

# **‘That Old Man Making Fun of Me?’: Humour in the Writings of Aboriginal and Asian Relationships**

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The dynamic and longstanding relationships between Aboriginal people and Asian immigrants<sup>1</sup> is rarely discussed in Australian mainstream political and demotic discourse, in which Aboriginal–White and Anglo–Multicultural binaries structure the discussion of race and ethnic relations (Curthoys 21; Edwards and Shen 1–22; Stephenson 57). From the 1980s onwards, however, Aboriginal and Asian Australian writers have been publishing literary works that represent the historical and ongoing engagement between these two groups (Xu 476). This trend is in tandem with the increasing publication of multicultural literature and the development and recognition of Aboriginal literature since the last decades of the twentieth century.

While scant critical attention has been paid to the intersection between Aboriginal literature and Asian Australian literature, acclaimed Indigenous writers such as Oodgeroo Noonuccal (formerly Kath Walker), Alexis Wright, Anita Heiss, Kim Scott, and Bruce Pascoe, and Asian Australian writers such as Brian Castro (born in Hong Kong and of Portuguese, Chinese and English heritage), Michelle de Kretser (Sri Lankan-born), Simone Lazaroo (Singaporean-born) and Ouyang Yu (from Mainland China) have all written about aspects of Aboriginal–Asian interrelations. These writings are an attempt by minority writers, as Anna L. Tsing suggests in a different but related context, ‘not to head back to an imagined center, but to extend ... account[s] toward other marginalities’ (36).

Noticeably in many of these texts, humour is frequently deployed to capture the moment of cross-cultural engagement and (mis)communication in the domestic space, on missions, or in the public and institutional arenas where aspects of Aboriginal and Asian lives were oblique to or viewed pejoratively by mainstream society. These humorous expressions cannot readily be summarised as Bakhtinian carnival humour or Rabelaisian satire. Rather, they are indicative of the witty, jocular, burlesque, vulgar, and coarse conversations among socially underprivileged people. This humour highlights how subordinate groups ‘actively engage their marginality by protesting, reinterpreting, and embellishing their exclusion’ (Tsing 5). This article focuses on the discussion of texts produced since the 1980s by Aboriginal authors<sup>2</sup> and examines how and why humour is deployed to recount Aboriginal–Asian alliances and tensions.

Humour is recognised as a salient feature of Aboriginal identity. As Adam Shoemaker notes, the ‘reliance upon laughter in the midst of adversity is an important element in the Aboriginal self-image’ (233). In fact, Aboriginal humour is often related less to joy and entertainment than to pain and sorrow. W.E.H. Stanner, in his essay ‘Aboriginal Humour’ discusses the ‘affinity between humour and tragedy,’ calling for an understanding of the paradox of humour in its own composition, as well as the context in which humour is produced and interpreted (268). Humour can be evoked at unexpected twists or turns in a narrative, arousing a string of sentiments in which surprise, shock, or fear is suddenly released and switched to relief, a smile, or mirth (Adams and Newell 7). A ‘good’ joke is revelatory and produces a lasting effect. That is, as the laughs dwindle, the allegorical or ironic meaning sinks in. Paradoxically, the stark reality that jokes bitterly allude to, both constitutes and deflates the humour. By acknowledging and

reflecting on absurdity, prejudice or ignorance, humour is likely to produce a cathartic effect in the audience (Banks 7).

It is widely recognised that humour heals pain and misery, however temporarily and symbolically, and enables individuals or groups to evade, disguise, and come to terms with difficulties or even tragic events in life (Morris 89). Moreover, humour in the form of jokes is an integral feature of Aboriginal social life and a riposte to rigid social sanctions (Duncan 20). Anthropologists use the term 'joking relationship' to describe certain behavioural aspects of Aboriginal kinship systems. A joking relationship, like an avoidance relationship, is an integral component of formalised kin behavioural patterns. For example, according to Stanner, 'joking relationships' are 'expressive and symbolic means of dealing socially with feelings resting on ambivalence' (273), and hence are a way of mitigating potential tensions that might arise between certain kin categories. To counteract hegemony and institutional control during the colonial/postcolonial period, making jokes provides a ready outlet for releasing tensions and an effective means of coping with conflict-ridden realities. As Lillian Holt writes, 'Aboriginal people see the necessity of humour as a tool of everyday existence and narrative, and for survival' (81). Humour as a strategy of survival epitomises the paradoxical connection between humour and tragedy in the life of Aboriginal people who were, and to a large extent remain, socially disadvantaged.

