

Serving up the “Other”: Representations of Indigeneity in Popular Culture

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Abstract

Through a critical engagement with the television show *Jonah from Tonga*, in this paper I attempt to address representations of indigeneity in popular culture in popular culture. Created by Australian comedian Chris Lilley, *Jonah from Tonga* is a mockumentary starring the white actor in brownface as Jonah, a young boy whose only attribute is his (mild) aptitude for break dance. By complicating notions of indigenous peoples as unintelligent, hyper-sexualized, and violent I attempt to unravel the show’s prevalent stereotypes that dis-empower indigenous people. As a dancer myself, I explore how movement and dance is linked to these stereotypes. I find that dance is indeed another mechanism for reproducing stereotypes of indigenous peoples as more connected to physical, rather than mental, capabilities. Alternatively, I examine how *Jonah from Tonga* opens up space for the production of counter-narratives about, and alternative representations of, indigenous peoples in the popular mass media. Through humor and viewer response, both indigenous actors and audience members exercise “visual sovereignty” that challenges stereotypical tropes in this problematic medium. By critically analyzing the show *Jonah from Tonga* and its viewer response, this paper explores the complex and often paradoxical intricacies of indigenous representations in mainstream popular culture.

Introduction

Jonah From Tonga is a show created by a white Australian comedian, Chris Lilley. The show follows the trials and tribulations of Jonah, a year 9 “Tongan” student at Holy Cross Catholic School in Australia. With a penchant for bullying and dancing, Jonah, a practically illiterate, hyper-sexual, homophobic, and aggressive student, navigates his prep school and challenging family dynamics. His adventures happen alongside his group of other Tongan friends who call themselves “fobalicious.” In *Jonah from Tonga*, Lilley, also the writer, director, and producer, plays main character, Jonah, in brownface. Lilley is known for his unpredictable and often offensive work that involves him embodying a variety of characters based on stereotypes of different races, ethnicities, genders, ages, etc. This particular series follows a few main story lines: Jonah avoiding trouble with the law (or not); a school-wide bullying war between Jonah and his “fobalicious” friends versus the red-haired students at the school (derogatorily called “rangas”); and Jonah’s quest for his father’s approval in order to get his family “dick tattoo.” These main story lines are mixed in with crude and juvenile humor, sexual objectification of women, teacher misconduct, and “Tongan” music and traditions.

Like other shows by Lilley, *Jonah from Tonga* has gotten very mixed reviews. While some condemn Lilley wholeheartedly for his appropriation and denigration of Tongan culture, others claim Lilley is in fact bringing issues of racism to the fore in a cultural critique. My immediate reaction was to fall faithfully into the former category, however after watching the first half of the series and observing the public

discussion about the show, I find myself more conflicted. In a manner that is somewhat contradictory and complex, the show seems to operate on both levels of this dichotomized view. This paper is my meditation on the polarizing show and its creator in an attempt to understand the truths of both sides. By complicating notions of indigenous peoples as unintelligent, hyper-sexualized, and violent I attempt to unravel the show's prevalent stereotypes that dis-empower indigenous people. Alternatively, I examine how *Jonah from Tonga* opens up space for the production of counter-narratives about, and alternative representations of, indigenous peoples in the popular mass media through representations of structural racism at Holy Cross Catholic School. I suggest that both indigenous actors and audience members exercise "visual sovereignty" that challenges stereotypical tropes in this problematic medium. By critically analyzing the show *Jonah from Tonga* and its viewer response, this paper explores the complex and often paradoxical intricacies of indigenous representations in mainstream popular culture.

The Racialized, Sexualized Other as a Playground

In *Jonah from Tonga*, Chris Lilley dons a curly wig and what looks like fake-tanner or bronzer to make himself appear "Tongan." The job seems to be done purposely bad, ultimately emphasizing his whiteness whilst still serving the purpose of racial cross-dressing. This racial cross-dressing comes with a long history of similar acts by white performers in colonized countries for upper class white audiences. In the US this is in the form of minstrelsy, or white performers dressed up as African Americans who put on shows that portrayed animalistic, naïve, and

“primal” behavior (Lott). In Australia, similar ends were met through live and print entertainment exhibitions associated with Aboriginal peoples. Liz Conor shows that much humor was in fact derived from racial cross-dressing in Australia through the 20th century—this included both images of white women dressing in “Aboriginal” ways, and images of Aboriginal women trying and failing to dress as white women (Conor). Much like Lilley, the white people were seen as successfully understanding and emulating Aboriginal culture, while Aboriginals were seen as painfully ignorant of their inability to understand white society. Though *Jonah from Tonga* presents a white man dressed as a Tongan boy, the similarities between this and earlier racial cross-dressing in Australia remains significant. Additionally, though I will not explore the possibility in this paper, I’d like to suggest that Lilley might be using the plight and repression of Tongan people as a stand-in for that of Aboriginal people in Australia.

