms of being a Māori entertainer, James came about at a time when Aotearoa NZ, needed and was ready for a superstar Māori in entertainment. However, James' Māori identity and body allowed for further political and cultural meanings in his comedy than he may have intended[48], especially in his comic treatment of race. As evident by interviews he gave, James was aware that his comedy was well-situated as a descendant of the Māori oral traditions, which he implemented in a highly performative, communicative, and engaging manner. In this way, James became part of the Māori lineage of entertainment while he navigated and shared his cultural history and lineage with a broad audience in an accessible and humorous fashion. As for being a comedian, James was a highly astute student of comedy, whose style and repertoire was entrenched in traditional conventions of humour. James actively drew upon Richard Pryor's socially aware comic treatment of race, Jim Davidson's offensive racial stereotypes, and Tommy Cooper's chaotic cheekiness. All these influences would become some of his most definable characteristics[49] and inform his diverse

[48] As shown in Goltz's intent, context, and response framework, the ultimate meaning of humour resides in the audience, not the performer (57; 86).
[49] Even James' signature laugh is a calculated comedic tool from watching Cooper, in which James exaggerated Charlie Te Hau's chuckle to make his audience laugh reliably and efficiently.

comic repertoire that was crucial for bringing new styles and perspectives of comedy to his Aotearoa NZ audience (Elliott; Horan and Matthews; *Funny As*). Therefore, it is apparent that James' comedy is embedded in *both* his Western influences of Pryor, Davidson, and Cooper and his Māori influences of the oral traditions and lineage of entertainment. Each of these influences exists independently in James' comedy, but they also have an underlying intersectionality that helps his comedy speak across race and culture as a comic hybrid.

As seen in chapters three and four, James' comic hybridity is most evident in his comic treatment of race. As a comic hybrid, he could perform within a postcolonial context to facilitate "broader cultural debates" around colonialism and post-colonialisation in Aotearoa NZ (Marx 2). The added element of colonial mimicry in James' comedy is a multi-faceted mechanism of "disavowal," which meant he could undermine stereotypes and assumptions about Māori by mirroring these representations with grandiose and satirical comic exaggeration (Bhabha, "Signs" 154). This mirroring rebukes the "power [of these representations] to be a model" for Indigenous peoples by entangling these representations with the lovable comic charm of his chuckle to provoke laughter and thought (Bhabha, "Mimicry" 128). In doing so, James invited his audience to debate the terms of his racial humour and "implicate[s] the audience['s]" own laughter at the racist assumptions, stereotypes, and colonial history that underpin the Māori-Pākehā relationship (Marx 3; Goltz 35).

The "Minister for Crown Lands" Sketch

By way of conclusion, one last example of James' colonial mimicry is in the "Minister of Crown Lands" sketch (*The Billy T. James Show* S5E3 10:48—12:28). In this

sketch, James plays the role of an unnamed Arabic Prince[50], who is donned in a white *thawb* (robe), white *kūfīyah* (headscarf), black *iqāl* (band), and dark sunglasses. He is sitting at a Minister's desk with his assistant lighting his cigarette, as the Minister for Crown Lands speaks:

> Minister: "Now, your Highness, I understand that you wish to purchase some land?"
>
> Prince (in a posh-British accent): "Yes, that is correct, yes."
>
> Minister: "How much land did you wish to purchase?"
>
> Prince: "Ooohh! An island or two!"
>
> Minister: "Any particular islands?"
>
> Prince: "Oh! Well, um! That little group of islands there (Points to a map of NZ) would be about right."
>
> Minister (looks back, then turn quickly with some shock): "But, that little group of islands, as you put it, your Highness is… New Zealand."
>
> Prince: "Yes, I suppose it is. Yes!"
>
> Minister: "But, I couldn't possibly sell you New Zealand!"

The scripted shock on the Minister's face conveys that the mere suggestion of buying Aotearoa NZ is an absurdist premise. However, it is the absurdity of this premise that makes the hypothetical question of How much money would it take to buy a country? a compelling subject to explore through comedy:

> Prince: "Surely, your government would certainly appreciate a small injection of oil dollars?"

