

**Tall Poppy Syndrome & Patriarchal Femininity:
An Auto-ethnographic Investigation into New Zealand's Female-identifying
Comedians**

BY

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Abstract

This practice-based and auto-ethnographic research project explores the correlation between Tall Poppy Syndrome (TPS) and patriarchal femininity in the performances of female-identifying stand-up comedians in New Zealand. I identify ways TPS, as a patriarchal ideology, has an impact on the subconscious/and or conscious choices of New Zealand's self-deprecating female-identifying comedians in contemporary performance. I have chosen to analyse TPS through an intersectional feminist lens, focusing on ways the historical construction of patriarchal femininity directly relates to the cultural phenomenon of Tall Poppy Syndrome. I aim to connect this relationship to the ways New Zealand female-identifying comedians 'perform' autobiographical comedy, as part of expected social and cultural conventions. As I want to investigate the impact of TPS in an exclusively New Zealand context, my research isolates its case studies to comedians who make comedy primarily for a New Zealand audience, discussing international comedians as a point of comparison.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Abstract	3
Acknowledgements	4
List of Figures	6
Glossary	8
Introduction	
Christmas Cracker Jokes	9
Chapter One	
Self-deprecating Humour In New Zealand – A Historical Overview	12
Chapter Two	
The Historical Construction of Patriarchal Femininity and its Relationship to the Cultural Phenomenon of Tall Poppy Syndrome	31
PART. I Patriarchal Femininity	31
PART. II Tall Poppy Syndrome	42
Chapter Three	
Social and Cultural Expectations: Female-Identifying Comedians 'performing' Autobiographical Self-deprecating Comedy in New Zealand	53
PART. I Live Comedy	54
PART. II Conversations with Comics	61
Chapter Four	
A Phenomenological and Auto-ethnographic Investigation	74
PART. I Script Analysis: <i>Horny and Confused</i>	76
PART. II Performance Reflection: <i>Horny and Confused 2</i>	90
Conclusion	97
Endnotes	100
List of References	102
Appendices	120

LIST OF FIGURES

Figure		Page
1	..... John Clarke as Fred Dagg 1975.	15
2	..... Ginette McDonald as Lynn of Tawa.	16
3	..... The Topp Twins as Ken and Ken.	18
4	..... Billy T James 1985.	20
5	..... Flight of the Conchords- Jemaine Clement and Bret Mackenzie.	22
6	..... Taika Waititi as 1600's vampire, Viago in the film, <i>What We Do in the Shadows</i> .	24
7	..... The poster for the 1988 December season of <i>Hen's Teeth</i> .	27
8	..... Laura Daniels and Rose Matafeo in <i>Funny Girls</i> .	29
9	..... Melanie Bracewell for the 2017 <i>Comedy Festival Gala</i> .	37
10	..... Ruby Esther as the winner of the 2017 <i>Raw Comedy Quest</i> .	51
11	..... Auckland comedian Lana Walters.	61
12	..... Wellington comedian Lucy Roche.	61
13	..... Auckland comedian Sarah Hughes.	61
14	..... Wellington comedian Lesa Macleod-Whiting.	61
15	..... Auckland comedian Brynley Stent.	61
16	..... Auckland comedian Bridget Davies.	61
17	..... Christchurch comedian Audrey Porne.	61
18	..... Auckland comedian Angella Draavid.	61
19	..... Auckland comedian Hannah Campbell.	61
20	..... Wellington comedian Alayne Dick.	61
21	..... Auckland comedian Katie Longbottom.	61
22	..... Wellington comedian Tui-Lou Christie.	61
23	..... Christchurch comedian Georgie Sivier.	61
24	..... Wellington/Auckland based comedian Janaye Henry.	61
25	..... Performance of <i>Horny and Confused</i> at the 2020 Fringe Festival.	77
26	..... <i>Horny and Confused</i> Script Excerpt 1.	78
27	..... <i>Horny and Confused</i> Poster.	79
28	..... <i>Horny and Confused</i> Script Excerpt 2.	80
29	..... <i>Horny and Confused</i> Script Excerpt 3.	84

30	.....	<i>Horny and Confused</i> Script Excerpt 4.	85
31	.....	<i>Horny and Confused</i> Script Excerpt 5.	85
32	.....	<i>Horny and Confused</i> Script Excerpt 6.	86
33	.....	<i>Horny and Confused</i> Script Excerpt 7.	88
34	.....	<i>Horny and Confused 2</i> Poster.	90
35	.....	<i>Horny and Confused 2</i> Performance Example 1.	93
36	.....	<i>Horny and Confused 2</i> Performance Example 2.	93
37	.....	<i>Horny and Confused 2</i> Performance Example 3.	93
38	.....	<i>Horny and Confused 2</i> Performance Example 4.	95

GLOSSARY

TERM	DEFINTION
Tall Poppy Syndrome	The cultural phenomenon of deliberately attacking other's successes.
Absurdity Curve	The assumption in comedy and improvisation that a scene or set which gets more progressively more absurd will hold the audience. (Salinsky and Frances-White 485).
Antipodean	Of, or pertaining to Australia or New Zealand.
Bomb	To say a joke that receives no laughs.
Comedic tension	A line or series of comments made by a comedian that may cause an audience to feel tense, typically released with a punchline.
Femophobia	An oppressive tool that preserves the rules of 'proper womanhood' and discourages "culturally sanctioned forms of femininity" (Blair & Hoskin 102).
Immasculation	The opposite of emasculation - women are deprived of their identity by men as coined by Judith Fetterley in <i>The Resisting Reader</i> (xx).
Kiwiana	Specific, often Pākehā-centric items and icons pertaining to New Zealand's heritage and culture particularly from the 20 th century.
Low-hanging fruit	The most easily achieved task. In comedic context, it refers to the most obvious joke.
Offer	Anything said or done that advances the scene or set. Typically used in improvisational comedy.
Pākehā	Te Reo for white New Zealanders primarily of European descent - originally applied to English-speaking Europeans living in Aotearoa/New Zealand.
Patriarchal Femininity	Homogenised femininity that is reproduced through an expected adherence to intersecting racial, able-bodied and cis-gender norms (Hoskin and Taylor 283).
Punching down	To make a joke at the expense of someone in a lower socio-political group than oneself.
Punching up	To make a joke at the expense of someone in a higher socio-political group than oneself.
The butt of the joke	An object of derision, abuse, or (esp.) ridicule. The person or thing the joke targets (<i>OED online</i> , 'butt' n.7 def. 5b).

INTRODUCTION

Christmas Cracker Jokes

Stand-up comedy is all about nerve—a battle between aggressor and victims with wit as the weapon and laughter as the prize. Different from prize fights that pit people against one another in the presence of paying spectators, comedy pits the fighter against the paying customers, with silence as the killer, and the detonation of laughter as the victory.

(Ruth R. Wisse, *No Joke: Making Jewish Humor* 2013).

Pulling Christmas Crackers was an essential event at my Nana's Christmas parties. It was 'first on the agenda' as my family sat at a small round table in mismatched chairs gathered from all corners of Nana's suburban Christchurch flat. With one hand inside a cracker on both left and right, there would come a cacophony of snapping sounds, and "hold on, I haven't grabbed the tab", "oh, my paper hat's ripped" and "where's my toy gone?" The gifts would be compared, (with swaps made if necessary) and, despite the lack of accommodation for larger heads, the paper Christmas hats went on. The jokes came last, consisting of badly written puns that we willingly entertained. To my Father, this was the main event; the badly written puns were mere provocations for the creation of better, wittier anecdotes. By the night's end, everyone's chairs would be angled to face my father; he held the floor, and he was excellent at it. Taking heed from my Father, I learnt how to hold the attention of a dinner table and make the best possible comment for maximum laughs. My brother also learnt this skill, but arguably (and he would disagree), with less success than me. Despite generating regular laughter from my family, I felt defeated at their persistence to call my brother, "just like his father" when the statistics pointed in my favour. The laughter my brother received poured excitedly out my family's mouths, while the laughter I received reflected a tonal opposite - it was brash, and grew in volume as if to say, "I wasn't expecting that". I read their reaction as a personality failing. In my later teens, the resentment I felt towards my brother transformed into defeat. Despite evidence to the contrary, I resigned myself to the fact that I wasn't funny; perhaps my jokes were good in form, but I could never be perceived as 'funny' - that just wasn't my role.

In the final year of my undergraduate degree, a comedy paper was offered: THEA 321: "Pass the Mic" (VUW, 2019). I applied to expand my repertoire as an actor, with little hope for my success. My best friend Charlotte and I found solace in our equal self-consciousness. Quickly our fears were proven true, with our offers in class falling flat, leaving us feeling exposed and embarrassed. This was sufficient evidence to continue the self-perception that I was not funny. We grew jealous at the effortless confidence of our male peers, whose offers were consistently more well-received. The turning point for

Charlotte was the first heat of our Improvisation show, *Mission Improv-able* (2019). The fear of bombing in front of a paying audience became a provocation for Charlotte - she was, without a doubt, the star of the show. Charlotte felt violently confronted by an epiphany: the earlier criticisms from herself and her friends had been false. Although I was happy for Charlotte's success, I felt dejected by my own unsuccessful performance. In the second half of the paper there was an option to try stand-up comedy. To complete an assignment, I wrote down some anecdotes about my childhood that I deemed to have some resemblance of comedic potential. As I thought I would only ever have to perform it my classmates, I didn't have much to lose. Opposite to Charlotte's experience, I found the lowering of stakes to work in my favour. I did not have to prove I was funny, because I had already proved that I wasn't. The performance was on a Monday and over the long weekend I developed a severe head cold. The stakes were lowered further: I had a bad cold, and this was my excuse to not be funny. I performed my stand-up as if I was speaking to a best friend at the end of a long day: I was tired, delirious, and determined to be heard. Despite this, I had my peers in stitches. Like Charlotte, I was confronted with the realisation that that the girl sitting around the table at my Nan's Christmas party was, in fact, an entertainer. She was the jester, the 'holder of attention', that was *my* role.

By the time I performed to an audience, I was convinced I found the skill I was exceptional at. I made the acute observation that - in comparison to my peers - I managed to get laughs out of every demographic. I was aware however, that stand-up was an inherently egotistical profession, for fear of being perceived as self-involved in a culture known for 'Tall Poppy Syndrome', I played into the messy, masculine, and self-deprecating, appearing as if I'd stumbled on to the stage, 'I didn't choose to be here'. 'C'mon, this was never my ambition'. Through convincing the audience that my presence on stage was accidental, I felt like I could retain a rapport of equal status. My anecdotes of misfortune and naivety served to convince the audience of my position as a 'humble kiwi'.

As a woman working in comedy - a field which had historically shown an unwarranted preference for men - I had subconsciously adopted the characteristics of a 'typical kiwi bloke'. At that stage, the concept of a femme-identifying woman discussing contemporary femininity felt unmarketable. Whilst performing a masculine persona, I spoke to my feminine failure, rendering femininity as the punchline. Such strategies were subconsciously employed to increase my comedy's likeability for what I regarded then as a 'mainstream' audience. In hindsight, my perception of mainstream meant anyone who was sceptical towards female-identifying comedians. In a profession reliant on likeability, I questioned whether other emerging New Zealand female-identifying comedians were also subconsciously adapting their comedic persona so the patriarchy (in the form of their partner's rugby-mad stepdad, for instance) also has something to laugh at.

The timeliness of this research is reflected by the recent influx of articles detailing a culture of gender-based abuse, misogyny, and sexual assault in the comedy industry (see Ruby Esther's 2020 blog

post, “I’m going to be raped” and Rachel Healy’s “Female comedians on extreme sexism in stand-up”, 2020). In an environment where fear may be a primary motivator, it is understandable that female-identifying comics may edit or compromise their comedy to protect themselves. By dissecting and isolating the effects of patriarchal femininity and TPS, I hope to provide research driven conclusions for female-identifying comedians to extend their knowledge and engage in productive conversations of change.¹ I do not attempt to create a new model of comedy which rejects the effect of patriarchal femininity. Rather I specifically identify tropes of patriarchal feminism in comedy through auto-ethnographic examples.