Lilley’s humor so often depends on embodying racialized, sexualized, and gendered stereotypes as a white male. When he’s not Jonah, he’s a “tiger mother”—a Japanese mother with a strange and disturbing relationship with her star skateboarder son—or an African-American rapper named S’Mouse (also in blackface), with such songs as “Grandmother Fucker” and “Squashed Nigga,” or a white, upper-class teenage girl who is proud of her eating disorder and a bully to all those around her. His humor depends on emphasizing difference, a perfect example of what bell hooks describes in her book *Black Looks: Race and Representation*. While hooks discusses primarily US American popular culture and the appropriation of Black culture, I find that some of her analyses can be carried over to this international

context. hooks explains how shows like this are made possible by the structure of popular mass culture in English-speaking societies.

“mass culture is the contemporary location that both publicly declares and perpetuates the idea that there is pleasure to be found in the acknowledgement and enjoyment of racial difference. The commodification of Otherness has been so successful because it is offered as a new delight, more intense, more satisfying than normal ways of doing and feeling.” (hooks 366)

Lilley’s characters are in fact commodified caricatures of dangerous tropes, laughable (supposedly) because of their deliciously different-ness. And yet, it is that same emphasis on difference that works to secure Lilley’s dominance as a rich, white, male. By invisibilizing his own whiteness in drag or racial disguise, Lilley is in fact emphasizing how easy it is for him to embody these others, to take on whatever persona he might desire, and ultimately to shower off and become himself at the end of the day. This ridiculous character he is embodying is seen as only possible in a darker skin tone, as an Other; darker, more dangerous, more sensual, more in some way in tune with basic humanness.

hooks’ conclusions in her essay seem to describe Lilley’s actions, as well. She states that “When race and ethnicity become commodified as resources for pleasure, the culture of specific groups, as well as the bodies of individuals, can be seen as constituting an alternative playground where members of dominating races, genders, sexual practices affirm their power-over in intimate relations with the Other” (hooks 367). In *Jonah from Tonga*, Lilley affirms his position of privilege

through his portrayals of the Other. By highlighting the stupidity, profanity, and violence of Jonah, he is at once denigrating the “Tongan” character and glorifying the white characters in the show that are more stable, logical, and (sometimes) sympathetic to Jonah’s plight.

One way we see Lilley use Jonah’s body as a playground is in his sexualization of Jonah. Liz Conor addresses the sexualization of Aboriginal bodies in Australia. Conor explains that Aboriginal women were seen as incapable of consenting (or dissenting) to sex, overwhelmingly exciting to white men (to the point where rape was justified as the fault of the victim¹), lacking in modesty, and deviant in their family structure (Conor). Non-heteronormative practices or non-nuclear family structures were shamed by white Australian society (Conor). Similar ascriptions of immoral sexuality to Indigenous bodies are understood to exist across the colonized “New World.” Dian Million makes a similar claim in the Canadian context, arguing that “Indians occupied a public imaginary that was intensely sexualized—where a depraved sexuality could be assumed as a norm relating to Indians—men, women, and children” (Million 42). Lilley demonstrates that this ascription is not dead today, reviving it in this case to describe Tongans. In the series Jonah is obsessed with tagging all kinds of surfaces with his personal tag—“dick-tation”, in which he draws a picture of a penis and then writes “tation” next to it. After the school administration discovers this is his tag, he changes it to “pussy-cat”—in which he draws a picture of a vagina and then writes “cat.” Almost every joke Jonah tells in the show ends in “my dick _____,” and he is shown to be obsessed

¹ And, some might argue, not much has changed in this regard to this day.

with hitting other males' genitalia and touching females' breasts. Additionally, he is sexually attracted, to the point of almost obsession, to his female cousin. Much like the colonizers Million and Conor reference, Lilley ascribes this sexuality to Jonah in order to reinforce white supremacy by banishing Jonah and all he represents to a more basic, primitive, banal level of humanity seen to be different from and less developed than white humanity.