It is no coincidence that humour finds its way into Aboriginal writers' enunciation of alliances and intimacies between Aboriginal and Asian peoples. Both groups experienced racial discrimination and social exclusion throughout the nineteenth and the twentieth centuries and arguably still do today. Their mutual engagement not only traversed national, cultural and social boundaries, but contested restrictive colonial legislation. For example, Queensland's *Aboriginals Protection and Restriction of the Sale of Opium Act* 1897 was among the most draconian laws imposing control over Aboriginal people and their interaction with Asians. The 1897 Act was purported to prohibit the supply of opium—mainly from the Chinese—to Aboriginal people. In effect, however, it allowed the forcible removal of Aboriginal people by Aboriginal Protectors to designated reserves and made Aboriginal people State wards, stripping many of their civil rights. Among other measures, it prohibited the cohabitation of Aboriginal women and Asian men so as to curb any increase of the 'coloured' population, which was then considered a threat to white Australia. Similar anti-miscegenation laws were implemented through a series of Aborigines Acts and amendments in other states and territories, such as Western Australia in 1905, the Northern Territory in 1910, and South Australia in 1911. These laws were enforced for the purpose of racial segregation. Sarah Yu notes in the investigation of Aboriginal and Asian partnerships in the Kimberley region that such laws 'created a regime of interference and fear and caused much individual suffering' (59). The impact of these laws lingered until the 1980s and arguably beyond. Notwithstanding the institutional intervention and prohibition that attempted to segregate Aboriginal and Asian communities, inter-racial marriages and lasting relationships occurred, contributing to today's polyethnic, mixed-race communities especially in the north of Australia.

Humour in texts that feature Aboriginal and Asian engagement articulates voices and opinions that are otherwise oppressed, silenced or censored, and thereby constitutes a tool for agency, resistance and survival. Humour can be one of 'the ordinary weapons of relatively powerless groups' as James Scott suggests, manifesting in various expressions such as 'dissimulation,' 'false compliance,' and 'feigned ignorance' (xvi). It is an everyday practice of opposition and rebellion. In most circumstances the deployment of humour by the oppressed is improvised, relying on individual wit and spontaneity. Humour usually occurs in clandestine, domestic or

private spaces, in which the powerless eschew confrontation with the powerful and thus evade potential consequences. Scott suggests the irony, satire and laughter of the oppressed comprise a ‘hidden transcript,’ which is offstage, behind the scenes, or beyond the powerholder’s control and surveillance (4). Whether the humour of the oppressed is revolutionary in any real sense remains contested. However, it offers a moment of liberty and emotional uplift in repressive contexts, helps strengthen individual or collective identity, and contributes to the foundations upon which interests and rights are negotiated (Kuipers 369).

This study has been influenced by Anne Brewster’s reading of Aboriginal writer Alf Taylor’s short fiction which considers humour as a ‘prime textual vehicle which destabilizes whiteness’ (427). Brewster views the construction of otherness and whiteness as a relational process and suggests that humour (such as black mimicking white and vice versa in Taylor’s work) brings to the fore the instability of racialised identities, hence disrupting both otherness and whiteness for the white reader. This article extends upon Brewster’s argument by explicating the humour between Aboriginal people and Asian people in Aboriginal writings about racialised identities, bodies and intimacies. By attending to, recognising and embracing other marginal positions these texts think beyond the binaries between Aboriginal and European, colonised and coloniser, and deconstruct the established critical paradigms for thinking about settler colonialism.<sup>3</sup> This article investigates the textual role of three forms of humour in three generically different Aboriginal texts that feature interracial engagement between Aboriginal and Asian peoples: self-deprecating humour in Alexis Wright’s novel *Plains of Promise* (1997), puns and witty language in Tex and Nelly Camfoo’s autobiography *Love against the Law* (2000), and boasting and self-compliment in Anita Heiss’s historical romance *Barbed Wire and Cherry Blossoms* (2016). It will demonstrate how humour works to unsettle racialised knowledge and the institutional control of the socially marginalised.

## I. Self-deprecation and Stigmatised Identities

While colonial superiors are often the butt of ridicule, joking about each other and self-deprecation is also commonplace between and within minority groups. Jessica Milner Davis considers humour as an essentially democratic tradition in Australia and suggests that humour is ‘an acculturating ritual’ for people living in difficult situations (31). Stress or trauma is mitigated by making fun out of it, or as Jones and Andrews suggest, by allowing people to ‘wryly-resign themselves to their own powerlessness’ (60). For Aboriginal and Asian Australians, joking expresses risible and sardonic humour about historical injuries, abject poverty, dysfunctional life, and pejorative depictions.

