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‘Time for a troll’; the standard story propping up the colonial state

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ABSTRACT
This article foregrounds the contribution of the widely available standard story of New Zealand history and Pākehā race-talk, to the social control of Māori and the naturalisation of racism. Assisted by recent studies that show how humour is variously used to encourage compliance with social norms, we focus on an item published as a newspaper column by Sir Robert Jones. The analysis shows how the piece utilises widely familiar themes and resources of Pākehā race-talk to create an allegedly humorous piece that works to maintain the broad status quo of colonising expectations in Aotearoa. Our article revitalises the extensive research, in New Zealand and elsewhere, on the uses and effects of Pākehā/settler race-talk. We conclude by outlining steps needed to displace and depower such colonising talk to enable our thinking and practices to contribute to a more culturally just and equitable society.

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Introduction

> Racist discourse, in our view, should be seen as discourse (of whatever content) which has the effect of establishing, sustaining and reinforcing oppressive power relations. (Wetherell and Potter 1992, p. 70)

There is a meta-account of the establishment and ongoing development of New Zealand as a nation state that suffuses policy documents (Came 2014; Harris et al. 2006), media reports and appraisals of events (Phelan 2009; Phelan and Shearer 2009), and the thinking of individuals and professionals (Harrison 2021; McCreanor and Nairn 2002). We term this narrative a standard story that enables the communication and understanding of ideas and practices consistent with its general thrust while encouraging the maintenance of a negative affective context for Māori. Concurrently, the standard story obstructs both consideration and discussion of ideas, policies, and social practices counter to those it sustains. As we believe it is important for all in Aotearoa New Zealand to break from the colonising past, we see a need to illuminate effects of the standard story, particularly in relation to the affective context it maintains for Māori. We begin with a sketch of the standard story and its symbiotic relationships with the discursive resources of Pakeha

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race-talk. To stay ground that discussion in everyday social practice we analyse a brief item written by Sir Robert Jones, an active teller of the standard story, and draw on his corpus for illustrations of clusters of race-talk resources we describe. A brief summary of literatures on the use of humour for social control, a stock-in-trade for hegemonic discourse, precedes the analysed item.

Since we first identified patterns in stories of New Zealand colonisation and relations with Maori (Nairn and McCreanor 1991) we have studied how widely-understood versions of a durable narrative, operate in justifying and legitimating colonial domination, while sustaining negative affective contexts for Māori. Central to both these achievements is a self-serving story of colonisation in which Māori are represented as a primitive people, who are unable to cope with the modern world and rely on the settlers, their descendants, and other hardworking New Zealanders to support them, their culture, and language. The beginnings of this story lie outside New Zealand. Research by ourselves (McCreanor 1997; Moewaka Barnes et al. 2012; Nairn and McCreanor 1990, 1991; Nairn et al. 2017) and others (Ballara 1986; Belich 1986; Nicholson 1988; Phelan 2009) has traced its early versions to the beginnings of European exploitation of the rest of the world. Culturally specific ideas such as the Great Chain of Being have been influential, setting a foundation for the standard story.

> … God at the apex, followed by archangels and angels, divine kings, the aristocracy and successive ranks of humans from ‘civilised’ to ‘savage’, followed by animals, plants, minerals and the earth in descending order. (Salmond 2017, p. 35)

This device encourages such ranking while justifying classification of any person or people deemed savage as primitive, violent, and untrustworthy, while relegating them to the lowest categories of humanity (Nairn et al. 2017, pp. 46–48).

Told in various ways, this story shaped and legitimated actions of explorers, missionaries, traders, colonisers, and settlers as they dispossessed Indigenous peoples to establish colonies and settler-states (Voyager 2000; Osuri and Banerjee 2004; Richards 2007; Belich 2009; Sanchez 2012). Those actors, in their thinking, planning, and acting, were constantly revivifying and modifying the standard story to more effectively legitimate or naturalise their imposed institutions and practices such as autonomous individuality, the sanctity of private property. A recent summary version of New Zealand’s standard story reads:

> This country needs to get over this politically correct rubbish about colonisation. (…) best race relations in the world before a few radicals started stirring up (…) ‘Maoris’, filling their heads (…) with hopes that are completely unrealistic (…). Nonsense about the Treaty, (…) has gotten even the good ‘Maoris’, riled up, (…) thinking that they should get land and compensation. (…) ‘Maori’ culture can’t foot it in the modern world and it’s being swept aside (…). ‘Maoris’ are (…) ramming their language (…) powhiris (…) tangis down our throats. They need to (…) forget about losing what they never owned, (…) for the national good. We’re one people (…) and we don’t want ‘Maori’ rights (…) privileging them and dividing our country. (McCreanor 2020, p. 9)

Like the numerous variants studied (Tuffin 2008; Phelan and Shearer 2009; Moewaka Barnes et al. 2012; McConville et al. 2020; Stewart 2020; Wetherell et al. 2020) the narrative outlined presumes the rightness of the colonising institutions, practices, and beliefs creating a context for negative portrayals and criticisms of ‘Maori’ actions and

culture. Constantly recycled by media (Ballara 1986; Nicholson 1988; Barclay and Liu 2003; Phelan 2009; Phelan and Shearer 2009) and talk (McCreanor and Nairn 2002; Wetherell and Potter 1992) the standard story provides a form of 'collective unconscious' or 'settler commonsense' (Nairn and McCreanor 1991, pp. 248–249). Hage (2000) identified similar discursive practices in Australia through which members of the dominating group assert and exercise an assumed right to define other peoples and to specify how they are to behave to be accepted into the dominant society. He names such presumption and its practice 'governmental belonging'.

Resourcing race-talk in New Zealand

Familiar, durable patterns

The study of discourse, in all its banal, patterned flexibility, provides important insights into the otherwise seamless web of Pākehā-centric culture that enables, sustains, and directs actions constituting the Pākehā cultural project that, overriding strong Māori dissent, imposed and sustains continuing colonisation of Aotearoa (Abel 1997; Barclay and Liu 2003; Nairn et al. 2020; Phelan 2009; Phelan and Shearer 2009; Moewaka Barnes et al. 2012; Rankine et al. 2014; Diamond 2018). In this section, we introduce particular clusters of discursive resources – words, images and narrative fragments – that sustain aspects of this settler commonsense present in the item analysed below. These descriptions start with those that underpin commonplace representations of signatories to te Tiriti, Māori and Pakeha, illustrating them with quotes from the Jones corpus.

'Maori' – a naturalised social category

In New Zealand English speakers initially referred to the Indigenous peoples as 'native' in talk, policy, laws, and institutional practices. At the request of Māori leaders, 'native' was replaced by 'Maori' in 1947 (Diamond 2018), yet, in 1950, Thompson (1954, p. 219) found: '[t]he use of the term 'native' with reference to the Maoris was widespread'. Settlers have since colonised the word 'Maori', woven it into their webs of sense-making as a naturalised social category strongly associated with primitivity, violence, and untrustworthiness, marking 'Maori' as savages: (Nairn et al. 2017). While Pakeha are routinely absented from any telling of the standard story (see '*Pakeha as the norm*' below), 'Maori' occupy a central role functioning discursively as a natural fact (Hill 2004; Moewaka Barnes et al. 2012). To be clear for readers it is essential that settler uses of the word 'Maori' (using scare quotes) with their freight of colonising effects, are distinguished from Indigenous meanings, written Māori. Comparable social categorisations that, in other Anglo-settler colonies' obliterated the uniqueness of the Indigenous peoples were developed and utilised to legitimate 'one size fits all' colonial policies (Hage 2000; Morris 2005; Harding 2006; Belich 2009; Coward 2012).

Across his corpus, Jones often uses this settler constructed social category when disparaging or ridiculing Indigenous individuals or groups. He utilises two clusters: '*Maori inheritance*' when he wishes to deny a person or group the right to identify themselves as Māori and elements of '"*Maori" culture*' when he wishes to emphasise that 'Maori' are violent, untrustworthy savages. The settler term 'Maori' is integral to these themes as described below. Although described separately such themes are typically interwoven

(Moewaka Barnes et al. 2012) as in 'Time for a Troll' (Jones 2018) the key text analysed in this paper.