The live comedy shows, *Horny and Confused* and *Horny and Confused 2* by my comedy company, Big Estrogen Energy, inform the experimental, phenomenological and autoethnographic approach of this thesis. As this is not a practice-led project, my performance does not need to be assessed to answer this thesis. Instead, I use live comedy practice as a method of testing and illuminating my own work to gauge action and reaction as a point of analysis. The primary focus is **performance** - not process or reception. However, performance requires an audience. The audience allows me as researcher, and the participants of this research (other comics), to gauge how the ideas in the thesis are working [i.e., how the audience responds to the gender identity and representation of the performer]. This can be considered through the methodology:

- a) I (a performer) wanted to test a theory
- b) I tested the theory through my observation of other performers
- c) I quantified this through surveying other performers
- d) I reflected on how this relates to my own experiences as a performer and how it enhanced my practice.

Chapter Outline

In Chapter One, I provide a literature review on texts detailing the history, cause and effect of New Zealand’s self-deprecating humour. In Chapter Two, I lay out my theoretical framework by analysing key contemporary texts dedicated to self-deprecating humour, patriarchal femininity and TPS with contextualised examples from the comedy sphere. In Chapter Three, I test the theoretical framework through observations, interviews and surveys of local emerging female-identifying comedians who consider their humour to have self-deprecating tendencies providing conclusions on the impact that TPS and patriarchal femininity has on New Zealand’s current comedic generation. In Chapter Four, I reflect on how this research relates to my own experiences as a performer and how it has enhanced my practice. I use the performance and script analysis of *Horny and Confused* and *Horny and Confused 2*, as case studies to develop the autoethnographic angle of my research.

CHAPTER ONE

Self-deprecating Humour in New Zealand – A Historical Overview

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review focuses primarily on New Zealand comedy, post-World War II to the present, providing a historical overview of the origins of a unique New Zealand comic voice through a chronological analysis of the most prolific local comic figures and writers of the 20th and 21st century. It also dissects the male-dominated comedy industry and its impact on female-identifying comedians in the live-comedy scene since the 1980s. The aim of this chapter is to determine the historical and contemporary reception of the New Zealand comic voice and its relationship to New Zealand's female-identifying comedians. These findings provide context for identifying the effects of Tall Poppy Syndrome as a patriarchal ideology, as explored in Chapter Two.

Despite its obvious influence on identity, literature, film and art, little research on New Zealand Comedy has been conducted with gender as the target variable. Contemporary scholarly research dedicated to New Zealand humour has largely focused on male experiences, notably indigenous and diasporic humour such as the work of Billy T James and *The Naked Samoans*.² The 2019 publication and documentary series, *Funny As*, by Paul Horan and Philip Matthews is the most recent account of New Zealand comedy history and is a key reference in this thesis. The corresponding interviews of 100 New Zealand comedians within this publication are also frequently referred to throughout.³ References to 'kiwi humour' in much of the following chapter, particularly in the 20th century examples, refer to a traditional, binarised often Pākehā-centric definition of a kiwi comic voice. 'Kiwi' humour will therefore be discussed as the historical stereotype, rather than the contemporary reality, which is the more general 'New Zealand humour'.

Although the history of New Zealand humour continues to be documented - often through documentaries such as *Funny As* (2019) and *Billy T: Te movie* (2011) - an analysis of the prevailing tropes of New Zealand humour has not yet been attempted in academic research. This is due, in part, to the subjective nature of comedy, and the difficulty this poses to discovering a collective comedic appeal. As Horan and Matthews point out, attempting to define one collective comic voice denies a creative variety (12). However, in the interest of defining the idiosyncrasies of New Zealand humour, this thesis focuses on the similarities of past and present well-known comic voices and how their comedic choices promoted them to success in New Zealand.

Early Entertainment

Prior to the arrival of Pākehā, Māori entertainment existed in Whare Tapere which were iwi community 'houses' set aside for the purposes of storytelling, music, puppetry, and games (Royal, 8). Leading Māori performance academic, Te Ahukaramū Charles Royal, describes the Whare Tapere as a magical place of master storytelling (ibid). A quintessential Whare Tapere story is that of Tinirau and Kae, which describes the foundation of the group haka, or kapa haka.⁴ The story begins with Tinirau and his wife, Hine-te-iwaiwa, who is having difficulty giving birth to their son, Tuhuruhuru. Tinirau calls upon the tohunga Kae to perform his baptismal ceremonies (102). In payment for his services, Tinirau gifts Kae a piece of flesh from his pet whale, Tutunui. Kae then takes the whale back to his island and kills him. This enrages Tinirau and he decides to convene a group of women with the task of capturing Kae, who is known for his distinctive teeth (106). The women perform a poteteke, an "indecent dance in which the naked performers execute grotesque movements" (Williams 296; Royal 110). According to Grey's manuscript however, it is not until the women expose their clitorises does Kae laugh and reveal his teeth (ibid). Their performance is considered the first example of kapa haka. Yet it also reveals the agency that Māori women were given to provide humour. Despite this first group haka's association with the display of female genitalia, former captain of New Zealand Women's National Union Rugby team, Farah Rangiokoepa Palmer claims the haka has now become synonymous with maleness due to the masculine institution that is New Zealand rugby (2171, 2173). This suggests that the misrepresentation of the vitality of women in comedy comes from the Victorian imposition of Patriarchal values on Māori society and the misinformation of male informants. It also indicative of the unadulterated comedic performances of Māori in pre-colonial society.⁵

Upon the arrival of European settlers, colonial New Zealand's entertainment industry was largely influenced by the comedy of Victorian British touring companies. The Gold Rush doubled the population between 1871 and 1880, allowing entertainment to become a sustainable industry (Simpson 13). Adrienne Simpson's 1994 publication, "Caterers to Public Entertainment" notes that the entertainment largely consisted of music, dances and humorous sketches and ventriloquy (14). As a majority of the migrants were British, a lot of the entertainment served as a reminder of home, with Scottish comic singer, David Kennedy labelling his 1870's touring comic routine, "Twa Hours at Hame" (11-12). British humour was known for its use of irony through oblique understatements (Figiel 47). The Victorian age had created an era of modesty and social taboos, preventing the public from speaking directly to certain more explicit subjects, such as sexuality and politics (Maurois 8). One touring act to New Zealand - Clifton's, 1874 "Incomparable Entertainment of Oddities" - the "Merry Moments" advertised itself as "150 minutes of genuine fun without vulgarity" emphasising its Victorian sensibility. (Simpson 12-13). French Author André Maurois, (pseudonym of Émile Herzog) notes that the British consequently developed a custom of "saying things solemnly as though they were not saying them at all" (8). She also notes that humour was a way to dis-simulate the British's natural timidity through

avoiding awkward subjects and showcasing an ability to laugh at oneself (thus maintaining an appearance of humility and modesty) (ibid). David Kennedy's comic performance of Robert Burns' poem, 'The Weary Pund o Tow', describes a husband who is lamenting his wife's lack of housework (Simpson 11). When he asks her to jump on a spinning wheel, she clouts him over the head (ibid). Kennedy's choice of poem reiterates the comedic potential (and success) of Victorian gender roles such as the working husband and domesticated wife. This stereotype would continue to influence New Zealand comic writers into the 20th century, in particular, the rurally beloved Barry Crump.

Defining a New Zealand Comic Voice

Tall Stories and Yarn Spinners

'Self-deprecating' is one of the most popular adjectives used to describe 'kiwi' humour. However, as New Zealand comic great John Clarke argues, self-deprecating humour is not idiosyncratic to New Zealand alone: "The New Zealand sense of humour is said to be laconic, under-stated and self-deprecating. Even if [this is] true this is not very helpful, as the same claim is not unreasonably made for the humour of the Scots, the Irish, the English, the Australians, the Russians, the Canadians and the Ancient Greeks, among others" ("John Clarke and the New Zealand Sense of Humour"). Clarke's quote suggests that to simply say New Zealanders are self-effacing does not provide any concrete conclusions about a unique national identity. Instead, it is the nuances within their laconic and self-effacing humour that separate New Zealanders from their international rivals.

'Tall Stories' and 'Yarns' were essential social tools for the spontaneous, yet nightly occurrence of New Zealand's male-dominated early pub humour (Harker 1). These self-mocking and anti-authoritarian tales were brought by the first European settlers to entertain their mates with hyperbolic narratives (2). Chapter Two in *Funny As*, 'Comedy and Writers - Blokes, Bastards and Outbreaks of Beauty', details the beginning of the stereotypical Kiwi 'bloke' as the optimal character for comedic possibilities post-World War II (Horan and Matthews 29). Frank S. Anthony's 'Wood Splitting with Gus' is believed to be the first piece of comedic writing that used the New Zealand vernacular to suggest a clearly Kiwi Pākehā male voice: a voice that used an "unaffected naturalness" to create observational and ironic humour (ibid). The humour shared similarities with Australia's comic farmer character, *Saltbush Bill*, first created in the early 1900s by writer and poet Andrew Barton. The idiosyncrasies of the Australian and New Zealand farmer archetype were indicative of their differing environments. Outback Australia, with its desert roads and threat of dangerous predators, promoted the Australian farmer as a roguish and risk-taking, as seen by the portrayal of protagonist Mick Dundee in the 1986 film, *Crocodile Dundee*. The New Zealand archetype was depicted as the lone bush venturer, or farmhand whose simple day to day routine (although not without its dangers) rendered them as more reclusive and terse individuals.

The humour of these archetypes further relied on binarising Victorian gender roles - the unassuming hard-working bloke as a farmer or bushman, and the strictly domesticated nagging housewife. Barry Crump, well-known author of the New Zealand bushman's adventures played on this Victorian gender binary with his blokey archetype. His first publication, *A Good Keen Man* (1960) depicted the journey of young New Zealand male's introduction to hunting. Crump's tale advocated for a world where the New Zealand Pākehā male was at his peak, "out in the bush, left alone by their bosses and women" (Horan and Matthews 33). His 1986 story, *Wild Pork and the Watercress* followed the relationship of Uncle Hec and his foster son, a young Māori boy named Ricky as they escape to the native bush of Urewera country to avoid social welfare putting Ricky into care. The beloved tale served as the basis for the critically acclaimed 2016 film directed by Taika Waititi, *Hunt for the Wilderpeople*. The humour of Sam Neil's portrayal of Uncle Hec lay in the same cantankerous, and distant bloke archetype, albeit in this tale is not the bush that propels his character's arch, but rather his relationship with the loveable Ricky. The positive reception towards the film, and the character of Uncle Hec suggests that the bloke archetype is still deemed to have ample comedic potential. After Crump's death in 1996, he was revealed to be a violent husband and absent father, causing the archetype his stories promoted to be met with retrospective skepticism by New Zealand audiences (Horan and Matthews 34). Yet, despite his male characters being reminiscent of Crump's problematic behaviour, the bushman archetype was already deemed a literary success.

Rural and Domestic Legends, Fred Dagg, Lynn of Tawa and the Topp Twins.

Cultural Cringe and Antipodean Camp

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Figure 1: The iconic John Clarke as Fred Dagg wearing his costume of a bucket hat, shearers' singlet and gumboots. 'Fred and Fred', 1975. Photograph by and courtesy of David Roberts.

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for further details.