The award-winning writer Alexis Wright is of Waanyi, European and Chinese heritage. Her first novel *Plains of Promise* (1997) touches upon Aboriginal–Chinese intimate relationships. The character Pilot Ah King comes from a medical family in China and is exiled to Australia for political and family reasons. He practises medicine in town and lives in the bush with his Aboriginal wife May Sugar. I argue that the subtle and intricate working of deprecating humour is exemplified by Pilot and May in Wright’s novel and it both recognises and deconstructs the stigmatised identities of marginalised groups living under a colonial regime.

In one episode, Pilot and May encounter a young Aboriginal man, Elliot, who is from another Aboriginal group. On the camp ground fifty dogs owned by Pilot gather. Seeing these ‘hairless’ and ‘unhealthy’ dogs, Elliot is reminded of a law at St Dominic’s Mission where he stays, which allows each family to keep no more than two dogs for hygienic reasons (88). Elliot asks, ‘What

about hygiene?’ (89) May does not follow the question and asks: ‘What’s that, son? What you call it?’ (89). Pilot cuts in on their conversation:

[1] ‘Hygiene is for white people, old woman,’ Pilot told her. ‘They build big houses for themselves. Don’t let no dirt or dirty people like you or me inside. That’s hygiene.’

[2] ‘That old man making fun of me?’ May Sugar asked Elliot, who smiled and shook his head.

[3] ‘Never mind him,’ Pilot said. ‘He wouldn’t know about white people. Ask me. I’ve seen plenty sick white people. Cattle station mob. Town mob. Believe me, everything makes them sick. Always bellyaching, moaning and groaning about something or other. You can get too much dirt or too little. It’s worrying about having no dirt makes you sick good and proper.’ (89)

Pilot’s remark (para [1]) drives home the racial implications of ‘hygiene’: defined in opposition to ‘dirt,’ ‘hygiene’ is synonymous with ‘whiteness,’ an imagined embodiment of racial purity and superiority. The pair of antitheses—‘dirt’ and ‘hygiene’—constitute a contrast between lower (i.e. dirt is an utterance of everyday language) and higher (i.e. hygiene is an example of specialised language) registers of discourse, and suggest a hierarchical opposition between black and white, colonised and colonisers, the powerless and the powerful. In this sense, ‘hygienic’ white people distinguish and distance themselves from ‘dirty people’ (i.e. Aboriginal and Asian peoples) who occupy lower rungs on the social ladder. Pilot’s emphasis—‘that’s hygiene’—is thereby tantamount to relentless satire, suggesting racialised ideology and power relations.

It is worth unpacking and explaining the historical and conceptual constitution of the set of associations that Pilot’s joke lays bare. The term ‘dirt’/‘dirty’ signifies a chain of connotations—uncleanliness, disease, impurity, disorder, and aberration (Douglas 2–3). It also invokes the racial discrimination and prejudice Aboriginal women and Asian men endured under the *Aborigines Protection Act*, a period reflected in Wright’s novel. Images of dirty, victimised, vulnerable and promiscuous Aboriginal women were deeply entrenched in settler society throughout much of Australia’s colonial history. Aboriginal women were often seen as sexual deviants, both racially undesired and sexually available, as ‘primitive sexual subjects’ who would succumb to the clandestine desire of white men (Moreton-Robinson 170). Inter-racial sex between white men and Aboriginal women was deemed ‘shameful, repulsive and worthy of ridicule’ (Robert 74). In examining the racialised and sexualised knowledge of black female bodies under the gaze of white men, Sander Gilman traces the discursive links between ‘black,’ ‘primitive,’ and ‘disease.’ He identifies that the idea of being ‘pre-eminently unclean’ (and hence pathological) is central to stigmatisation of racial and sexual difference (234). As he points out, ‘[i]t is this uncleanliness, this disease, which forms the final link between the two images of woman, the black and the prostitute’ (256). As Sullivan argues Aboriginal women who engaged in inter-racial intimacy were often stigmatised and branded as prostitutes, and their agency in varying scenarios was rarely recognised (402).