'Maori' inheritance

… as a self-appointed Maori spokesperson she is in fact half Irish (Jones 1988c, p. 109)

> … there is not a single pure blooded Maori left. … most vociferous claimants … have more Irish than Maori blood. (Jones 1988a, p. 169)

Central to this theme, as Jones employs it, is the belief that genetics (race) determine a person's identity although it is more than forty years since social self-identification replaced such 'blood fraction' definitions of Māori identity in New Zealand law. So, to be 'Maori' your blood must be pure and certainly not 'more Irish' (than 'Maori'). This belief, a commonplace among slave-traders who marked desired dilutions of a slave's savage blood with terms like half-caste, quadroon, and octroon, remains part of everyday talk as evinced by race-associated phrases like 'half Irish', 'half caste', or 'quarter caste'. Historically the last two were common in New Zealand press and legislation: research by Thompson (1954) reported that 'Maori' involved in crimes were often described as 'half-caste' or 'quarter-caste' (Thompson 1954, p. 220). Māori who wished to vote on the Maori roll or be identified as Māori, prior to 1975, when legislation changed to a social identity framework, had to establish they were at least half-caste.

'Maori' culture

> Maoridom comprised Stone Age warring tribes living simple existences. (Jones 2012)
> 1840 primitive Maori society … an essentially hand-to-mouth existence. (Jones 1988a, p. 169)

This theme resources representations of 'Maori' as primitive and savage, a people unchanged since the first contact. The notion that an Indigenous culture should remain unchanged sustains a 'Maori culture cannot change' motif speakers employ when demanding that Māori, protesters live and dress as their ancestors did when Europeans first arrived, pointing to European clothes and other artifacts as signs of 'Maori' inauthenticity. Tellers of the standard story utilise this cluster to represent *te reo* as inadequate for modern life and enable claims that 'Maori' only progress because advanced, civilised, Christian settlers brought and shared superior knowledge, artifacts and procedures. Jones (2001) reinforces these constructions by calling 'Maori' culture their 'former culture' and pronouncing their language dead without providing supporting evidence (Jones 2001; 2014).

Readers of Jones' judgements or claims about 'Maori' and their experiences are being primed for the associations of the naturalised social category. For example:

> The Maori has developed to become a citizen of the 20th Century. (Jones 1988a, p. 168).

Although apparently positive, the statement cues the ascribed primitivity of 'Maori' culture – they had to develop to gain this status. Similarly, when expressing his contempt for 'Maori' gangs, Jones co-opts the majority of the Indigenous population to his belief:

> I am sure most Maoris would feel a sense of shame as well as sharing non-Maoris contempt for the mob. (Jones 1978, p. 242)

This cues, at least for non-Māori readers, the constructed associations of 'Maori' with the unleashed violence of savages.

These discursive resources: the standard story, the naturalised category label 'Maori', and other race-talk themes identified in current usage are colonising creations saturated in the settlers' language, culture, and institutions of the settlers (Said 1995, p. 272).

Pākehā as the norm

This cluster, which is also prominent in the Jones corpus, includes resources that enable speakers to represent aspects of the status quo, including Pakeha dominance, as the natural order of society without identifying the dominant group or their culture. For instance, speakers may simply take particular beliefs, practices, or institutions for granted, as when the author presumes the facticity of the belief that New Zealand once had the best race-relations in the world:

> We will only regain a progressive and harmonious society by relegating it [Treaty of Waitangi] and our many discriminatory laws, all in 'Maori' favour, to the dustbin of history. Jones (1988a, p. 170)

In saying '[w]e will only regain', this statement cues the common fantasy of a golden age of race-relations that government might restore by repealing biased laws and dumping the Treaty of Waitangi. Despite advocating a return to a more colonial society the dominant, Pākehā, group remains unspecified, rather, by employing 'we' and 'our', Jones appears to speak for, of, and to the entire society warranting our reading (Richardson 1998). Similar prescriptions are frequently offered by tellers of the standard story and such repetitions grant a kind of authority.