Besides overt references to genitalia and sex, Lilley uses dance to sexualize and primitivize Jonah's body. Dance here represents a heightened awareness of, connection with, and (in)ability to control the body. Jonah throughout the show is shown as being more connected with a physical understanding of the world and himself than a mental one. The contrived separation of physical and mental experiences and intellects is an inherently Western one. Gusterson examined the violent colonial work of this arbitrary constructed binary in his work on nuclear weapons facilities in the US (Gusterson). Part of the reason this dichotomy is so problematic is because mind is assumed to be the more developed and superior of the two epistemologies; the body is seen to be primitive, base, and uncomplicated. Though this context is quite different than that of Gusterson, the work of distancing mind from body is similarly violent and colonial in *Jonah from Tonga*. By associating Jonah with only the physical epistemology, partially through his interest in dance, Lilley establishes Jonah's intellectual inadequacy and associates him with a more primitive human experience in the mind of the Western audience. Thus, dance is indeed another mechanism for reproducing stereotypes of indigenous peoples as more connected to physical, rather than mental, capabilities.

Additionally, Jonah's dance movements involve a significant amount of pelvic thrusting and crotch grabbing, quite overtly sexual movements. Dance for Jonah feels more like another opportunity for him to display his masculinity and virility rather than an artistic mode of expression. Though dance is supposed to be a talent of his, he is in fact the least capable of all the characters on the show. Kool Kris, the Catholic Tongan youth worker at Jonah's school, is also a dancer. His movements, practiced and choreographed as opposed to Jonah's improvisational ones, involve more controlled torso and upper body movement. In fact, somewhat the opposite of Jonah, he rarely moves his hips or pelvis at all. Perhaps this is to show Kris as the other end of the spectrum from Jonah, though not necessarily in a positive light, either. To compare these characters to earlier racial drag comedies in Australia, Jonah can be seen as the white performer acting as the Aboriginal, while Kris is the Aboriginal trying unsuccessfully to perform as white. Kris is very modest, denies himself sexual expression, is a devoted Catholic and pacifist, and ultimately works to convert others to his ways. However, Kris finds himself neither accepted by Jonah and his Tongan peers, nor by the white teachers at the school. It is clear that try as he might, Kris will not be accepted as part of the dominant white culture. Jonah, however, is shown as embraced by his Tongan counterparts. At least in the show, Jonah's authenticity as Tongan is not questioned, while Kris' is. Unsurprisingly, Kool Kris' role is another main source of comedy in the show; Kris' lack of social mobility is an opportunity to once again establish and serve white supremacy.

The Exotic is Already Known

The image of a sexualized, primitive Native that Lilley crafts in *Jonah from Tonga* is one all-too-familiar in the Western vernacular of popular culture. Fatimah Tobing Rony addresses the creation of these types of images in her book, *The Third Eye*, in which she analyzes what she terms ethnographic films. Tobing Rony claims that “The exotic is always already known” (Tobing Rony 6), as these mass media, popular culture representations of the exotic and the Native are so powerful and pervasive that they are the images we choose to look for, choose to share, choose to remember in our encounters with other humans and other places in the world. Tobing Rony explicates on this with “explorers, anthropologists, and tourists voyage to foreign places in search of the novel, the undiscovered. What they find, [...] apart from their own trash thrown back in their faces, is what they already knew they would find, images predigested by certain ‘platitudes and commonplaces’. It is thus impossible to view the ‘native’ with fresh eyes” (Tobing Rony 5-6). Tobing Rony’s claims ring true with the case of Chris Lilley. Lilley’s commentary on his “research process” for his various TV shows in particular speaks to Tobing Rony’s assertion. The following is transcribed from an interview with Lilley done by BBC 2’s radio station in preparation for the release of *Jonah from Tonga* in the UK.

Interviewer: [...] Let’s talk about Jonah cause you’ve got the series coming out. So how did you conceive the idea and like get all of his mannerisms and the story?