Figure 2: Ginette McDonald as the 'white trash' Lynn of Tawa pictured here in suburban bliss (Nowtolove.co.nz)

In the 1970s, two of New Zealand's most beloved self-deprecating, yet likeable comedy characters were born from comic legends John Clarke and Ginette McDonald. John Clarke's 'Fred Dagg' rendered himself as the hyperbolic depiction of kiwi blokeyness as the inarticulate owner of a Southland farm. Ginette McDonald's 'Lynn of Tawa' served as the equally hyperbolic 'white-trash' Tawa resident. Their excruciatingly 'kiwiness' localised their comedy to a New Zealand sphere making them household names by the mid-seventies (152). In Fred Dagg's 1974 satirical parody of TV One's *Country Calendar*, Dagg is seen to swipe his rooster off his bedside table as if it was an alarm clock and sing the New Zealand national anthem whilst showering with his gumboots still on (0:04 -1:07). Dagg and his six sons (all of whom are called Trevor, or 'Trev') are followed around on their farming adventures which continue to result in mishaps, with Dagg's character unsuccessfully attempting to articulate his in-depth agricultural knowledge. This satirical depiction of provincial New Zealand continued to recognise the comedic potential of the laconic, farming bloke archetype. Whilst Fred Dagg inhabited provincial New Zealand, Lynn of Tawa inhabited the domestic atmosphere of the growing suburbs (Holmes qtd. "Character vs. Stand-up" 17:10-21). Lynn represented aspiring middle-class New Zealand; her accent was fuelled by grating vowels and repetitive mention of commonplaces and kiwiana (Maclean 5). In the 1982 *Lynn of Tawa Show*, Lynn is seen to discuss a competition about Harpic toilet cleaner, in which her friend Gary brought "every bottle of Harpic south of Englewood to do it", "[Gary] uses it for just about everything eh, like he discovered it you mix it was a bit of Fabulon (an ironing aid) it sets like concrete, so he got stuck in and re-piled the house eh" (0:13-23). McDonald claims it was the familiar mentioning of urban preoccupations that promoted her to success ("Character vs. Stand-up" 19:35- 40). Together Lynn and Fred created a folklore of New Zealand life at its most ordinary (Horan & Matthews 152).

Through Clarke and McDonald's continuous celebration of their characters' mundane lives, they successfully suppressed any critiquing theories of elitism that their growing fame may have provoked.

In addition to their humble situations, or shtick, the phenomenon of 'Cultural Cringe' may have played a role in the success of these characters. Cultural Cringe is defined by Arthur Philips as the inability to escape comparison between one's country and foreign cultural opposition (300). Katie Pickles considers the causes and consequences of cultural cringe in both Australia and New Zealand, proposing that despite New Zealand's well-documented historiography, Cultural Cringe is still present in New Zealand society (658). If New Zealanders indeed ruminated on the perceived inferiority of their culture, then making fun of it provided potential catharsis. Although the characters of Fred and Lynn were heightened versions of middle-class New Zealanders, there was an unnerving quality of truthfulness to their 'cringe-worthy' portrayals. As Ginette McDonald states, "Everyone likes to think they're nothing like Lynn of Tawa, but maybe [they know someone] down the road who is" ("Character vs. Stand-up" 19:44-19:47). John Clarke often observed the local public to find inspiration for Fred Dagg – "they'd say stuff like, 'it's overcast again' [...] and the other person would say, 'yes there's no question about that [...] there is no doubt in my mind that cast there is over'" ("Character vs. Stand-up" 8:08-16). The social truth of their characters shone a light on the perceived simplicity of kiwi culture. Fred Dagg and Lynn of Tawa's self-effacing qualities skilfully mocked both rural and domestic New Zealand culture. Yet by revelling in it, the cringe could be acknowledged and accepted, proving a self-awareness to their international neighbours.

New Zealand's next-door neighbour, Australia, developed a similarly dry and self-mocking sense of humour (Wagg 204). An iconic example is Drag Queen, Dame Edna Everage, the creation of comedian, Barry Humphries. Edna's humour, like Lynn's, lay in suburban values and commonplaces; her monologues were often so mundane that took on the tone of reading newspaper advertisements (206). Another icon was introduced with the 1986 release of the feature film, *Crocodile Dundee* with Paul Hogan starring as Michael 'Mick' Dundee. Outback hero Dundee, with his bare chest and crocodile skin vest was the embodiment of the idealised Australian bloke. The film posed as satire to challenge and capitalise on popular images of Australia.⁶ Wagg claims that Edna Everage and *Crocodile Dundee* are both in differing degrees, awkward, inept and colonial (208). Both New Zealand and Australia are described by Katie Pickles to feel the burden of Cultural Cringe, their comedy characters reflecting a national cultural need to satirise popular depictions of rural and domestic culture (658).

Charles Brasch's short essay on New Zealand humour in 1947 suggested that for humour to gain the respect of the New Zealand public, it needed to maintain qualities of 'idiomaticity' (112). Idiomaticity involved conforming the distinct expressions of a country's dialect (*OED online*, n.1b) By highlighting New Zealand colloquialisms, New Zealanders could maintain a constant and relatable exposé on themselves. The colloquial and self-effacing qualities of provincial New Zealand were an essential social

tool. Comedy song-writer Laura Daniels notes, “you’ve just got to push the kiwi accent, because it’s really stupid” (*Funny as Interview*, 3:30-35). Comedian Jamie Bowen echoes, “if you’re from New Zealand you’re funny, compared with anyone with a kiwi accent you’re not as funny” (“New Zealand Comedians on Comedy Culture” 1:22-29). The preference for a heightened kiwi accent promoted a comic voice unique from its international neighbours.

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Figure 3: The Topp Twins as Ken and Ken. Courtesy of the Topp Twins website, 2020.

The bloke archetype would also be used by iconic comedy duo, Jules and Lynda Topp, aka the Topp Twins, in their characters ‘Ken and Ken’, a Wairarapa sheep farmer and a regional sports caster. However, as Matthew Bannister argues, The Topp Twins were more complex than appearances suggested. The pair of yodelling, folk-singing twins from Huntly in the rural Waikato are much-loved kiwi entertainers (Bannister, “Happy Campers” 15). Alongside being entertainers, the twins publicly positioned themselves as protesters in the *Bastion Point Occupation* in 1978, the *Springbok Tour* in 1981 and the *Homosexual Law Reform* in 1985 (ibid). Despite the difficulty of being openly gay in 1970s and 1980s New Zealand, the twins seemed equally comfortable performing in rural New Zealand as they were in the gay and lesbian clubs of New York (17). Burlesque performer, Mika X notes that “people knew they were lesbian, but they were just Jules and Lynda” (“Women’s Comedy: A Secret History” 13:52-57). Bannister connects New Zealander’s nonchalance towards their sexuality to Richard Dyer’s definition of entertainment. Dyer argues that entertainment is utopian, not in content but in form and affect, providing an appealing simplification and a reduction of tension towards both complex and everyday anxieties. (Dyer 17; 16). Bannister suggests that the Topp Twins exceed this definition as their content is not elitist, refined or difficult (ibid). The Topp Twins’ performances had the ability to be in successful in rural environments whilst remaining true to their queer agenda. In Season two of their show, *Do not adjust your Twinset*, Jules and Lynda appear as their characters, Ken & Ken, and Camp Mother & Camp Leader in a local shearing competition. Ken and Ken feature as broadcasters of the

event, satirising the aforementioned ‘blokey’ stereotype, meanwhile Camp Mother and Camp Leader reside in the cafeteria, embodying middle-class suburban stereotypes with their knowledge of niche household products. However, Camp Mother played by Lynda approaches the catering manager of the cafeteria and asks, “in my day we were called tea ladies, then a bloke takes over and it’s called catering, why’s that?” (5:48 – 6:12). Here Lynda Topp integrates a feminist agenda with familiar kiwi stereotypes, potentially making it more palatable for their multiple demographic audience.

Bannister describes the contradiction of the Topp Twins’ rural and queer agendas as comparable to Nicholas Perry’s concept of ‘Antipodean Camp’ (4). Perry claims that Antipodean Camp is often a result of cultures from which colonisation was constitutive (11). It amplifies versions of cultural identity that imply an accident of place, thus a lack of power in global affairs (ibid). Bannister renders Antipodean Camp as the reformulation of Cultural Cringe which reflects a post-colonial anxiety about authenticity (“Happy Campers” 17). Camp, however, favours contradictions, and so Antipodean Camp casts the ordinary and the everyday as extraordinary and entertaining (Bannister, “Bush Camp” 7) – thereby continuing the theme of making mundanity the crux of the humour. Nicholas Perry’s examples of Antipodean Camp are inherently masculine, as masculinity is more commonly associated with notions of national identity and the definition of Antipodean (11). The Twin’s characters of Ken and Ken are perhaps the strongest examples of Antipodean Camp as it has been traditionally defined. Nick Holm claims the Kens were not just caricatures of provincial masculinity however, but were “good people, passionate, steadfast and honest” (qtd. Horan and Matthews 209).⁷ As lesbian women, their choice to play these characters as two straight men was undoubtedly subversive, yet it still revealed this archetype as a favourable choice to gain likeability and laughs from a New Zealand audience.

The nationally renowned appreciation for Fred Dagg, Lyn of Tawa and the Topp Twins suggested that New Zealand humour was gaining a specific sensibility; while the wish to make fun of rural and domestic life was not unique from countries such as Ireland and Australia, the characters themselves reflected clear markers of kiwiana far removed from the streets of London.

Laconic Language

Another trope used by kiwi comics to localise their act and increase their likeability is laconic language. Laconic describes the popular ‘laid-back’ and ‘simple’ kiwi sense of humour. Humour could be derived from a simple pause and a ‘Yeah [...]’ delivered straight to the camera. This verbal economy suited anti-complex comedic personas; the characters themselves appeared to have an obliviousness as to why people were laughing. The routine of comedians appearing as if they had stumbled onto stage to perform their set is a strategy that kiwi comedians have used to create an appearance of humility. In his *Funny as* interview, comedian Jesse Griffin suggests that John Clarke launched a campaign for a very “straight type of comedy” (49:24). His last name, ‘Dagg’ directly referenced the popular kiwi adjective used to describe someone with a teasing nature. The term is derived from the dangling piece of dried faeces

attached to a sheep's behind. This association emphasizes a nonchalant approach to the 'muck' of life at its simplest.

Lorna Thornber's, 2019 article, "Is Kiwi humour 'totally weird'" argues that the straightforward and unpretentious qualities of the kiwi vernacular render the performer as authentic (*Stuff*). As Rose Matafeo discusses her monthly cycle during her opening night at *Comedy Allstars* in the Melbourne Comedy Festival, she remarks, "I'm a 5 day-er myself, yeah, classic, classic" (4:04-10) The distinct use of 'er', 'yeah' and 'classic x2' allow Matafeo to juxtapose her perceived femininity with the kiwi vernacular.⁸ Comedian and writer, Michele A'Court draws attention to Dagg and his influence on New Zealand comedy, "we don't like to show off [or] look as if we're trying too hard" (qtd. Harker, "Humour" 7). By choosing characters where the humour of their actions is unbeknown to them, the comic does not look desperate to gain laughs and therefore combats any perceived claims of 'showing off'. If their comedic persona remains oblivious to the success of their comedy, then their non-comedic personas can successfully claim their 'humbled' attitude in the eye of the media.

Billy T James

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Figure 4: Billy T James, comedian and entertainer, shows off his trademark moustache, 27 July 1985. Photograph by and courtesy of Phil Reid.

Billy T James is a comedic great, described by his friend and comedic collaborator, Peter Rowley as 'our Elvis' (Horan and Matthews 183). *The Billy T James show* dominated the New Zealand TV ratings in the 1980s (187). James' humour was often reliant on ethnic stereotypes. As James rose to fame during the

decade of the Māori Land March and the Springbok tour, the conversation about race became a prescient one in New Zealand.