Miscegenation between Aboriginal women and Asian men triggered an even worse fear and anxiety in white settler society. This horror resulted from the belief that miscegenation was unnatural, disgraceful, unhealthy and destructive, and that a mixed-race population was unclean. In the early twentieth century Asian men were widely seen as an alien and impoverished

population living on the fringe of Australian society. Stigmatised images associated this population with activities such as gambling, sales of opium, corruption and other malpractices. An increasing number of labourers from Asia were seen to threaten European economic interests and their control of women. As a result rumours and accusations of Asians as carriers of venereal disease and leprosy were widespread. For example, Regina Ganter's archival research on Asian exclusion in Western and Northern Australia shows that '[t]he Aboriginal protection bureaucracy viewed leprosy as an "Asian problem"' (111). Authorities also made untruthful claims and exaggerated the epidemic outbreak, stressing that leprosy was 'common in all Asiatic countries from which the [pearling] crews [in Darwin and Thursday Island] have been drawn' (qtd. in Ganter 111). The sexual engagement between Aboriginal women and Asian men was seen not only as a site of contagion and immorality, but also a vice and crime (Robert 74). Although these laws were allegedly to protect Aboriginal women from Asian men's sexual exploitation and diseases, rumours as such became a rationale for anti-miscegenation laws and amendments which enforced racial segregation and delegitimised inter-racial cohabitation.

Pilot's remark demonstrates that the association between dirt, disease and disorder justifies the attempt of white people to shun Aborigines and Asians. It reflects that the inter-racial intimacies between Aborigines and Asians were deemed as 'disgraceful anomalies,' incompatible with the idea of family in settler society (Robert 76). In the novel, a critique of racial discrimination is skilfully expressed through Pilot's self-deprecating humour which not only affirms how the idea of 'hygiene' functions socially and politically but also proclaims that he and May are 'dirty people.' Self-deprecation reverses the butt of the joke, but not necessarily the target of criticism. Rather, by producing a sense of irony, Pilot's self-deprecating humour attacks white supremacy all the more powerfully. This can be seen when following his self-mockery, Pilot continues to debunk the absurdity of white people who insist on 'having no dirt' and satirises their futile attempts to keep away from 'dirt.' Pilot shows that it is not a problem of dirt but rather the anxiety about dirt that makes them 'sick good and proper' (89). The sarcasm redefines the discourses that link racial purity to hygiene and miscegenation to disease.

Humour enables disobedience and defiance, and the symbolic reversal of hierarchical power relations. In this case, self-deprecation both acknowledges and contests the stigma imposed upon the marginalised (e.g. Aboriginal and Asian peoples). By reaffirming stereotypes, self-deprecation enacts a process of interpellation which brings racialised knowledge into the individual perception of the self. Meanwhile, in creating and exaggerating a sense of irony (e.g. defining what is 'hygiene' and what is not), self-deprecating humour releases a force of rebellion and rebuts accusatory denigration, unsettling the logic of stigma (e.g. attached to Aboriginal and Asian peoples). Thereby it opens up a discursive space in which the way stigma works on individual identities is at once revealed and resisted.

Responding to Pilot's blunt and cynical words, May turns to Elliot and scoffs: 'That old man making fun of me?' May takes the ostensibly offensive label as 'dirty' Aborigine as a joke, though it may not sound particularly funny. May's engagement with self-derision and stigmatised labelling in this moment can be understood in relation to Gillian Cowlshaw's suggestion that 'Aborigines are active participants in these social dynamics rather than merely passive, innocent recipients of racist stereotyping and exclusion' (*Blackfellas* 4). The mockery of Aboriginality within the Aboriginal community is recognised as a 'ritualization of stigma,' which accustoms individuals to the stigma associated with their identity (Carter 72).

As Eckermann has suggested, the socialisation of Aboriginal children by inuring them to jokes of this kind could prevent them from being deeply hurt as they grow up to confront prejudice and racism (Eckermann 300). Aboriginal people's appropriation, as well as reproduction, of their own ostensible stigma becomes excessive to the extent that it renders stigma a sign that lacks specification and meaning. Suffice it to say that, in finding humour in stigma, Aboriginal people deplete the power of derogatory stereotypes, making racial accusation less harmful. Elliot's answer to May's self-derisive question, a reassuring smile and shake of the head, reveals composure in the face of racism.