Lilley: Um, Jonah’s a tricky one because I just I had the idea of this... in Australia there are a lot of Pacific Islander people and I’d met a few and I just thought there is something really warm and kind of... I don’t know, I just

found them really... interesting and then I did some interviews in schools where I met some groups of Pacific Islander kids and I was like “This is brilliant” and I met a few naughty ones and I met teachers who were trying to deal with them.

Interviewer: And a lot of it is about the relationships with the teachers, and that’s kind of where the emotion comes into it you can see the people who go the extra mile who understand Jonah and people like him.

Lilley: Yeah.

Interviewer: No matter how rude he is and they are so frustrated and they get so very, very angry with him and he pushes all those buttons.

Lilley: Yeah, they are all trying different approaches to get through to him and the funny stuff comes out of the relationship between him and the adults.

(Chris Lilley Interview with Jo Whiley BBC Radio 2)

In the first part of this transcribed interview, Lilley essentially tells the woman doing the interview that this was a tricky one because he just sort of had an idea or an image in mind, and then went to seek out those people who fit in his already-crafted image. Before meeting with people he knew what kind of show he wanted to make; it seems that it would have been hard at that point for Lilley to be much swayed in a different direction by what he saw around him. For, according to Tobing Rony, he was seeing only what he was looking for—troublesome, stupid, hypersexual young brown boys. Lilley is not creating a new image, he is simply repurposing a very old one and serving it up as “challenging” and “new.” Recently one of the adult women Lilley met with during his research process came out

against the show. She claimed that Lilley had not listened to what she had told him; in fact he had gone against some of what she had explicitly said about Tongan culture (“Tongan SBS Presenter Meliame Fifita Slams Chris Lilley’s Jonah from Tonga as Degrading to Her People”). For an artistic project, this is a fine line. Lilley was by no means obligated to take the advice of every person with whom he met (though if he was ignoring the information he was receiving, one wonders why he even conducted interviews). However, his choice becomes problematic when couched in the narrative that his show is just like real life, a piece of the puzzle I will explore later in this paper.

The second part of this transcribed quote from BBC 2’s interview speaks to the idea that humor comes from laughing across difference as defined by racial lines. Both the interviewer and Lilley agree that the real humor happens in the interactions between Jonah and his (white) teachers, the ones who “go the extra mile” and persevere in trying to help him even when he “pushes all their buttons.” Another way their description can be read is that the real humor happens in the interactions across race. These interactions are often about misunderstanding, opposition, manipulation, stupidity, and aggression. And, they are all about trying to get Jonah to conform to proper, humane ways of existing in society. Showing Jonah as disobedient, illiterate, aggressive, and hypersexual highlights all of the ways in which Jonah is not fully human according to Western notions of humanity. While perhaps some might offer the explanation that this is because Jonah is a teenager and, like the teacher in the show says, his brain is thus not fully developed I have to disagree. Other teenagers in the show, namely the white teenagers, are shown to be

fully functioning, intelligent, reasonable, and boring. The humor, the ultimate purpose, of this show comes from emphasizing difference at the expense of primarily Tongans, though the whiteness displayed in the show is not particularly appealing, either.

The Real in *Jonah from Tonga*

One of the first things I noticed in listening to interviews with Chris Lilley, particularly those done by British and Australian interviewers, was the incredible emphasis on the realistic nature of *Jonah from Tonga*. During an interview with BBC 3, Lilley offered the following explanation for his understanding of teenagers in Australia.

Interviewer: How do you manage to perfect all the mannerisms of teenagers and have such good knowledge of their behavior and phrases?

Lilley: it's weird, I don't know. I think maybe I... I guess I just I'm interested in certain types of people so I must just take it in through television shows or maybe I'm like stalking Facebook and like looking at stuff, I don't know. It just happens! ("BBC 3's Exclusive Interview with Chris Lilley")

In a separate interview Lilley explained that he puts a lot of import on using "real environments and to shoot it in a way that was like a documentary, and then for my characters to step into these real worlds" (EXCLUSIVE: Chris Lilley Catches up with Kyle and Jackie O). In yet another interview, Lilley described his approach to shooting his shows:

I get really excited about trying to make the world as real as possible. I feel like people will connect with it more if it just feels like it is legitimate. And that's why I like the documentary format because it yeah I place my characters within a real world and I cast people who are pretty much the real thing. So yeah, you get into a real environment, we shot in a real school with real kids, real teachers, and the principal was a real principal. (*Chris Lilley Interview with Jo Whiley BBC Radio 2*)

Overall, Lilley seems to want viewers to feel like his show is simply a window into real life. As if, when you tune the channel to *Jonah from Tonga*, you are watching an actual documentary. The problem is, you are not. This obsession with the “real” in his shows seems to describe a few other Lilley phenomena.