The way Māori had previously been treated in New Zealand's comedy culture was put under the microscope in the 1980s, and the *Billy T James show* was caught between both a Māori and Pākehā world (Horan and Matthews 191). This cross-cultural position is perhaps the reason it received the most discussion in the context of race relations. In James' *Te News* sketch, he wore a black shearer's singlet and yellow towel, not dissimilar from the black singlet often sported by John Clarke as Fred Dagg. Jokes such as, "the cops in Auckland are on the lookout for a man believed to be masquerading as a Māori language teacher, one of his students became suspicious when he told her that the Māori word for food was 'take away', and 'coat hanger' was Māori for 'car ariel'" received criticism that they harkened back to the problematic Hori Humour of the 1960's (6:49- 6:59). W. Norman McCallum's 'Hori' column created a contrasting character to Barry Crump's bushman archetype depicting Māori as "lazy, backward, stupid yet somehow cunning" (Horan & Matthews 34). It followed the stereotypes of the Minstrel troupes that were "enormously popular" in 1870s New Zealand (Simpson 14). The Minstrel shows, imported from the United States, rendered blackface as a widely accepted form of theatrical entertainment (Pickering 311). These shows consisted of white performers who "blackened up" and engaged in degrading physical and verbal humour intended to stereotype Black people as stupid, poor and grotesque (Simpson 14). The popularity of Minstrel shows would contribute to the overwhelming tendency of post-war comics to make Māori the punchline of the joke. Billy T was deemed to revel in these stereotypes, which resulted in antipathy from some Māori audiences. However, James' fervently rejected claims that he was placating Pākehā stereotypes by claiming that his characters were not completely fictional but based off friends and family. "Black singlets and gumboots and football jerseys aren't our culture [...] to me our culture is the marae etiquette [...] which I never make fun of" (Horan & Matthews 192).

The question is posed by Horan and Matthews as to whether playing on the 19th century stereotype of Māori being "cunning, deceitful and savage", is simply reinforcing the Pākehā's position as the coloniser (191). Even if James' intention was to subvert the stereotypes, does his continued mention of the stereotypes equate to a tension disclaimer (see p. 8 for definition) in a room still full of racial prejudice? Hone Kaa, an Anglican church leader, claimed he had reservations when he watched James' 2002 documentary on Māori humour, *The Last Laugh*; if a Pākehā laughed, he felt like he was being laughed at (195). By laughing at the stereotypes created by Pākehā perception, is it subversion or confrontation? Are both possible? Sir Howard Morrison explains that humour and mockery has long been of Māori oral tradition (ibid). The life of Billy T James and his strategic use of humour encompasses the themes of this thesis and whether the self-deprecating humour of minority groups is an effectively subversive form of humour.

Flight of the Conchords

An Awkward Comedy Duo

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Figure 6: Jemaine Clement and Bret Mackenzie photographed as struggling musicians in New York for their televised sitcom. Photo by and Courtesy of Craig Blakenhorn.

In 1985 comedy musical duo, The Front Lawn, sought to narrate the “emotional clipping” that reflected New Zealand’s suburban psyche and “lawn mentality” of keeping things neat and tidy (Horan and Matthews 215). Gordon McLaughlan described the duo of Don McGlashan and Harry Sinclair as being “foot shuffling individuals with an ‘aw shucks’ modesty about themselves” (9). The duo was known to play on their awkwardness, toying with the social cues New Zealanders had developed from living seemingly ordinary lives. Their songs, ‘Queen Street’ and ‘Breakfast Anthem’ used local street names and everyday activities to continually situate themselves in domestic New Zealand (1993). Continuing the strategies of Clarke and Macdonald, The Front Lawn presented the boring and ordinary aspects of life to glean a collective sense of New Zealand’s inferiority complex and attitude towards Cultural Cringe. By aligning themselves to ordinariness, the public were unlikely to perceive them as arrogant but as desirably humble kiwis.

Amongst The Front Lawn’s fans were arguably New Zealand’s most famous comedy duo to date, the Flight of the Conchords. Bret Mackenzie and Jemaine Clement met in Victoria University of Wellington’s Theatre programme and subsequently became flatmates, forming a band in 1998. The name came slightly later as Bret noted that their flat toilet was called the Concorde which led to him suggesting the name ‘Flight of the Conchords’ (“An Incomplete History”). Their humour quickly built them a fanbase in the local Wellington area, followed by appearances in the 2002 and 2003 *Edinburgh*

Fringe Festival, and their 2004 *BBC* radio series which built them an international following. Their growing popularity allowed them to create a television show, *Flight of the Conchords* which premiered in 2007. Their humour stepped away from the hyper-masculinity parodied by Fred Dagg, yet continued the theme of awkwardness and the hyper-ordinary by making light of New Zealand's reputation for being boring. For instance, their well-loved song 'Business Time' was inspired by the men who boast about their sexual prowess yet come with inevitable disappointment (Horan and Matthews 297).

Girl, tonight we're gonna make love
You know how I know?
Because it's Wednesday
And Wednesday night is the night that we usually make love
Monday night is my night to cook
Tuesday night, we go and visit your mother
But Wednesday, we make sweet, weekly love
It's when everything is just right
There's nothing good on TV
You haven't had your after-work social sports team practice
So, you're not too tired
Oh boy, it's all on
You lean in and whisper something sexy in my ear like
'I might go to bed now; I've got work in the morning'
I know what you're trying to say, girl
You're trying to say, 'Oh, yeah, it's business time'
It's business time

(*Flight of the Conchords* 2008, 'Business time' 0:11- 1:04)

In the first verse of 'Business time' the comedy does not derive from the excitement of sex, but from the details of their ordinary domesticity as a couple. Wellington playwright and comedian, Jo Randerson claims that awkwardness is now seen internationally as the marker of New Zealand Comedy (Horan & Matthews 291).

The FLOTC revelled in the performances of inarticulateness and awkwardness, alongside other successful comedians and collaborators also emerging in the 2000s, Rhys Darby and Taika Waititi. Instead of directly showcasing their cleverness, (which is evident in their songwriting), they showcased a collective fumbling through the boring parts of life. An awkward sense of humility seemed more palatable to audiences. Nicola Hyland argues that their subtle mocking of New Zealand culture renders them and New Zealand as 'cool' by deliberately appearing effortless ("Kind of like an evil version of our accent" 64). In their attempt to appear 'effortless', the FLOTC did not always self-deprecate directly,

but rather presented themselves with an obviously false male bravado and swagger (ibid). In Hyland's article on expressions of black masculinity in the men's 100-metre final at 2012 London Olympics she discusses performative swagger as a means to gain back control over one's image ("Bolt and The Beast" 279-280).⁹ The FLOTC often sing with inflections of a masculine swagger; in 'Business Time', Clements remains committed to appearing sexually confident as he continuously furrows his brow and bites his lip. Despite his physicality and tone, the lyrics of the song expose his male bravado to be false. This is an example of ironic overinflation, which is coined in this thesis as a sub-genre to self-deprecating New Zealand humour. It allows the comic to appear confident enough to gain their audiences trust, but also prevents their confidence from being excessive. The bravado is presented in excess so it can quickly be exposed as overinflation. It is an example of appearance vs. reality, except the appearance does not strive to disguise reality, rather appearance and reality work in tandem to create a palatable level of confidence. These strategies in the Flight of Conchords humour maintained their reputation as humbled, unaffected kiwis who still struggled with the same anxieties as their audience.

Navigating a 21st Century Definition

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Figure 6: Taika Waititi as the 1600's vampire, Viago in his Wellington flat for the mockumentary style film, What We Do in the Shadows (themarysue.com).

As the live comedy industry began to boom in 1990s New Zealand, so did the number of emerging comedians, and Kiwi humour sought a 21st century definition. Director, writer and comedian, Taika Waititi described contemporary New Zealand as shying away from sentimentality, or 'cheesiness' when creating emotional narratives (Deadline Interview). Waititi's describes his film, *Boy*, as a very un-American coming of age film, its humour rests on child poverty and boredom (ibid). Waititi stresses that these attributes allow the narrative to be 'real and authentic' (ibid). This is also notable within his internationally acclaimed comedy, *What we do in the Shadows*. The film's opening scene involves Waititi

as Viago the 300-year-old vampire rounding up his flatmates and the other vampires (Jemaine Clement as Vladislav the poker, Jonathan Brugh as Deacon Burke and Ben Fransham as Petyr) for a flat meeting:

VIAGO. (*Pointing to the flat chore timetable*). The washing and the rubbish, I did that. Deacon on dishes, and it still hasn't moved in five years!

[...]

VLADISLAV. (*Documentary confessional*) When you get the four vampires in a flat there's going to be a lot of tension, there's tension in any flatting situation.

VIAGO. It's sorted then, we will all do our jobs, starting with a certain Deacon.

DEACON. (*Shouts*) I will do my dishes! (Flying up in the air and hissing at Viago)

[...]

DEACON. (*Doing the dishes*) This is bullshit. (6:00- 7:19)

Despite the fantastical premise of four immigrant vampires, the mockumentary genre allowed the film to make light of three vampires living in a domestic flatting environment. The funniest lines of the film rely on the vampires' naivety to view the mundane as worthy of documenting. As they enter a nightclub claiming it to be the height of New Zealand nightlife, the camera pans to a run-down almost empty basement. It is not life with the boring parts taken out, as drama or comedy is so often described as, but life with the boring parts as the object for humour.

Horan and Matthews describe the works of Waititi as an "increasingly familiar pattern of [...] dogged naivete [and] nervous politeness" (323). As Waititi received praise for his directing on the 2017 Marvel film, *Thor: Ragnarök*, he posted a picture of himself cooking fish fingers in celebration with the caption, "How do we celebrate \$121 million in the US Box office? Fish Fingers for dinner" (@taikawaititi). By announcing Box Office success alongside his very 'kiwi' act of cooking fish fingers, Waititi hints, albeit perhaps subconsciously, at his ability to stay 'of New Zealand' despite his international acclaim. In a 2016 *NZ International Comedy Festival* promotional video, New Zealand comedians were asked to speak on kiwi comedy culture. Jamie Bowen reiterates that, for New Zealanders, the fear of Tall Poppy Syndrome causes the comic to take themselves down before others do (0:13-17 & 0:31-35). Through emphasising their inability to navigate life, it consequently heightens their 'normalness', thus allowing comedians to remain humble despite their position in the public eye. Intriguingly, Rose Matafeo, winner of the 2019 *Edinburgh Fringe Festival* Comedy Award, claims she

often tries to phase out some of her 'New Zealand-ness' to her international audiences (Horan and Matthews 323). She argues that it feels 'a bit cheap' to constantly play the point of difference card on stage (ibid). Conversely, for New Zealand audiences, an obviously kiwi persona is likely to gain more laughs. It is the motivation behind the hyper-kiwi persona, however, that is indicative of the consequences of Tall Poppy Syndrome and the humble kiwi prototype in New Zealand culture. If a comedian chooses to heighten their 'kiwiness', and adopt traits of self-deprecation, are they doing so to avoid being tall-poppied or is it a genuine homage to the comedic potential of New Zealand culture?

'I'm not a Comedian.'

Taking heed of the ('aw, shucks') modesty, many post-2000s New Zealand comedians indicate a collective reluctance to call themselves professional comedians. Statistically, it is the female-identifying comedians that were more likely to lessen the weight of their profession or their success in it.¹⁰ Even with an HBO comedy special on the horizon, Rose Matafeo claimed she wasn't a comedian before 2019; that it was only at her very successful year in the *Edinburgh Fringe Festival* that she accepted it was her profession (*Funny as Interview*, 2:00-10). Justine Smith considers the implied egotism of being a comic, despite being in the industry since the 90s: "The arrogance of me thinking I can go up there in front of 200 people and talk about myself and they're gonna find it amusing" (*Funny as Interview*, 12:44:13:05). Regardless of her success in the comedy industry, Smith reveals the delicate relationship comedy poses on one's ability to appear 'down to earth'. Cal Wilson asserts that when asked if she was any good at comedy, she'd reply with "I'm alright". She adds, "you [can't] go, I'm fantastic" (*Funny as Interview*, 57:47:58:10). Wilson and Smith claim that New Zealand audiences are lot harder to please - they have a "who do you think you are" mentality as result of Tall Poppy Syndrome, which serves as a constant reminder to 'settle down mate, don't show off' (J. Smith, 36:45-37:25). Further research should be undertaken as to whether this reluctance is shown by international comedians, or as Wilson and Smith suggest is indicative of New Zealand culture encouraging a forced humility.