Another practice in this cluster involves failing or refusing to identify the cultural origins of beliefs, practices, and institutions of the dominating group. Such omissions are a form of exnomination (not naming the source of a statement or practice, Edwards and Potter 1992) that masks the cultural origins of the state. Jones (1988a, p. 170) does this in justifying anglicised pronunciations of *te reo* place names:

> The fact is many Maori place names have been modified over the years through common usage … In these circumstances, using the colloquial is correct. (Jones 1991, column 1)

Misrepresenting the common English practice of anglicising pronunciation of non-English place names as 'common usage', the text denies that monolingual English speakers routinely modify Indigenous pronunciation for their own convenience. Having rendered such mispronunciation a-cultural and a-political it morphs into 'the colloquial [pronunciation]', that everyone may happily use. Through this manoeuvre the two sentences grant a disinterested quality to the author's judgement that anyone may incorrectly pronounce *te reo* place names. A later piece in which 'Maori' are subjected to the protestant work ethic (Jones 1993, column 4), similarly omitted that ethic's cultural and historical origins to cast it as a universal rule.

> … message to 'Maoridom', equally true for everyone always has been and always will be, … life will deal you what you deserve.

Recountings of the standard story routinely omit the coloniser's culture. Hence, when Jones needed to ascribe a positive quality to that culture he says:

> … the European culture has one great virtue … that is its flexibility and critical self-analysis. It is … peculiar to the Western European ethic … [and] its greatest strength. (Jones 1988b, p. 110)

Jones named the dominating culture 'the European culture', which separates it from those who colonised New Zealand. This enables his account of 'Maori' critics causing cultural anguish by violating values deeply held by Western Europeans to disconnect from issues of justice or decolonisation whilst cuing early settler assertions that they, unlike 'Maori' were advanced, civilised, and Christian.

Humour enforcing social norms

Jones claims his newspaper columns are preponderantly light-hearted jesting or teasing although the reciprocity required for those categorisations is precluded by the media he works. Consequently, we include a brief overview of the pincer movement through which humour is used to exert social control and enforce community norms. Folk-wisdom that claims laughter and humour as a positive feature of human life is one jaw of the pincer. It deflects criticism from those who ridicule and mock to keep others in line (Husband 1988; Billig 2005a). Ridicule and mockery, humour that degrades the target (Willis 2005), is the other jaw and a widely used form of social discipline (Billig 2005b; Abedifinard 2016; Perez 2017a).

Treating humour as a benign presence in our lives, despite precious little evidence of its contribution to individual and collective health and wellbeing (Billig 2005a), encourages more powerful people to use 'activities such as teasing, sarcasm, and ritualized insults' (Wooten 2006, pp. 188–189) to impose group norms. It also creates a demand that everyone has a good sense of humour (Jones 1994; Lockyer and Pickering 2005; Billig 2005a). That means a humourist who responds to criticism with 'it was only a joke' concurrently implies their critic lacks a good sense of humour, challenging their standing in the social group (Husband 1988; Howitt and Owusu-Bempah 2005).

It is clear from the literature that even where light-hearted jibes are reciprocated, they still encourage conformity because they signal ongoing surveillance (Billig 2005a; Abedifinard 2016). Exerting social control by making fun of people shares similarities with hate speech in that it attacks the target's social standing, undermines their self-belief, occasions intense stress responses (Wilkinson and Pickett 2010, p. 38), while negative characterisations of the target may encourage others to pick on them (Waldron 2012). In the context of Aotearoa exercises of governmental belonging are rendered more damaging by these effects of racist humour (see Jones 1989; 2012; Pack et al. 2016) that are complemented by the use of a wide range of tropes and patterns identified in Pākehā talk about Māori.

The preceding sections lay the foundations for our analysis of 'Time for a troll', an item in Jones' column 'Media gaffes part 2 and flights of fancy' (*The National Business Review,* February 2, 2018). To clarify our analysis, the sentences of this short piece are numbered.