First off, it seems to be related to Tobing Rony's idea that we see what we look for. This show was curated by Lilley to include various iterations of representations that reinforce mass media's (and consequently, many individuals') understanding of the Native. By describing all of the people in his shows as “real,” Lilley obscures the fact that they are, indeed, actors. Despite the fact that the people who are cast perhaps have served in the roles that they perform on the show, they are still actors being instructed by a director (Lilley) with a particular vision, sense of humor, and penchant for stereotypes.

The emphasis on the realism of the show is in some ways quite dangerous. Even the idea that *Jonah from Tonga* could be “real,” mistaken for real, or described as real, is quite disturbing—not just because of Lilley's crazy character, but because of all the other characters, as well. The Tongan father who is easily fooled and easily

angered, the friends who are equally illiterate and bumbling followers-along, the racial cults at the school, the teachers who blatantly treat Jonah and his counterparts as half-human compared to their peers. Real or not, it is inevitably influencing the viewers' understanding of the real, altering ideas about potential characters or performativities available for embodiment. Art, even art as crass as that made by Lilley, has power. Lilley's stage is not in fact limited to a television set—it moves and affects others, sometimes in unfortunate ways. In a recent interview with Esquire magazine, Lilley was asked about the effects of his show about a private school girl, *J'amie*.

Lilley: I don't want girls to walk around genuinely thinking that they have to have legs like that. [Referring to the phrase 'box gap' originated on his show before going viral across Australia that describes and glorifies the gap between a girls' thighs when she is very thin]

Interviewer: As opposed to everything else that Ja'mie says or does?

Lilley: She's not the best role model.

Interviewer: You think teenage girls are watching this show and taking it seriously?

Lilley: I hope not. I hope people realize that it's a joke, that I'm making fun of her. But at the same time, she's sort of a hero on the show. I could see why people would probably want to be her.

Interviewer: She's popular. And from what I've watched thus far, there are no repercussions for her actions.

Lilley: I guess it could be giving permission to girls to start talking and acting like that. But that's not my responsibility. I'm just in charge of the funny stuff.

(Snetiker)

We can see here that Lilley feels in some ways conflicted about the effects of his show. He created this catchphrase as something to make fun of teenage girls' obsession with image, and in fact it caught on as a real trend and continued to foster a culture in which teenage girls are asked to obsess over image. Though Lilley does not seem to be happy about that, he is also unwilling to accept any responsibility for the serious effects of his work.

Fatimah Tobing Rony describes a similar phenomenon in her book, saying "the individual 'native' is often not even 'seen' by the viewer but is taken for real: as when the barker outside the fair tent calls potential spectators to come in and 'see real Indians,' or the excitement over Kevin Costner's [...] *Dances with Wolves* as a film employing 'real Lakota Indians'" (Tobing Rony 5). The similarities between Kevin Costner's selling point of "real Lakota Indians" and Lilley's of "real kids, real schools" is eerie and reeks of stale racism that has been sitting out for far too long. One other way depictions in *Jonah from Tonga* and other mass media that purport to represent "real" Native or indigenous peoples affects individuals outside of its delineated space, is by developing the "third eye," as Fatimah Tobing Rony suggests. Tobing Rony explains the formative importance of "viewing oneself as an object" (Tobing Rony 3) that exists for young people of color. Though the third eye is an experience that can happen anywhere, at any point, and to anyone, it is often powerfully replicated in popular culture for specific groups of people. Tobing Rony

explains that there is a “humiliation of being forced to identify with images of blacks on the screen as servile and inferior” (Tobing Rony 5). This, I argue, is an experience furthered in *Jonah from Tonga*, as there are so few positive images of people of color, and specifically Tongans, in this show with whom viewers can identify. To ask viewers over and over to identify with negative stereotypes is damaging. Clearly, identity is much broader than race, a socially constructed category. But, to deny the importance of race in our society is naïve and foolish, particularly while shows like *Jonah from Tonga* remain to be produced and aired. The mere fact that brownface is used in this series is another signal that race must be addressed and indeed is on everyone’s mind who is watching it.