Masculine influences and the "f* it's a chick" Mentality**

New Zealand Women doing Stand-up

There is limited scholarly research with a focus on women in comedy in New Zealand. A recent exception is "Women's Comedy: A Secret History", the first episode of *TVNZ's* 2019 documentary series, *Funny As*, which tells the story of female-identifying comedians in recent New Zealand history. The inclusion of the adjective 'secret' already reveals women's history as an antonym to the widely publicised male successes. Accompanying *Funny as*, Horan and Matthews conducted 100 interviews of New Zealand comedians, 34 of which were female-identifying comedians. The opening question, "what made you laugh as a child?" reveals the influence of the male-dominated comedy culture. Laura Daniels claims she "always knew" The Flight of the Conchords were an inspiration for her, "I would say a lot of my comedy influences were men[...] yeah that's what you watch[...] when you were younger and now

you do this” (*Funny as Interview*, 3:10: -15, 49:48- 54). Amanda Kennedy and Livi Reihana acknowledge the Flight of Conchords as their only major musical-comedy influence (*Funny as Interview*, 11:32-40). When asked about the Topp Twins, Reihana exclaims “oh yeah I forgot about the Topp Twins, they’re great” (ibid). Whether this a general memory lapse or an example of the media's lack of exposure towards ‘funny women’, most of the women answer with the most successful male comedian of their generation. Jessica Hansel, also known as, Coco Solid - comedian, musician, and creator of cartoon *Aroha Bridge* - discusses the unavoidable influence of a male-dominated culture, “they’re pulling from stuff they don’t even realise they’re pulling from” (40:04- 10). 2018 *Billy T Award* nominee, Alice Snedden quips that she didn’t look at her future and think, “I’m going to be a stand-up comedian [...] there was no female hero for young stand-up comedians” (“RNZ- More than just Broad Humour”) With majority male influences, comedy from a male perspective situates itself as quintessential New Zealand comedy.

Live Comedy 1970s-1990s

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Figure 7: The poster for the 1988 December season of the all-women satirical cabaret, Hen’s Teeth. Designed by Donna Cross courtesy of the Alexander Turnbull Library.

The international comedy sphere of 1970s -1980s was largely dominated by male comedians, such as Lenny Bruce, Rodney Dangerfield, Norm McDonald and Bill Cosby, who engaged in transgressive humour that was deliberately vulgar and crass. Popular comedians like Norm McDonald relied on sexist jokes such as, “An accident ensued that damaged six cars, and injured seven others, which once again proves my point that women can’t drive” (0:11-23). The reactionary second wave of feminism in the 1970s saw an influx of women into professional stand-up comedy (Rodgers 62). This created the inroads for the UK’s Alternative Comedy movement in the 1980s, which directly challenged the popular culture of sexist, racist and homophobic jokes.

The global situation was mirrored by the scarcity of performance opportunities for New Zealand female-identifying comedians in 1980s. The prevailing popularity of sexist attitudes, which would lead to the formation of the satirical women-only cabaret *Hen’s Teeth*. The name was based on the phrase “rare as hen’s teeth” quipping at the rarity of women comedians in mixed-bill comedy nights. Alumni Vicky Walker asserts that the gladiatorial aspects of the comedy sphere were challenging for emerging comedians (Elliot 108). The collective sought to create a safe space for women comedians, free of hecklers and judgement. Line-ups consisted of Ali Wall, Vicki Walker, Fiona Edgar, Michelle Hine, Lynn Lorkin, Brenda Kendall, Pinky Agnew, Kathryn Burnett, Suzanne McAleer, Celia Nicholson, Miranda Wilson and Juliet Monaghan. The show sought to defy the age-old criticism of ‘women aren’t funny’ with topics ranging from sex, fashion and deviance.

Despite the predominantly male line-ups at other venues, the *Hen’s Teeth* 1988 Christmas performance broke Wellington’s *Circa* Theatre box-office records. Within a year, the writers and performers grew in confidence, creating many offers on their own. Walker notes that this was a very satisfying outcome; honing one’s talent was incredibly difficult when you were constantly bombarded with hecklers yelling sexual innuendos (108). Their intention was both to be rioters, but also to be self-sufficient. Walker claimed it allowed her to subvert memorable heckler quotes and recalls herself and Juliette Monaghan writing one song called “Show us ya Growler” after this being yelled at them on multiple occasions (*Funny as Interview*, 23:56-24:35). In Auckland 1990, another all-women show, *A Girls Gotta Eat*, gained a mass following, proving female-identifying comedians were a sought-after gap in the market.

Hen’s Teeth and *A Girls Gotta Eat* were created to counteract predominantly male line-ups and highlight the ongoing need for safe spaces. In line-ups skewed towards male performers, there was very little margin for error for the token female-identifying performer. “Every time you had an opportunity to do stand-up [...] you had to be at your best because otherwise an audience would be going away saying, ‘told you women aren’t funny’” (Walker, *Funny as Interview*, 39:31-40:01). Comedian and writer, Michelle A’Court claims that a woman on stage during a comedy show wasn’t something audiences were used to looking at, she could hear people say, “f*** it’s a chick” as she walked on stage (*Funny as Interview*,

5:50-6:15). Walker exclaims that despite the gladiatorial mixed bills, within *Hen's Teeth* she found her “kindred spirits” - proving the value of safe space amongst risky ones (*Funny as Interview*, 39:32-40:13). *Hen's Teeth* still tours New Zealand and holds bi-annual productions at Circa, continuing to cultivate an all-women environment for comedy performers.

Another women-dominated comedy collective is the cast of TV3's *Funny Girls*. The first series premiered in 2015 with Rose Matafeo, Jackie van Beek and Laura Daniels as the primary cast. The show is a montage of 1-3-minute sketches and comedy songs that often speak satirically on issues of inequality. The show's initial success granted it a season two, with Kimberly Crossman and Brynley Stent also becoming primaries. In 2018, a *Funny Girls* special was released which featured New Zealand Prime Minister, Jacinda Ardern. Alongside its main cast, it included Billy T award winners and nominees Melanie Bracewell, Angella Dravid and Alice Snedden. As contemporary female comedians, the cast of this show, and in particular Rose Matafeo, will be discussed further in the next chapter.

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Figure 8: The original title actors of TV3's Sketch Show, Funny Girls. Laura Daniels and Rose Matafeo (lyricstranslate.com).

Conclusion

The post-war creation of the laconic, rural bloke and the white-trash, suburban ‘sheila’ would determine self-effacing, middle-class, and overwhelmingly colloquial humour as the ingredients for a successful comic voice in the late 20th century. The comedic choices of Fred Dagg, Lynn of Tawa and folk-duo the

Topp Twins suggested that the phenomenon of Cultural Cringe still played a part, albeit perhaps subconsciously in the shaping of comedic narratives. Comedic acts that showcased a mundane yet heightened depiction of commonplace New Zealand, proved a collective awareness towards the cringe-worthy elements of New Zealand culture. The mundanity of Antipodean culture in contradiction with camp allowed Jules and Lynda Topp to be respected in both rural and suburban New Zealand. Despite their reputation as openly lesbian in an environment largely sceptical about homosexuality, their likeability rested on the fact that they were also both hard-working, rurally raised women whose routines reflected kiwiana. Additionally, through these comics choosing to localise their acts with lower middle-class personas, the comics themselves could deny an appearance of elitism despite their growing fame. The theme of making the mundane entertainment continued into the 21st century. The Front Lawn, Flight of the Conchords and Taika Waititi brought more 'awkwardness' to the perception of the kiwi comic voice. Through depictions of ordinary kiwi lives the comics equalised themselves with their audiences. The masculine roots of laconic and self-effacing New Zealand humour undoubtedly influenced the live comedy scene of the 1970s to 1990s, with female-identifying comedians in present day describing men as their comedy role models. This unyielding preference for masculine voices during the live-comedy boom would cause a reactionary influx of female-identifying comics and the creation of safe spaces.

The remainder of this thesis investigates the effects that a male-dominated comedy industry has on the comedic choices of female-identifying attempting to maintain a reputation of likeability in the New Zealand comedy industry. The thesis asks, in the interest of gaining likeability, are female-identifying comics still adopting the masculine born tropes of the New Zealand comic voice? What additional strategies do New Zealand female-identifying comics employ to navigate the complexities of creating a comedy for the wider New Zealand demographic? Is the reactionary feminist comedy of the 1970's until present still inherently serving patriarchal interests?

CHAPTER TWO

The Historical Construction of Patriarchal Femininity and its Relationship to the Cultural Phenomenon of Tall Poppy Syndrome

THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK

In Part One of this chapter, I survey texts with theories relevant to the key terminology, including patriarchal femininity, intersectionality, femophobia and performative tension disclaimers.¹¹ These key terms are contextualised with examples from the comedy sphere, identifying the relevant constructs and variables to provide a specific viewpoint for further analysis in Chapter's 3 and 4. Part II. discusses Tall Poppy Syndrome in relation to the New Zealand expectations of humility, determining gender as the target variable. It contextualises Part 1's discussion of Patriarchal femininity within current academic scholarship dedicated to self-deprecating humour and female-identifying comics - the overarching theme being the theory of self-deprecating humour as a defence mechanism for those who are marginalised. The concluding sections of this chapter propose contemporary methods to allow self-deprecating humour to reach its subversive potential. The final section discusses recent publications that speak to the current environment which female-identifying comics face in the comedy sphere.

PT. I PATRIARCHAL FEMININITY

The patriarchy is defined in Allan Johnson's *The Gender Knot* as a society that prioritises male privilege through systems that are "male dominated, male identified and male centered" (5). Male dominance ensures that men dominate positions of power, with political, economic, legal, religious, and military roles typically rewarded to men (6). A male identified society is one whose universal core values are synonymous with masculinity and manhood, and where values including strength, toughness, logic and rationality are considered to align with the aforementioned positions of authority (7). The opposing values associated with femininity – such as collaboration, flexibility, and encouragement – are more commonly associated with subordinate roles, those epitomised by the Victorian 'Angel of the House' figure, referencing a poem made by Coventry Patmore in which he regards his passive, meek, pious and self-sacrificing wife as the ideal model of femininity (Noddings 59). Male-centeredness promotes the male experience as the synecdochal experience, the female gender is therefore defined by its inability to fulfil the criteria of a masculine gender. (Johnson 10). The patriarchy relies on the reinforcement of gender binaries, promoting these traditional concepts of masculinity as **male** and femininity as **female**, in order to maintain male hegemony.

Patriarchal femininity derives from the way society socialises women to adhere to their prescribed gender role, with an emphasis on child-rearing, agreeability, passivity, submission, purity and the pressure to conform one's physical appearance to satisfy the male gaze (Buys). It is a form of homogenised femininity that is reproduced through an expected adherence to intersecting racial, able-bodied and cis-gender norms (Hoskin and Taylor 283).¹² Moreover, it seeks to police and maintain those who defer from subordinate heteronormative models of femininity and feminine beauty by rendering them as failures of the expected standards of femininity (ibid). Hoskin argues that patriarchal femininity denies anything that does not allow a complementary relationship of dominance and subordination between women and men (Schippers qtd, "The Role of Anti-Femininity" 98). Although a subordinate and docile depiction of femininity is given preference in patriarchal systems, those who attempt to adhere to its expectations are still considered inferior to patriarchal masculinity and therefore are subjected to ridicule, because hetero-patriarchal masculinity relies on the idea that women (the object) exist only to fulfil men's needs (the subject). This is partly due to the expectations of patriarchal femininity and feminine beauty being unachievable; a women's inability to meet such impossible expectations incites feelings of insecurity. These forced insecurities are used by the patriarchy to label women as emotional and sensitive, reinforcing femininity as inferior to 'rational' masculinity. Leading Gender theorist Judith Butler reiterates that it becomes a very difficult task to separate gender from its political and cultural intersections from which it is continually "produced and maintained" ("Performative Acts and Gender Constitution" 4). Thus, the communities who seek to reject these systems are still working within them. In male dominated environments such as the comedy sphere, female-identifying comedians are often required to rise to masculine standards, or to focus on their feminine failure (their inability to adhere to patriarchal expectations of femininity), to gain agency.