[50] Thankfully, neither James nor his assistant are wearing makeup to look Arabic, as this would be an offensive form of 'Brown-face'.

Minister: “Well, I certainly know that I would (ha. ha. ha).”

Prince: “Yes, I thought you might, Minister. Shall we say uhh two million [USD]?”

(Assistant puts a leather briefcase on the desk)

Here, the fictional Prince attempts to answer a country's worth, with an amount of Two million USD equivalent to ~ NZD 4.2 million in 1985[51]. This amount is comically absurd, given that Aotearoa NZ’s GDP was $24.6 Billion (USD) at that time (Macrotrends). Indeed, it is a purposefully absurd amount that underpins James’ satire, which emphasises the corruption and self-interest of politicians in roles of great power.

James’ satirical treatment of corruption in the New Zealand Government becomes even more irreverent when the colonial histories of Māori land confiscation and alienation by Pākehā are taken into consideration. The sketch makes these histories explicit to its audience through the Minister’s dialogue: “Well yes! But you, see? *Confidentially,* your Highness, it is not our land to sell.” The Minister’s understanding of innate Māori land rights provides some hope that he will do the morally right thing under Te Tiriti and reject the prince’s offer. However, as this sketch is satirical, this hope is short-lived as he immediately dismisses the countries founding constitutional document: “We acquired it…for a mere pittance you understand…by the way of the *Treaty*, which…hahaha. Really isn’t worth the paper it is written on” (stifled audience laughter). The minister’s dismissal is an explicit implication of the various institutions, whose legislation, court rulings, and inaction support this sentiment and its colonial underpinnings[52]. An implication that is further reinforced as the Minister accepts of the prince’s second offer:

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[51] ~$13.5 million NZD in 2022

[52] i.e., the landmark 1877 Supreme Court case *Wi Parata v Bishop of Wellington*, where, the presiding Court Justice James Prendergast ruled “Maori had no native title to cede to the Bishop [because] the existence of the pact known as the 'Treaty of Waitangi' … as that instrument purported to cede the sovereignty - a matter with which we are not here directly concerned - it must be regarded as a simple nullity” (qtd. by Tate).

Prince: “Really, then shall we say, 3 million US and a numbered Swiss bank account?”

Minister: “ANZ Bank, Sydney!”

Prince: “Excellent, then we have a deal, Minister (reaching to shake hand).”

Minister (shaking James’ hand): “Well, yes, although I still have a great deal of work to do on it.”

As shown above, if two million USD is “a purposefully absurd amount” to buy a country, the Minister’s acceptance of three million dollars is still—to use his own words as the sketch suggests— “a mere pittance.” This absurdity again reinforces James’ satirical mimicry, and its ultimate purpose of highlighting the broken promises of the Crown and the failures of successive governments to uphold the unique Māori-Pākehā relationship entrenched in Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

To this end, James finishes the sketch with some comedic subversion, whereby his Prince character reveals that the meeting has been an elaborate ruse to entrap the Minister and his corruption:

Prince: “Oh, no, no, you’ve done quite enough already, Minister.”

Minister: “I don’t quite understand, your highness.”

Prince: “No, not your Highness (James removes his *kufiyah,* then puts on an exaggerated Māori accent), Manu Tutaki of the Akoranga action front (audience cheer) and we got you on tape, turkey” (audience laugh in realisation as James presents tape out of his *Thawb* chest pocket).

Assistant: “Oh, there it is, bro (grabs the tape and puts it in the machine).”

On a comedy level, James subverts the ruse with the reveal that Tutaki (James) and his assistant failed to record the meeting by forgetting to put the tape in the machine. More

importantly, however, on a television production level, the Minister's sentiments[53] are recorded on *The Billy T. James Show* for James' audience to see. Such a platform means that James can de-normalise these sentiments through his mimicry, "so that the 'national' is no longer naturalizable" (Bhabha, "Mimicry" 126-128). This effect happens because the negative sentiments toward Te Tiriti o Waitangi are recognisable in the "almost the same, but not quite" fashion of mimicry, to "problematize[…] the signs of racial and cultural priority" within these sentiments (126-128). Thus, through colonial mimicry and satire, James' comedy enabled him to challenge the multiple failures of the Crown to uphold Te Tiriti o Waitangi.