Subverting *Jonah from Tonga*

In this section I will look at *Jonah from Tonga* from the opposite side, seeking to understand how Lilley’s work can operate on the level of critical satire. I will examine it as a social commentary on Australian, and perhaps American, society. In order to do this, I will inspect two scenes from the second episode of *Jonah from Tonga* and attempt to read them as subversive. The scenes in the first two episodes of *Jonah from Tonga* that stand out to me the most, and indeed the ones highlighted by Lilley as the most humorous, are the ones in which Jonah interacts with his teachers. I found these memorable not for the comedy, but because of the indifferent, un-empathetic, or simply misguided way that the white teachers at Holy Cross Catholic School interact with Jonah.

In the first scene Jonah and his younger brother Moses (two years younger as a year 7, and considerably less unruly) are paired as reading buddies at school. In this scene all of the reading buddies are sitting outside together and are supposed to be reading on I-pads together. Jonah and Moses chat about their plans to leave Australia for the US in order to get Moses a record deal and together they sing a (rather raunchy) song they worked on together. The teacher sees this from afar and yells to them, "I-pad out and reading, Jonah." Jonah responds, "I suck at reading and so does he, I don't wanna do it." To which the teacher says "Ok. Well... just see if you can recognize some words" and walks away. Of course, Jonah and Moses simply continue to talk instead of read. This interaction is fascinating because it is one of the moments in the show when it becomes hugely obvious that this school is not made for Jonah. The school and the teachers in it are largely unconcerned with his success, academic or otherwise. In this scene I felt like I empathized with why Jonah was acting out—at best his teachers ignore him, at worst they verbally and physically abuse him. Here, the subversive reading is that Lilley is commenting on the fact that many students in public and private schools are overlooked and underserved by teachers who underestimate their abilities. This is indeed an acknowledgement and critique of structural racism in schools (and elsewhere) that does a huge amount of work to maintain white supremacy.

Another scene that can be read similarly is one between Jonah and a few of his friends, the older school captain Graydon, with whom they appear to be in a

bully war, the Lazarus program² instructor Mr. Joseph, and Kool Kris, a catholic Tongan youth worker at the school. The scene takes place after Jonah and his friends have melded Graydon's locker shut as retaliation for his mocking of Jonah's dancing. Mr. Joseph is trying to mediate the two sides as Kool Kris observes. While Graydon explains that as a year 12 and school captain he deserves more respect than what he is receiving, Mr. Joseph does not buy this. Though he placates Graydon, he also clearly does not want to get Jonah and his friends in more trouble than needed (partly to save face for the principal and his own program). When reasoning with Graydon he says "Stop waving your stupid captain card. You know better than to provoke the shit out of a semi-retard like Jonah. Have a look at him, he's clearly a fuckwit." To which Jonah responds, "Yeah, I'm clearly a fuckwit!" At this point Kool Kris jumps in for the first time, saying "Jonah, let's talk about how Graydon made you feel when he said that stuff about your dancing." Jonah says "he made me feel... like he's a homo" and laughs, at which point the program director intervenes with "I don't have time for this shit" and dismisses Graydon to be walked back to class by Kris. As Graydon is leaving, he and the other boys exchange insults. One of Jonah's friends says "Piss off, ranga," to which Graydon retorts "Shut up, FOB. At least I can read books." Mr. Joseph steps in here and says, "That's enough of that racist thing. You've got a FOB youth worker standing right next to you... I think you're outnumbered, mate." The camera flashes to Kool Kris at this point, who is silent and un-amused. The other boys are supporting Mr. Joseph saying things like "yeah, quit being a racist!" Kris and Graydon exit together, and Jonah and his friends cheer

² This is a remedial program in which Jonah and all of his friends are enrolled. It is of note that all of the students in this program are boys of color.