Intersectional Femininity

The concept of intersectionality is integral to this thesis, as when using gender as my target variable, I must consider the diversity amongst those who identify as female to obtain a balanced and contextualised conclusion. In 1999, Judith Butler sought to revise her 1990 version of *Gender Trouble* and its use of the word 'universality' to collectivise the thoughts of marginalised groups. After spending some time as a board chair on the *International Gay and Lesbian Rights Commission*, Butler concluded that universality "conjured a reality that did not yet exist", and to pre-emptively claim or wish for its existence is to disregard the extreme difficulty those in the margins are still currently facing (*Gender Trouble* XVIII). Western feminism's desperation to establish a collective rebellion against the patriarchy granted a fictitious universality to their oppressors and produced an unhelpful simplification of women's "common subjugated experience" (5). By eradicating the presumption that women should think as one collective and unified group, Butler argues that diverse and accurate discourses are more likely to take place (21).

US lawyer and intersectionality theorist Kimberlè Crenshaw argues in her 1991 article “Mapping the Margins” that identity politics continuously conflate group differences (1242). Much of the theory dedicated to identity politics at the time failed to account for the ‘additional’ and crucial issue of race in relation to the power of the patriarchy (1252). Crenshaw stresses that to focus on where the categories intersect would be a more productive conversation; that through an improved awareness of their intersections, differences can be better identified when constructing group politics (1299). Devon W. Carbado et al. argue that by first identifying categorical and relevant differences, the future identification of commonalities will be a more successful endeavour (304). As it stands, the advantage of feminist theory for a black woman is limited as it built in a white racial context with white women speaking for ‘all’ women (Crenshaw, “Demarginalizing the Intersection of Race” 154). White feminists must then both be conscious of their privilege whilst analysing the patriarchy and also seek out those who can accurately and truthfully articulate the additional and/or different effects that race or sexual identity inevitably create (ibid). For example, the patriarchy did not manifest itself in the same way that it did in black families as in white households; the patriarchal definition of femininity already favoured white women so as much as it was exclusionary; it meant that black women may not have faced the same expectations of gender performance (156). Carbado’s co-writer Sumi Cho contends that intersectionality is not bound to a specific social position, it has and should continue to move (et al. 306). Cho, Crenshaw and McCall claim that academic discipline should be treated as an open-ended analysis with “overlapping and conflicting dynamics of race, gender, class, sexuality, nation, and other inequalities”, thus the encouragement of centrifugal and centripetal processes (Lykke qtd. “Toward a field of Intersectionality Studies” 788 & 794). This political intersectionality proves to be a “dual concern” resisting and reshaping the different effects that systemic forces have on intersectional subjects (800). By identifying essential differences through intersectionality, greater analysis can be given as to how power works (797).

This thesis holds an intersectional lens as imperative to its success. Thus, I acknowledge the essential differences of experience between the dominant culture and groups with other world views and experiences. When discussing Tall Poppy Syndrome as a patriarchal ideology, I also acknowledge that the effects of the patriarchy are not universal, and to treat them as such would mimic the strategy of the oppressors.

Performing Femininity

The Feminine and Masculine Persona

Despite the traditional binarised concepts of femininity and masculinity, contemporary academic conversation reinforces gender identities to be fluid and ever-changing. Butler draws on Lacan to suggest the “feminine mask” is either an attempt to conceal insubordinate feminine desire which would expose the failure of masculinity, or the engrained suppression of a female identity (*Gender Trouble* 70). This thesis proposes that the feminine masquerade still exists in environments that are still or were

historically (and unfairly) dominated by men, such as the comedy sphere. Performance theorist Sue Ellen-Case claims the masquerade can also be achieved by presenting one's femininity in excess (hyper-feminine personas or stereotypes, e.g., the nasty women, the Madonna, the bimbo etc.), thus the hyper-feminine becomes the mask, and femininity in its truthful portrayal remains disguised (Riviere 1929 81-82, Ellen-Case 41). Self-deprecation, paired with a hyper-feminine persona, may prove to be the performative mask allowing women to successfully navigate the gladiatorial comedy arena.

In opposition to the hyper feminine persona, women in comedy have also adopted masculine traits, for distinct purposes. Pamela Blunden quotes stand-up comic British Shazia Mirza, "To survive, I'm turning into a bloke. It's not only that I am growing a moustache and beard, but I am turning into a man - more aggressive, I do what the men do. I just get on" (qtd. 2007, 232). Her statement acknowledges the audience's long-established preference for a masculine voice. In his infamous 2007 *Vanity Fair* article, "Why Women aren't Funny", Christopher Hitchens claimed that the female-identifying comedians who are talented, are often "hefty, dykey or Jewish" and thus, 'boiling with self-deprecation and angst', making them inherently masculine – suggesting that a masculine persona is more appealing in comedy than a feminine one. Yet Joanna Russ suggests that even if a 'woman' becomes a 'man' in order to be considered funny, she is not funny, but her attempt to be masculine *is* (qtd. Barreca 23). Russ reiterates her theory by claiming that when the sex of the protagonist is changed in great works of literature, the plot is overtly comic: "two strong women battle for supremacy in the early West", "A young girl in Minnesota finds her womanhood by killing a bear" (ibid). Michelle A'Court exclaimed that even when she created routines that spent more time speaking to Kiwi culture, drinking and economics through a masculine lens, her reviews would focus on critiquing her brief allusion to a period joke ("Making Feminism Fun" 3). Thus, her brief mention of a 'women's issue' broke the illusion of her masculine persona. Butler suggests that the oppositional quality of feminine and masculine binaries demands that further gender identities cannot exist within this equation (*Gender Trouble* 24). Thus, as A'Courts' performance dictates, the female-identifying comic is compelled to operate within the extremes, such as the hyper-feminine or masculine. By doing so, she seeks to clearly establish her comedic voice within the binaries that her audience is familiar with. This thesis does not seek to invalidate these personas as a comedic choice, but rather question as to whether they are a defensive tool preventing female-identifying comics from having an authentic relationship with their audience.

Femophobia & Imposter Syndrome

Making Femininity the butt of the Joke

The hyper-feminine persona often marks femininity or feminine failure as the butt of the joke (see p. 8 for definition). In the traditional and binarised definitions of femininity and masculinity, humour is seen as a masculine trait, consequently, humour and femininity were seen as antithetical. For fear of a female-identifying comic appearing un-funny, she either lessens her femininity or heightens it, avoiding its

expectations or making it the butt of the joke. Australian commentator Clementine Ford talks of the “I’m not a feminist” phenomenon in her book, *Fight Like a Girl* (2014). Ford acknowledges that internalised misogyny is complicated as it is driven largely by fear; for women who exist in groups where threatening behaviour is under policed, it is reason to see why they want to minimise their danger (146). Immediately exclaiming these women need to “think for themselves” neglects the possibility of an unseen or unconscious battle for self-preservation (147). The horror of women contributing to the narrative of men’s violence by victim-blaming may be a negotiation of their safety. Women may deem their input as hopeless, but by consenting to the removal of their authority they gain symbolic power (148). By successfully re-enacting the patriarchal definition of femininity, women avoid showing obvious characteristics that would label them as an imposter and can therefore operate (albeit submissively) within the dominant power groups (ibid). Gin Corkindale describes Imposter Syndrome as a feeling of “inadequacy that persists despite evident success” (2). This was reiterated in Chapter One, where female-identifying comics were more hesitant to call themselves comedians than their male counterparts. Patriarchal femininity and Femophobia (described below) increase the likelihood of a woman feeling like an imposter by questioning the legitimacy of their role, particularly if it is one of authority. This feeling of inadequacy is not always caused by sexism which would seek to verbally question a woman’s authority – rather it is an engrained feeling of inferiority that is learnt through patriarchal systems, structures and teaching. In the male-dominated comedy sphere, Carol Montgomery notes, a female-identifying comic is more likely to say her comedy is generated from a female perspective than claim that it is feminist. By doing so, she can lessen the perceived extremity of her ‘femaleness’ and therefore increase their chances of reaching a larger demographic (34).

Femophobia refers to an aversion, or fear of feminine qualities by oneself or others. Rhea Hoskin defines femophobia as an oppressive tool that preserves the rules of ‘proper womanhood’ and discourages “culturally sanctioned forms of femininity” (Blair & Hoskin 102). It is the simultaneous devaluation of femininity and regulation of patriarchal femininity; thus, it also maintains the required subordination of femininity and the gender hegemony (Hoskin, “Femininity? It’s the Aesthetic of Subordination” 1). This can be likened to Judith Fetterley’s concept of Immasculation. In *The Resisting Reader*, Fetterley marks that the cultural reality is not the “castrating bitch”, or emasculation, but more commonly it is the *immasculation* of women by men (xx) through toxic masculinity. Fetterley suggests that through immasculation, women are taught to identify with a male point of view and to accept male systems and values as normality (ibid). This causes women to feel estranged from their own life experiences as women, as they are unable to see it as authentic (Elaine Showalter qtd. Fetterley xxi). Terry A. Kuper’s 2005 article on ‘Toxic Masculinity as a Barrier to Mental Health in Prison’ declares toxic masculinity as useful in academic discourse as it delineates the socially destructive qualities of hegemonic masculinity such as, misogyny, homophobia, transphobia, greed and violent domination (716). The term ‘toxic masculinity’ is not recommended by scholars in men and masculinity studies as it is considered shorthand (typically used in mainstream media) for larger concepts under patriarchal and hegemonic

masculinity (Waling 366; Harrington 5). However, much of comedy by marginalised comics is a response to toxic masculinity and therefore will be referred to in future performance analysis.

Femininity's presumed inauthenticity enables its potential for comedy. The feminine joke is used to reaffirm the perceived inferiority of being feminine. As masculinity is seen in the aforementioned binary as logical and scientific, femininity is seen as irrational and emotional, thus more likely to produce humour through its misfortunes (Hoskin, "The Role of Anti-Femininity" 697). Rose Matafeo notes that as women in comedy aren't seen as making deliberate choices, audiences presume it is all accidental – "people think oh she's crazy and anything could happen and it's not that, [it's] the exact same every night [...] I'm not just a wild card on stage it's all very well-rehearsed" (98:18 -99:00). The audience is quick to see Matafeo's on-stage chaotic persona as reminiscent of her femininity rather than a conscious choice made by a talented comedian. Laura Daniels remarks on the difficulty of being feminine and funny, without having a trait that fails to meet the idealistic version of femininity (22:23 - 43). In opposition, if a female-identifying comic does 'succeed' at maintaining society's definition of femininity then she is less likely to be perceived as funny. To navigate the engrained patriarchal teaching that feminine women aren't funny, the comic may appear superficial. By rendering femininity, a superficial quality, it remains the butt of the joke.

Comedian Greta Titelman's onstage-persona often makes reference to her as the 'hot girl' with a heightened 'valley girl' accent.¹³ In her 2020 set on US television special, *Comedy Central*, Titelman tells the story of how she lied to her date that she liked to go surfing; whilst describing the date Titelman asks her audience questions like, "have you guys ever seen one of these before?" in reference to her date's truck, and "does it look like I've ever been surfing?" indicating towards her appearance (0:35- 1:15). By asking intentionally stupid questions, Titelman imitates the stereotypical and superficial 'hot girl' that her appearance may be reminiscent of. Titelman simultaneously acknowledges that she is a hyper-feminine woman whilst also by making it the butt of the joke.

For comics or characters where their femininity does not meet its societal expectations, their feminine failure is consequently emphasised. Roxanne Gay draws attention to the portrayal of Melissa McCarthy's character, 'Megan' in the blockbuster film, *Bridesmaids*, "almost every joke was designed to rest on her presumed hideousness and her ribald but unmistakably 'butch' sexuality" (54). The character's failure to conform to the idealistic representations of femininity in the film was the crux of her humour. Additionally, In Matafeo's 2019 Conan set "It's a Tough Year to be a Straight Women", she makes a joke about her feminine failure:

I do think that me being straight is purely a symptom of low self-esteem, which is true, I have low self-esteem - I'm fine with that. I think I've got the perfect level of self-confidence as an adult woman right and that confidence, it's very specific, but some of you might know what I'm talking

about, I have the confidence to measure a link between the two tips of my index fingers and then travel with that measurement to the other side of the room and believe that will be at all accurate (4:30-5:01).