While self-deprecating humour encompasses both an identification with and resistance to stigmatised images, it is important to note that for stigmatised groups, joking about their own stigma can be a vehicle of empowerment. Drawing on Judith Butler's theory on the 'agency derived from injury' (41), Cowlshaw sheds light on the relationship between injury and agency when stigma is reproduced. As she suggests, 'the injuries ... are fostered and displayed as markers of identity and become the source of some degree of agency' (*Blackfellas* 60). Injuries can be the catalyst for resistance and righteous revenge. Self-identification with injury is a way for disadvantaged groups to retain some agency by acknowledging and embracing their disadvantage. Returning to the text we could argue therefore, that in taking Pilot's 'accusation' as a joke, May's sense of humour transforms stigmatisation into self-affirmation and is thereby a vehicle for self-empowerment.

In this episode, the function of self-deprecating humour is complex. The stigmatised identities of socially marginalised groups are resisted and defied, as much as they are reinforced and reproduced. The episode underlines a core question about whether humour is 'conservative' or 'subversive.' On the one hand, in mocking undesirable properties/behaviours and imposing shame (e.g. Pilot hails May and himself as 'dirty people'), humour conforms to social conventions and regulates transgression. On the other, humour can be deployed in ways that challenge and subvert the existing hierarchy, and so become a disguised act of aggression. The ambiguity of humour is that it manages the status quo, as well as facilitating defiance and rebellion. As Donna M. Goldstein contests, humour is 'an expression and deployment of (class) power, [which] is potentially both conservative and liberatory' (6). Her argument echoes Peter Gay's view that humour is a source of power which facilitates 'the exercise—and the control—of aggression' (368).

The paradoxical nature of humour is inherent in the dual existence of literal and actual meanings in this scene: the first layer of meaning (literal meaning) appears conservative, and the second layer of meaning (implied or actual meaning) is subversive and in effect counters the former meaning. The real intention underneath self-deprecation is expressed in a refracted way; as Stanner puts it, '[t]he symbolic signs are turned, as it were, inside out' (275). Wright's novel exemplifies how the use of self-deprecation both affirms racial stereotypes about Aboriginal and Asian peoples and deconstructs such views. It demonstrates that as a textual device, humour undertakes a double role, reproducing stigmatisation and expressing the agency of the stigmatised.

## II. Puns, Inter-racial Intimacy and Institutional Control

*Love against the Law* (2000) is an autobiographical account of Tex and Nelly Camfoo (recorded and edited by Gillian Cowlshaw). The narrative retains the rhythm of oral storytelling through witty and humorous language, and is full of energy and vivid melodrama. Born in 1922, Tex Camfoo is the son of Jimmy Camfoo,<sup>4</sup> a Chinese miner and then saddler, and Florida, a

Rembarrnga woman. His wife, Nelly Camfoo, grew up in a traditional Aboriginal community in Central Arnhem Land and never saw white people until she was a young girl. Tex was educated on the mission, and worked for years as a head stockman on stations. He has been identified as ‘blackfella,’ ‘European’ and ‘half-caste’ during different periods of his life, reflecting the ambiguous social status of Aboriginal people and Australia’s contradictory racial policies. While the Chinese were sometimes classified as Europeans by Aboriginal people and occasionally by the authorities, Tex’s Chinese heritage was mentioned mostly in familial settings, such as when with his Chinese father and relatives. Nelly, however, has always been identified as Aboriginal.

This autobiography documents the life and experience of Tex and Nelly in the Northern Territory across most of the twentieth century. Their story of love and marriage, brimming with humorous and sardonic irony, exposes how racialised people were caught in identity politics and struggled with restrictive and often farcical institutional rules during the 1960s. In an episode entitled ‘Permission to Marry,’ Tex recalls the ceremony where he and Nelly were officially married by a Minister in Katherine:

We sign the paper and Ron Ryan [the patrol officer’s wife who provided her wedding ring for this new couple to complete the ceremony] said, ‘You try and get away now!’

They took my photos and everything like that. ‘You never run away now!’

I was hobbled! (73)

Tex’s humorous response—‘I was hobbled’—is a pun that involves two layers of meaning. Firstly, it references the western marital bond, symbolised by the wedding ring and marriage certificate. However, secondly, it alludes to an invisible chain imposed by the authorities to control the intimate relationships between Aboriginal and Asian peoples. This second point requires further elaboration.