before getting a talking-to from the program director. The subversive nature of this scene seems to lie once again in criticism of the teachers' treatment of Jonah. Here, perhaps unlike the reading teacher, Mr. Joseph does mean to help Jonah. However, his deep-rooted, paternalistically racist views mean that he is not really helping Jonah. Rather, he is underestimating him and putting him down to get him out of trouble, indeed teaching Jonah that either he is stupid and/or he should play stupid in order to get away with things. Additionally, he is teaching Jonah who can call out racism and when. It is important to note that this is not the first time Mr. Joseph has used the term "FOB" to refer to Kool Kris casually and thoughtlessly in this episode. From what we see, Mr. Joseph can both participate in and call out racism, but Jonah and his friends must wait until a white paternal character comes along to do so. This is the first time that the word "racist" has come up in the show, though certainly not the first instance of racism. A generous reading of this is that Lilley is showing us all of the things we miss everyday that are incredibly racist, and challenging the validity of just calling out one remark, versus working to shift a discourse or practice. The scarier reading here is that Lilley sees "racist" as a petty retort pulled out to give one person the last word in the argument, not as a consequential societal structure.

These scenes are a couple examples of moments where *Jonah from Tonga* has the potential to serve a subversive, challenging end. To me, rather than humorous, these interactions feel deeply upsetting. It led me to a third eye moment of my own, forced into seeing myself in the white teachers and feeling rather disgusted. I found myself asking questions like: Have I had teachers like that? Do I patronize others in

that way? What, like Mr. Joseph, have I been missing this whole time? And, why is this supposed to be funny? These moments of discomfort in *Jonah from Tonga* indeed made me question my own initially poor view of the show. Could the discomfort Lilley creates for audience members actually be a tool to ask viewers to reflect on their own lives? By this reading, the poor reviews *Jonah from Tonga* has received in Australia, the UK, and now the US might be seen as dismissive. Perhaps casting off *Jonah from Tonga* as worthless is really a quick fix to a culture of racism. Admonishing Lilley and his show without question or pause is the alternative to dealing with the more structural racism that is prevalent in the show and can often be quite uncomfortable to address.

Visual Sovereignty in *Jonah from Tonga*

Michelle Raheja offers some critical insight into the role of indigenous peoples in popular media, and more specifically, film. Though Raheja is interested in a particularly American context, many of her ideas and analyses feel appropriate for this international television show, especially as it debuts in the United States. Raheja explains the paradox of Native Americans in US cinema in the following passage:

Native Americans in mass media have occupied a twilight zone existence in which they are both hyper visible in ways over determined by popular and nostalgic representations and completely invisible because Native American actors are often uncredited, underpaid, and cast in ancillary, sometimes demeaning roles in support of the white protagonist who provides the point of entry for the spectator. (Raheja 1171)

This statement seems to be fitting to describe *Jonah from Tonga*. Even though Chris Lilley is playing a “Tongan” character as Jonah, ultimately he is in this case the white protagonist. As discussed earlier, it is whiteness in this narrative that is glorified and made more obvious through the use of brownface. The other indigenous actors used are, as Raheja describes, background fodder as “demeaning roles in support of” Jonah. So, while the show claims to be making indigenous people visible, it is at once making visible and making invisible indigeneity. It indeed torques the shape of indigeneity to fit into a white-centered, white-created mold.

In her article Raheja examines how, despite the problematic nature of many cinematic representations of Native Americans, Native actors in various films are able to insert a counter-narrative often only legible to other Native or Inuit people. Raheja particularly looks at the use of humor and laughter as a tool of what she calls visual sovereignty in order

to confront the spectator with the often absurd assumptions that circulate around visual representations of Native Americans, while also flagging their involvement and, to some degree, complicity in these often disempowering structures of cinematic dominance and stereotype. (Raheja 1160)