By drawing attention to her lack of measuring abilities whilst previously mentioning her low self-esteem, Matafeo depreciates her self-confidence whilst simultaneously revealing her failure at a traditionally masculine activity. During the same set, Matafeo discusses her sexual history where she reveals her number to be 9, “it is surprisingly low [...] considering that I’ve literally never rejected anyone in my life” (2:55- 3:30). Here Matafeo makes another quip towards her feminine failure. By exclaiming that she has never rejected a man’s attention, whilst still having a low number of sexual partners, Matafeo implies that she does not receive a lot of attention from men. Her inability to gain this attention reemphasises her feminine failure. Another example is provided by popular New Zealand comedian, Melanie Bracewell during her 2019 *Comedy Up Late* set. Bracewell introduces her set with, “So I was in Bunnings the other day, *lowers voice* yeah, I’m into hardware baby, ha just kidding, I was buying a [scented] candle” (0:32-0:40). The self-deprecating aspect to her joke suggests that she cannot perform to the masculine standards that the start of the joke originally suggested, by revealing that she was there for a scented candle instead of ‘hardware’, her implied femininity is therefore the butt of the joke.

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Figure 9: Melanie Bracewell performing in the 2017 Comedy Festival Gala (comedytrust.org.nz).

Femophobia is also present in the negative reception towards jokes about topics which are rendered as ‘women’s issues’. In an interview for *Deadline* in 2017, Liza Schlesinger a well-known American comic was asked how she thinks women represent themselves in comedy, Schlesinger responded,

When you're a woman in comedy and you get a break, people get so excited about it, but while we have to work hard to get that attention, I do think many women think, "Oh if I just act like a guy, if I go for that low hanging fruit..." Everything's about sex, or how weird I am. It all just kind of runs together. I could walk into *The Improv*, close my eyes, and I can't tell one girl's act apart from another. That's not saying that 30-something white guys don't all sound the same sometimes, but I'm banging my head against the wall because women want to be treated as equals, and we want feminism to be a thing, but it's really difficult when every woman makes the same point about her vagina, over and over. I think I'm the only woman out there that has a joke about World War II in my set. I think shock value works well for women, but beyond that, there's no substance. I want to see what else there is with such complex, smart creatures. That's why women like Tina Fey do well. It's smart, and men can laugh at it, too. I consider myself one of those comics, and quite frankly, I'm appalled by what is expected of women, and what women offer in response to that. (Wright)

Schlesinger quickly received backlash on Twitter from her fellow comics,

I don't care if you think we're too dirty, self-deprecating, sexual, or ukulele-dependent. Men get to use all their words, so do we. — Eliza Skinner (@elizaskinner) June 15, 2017

How is discouraging women from discussing their everyday life (I have a pussy every day) and doing WWII jokes to impress dudes feminist? — Rae Sanni (@raesanni) June 15, 2017

Schlesinger's argument fails because it claims that female-identifying comics only tell jokes about vaginas, periods and sex because these topics are shocking- and that is what elicits laughter. To suggest that jokes on these topics are funny solely because they're shocking, claims they cannot be funny even if well-crafted and well-delivered. In her thesis, "Women's Work and Feminist Laughter in Stand-up Comedy" Lindsay Rodgers observes two period jokes told at US comedy night *Ladyfest* in 2017. The first comics in the line-up spoke to the irony of some men being grossed out by periods,

I am so confused why men are so grossed out by blood coming out of a vagina. 'Cause a man can annihilate his friends and turn them inside out on a video game all day, and I'll just like pull a tampon out and he'll fuckin walk right away from me. Like what the fuck, I thought you thought it was cool! Isn't this cool to you? WHAT IS HAPPENING?! That's not fair, fucking man-up, man. If penises exploded every month, I would keep a fucking band aid in my purse. (Anonymous comic, 2017 qtd. Rodgers 12)

Rodgers notes that this joke didn't receive much laughter from the audience as it didn't make any new observations and relied on the concept of exploding penises to provoke laughter (13). On the same

line-up another comic, Ashley Moffatt made a joke about periods which did elicit laughter from her audience,

I was raised by a single dad. It was hard to be a young girl without a mom around. There's a lot of things dads don't know about. [...] period, or my 'monthly' as my dad would call it, he would just give me sixty bucks. That's a lot of money! I don't know what he was thinking. 'Well, you're a woman now, you're gonna need tampons, pads, [Michael] Bublé tickets.' It's so much money, but he never wanted to talk about it. It was as if every time I lost an egg, the period fairy would come into my room, put sixty dollars under my pillow and say, "here ya go, I don't wanna hear about it.", I work for a business [...] full of like clipboard business dicks, and I talk about my period, and they hate it. They hate it so much! That's why I love to do it. They're like "oh, a female comedian talkin' about her period. Original!" [...] "Oh! she's fired up now talkin' 'bout, talkin' 'bout talkin' 'bout her period. I hate this. I am just gonna stare at her tits. SHE DOESN'T HAVE ANY TITS." I know. Listen, dudes, I know, but if you don't want to hear about my period, GIVE ME SIXTY BUCKS. (Moffatt, 2017 qtd. Rodgers 14)

Moffatt's joke is well-crafted with the call-back to the sixty bucks creating a satisfying and original punchline. As argued by the Schlesinger's fellow comics, female-identifying comics should be allowed to tell jokes about topics that regularly intersect with their lives, but it should be held to same standard as any other comedic observation. To remove any jokes which contain topics traditionally rendered as feminine perpetuates femophobia as it claims they are only funny because they are taboo. Moffatt's joke however, still placates any sceptical audience members by drawing attention to previous critiques. Although it is an exposé towards the negative mindset of men towards period jokes, by giving a voice to their fears she releases tension. Would her joke still succeed if she cut her version of the clichéd, 'I know what you're thinking' and released the tension solely with the 'sixty bucks' punchline?

The Tension Disclaimer

The tool used by Ashley Moffatt to help placate her audience is coined in this thesis as the **tension disclaimer**. When Vicki Walker walked out onto stage for the Auckland *Comedy Store* finals, she was greeted with a heckler who yelled, "hey babe, are you on the pill?" in which Vicki replied, 'no, but it was a f***** shame your mother wasn't [...] I know this is strange that you have a woman on stage, but I think I should be allowed to do my piece (29:02-29:40). Tension disclaimers are used by marginalised comics to point out their non-normative behaviour, appearance or identity to reduce tension within the audience. The 'tension' being discussed is due to historical, social and cultural discriminatory associations with certain identities, and the knowledge of how one's privilege intersects with these identities. For example, a cis woman who is more privileged than a trans-woman may not feel comfortable laughing at a self-deprecating joke about discrimination told by a trans woman, as their cis

privilege protects them from that discrimination. Alternatively, members of an audience may struggle with seeing diversity in line-ups as they are more accustomed to the presence of white, cis males. Or, in more extreme conservative circles, members of the audience may be overtly homophobic, transphobic or sexist and feel tension due to their discriminatory views. If those with discriminatory views do not understand the tension disclaimers as satirical, but perceive these as validation of their own bigotry, then the tension is diffused incorrectly (not at the fault of the comic themselves). Although the last two kinds of audience members do not deserve tension disclaimers, the comic may be aware of the different kinds of members in their audience and release the tension, giving themselves a higher likelihood of being understood. Marianna Keisalo suggests that comedians with a “marked identity” have the advantage of intrigue even if they have to work harder to gain likeability because of their said ‘marker’ (558). This is demonstrated by Scottish stand-up comedian Fern Brady’s opening for her set the ABC Comedy Allstars Show in the Melbourne Comedy Festival in 2018:

Wowee it’s still illegal to do this in Scotland, so this is amazing. Usually when I walk out on stage in Scotland people work out I’m a woman very early on and everyone just folds their arms devastated and as if to go, “why is the stripper talking, this is gonna be rubbish.” And I was a stripper before this so I should know. In the UK when I say I was a stripper people go really tense, “if you were a stripper does that mean you were abused in some way by your parents?” Not physically no, but I was abused economically by a father who wouldn’t pay my rent through university (0:11-0:38).

By opening with a playful allusion to the sexist reactions Brady gets in Scotland, she subtly reassures her audience that she is aware of the unusualness of her presence on stage. By first mentioning “the stripper” as a derogatory term but then announcing she was one, Brady releases the tension that her mention of sexist attitudes might have caused. Brady then releases any further tension by making a quip about her less-than-valiant motivations being that father wouldn’t pay her rent. Brady goes on to say that she was the worst stripper in all of Scotland (1:13- 19). By transforming the mention of sexist attitudes into a playful anecdote about her previous occupation as stripper, Brady appears unaffected by the situation, making the audience feel at ease. Jen Brister repeats this tactic in her debut at *Live at the Apollo* in 2017:

Well good evening Apollo, it’s lovely to be here. I’ve come all the way from Brighton - just in case you’re wondering what this haircut is about. Might be a new face for some of you people, don’t worry the *BBC* invited me here cos they needed a beige lesbian. So, I’m just here to tick some boxes, not your box, Madam, just a metaphorical box (0:02-0:46).

Similarly, to Brady, Brister also announces the underrepresented nature of her presence on stage. By mentioning the BBC'S diversity ploy, Brister risks creating tension, yet she quickly diffuses it by making a light-hearted quip to an audience member about her metaphorical 'box'.

It is not uncommon for female-identifying comics to neutralise their appearance to avoid needing a disclaimer for their presence. Michelle A'Court claims that she tried to make her appearance as neutral as possible by, "not wearing anything that is going to warrant a disclaimer before you even start talking" (72:18 - 73:46). Gender and Comedy academic Danielle Russell quotes Jay Sankey, "I know women comics who deliberately play down their attractiveness, saying it can make women in the crowd jealous and distract men from focusing on their minds rather than their physical selves" (13). However, if women dress in 'non-feminine' clothes they are berated for not living up to idealistic feminine standards. In Hannah Gadsby's *Nanette* she talks of being labelled "incorrectly female" (59:50- 1:00:10). As a reaction, she made fun of her figure and appearance to gain permission to speak. Members of non-marginalised power groups, such as cis-white men, typically do not need to exclaim their presence on stage as their presence is expected. In the 'Allstars Supershow' for Melbourne Comedy Festival in 2018, Rose Matafeo exclaims: 'thank you for having me tonight, I dressed up for the occasion, apparently I dressed up as your stepmother!' (0:00-0:09). By making a quip about her attire, Matafeo is able to neutralize her outfit and any presumptions that may be made about her appearance. In Ellie Taylor's set for 'Comedians of the World', she walks out on stage heavily pregnant; before Taylor begins her set, she starts rubbing her tummy and make loud primal sounds, exclaiming, "yes, I did have a burrito for lunch" (0:04-0:15). Taylor's instinctive choice to address her pregnant belly releases the tension that may have arisen through the rarity of seeing a pregnant woman on a comedy stage. It begs the question, however - if the tension, such as Taylor's pregnant belly is left unaddressed and therefore unresolved, what effect would this have on the audience? In *Nanette*, Gadsby announces that she is no longer releasing the tension, she calls for comedians to speak truthfully to their trauma, and not sacrifice their own worth in order to create a punchline (1:05:00-1:10:00) However, by verbalising that she is releasing the tension, Gadsby arguably releases a fraction of it, by making her audience aware of her intentions. Perhaps the next step is for comedians to withhold tension without verbalising that are doing so, allowing their presence to not be treated as unconventional.