James' comedy in the "Minister for Crown Lands" sketch exemplifies much of this thesis. While *The Billy T. James Show* where this sketch aired originally was a mostly Pākehā-led production with a mostly Pākehā audience, it gave James an immense platform to explicate colonial history and greater issues within the colonial process. This is the epitome of working *both* with and against the coloniser. Through colonial mimicry, his comic exploration of the Crown's ownership of confiscated Māori land explicates the colonial history of Aotearoa NZ, the failures to uphold Te Tiriti o Waitangi, and the unique Māori-Pākehā relationship within. However, James having a platform was not enough. He had to be funny and accessible to his Pākehā audience, who would have never thought of the issues presented in the sketch above, if not, for his ability to make them laugh. This is where James' comic hybridity came to the fore. Within the above sketch, James utilises definable Western conventions of humour (satire, absurdity, subversion) and his impeccable comic charm to engage and make his audience laugh. Therefore, James' "Minister for Crown Lands" sketch demonstrates his capacity to share the colonial history of Aotearoa NZ, and historical grievances of Māori in an accessible and funny manner, which becomes a social critique through colonial mimicry and comedy.

[53] Albeit a satirical mimicking of a government minister.

With all that has been shown in this thesis, Billy T. James' relationship with the coloniser can be understood as something beyond just his comedy repertoire and prowess. James was an "arbiter" who communicated his cultural history, the colonial lineage of Aotearoa NZ, and racial assumptions about Māori through humour (Marx 2). In a tribute to James after his death in 1991, Angus MacDonald of the *Dominion Sunday Times,* writes that "while many Maoris have advanced the cause of their people by poring over the Treaty of Waitangi and delving into tribal lore and law, James advanced the same cause in his unique way" (qtd. in Elliott 370). MacDonald's assessment of James concerning Te Tiriti o Waitangi may sound hyperbolic, given its equivalency to work done by the likes of Ranginui Walker DCNZM (Whakatōhea; 1932-2016), Sir Graham Latimer KBE (Ngāti Kahu; 1926–2016), Sir Edward Durie KNZM (Rangitāne, Ngāti Kauwhata, Ngāti Raukawa) and Moana Jackson (Ngāti Kahungunu, Ngāti Porou; 1945-2022) – and many others. However, the sentiment that MacDonald conveys remains true. James' comedy's political and cultural meanings were significant to Māori representation and culture at its time – and I still hope today. This significant contribution to the Aotearoa NZ public zeitgeist is just a part of James' comedy, as the memories of laughter he created through his loveable comic charm. A memory that should never be forgotten, because at the end of the day, James "helped New Zealanders laugh at themselves [and] It would be an equal tragedy were that spirit to die with him" (*Evening Post* qtd. in Elliott 369).

A Look to the Future

To help keep this spirit alive, it is imperative to look forward to the future of Aotearoa NZ comedy scholarship, especially around Māori humour. In this regard, there are three intrinsically linked aspects of Māori humour that I see as needing to be addressed:

The first aspect that needed be addressed is the most pressing and relevant, given the current public and political discourse surrounding cancel culture and political correctness. Within this discourse, cancel culture is relatively new, mainly appearing in the late 2010s and early 2020s, but the discourse around political correctness and incorrectness has surrounded comedy for much longer—notably with Lenny Bruce's obscenity trial in 1964 and George Carlin's 1972 "Seven Words You Can Never Say on Television" satirical monologue and the subsequent US 1978 Supreme Court case *Federal Communications Commission V. Pacifica Foundation*[54]. As evident by the above, this discourse is highly Americanised, which cannot be avoided given the amount of research and public discourse on this issue. However, this discourse has since encroached on international borders through American cultural imperialism and the globalisation of social media, news media, and entertainment. Due to the globalisation of cancel culture and political correctness, the focus on this discourse can be set within Aotearoa NZ, regarding the representations of Māori through humour in various contexts[55]. Specifically, I contend that cancel culture and political correctness are an oversimplification of comedy discourse. These discussions are driven more by political ideology that is morphed into supporting an argument, than an understanding of comedy as a financially viable entertainment product, and the various social functions of humour.