Tex meets Nelly for the first time when Nelly is around nine years old and Tex has a feeling that Nelly will be his wife. They see each other again when Nelly turns twenty-six. They fall in love and finally decided to get married. By this time Nelly has a promissory husband, Larry, an Aboriginal man who has two wives: Nelly and her sister Dolly. Larry is Tex’s brother according to Aboriginal kinship. Larry agrees to relinquish his claim and allows Nelly to go with Tex. The partnership between Tex and Nelly is acknowledged in an Aboriginal sense. However, because Tex is classified as a European by the authorities, he is told to gain permission from the government to marry Nelly legally. Tex is discombobulated and comments sarcastically on the rationale of government regulations: ‘I used to go with Nelly for nearly three or four years ... Native Affairs, that patrol officer Ron Ryan [patrol officer in charge of Katherine and the area to the east in the 1950s and 1960s] he didn’t know I was going around with Nelly’ (58). In Tex’s opinion, it is ridiculous that permission is required from a patrol officer who stands for government law enforcement yet who is irrelevant to the *de facto* marriage between him and Nelly.

The Department of Native Affairs at first rejects Tex’s request for permission to marry Nelly on the grounds that Tex is already married to Ruth, an Aboriginal woman. Tex is threatened with arrest and prosecution for bigamy. While the authorities did not ban the practice of polygamy in traditional Aboriginal society (in cases such as Larry and his two wives),

polygamy was not permitted among the mission-educated Aboriginal people (Ganter 117). Although it turns out that Tex's marriage to Ruth was never officially registered as Tex is classified as 'European,' he is refused the right 'to live or cohabit or have sexual intercourse with any Aborigine or half-caste' according to the *Aboriginal Ordinance* (1936). The ruling by Native Affairs about Tex's identity is at once serious and farcical. As he states: 'When Native Affairs—he came out getting all the census [Register of Wards], he said "Your name not here, you're not an Aboriginal, you're a European because your father's a European." Chinese they haven't got all that, all the laws that Native Affairs had. He said, "but we keep it as a secret"' (qtd. in Ganter 117).

It is bewildering that Tex is classified as European but not Aboriginal. The racial divide between Europeans and Aboriginal people imposed by Native Affairs dismissed Chinese Australians as a distinctive demographic category and hence Tex's Chinese heritage goes unrecognised. This is also risible because on the one hand the Native Affairs officer mistakes Tex as a European; on the other, he claims to do Tex a favour by brushing Tex's European identity aside as a 'secret' so that Tex can pass and marry an Aboriginal woman. While it was considered an offence for a European man to have carnal knowledge of an Aboriginal woman on the grounds of protecting Aboriginal women from sexual exploitation, prohibition was not always enacted strictly. However, as Cowlshaw stresses, the illegitimacy as well as the sense of shame related to inter-racial relationships was often reinforced (*Love* 23). Tex's ironic humour in the lively retelling of his stories can be read as a sarcastic retort to institutional authorities. After several years of dispute and struggle, Tex and Nelly finally get married and their lifelong partnership renders the colonial attempt to control the intimate relationship of its subject citizens as futile as a joke that is not funny.

Tex's pun—'I was hobbled'—takes physical constraint (i.e. 'hobbled') as a metaphor for the socially and politically disadvantaged status of people of Aboriginal and Asian heritage. Engaging playfully with 'negative' bodily expression, humorous puns in this text reveal the extent to which Aboriginal and Asian Australians are discriminated against and interrogate the mid-twentieth century colonial regime.

### III. Boasting to Destabilise the Stereotypes

Anita Heiss, a prolific Aboriginal writer who describes herself as a 'creative disruptor' and is known for establishing the genre 'Koori chick lit,' writes about proud, educated, independent, and urbanised Aboriginal women, challenging the mainstream representations of Aboriginal female characters. Her latest fictional work, *Barbed Wire and Cherry Blossoms* (hereafter referred to as *Barbed Wire*) dramatises the breakout of Japanese soldiers from the prisoner of war camp in Cowra, New South Wales, in August 1944. It centres on a fictional romance between Hiroshi, a Japanese soldier who is on the run and sheltered by the Aboriginal community on Erambie Mission, and Mary, an Aboriginal girl who delivers food to Hiroshi and saves his life. *Barbed Wire* follows Heiss's previous chick lit novels—*Tiddas* (2014), *Paris Dreaming* (2011), *Manhattan Dreaming* (2010), *Avoiding Mr Right* (2008) and *Not Meeting Mr Right* (2007). It utilises the love-story plotline and light-hearted tone characteristic of the chick-lit genre. Although it does not have a clichéd 'happily ever after' ending, its conclusion is sentimental without tragedy which is also typical of romance: Hiroshi is expatriated to Japan and so leaves Mary after the end of WWII. In the epilogue Hiroshi revisits Cowra years later and Mary, who has already married a caring husband, still cannot forget him. Although set in small-town Cowra (instead of against a cosmopolitan background), *Barbed Wire* contains a list of book club questions on the final pages and is clearly marketed to a mainstream, urbanised,