'Time for a troll'

- [1] While on the subject of Maoridom, rather than making kids learn the language, here's a much better idea. [2] We should introduce a new public holiday, Maori Gratitude Day, in place of the much disdained Waitangi Day.
- [3] As there are no full-blooded Maoris in existence it indisputably follows that had it not been for migrants, mainly Brits, not a single Maori alive today, including Professor Temaru, would have existed. [4] So excluding individuals who may be miserably suicidal, and instead like 99.999% of us who actually like being alive, it's actually long overdue for some appreciation.
- [5] I have in mind a public holiday where Maori bring us breakfast in bed, or weed our gardens, wash and polish our cars and so on, out of gratitude for existing. [6] And if any Maori tries arguing that he/she didn't have a slight infection of Irish blood or whatever, they might be better for it, the answer is no sunshine.
- [7] Every one of the circa 108 billion humans who have existed since our ancestors first stood upright, has been a genetically unique individual. [8] So too today. [9] For example, you can't argue that if Mum had married say Peter Snell, instead of Dad, you might have been a terrific athlete. [10] You would not be you, but someone else.
- [11] Maori Appreciation Day in which Maori tangibly express their gratitude for existing thanks to European immigration, by a day's voluntary labour for non-Maori folk would be an excellent initiative for the new government.

The title was provided by NBR staffer who apparently recognised the piece as like the work of on-line trolls, intended to start quarrels, upset people, distract, and sow discord. As described above the term 'Maori' and the related 'Maoridom [1]' corral Māori into a single, homogeneous aggregate ignoring their varied oppressions and diverse realities. Jones' proposition that Maori Gratitude Day is 'much better' than children learning te reo [1] reiterates the settler belief that anything 'Maori' is primitive, inferior to the colonial culture, and a handicap in a modern society (*'Maori' Culture*).

The replacement for the allegedly 'much disdained' Waitangi Day [2] is a public holiday named 'Maori Gratitude Day' (MGD) that cues the presumption of 'Maori' privileges, because it is structurally similar to Māori All Blacks, Māori Electoral Roll, and Maori seats in parliament, all of which trigger that assumption (Moewaka Barnes et al. 2012). In offering MGD as an alternative to the Treaty of Waitangi, Jones joins many other Pākehā who have felt entitled to unilaterally determine the meaning and value of te Tiriti (see 'Treaty of Waitangi' in Hill 2002; Moewaka Barnes et al. 2012) when he promotes his view of the Treaty as the unarguably correct basis of action (1988a, 2012a).

The author's symbolic annihilation (Gerbner 1972; Klein and Shiffman 2009) of Māori as a people [3] relies on the central contention of 'Maori Inheritance' – to be 'Maori' your blood must be 'Maori'. Despite that, the exnominated statement 'there are no full-blooded Maoris in existence [3]', is the basis of a proposal that casts 'migrants, mainly Brits [3]' as preservers of a race that nineteenth century settlers said was dying. The logic appears to be that full-blooded 'Maori' could not cope and mated with migrants to survive, diluting their 'Maori blood'. In demanding blood purity to be 'Maori' this construction suggests other Māori are inauthentic. The notion that Māori owe their survival

to intermarriage with European immigrants mocks their ongoing struggles to be Māori in their own country. Jones allows no 'Maori' to avoid this need to show appreciation, since Māori all have at least 'a slight infection of Irish [or other] blood [6]' which means, as Jones reiterates [10], they are not 'Maori', they are 'someone else'. In detailing how 'Maori' will show their appreciation for being rescued in this way, Jones names three menial tasks: 'bring breakfast in bed', 'weed our gardens', 'wash and polish our cars' that mirror forms of privilege Jones said (2012a) 'Maori' have or desire ('breakfast in bed', 'first lick of one's ice-cream', 'free cars for Maoris').

Before closing the piece by suggesting this would be an 'excellent initiative for the new government' [11], Jones revisits the key idea that genetics determine ones' identity, this time without using 'blood quantum' terminology. His replay [7] elides genetic uniqueness with individuality by simply using 'individual' where 'person' would be more apt. Equating a person's unique genotype to their individuality in this way denies familial, societal, and cultural influences on personal identity and the interrelations between genotype, phenotype, society, and culture in each individual's social identity. The supporting story [9] about athletic ability serves to reinforce the author's claim that 'Maori' no longer exist, furthering the discursive erasure.