The second aspect is that there is a need for further case studies of popular Māori comedians and other actors and performers who utilise a significant amount of humour in their work. In 2019, Pākehā comedian Guy Williams authored an article, "Where are all the Māori comedians?" with the following observation: "What's amazing to me is that since Billy T. dominated ticket sales and TV ratings in the 1980s, there have been very few Māori comedians," regarding the NZ Comedy Festival of that year. Williams does name a few

[54] Which found certain sanctions on public-broadcast were reasonable.
[55] Though, it will still need the reference to the global discourse to anchor this discussion.

"prominent Māori funnymen and women": Jemaine Clement, Taika Waititi, Mike King (Ngāpuhi), Ben Hurley, Gish, Jamaine Ross (Ngāi Tahu, Ngāti Kahungunu), Livi Reihana (Ngati Raukawa, Te Arawa), Kura Forrester (Ngāti Porou), Jordan Watson, and Jimi Jackson. However, since James died in 1991, there have also been the likes of Pio Terei[56] MNZM (Ngāpuhi, Te Rarawa), Julian Dennison (Ngāti Hauā), Cohen Holloway, Rachel House (Ngāti Mutunga, Ngāi Tahu), Maaka Pohatu (Ngāi Tāmanuhiri, Ngāti Apa, Ngāti Tūwharetoa), Rima Te Wiata MNZM (Ngāti Raukawa), including relative newcomers like Janaye Henry (Ngāti Kahu), Kura Turuwhenua (Ngāti Porou, Tūhoe, Kāi Tahu), Chardé Heremaia (Ngāti Kahungunu, Ngāi Tahu), Aunty Lianne (Ngāti Kahungunu), Joe Daymond (Te Āti Awa), and Courtney Dawson (Ngāti Kurī, Waikato-Tainui), who embrace comedy in their work. It is not that there are a few Māori comedians, actors, and performers. It is more a question of opportunity and notoriety, which can be supported by academic case studies (and supporting local comedy, not just the big names). Therefore, while this is certainly not an exhaustive list of Māori comic performers, it does show that many case studies of Māori humour could be written, especially the comedy veterans.

The final aspect is a more philosophical question: What is Māori comedy? This question is much the same asked of Thomas King, which I highlighted in the introduction. King states, "Native humour is humour that makes Native people laugh, and hope that you didn't ask me to define a Native," before settling on native humour changes with performance (177). I posited that this is very much the same for Māori humour; however, more work on the scale of Drew Hayden Taylor's book *Me Funny* must be done to begin outlining the possible definitions of Māori humour. The comedian case studies I suggested above are the first introductory step towards this, but even then, there is the question of how

[56] Especially as the show *Pete and Pio* (1995) with Peter Rowley and Terai was made to effectively replace the hole left by James' death.

representative their comedy is of any Māori sensibility for humour. For example, Jemaine Clement is undeniably Māori, but the degree to which his most-known project[57], the *Flight of the Conchords,* can be considered in terms of Māori humour is highly debatable. This debate is a question that can only be answered once we know how Māori humour changes with performance (177). A performance that is intricately linked to the performer's body as a Māori person (especially when they look more stereotypically Māori) but also the linguistic, contextual, and intended meanings of what is being performed. Thus, Billy T. James was just the start of this journey to understanding what can be considered Māori humour. Even so, as stipulated in the introduction, he was a contributor to what we know as Māori humour, not the sole representative. The greater understanding of Māori humour must therefore be predicated in pre-colonial Māori history and build on the linguistic, contextual, and performative meanings within te ao Māori as they change.

[57] In another project, *The Humourbeasts,* Clement and Taika Waititi did explore Māori Mythology in the 2003 and 2004 stage show titled "The Untold Tales of Maui".

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