middle-class female readership. Imogen Mathew reads Heiss's chick lit as an advice manual that aims to instruct non-Aboriginal readers how to communicate and interact with Aboriginal Australians (334). Furthering this argument, I contend firstly that humour in Heiss's fiction *Barbed Wire* facilitates the education of mainstream readers by unsettling racially stereotyped bodies and the sexuality of marginalised groups. Secondly, the self-complimentary humour evident in Heiss's fiction, in contrast to the self-deprecation found in many Aboriginal texts, challenges readers to accept humour in works by minority authors.

In *Barbed Wire*, Heiss connects the history of Japanese POWs in Cowra with the local Aboriginal community, a connection that has not been recorded and studied (see Jenkins 13). The Aboriginal camp in Erambie which Heiss refers to in this novel was dubbed a 'prison' by local Aboriginal people for being isolated and controlled and resembled the POW camp which was only four miles away. Heiss comments in an interview that 'the [Aboriginal] people living in Erambie were treated worse than the POWs' (qtd. in Jenkins 13). In the novel Aboriginal humour provides a way of surviving this bleak history: 'It's only Black Humour and making fun of the Manager that sustains the locals at Erambie through the misery of being no one in your own land' (13). 'Black Humour' is emphatically a play on words in itself, suggesting both Aboriginal humour and the way in which humour is derived from misery or the unspeakable (similar to 'gallows humour').

The episode subtitled 'Even Dead Japs' describes the contamination of water consumed by Aboriginal people on the mission with humour: 'the bad smell in the town's water can be blamed on rumours of dead horses, cattle and "even dead Japs" found at Lithgow water supply. "Cuppa anyone?" Joan [Mary's mother] asks, trying to break the moment with some humour' (171). Joan's fake invitation 'Cuppa anyone' transforms the unspeakable, repulsive subject and expresses her 'real' repugnance. The uncanny switch of the real/fake meanings created by satirical humour accentuates the harsh reality facing Aboriginal people who live on the outskirts of the town.

However, it is the use of complimentary humour that is most interesting in *Barbed Wire*. This humour is in line with the text's broader characterisation of proud, educated and sensible Aboriginal and Asian characters, who are sexually desirable as well as lovable and marriageable. This characterisation is in stark contrast to victimised or exoticised representations of Aboriginal women and Asian men. The emotional affection between Hiroshi and Mary develops along the formula of romance and chick lit in which the hero and the heroine meet, date and fall in love. Under the pen of Heiss, Mary is a caring and kind-hearted girl who looks 'thin, very thin' due to heavy chores and malnutrition, but 'she is fit' (32). Hiroshi 'is very skinny but he has muscles' and at first sight Mary 'thinks there is something attractive about him' (33). The positive (rather than romanticised) description is a transformative representation of Aboriginal and Asian bodies and intimate relationships. Following a typical storyline of romantic love that has little to do with racial or ethnic specificity, the affection between Mary and Hiroshi grows on the grounds of physical attraction, common traits and interests. They share stories, sports, music, and books, as well as their mutual longing for freedom and homeland. As Mary tells Hiroshi about her country and people, she blushes at her words: 'My Uncle Kevin reckons some people come to Cowra searching for the good-looking women here. He reckons we are famous for them' (42). Uncle Kevin's mildly boastful remark, as retold by Mary to Hiroshi, produces subtle humorous pleasure. The compliment is made with none of the references to skin colour or racial features that are usually apparent in the patronising descriptions. Though claiming to be good-looking embarrasses Mary herself, the self-

compliment produces a playful and light-hearted humour that stems from a palpable sense of racial and sexual confidence.