Discussion

Prior to the arrival of Europeans *māori* meant 'ordinary'. In the colonising usage explored here, it has come to be a denigratory classification through which Indigenous people are systematically embedded in racist generalisations. Our analysis shows that 'Time for a Troll' contributes to a repressive affective ambience directed at Māori, and how that is achieved. It is saturated in the hierarchical racial thought of the standard story, shaped by resources of Pākehā race-talk that portray 'Maori' as hybrid people of lesser standing, best suited to manual labours, and dependent on European migrants. Despite his claims to the contrary, this is not friendly teasing that just happened to cause offence, it is an open assertion of Pākehā dominance that necessarily denigrates and marginalises Māori who are consigned to subordinated roles in contemporary colonial society. To readers familiar with the commonplaces of Pakeha race-talk, the racialised, hierarchical relations are immediately accessible, while that familiarity may grant the item a kind of legitimacy.

Marketed as light-hearted humour, employing an informal style that draws on familiar vocabulary and tropes of Pākehā race-talk it re-presents Pākehā commonplaces about Māori/Pākehā relations as if they are truths about New Zealand society. In doing so the item conveys hints of its pre-history, (Billig 2001; Lockyer and Pickering 2005; Perez 2013), cuing power differentials imposed by colonisation and white supremacist assumptions that naturalise such hierarchies (Perez 2017b). It relies on the racialised categorisation 'Maori' to represent Māori as unsuitable for full civic participation and belonging whilst encouraging Whites to believe themselves superior (Billig 2001; Perez 2017a). The item helps undermine efforts to create a more just society that is consistent with He Wakaputanga i te Rangatiratanga o Nu Tireni (Declaration of Independence, 1835) and Te Tiriti o Waitangi (1840).

This paper has demonstrated just how readily commonplaces of New Zealand race-talk grant an easy readability when a veneer of humour masks a sustained assault on

Māori, on their mana as *tangata whenua* and on their standing as equal participants in this society. The humorous mask and easy accessibility are rendered more potent by the lack of specific details of social and historical context, absences that make it easier for such talk to ignore or deny damage caused by past and present colonising.

Concurrently, the lack of context makes it more difficult to generate alternative readings (Hall 1980) privileging the preferred reading (Richardson 1998) we have outlined. 'Time for a troll' is an assault on efforts to eliminate racism from New Zealand's health, education, social services, and society (for analyses of more aggressive promotion of such racism, see Phelan 2009; Nairn et al. 2020). As with hate speech this, like many of Jones columns, performs two tasks: telling Māori they are subordinate and unwanted; and encouraging others, stimulated by the author's 'wit', to support white supremacy by attacking Māori in similar ways (Pack et al. 2016).

This article confirms that it is very easy for Pākehā to live in the racist flow sustained by the colonising racist talk of our ancestors and peers, it has provided another sketch of these all-too-familiar discourses that can only be used to denigrate Māori, their aspirations and worldviews (see also Tuffin 2008; Phelan and Shearer 2009; Moewaka Barnes et al. 2012; Nairn et al. 2012). Unless constantly critiqued and superseded, these discourses continue to constrain Pākehā thinking and our collective ability to be equitable partners in te Tiriti relationships. Those who continue to employ these discourses are choosing to be complicit in and supportive of overt acts of colonisation, denying the attendant traumas that cripple Māori advancement, blight development of Pākehā as a people, and contribute to unjust and unsustainable futures for this country.

To step away from that trajectory requires acknowledging the role of the standard story and its associated colonising race-talk in reproducing and sustaining unjust and exploitative relations between Pākehā and Māori. That recognition provides a necessary beginning. The way forward involves challenging and supplanting both the standard story and the supportive race-talk through sustained, informed, communal efforts. In the domain of discourse quite small changes suffice to produce the kinds of tectonic shifts that will motivate all New Zealanders to replace the skewed, unbalanced structures of colonialism. Such changes should enable widespread participation in sustained, collegial responses to initiatives such as *Matike Mai* (Mutu and Jackson 2016).

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