The example that brings Raheja to this conclusion is a scene from the iconic *Nanook of the North*, a film made by a Westerner about Inuit peoples. In this particular scene Nanook looks at the camera and laughs after being shown a phonograph record player. While most Western audiences read this laugh as one of disbelief or misunderstanding, Raheja points to Tobing Rony’s conclusion that it is actually amusement as a way to give back independence and power over representation to

indigenous peoples. I'd like to suggest the possibility that Tongan actors involved in *Jonah from Tonga*, and indeed Tongan viewers of the show, might be using a similar tactic as that described by Raheja in order to laugh at Lilley and what he represents. In an interview done by The Guardian with a 17 year old Tongan Australian boy living outside Sydney named Sione Tuitulotu, Tuitulotu told his interviewer he was very aware that Lilley relied heavily on negative Tongan stereotypes for much of his humor. Despite this fact, however, he and his group of Tongan friends still watched the show and found it funny. In fact, "Tuitulotu and his other friends of Tongan descent have started using the word "fobalicious", the name of the crew titular character Jonah belongs to, and employed by the characters as a source of pride," claims the article (Tan). It seems possible that Tuitulotu and his friends, in a manner similar to that described by Raheja, might find the show entertaining because they recognize its ridiculousness. Though I do not know what specific elements Sione Tuitulotu and his friends find funny, perhaps they latch onto moments inserted into the narrative by the Tongan actors who are their age and attend a similar type of school as they do in real life, in the show. Though we don't hear in Tuitulotu's own words how the show has been a source of pride, it seems this show has been a catalyst for increased positive attention for Tuitulotu, likely due to the way Tuitulotu has embraced the show. Reworking the narrative of *Jonah from Tonga* for his own purposes renders Tuitulotu's response something akin to visual sovereignty.

While some others have expressed similar views to Tuitulotu, especially in comment sections on YouTube videos, I will not address the complexities of

reactions to *Jonah from Tonga* on YouTube in this paper. Suffice it to say, a minority of those commenting are self-identified Tongan or Pacific Islander, and among that group the divide between positive and negative reviews seems to be about 50/50.

Conclusion

One of the responses to *Jonah from Tonga* by those who viewed the show as racist and harmful was a hashtag started by a student named Leitu Havea, #MynameisNOTJonah. This hashtag started as a picture of Havea, a young Tongan woman, holding a sign that said “My name is Leitu Havea/I am a proud Tongan/I’ve never spent time in prison/I was never suspended from school/I am currently studying for my university degree/#MynameisNOTJonah #ChangeStartsHERE #ProudPoly.” Following Leitu Havea, other young Tongan women began posting similar pictures, as well as a few young Tongan men. Most shared some element of their personal story that contradicted the representations of Tongan youth in *Jonah from Tonga*. Following #MynameisNOTJonah, Sione Latu and Jarom Vaha’i published a petition on change.com asking HBO not to air the show in the US and Canada. Besides countering the stereotypes shown in *Jonah from Tonga* like Havea and others, Vaha’i and Latu described the content of the show in the following way: “This is not satire, this is anti-Tongan propaganda that plays into Australia’s self-appointed role as the ‘civilizers’ of the Pacific” (Latu and Vaha’i). Unlike Tuitulotu and his friends who have used their personal experience to find humor in the show, Havea, Vaha’i, Latu and their supporters have used it to open a dialogue about racism and, indeed, modern colonialism in the Pacific.

These images, testimonies, and petitions are narratives. They are a different kind of real than that which Lilley strives to create in his show. They represent an alternative to the stereotypes that take center stage in the show. And, though many believe *Jonah from Tonga* continues to disseminate harmful stereotypes about indigenous peoples, it also was the impetus for a movement like #MynameisNOTJonah to get media attention and public notice. Had Lilley's show not been quite so startling in its offensive nature, it likely would not have sparked the petition to HBO or indeed any dialogue about the way we consume representations of indigenous people in popular culture. In fact, even in my own life *Jonah from Tonga* has been an impetus for conversations about representations of race in the media and popular culture with family members and friends. With each conversation I have regarding the show, I am learning something new about the bidirectional effects of popular culture and our own perceptions of racism, misogyny and reality.

There are some questions that continue to nag at me when weighing both sides of this debate. Questions like, is it worth it? Is a laugh worth perpetuating a damaging stereotype? Are moments of cataloging racist behavior in society worth glorifying other violent and cruel behaviors (including misogyny and homophobia)? And, is the space for counter-narratives like #MynameisNOTJonah worth the continued objectification of indigenous bodies? While my own inclination is to answer no, perhaps the more important thing is that we debate these questions. That *Jonah from Tonga* is watched with intention and caution, treated as the important and telling product of a society with a long history of colonialism that has

been carried out using tools like racism and sexism to create legible hierarchies and naturalize and invisibilize white supremacy at the expense of Indigenous peoples.

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