Boastful humour, as opposed to self-deprecation, subverts or avoids stereotypes, and thereby broadens the way Aboriginal humour is usually conceived. In her analysis of *Black & Tran* (2001), a comedy by Aboriginal performer Ningali Lawford and Vietnamese-Australian comedian Hung Le, Helena Grehan draws attention to the tendency to believe that humour produced by racial/ethnic minority performers needs to follow ‘a formula of irony, mockery and self-deprecation’ (115). This formula generates rebellious irony but also risks reproducing western derogatory and racialised stereotypes. Furthermore, Grehan raises concern about the audience’s narrow-minded response to humour in comedy about and by minority groups: ‘when their [audience’s] expectations are not met—when the piece does not rely on self-deprecation and comic irony—they become frustrated and interest wanes’ (116). What is worse, the deployment of self-deprecation and sarcasm about race/ethnic relations ‘risks the ghettoisation of the performer’ who has racial/ethnic minority backgrounds (Grehan 117). In this regard, Heiss’s fiction presents an alternative ‘black comedy’ in which humour is made out of self-compliment, challenging the attempt to confine Aboriginal humour to self-deprecation, mockery and irony. It demonstrates that self-complimentary humour is equally effective in unsettling stereotypes in the representation of Aboriginal women.

After all, humour can be generated not only through devices such as irony, the burlesque and comical, but also through boasting, bragging and being cheeky. The latter works to deconstruct images of discrete and maligned racialised otherness. Heiss’s fiction normalises the representations of racialised and marginalised people. Stressing the similarities between women from diverse backgrounds, Heiss comments ‘we’ve got more in common than we haven’t’ (qtd. in Hardy para 6). Humour in her work attempts to educate readers about racialised bodies and intimate relationships, enabling them to reflect on the ‘sameness’ and equality of people from different racial and ethnic backgrounds. Humorous self-compliment satirises insular and parochial views of minorities and their sense of humour.

The readings in this article are an opening to a further and broader inquiry into the literary representations of Aboriginal and Asian relationships in Australia. Humour is widely and creatively deployed in these writings. Martin Nakata speaks of the important role of Aboriginal humour in the construction of a cultural interface because humour ‘emerges from this locale where we form a community around some shared inter-subjective understanding of our experience, where we can understand the jokes’ (216). Humour has the potential to establish intellectual dialogues between different groups and cultural contexts, though its multiple forms and varied functions require careful explication. Self-deprecating humour at once affirms and disrupts the racialised and sexualised otherness, and humour through puns implicitly debunks the colonial regime which is the root cause of Aboriginal disadvantage. By contrast, self-complimentary humour challenges Aboriginal victimisation and otherness more directly. Ultimately humour allows Aboriginal authors to reflect on stigmatised identities, bodies and intimacies, and to demonstrate the way Aboriginal and Asian Australians survive colonial dominance.

## NOTES

<sup>1</sup> In this article, I use ‘Aboriginal people’ as a general term referring to the peoples of the First Nations of Australia. ‘Asian immigrants’ refers to peoples with different language, cultural, and religious backgrounds in East,

Southeast and South Asia, who have immigrated or whose parents migrated to Australia. The encounters between Aboriginal and Asian peoples occurred at different historical times and geographical locations.

<sup>2</sup> Compared with Aboriginal texts, there are fewer literary texts by Asian writers that feature Aboriginal–Asian interactions. The reasons are complicated: for a long period of Australian history a singular identity—either Aboriginal or Asian—was accepted or practised in *de facto* polyethnic societies. Many Aboriginal writers who have Asian heritage (such as Alexis Wright and Jennifer Martiniello) consider themselves Aboriginal. Moreover, Asian writers who have no Aboriginal heritage are concerned about inadvertently breaching Aboriginal cultural codes if their work includes Aboriginal characters or Aboriginal related subject matter.

<sup>3</sup> Although on occasion sensitive to more complex expressions of identity, much literary criticism, post-colonial and settler colonial analyses, ultimately fall back on or postulate distinctive binaries. See for example Verancini, Wolfe. Cf. Paradies.

<sup>4</sup> Camfoo is a literal translation of a traditional Chinese name—not a surname though—Lai Fuk (來福), consisting of the Chinese characters ‘來’ (meaning ‘come’) and ‘福’ (meaning ‘luck,’ ‘good fortune’). Originating from the area of Canton (today’s Guangzhou), Lai Fuk was a common given name of a boy from a lower class family, who was expected to bring good fortune to the family. While it is unknown whether it was a convenient omission of Camfoo’s surname by the immigration authorities or whether Camfoo himself had not had a surname back in China (it was common back then in China that the illiterate had a given name only), this awkward combination of an English (i.e. ‘Jimmy’) and a Chinese given name (i.e. ‘Camfoo’) discloses the low social status of early Chinese migrants who made their way in white Australian society.

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