In summary, the policing of patriarchal femininity as the regular reinforcement of its definition ensures its subordination to masculinity and renders the male experience as synecdochal. In environments that were (and still are) traditionally dominated by men, such as the comedy sphere, masculinity and the male experience positions itself as the popular and accepted humorous narrative. As the traditional definition of femininity does not permit humour as a desirable trait, femininity is not culturally associated with humour. Femophobia compels female-identifying comics to engage in a feminine masquerade through hyper-feminine or hyper-masculine personas emphasising their feminine failure through self-deprecation. This either reinforces the impossible expectations of femininity,

providing validation for the female experience or presents femininity as likely to cause failure through its inability to reach masculine standards - femininity maintains its position as inferior. When comics disparage femininity, they often disparage other women and are therefore not a positive female spectator but an example of internalised patriarchal conditioning where their comedy placates a male audience (Gilbert 156).

PT. II TALL POPPY SYNDROME (TPS)

A Tall Poppy is defined as “a person who is conspicuously successful and whose distinctions frequently attract envious notice or hostility” (Deverson, 1998: 833). Tall Poppy Syndrome (TPS) continues to be perpetuated performatively as ‘acts’ or enactments of the now clichéd trope of the ‘humble kiwi’. Scott Pierce’s et al. investigation onto the effects of Tall Poppy Syndrome and the perceptions and experiences of elite New Zealand athletes defines TPS as the behavioural expectation of not being a show-off, “which is ingrained in New Zealand’s tentatively post-colonial culture” (352). Pierce drew attention to the paradox of encouraging athletes to be competitive and confident yet simultaneously humble (358). In light of the current mental health crisis, the function of Tall Poppy Syndrome to ‘forcefully humble’ public figures proves itself as a major cultural behavioural flaw. When Rose Matafeo won the *Edinburgh Fringe’s* Comedy Award for Best Show in 2018, which Amanda Kennedy equates to winning the “Olympics of Comedy”, she received little media coverage back at ‘home’ in New Zealand (*Funny as Interview*, 52:40-48). Kennedy concludes that this is due to New Zealand’s inward-looking culture, “when someone does well overseas, we’re [not interested]” (52:48-59). Matafeo claims that people saw her move to London to pursue her comedy career as sign of betrayal (2018). In an interview for *Noted*, she is asked, “have you gone all snooty now that you’ve won the big award?”, in which she replies, “don’t tall poppy me!” (ibid). This manipulative strategy of Tall Poppy Syndrome in New Zealand is often misconstrued as the act of enabling humility. Kaupapa Māori academic Mere Berryman’s ‘Culturally Responsive Methodologies’ equates humility as the blurring of the self, to render the other visible (et al. 209). She reiterates that humility is commonly understood as ‘to know one’s place’ (212). The turn of phrase ‘to know one’s place’ is still used to police those who do not conform to traditional gender roles. The essential difference being whether the phrase forces minorities further into the margins or calls for an awareness on which stories are more important than one’s own.

Jacqui Wilkinson maintains that envy is the natural reaction when someone does better than us, and that the focus should not be on Tall Poppy Syndrome, but on celebrating the preference towards humility in New Zealand: “Our humbleness is one of the reasons why people love our country, love doing business with us, and why a holiday here is such a joy for so many international visitors”. Wilkinson neglects to investigate the damage of forcefully imposing an expectation of humility onto an individual, equating Tall Poppy Syndrome as a necessary evil. Conservative journalist Heather Du Plessis-Allan presents the argument that Tall Poppy Syndrome is no longer present in 21st century New Zealand: “I

think we kiwis like people to be decent. Be famous, but be kind, [...] be a team player, [...] and if people aren't we call them out, there is nothing wrong with that" (*NZ Herald*) Du Plessis-Allan's argument provides an important distinction between those who discourage elitism and those motivated by envy 'cutting' down tall poppies to serve their own insecurities.

New Zealand linguist Professor Janet Holmes's et al. 2017 article "Negotiating the Tall Poppy Syndrome in New Zealand Workplaces: Women Leaders Managing the Challenge" is the most recent investigation into the effects on Tall Poppy Syndrome with gender as the target variable. Holmes draws on the McLeod theory that Tall Poppy Syndrome can be traced back to the early settler's rejection of Britain's class dominated structure, devaluing an elitist mentality (55). Holmes's study analyses the anti-elitist language used by New Zealander leaders, particularly women, to navigate the pre-existing hierarchy in a boss-employee relationship. She notes that in the workplace, Tall Poppy Syndrome operates as an unwritten enforcement mechanism to continually "keep self-promotion in check" (1). New Zealanders adapt quicker and more comfortably to an egalitarian environment than their overseas powers at be, such as the U.S and the U.K. Although the notion of an egalitarian society is often referred to as sociocultural myth (Nolan 2007:127), there is evidence to suggest that New Zealanders do not comfortably accept obvious presentations of power (Holmes et al. 3-4). New Zealanders' preference for colloquial language rests on the perception that formal speech outlines class distinctions. Holmes proposes that New Zealand leaders opt for a relaxed and casual style of speech to mitigate any notions of superiority (4). Her study – "The Complete Language in the Workplace Project Corpus" – took notes from 2000 workplace interactions involving 700 participants (7). One example is from 'Yvonne', who read out a letter during a meeting which praises the company, in particular her leadership. Yvonne maintains an ironic, self-disparaging tone when the letter mentions her role, distancing herself from the praise and reinforcing her avoidance of self-promotion (11). Many of the observed women lessened the directness of their workplace speeches with the hedges of 'just', 'like' and 'sort of' (12). Although their position in authority ensures their status, the employment of phrases such as "does that make sense?" reveal the mitigating strategies used to combat TPS (20). Holmes requests that further research be undertaken to determine whether these tendencies are gendered as feminine (22). Her research reveals the complex difference between an admirable display of humility, which prioritises equality and an appearance of humility that is born from fear, favours self-deprecation and avoids celebrating one's own success.

Self-deprecating vs. Self-defeating Humour

To understand the type of self-deprecating humour discussed in this thesis, it is important to briefly contextualise the current discourse that defines the differences between self-deprecating humour and self-defeating humour. The international success of Hannah Gadsby's set *Nanette* sparked conversations across media and academia on the relationship between self-deprecating humour and defeatism,

And at that point, I realized that I'd been telling my stories for laughs. I'd been trimming away the darkness, cutting away the pain and holding on to my trauma for the comfort of my audience (Gadsby 'Three Ideas. Three Contradictions. Or not.', 2019).

In 2017, *Nanette* won multiple awards at the *Melbourne International Comedy Festival*, *Adelaide Fringe* and *Edinburgh Fringe* and in September 2019 Gadsby won an Emmy award for Outstanding Writing in a Variety Special. *Nanette* served as an exposé on marginalised comics using self-deprecating humour to gain permission to speak. Gadsby carefully constructed *Nanette* to complete her previously 'half-told stories'; she discusses how her jokes often succeed through the building of tension, which is then released by a punchline for the comfort of the audience (28:00- 30:00). Initially *Nanette* seems to continue making jests at Gadsby's non-conforming appearance. She tells the story of how she was confronted at a bus stop by someone who mistook her for man who was hitting on his girlfriend (10:10 -13:05). Upon discovering that Hannah is a woman, the man exclaims, 'oh sorry, I don't hit women', Gadsby exclaims, "what a guy!", the audience laughs, the tension is released (ibid). Later in her set, Gadsby revisits this story and explains that when the man discovered she was gay he attacked her anyway (59:50- 1:03:10). This time Gadsby does not release the tension, "it's yours" she says to her audience, "I am not helping you anymore". (1:08:20- 1:10:20). Gadsby concludes that previously she had lived a lie that was "real and debilitating", now she wants the truth of her story heard, "what I would have done to have heard a story like mine" (1:03:27- 50).

Nanette received critique from other comedians who felt that Gadsby had discredited their own career-defining self-deprecating personas.¹⁴ This is where the difference between self-deprecating humour and self-defeating comedy is essential. Rawlings and Findlay revealed that whilst self-deprecating and self-defeating humour are both self-disparaging in nature, they are individual humour styles. Self-defeating humour shares a negative association with self-esteem, whilst self-deprecating humour is positively correlated with self-esteem. (qtd. R. Brown 29). This hypothesis neglects to acknowledge the possibility of a comedian using self-deprecating humour but successfully masking their emotional intent or negative origin - if the audience is successfully 'deceived' by the comedian and their relationship with their content, then they are protected from second-hand feelings of discomfort and psychological distress. This opposing theory suggests it is impossible to completely differentiate self-deprecating humour from self-defeating humour unless the comedian has spoken candidly to the disparaging parts of their set. How a comedian's self-esteem is perceived may play a part in how their audience perceives their self-deprecating humour. This may not change the comedian's intention but perhaps prevents them from masking it successfully. Ellie Tomsett suggests the difference lies between subjective self-deprecation and bodily self-deprecation ("Reclaiming the Female Body" 8). Tomsett renders subjective self-deprecation that targets one's character or personality as the simple subjective critique of oneself (9). However, with bodily self-deprecation the performer focuses on a failure to conform to normative patriarchal expectations, or a visually evident 'flaw' that is often unchangeable

(This was true of much of Gadsby's humour prior to *Nanette*) (ibid). Subjective self-deprecating humour rests on the phrase, "I have this thing about me that I could change, but I won't", it often presented ironically or as a ploy to receive compliments from their audience. Bodily self-deprecation says, "I have this thing about me that I can't change, but I feel that I should". Self-deprecating humour should announce one's flaws but not use them to make themselves appear smaller to the audience.

Self-deprecating Humour as a Defense Mechanism

Cutting yourself down to avoid the cutting of others

If somebody does something mean to you, you laugh at yourself first before anyone else gets a chance to, so then they can't get to you - Gilda Radner (Gina Barreca 27).

The conventions of stand-up comedy provide a difficult challenge for New Zealand comedians who seek (albeit, perhaps out of fear) to adhere to the humble kiwi prototype. This entrenched social convention challenges an essential praxis of stand-up comedy, which is largely egotistical in nature. Autobiographical stand-up, which this thesis focuses on, requires a certain confidence, on the part of the comic, that the audience is interested in their life, thoughts and experiences. An audience is essential in stand-up, as is laughter, the quantity and volume of the laughter determines a joke's immediate success. The occupation of being a comic entertainer grants one immediate status: through skilled preparation the comic creates an intended destination for their audience, yet the audience's power to derail their plan is an ever-present hazard (Russell 14). For female-identifying comedians in New Zealand, their gender identity also poses additional challenges. Danielle Russell notes that for women "to seize center stage is to assert conversational dominance [and] contend with cultural definitions of femininity" (3).

If TPS acts as a patriarchal ideology to police public presentations of femininity that do not abide by their binary category, and if the use of self-deprecating humour is a way to both reduce tension and equalise the status between comedian and audience (Ellithorpe et al. 403), then for it to successfully equalise a space, the only element of status the comedian holds before their set is their choice to perform, rather than sit in the audience. By revealing one's inadequacies, the comic grants the audience superiority through their freedom to laugh at them. However, in most circumstances, the power differentials that exist between comedians and their audience prior to their gig, as well as the comic still holding the mic and remaining the focus of the attention, prevents an equilibrium from being reached. Therefore, the surrendering of power is perhaps an allusion - or do audiences still maintain superiority by being able to usurp the power through withholding laughter? (Russell 12). Comedians who exist in high power culturally dominant groups, such as cis white men, might employ self-deprecating humour to equalise with their audience; through recognising an incompetence in himself as a human, he is able to contest his privilege. If his audience consisted of marginalised communities, he might then be able to

achieve his goal. If this is reversed and the speaker themselves is marginalised, are they lowering themselves further by asking the power majority groups to laugh at them?

While the concept of using self-deprecating humour as a defence mechanism has minimal academic attention in New Zealand, numerous overseas academics have contributed to this discussion. Morgan Ellithorpe's "Putting the "Self" in Self-deprecation: When (Self) deprecating humour about minorities is acceptable" (2014) reiterates that whilst self-deprecation is commonly known as the act of disparaging oneself, self-deprecating *humour* is an offering of salient aspects of oneself as the target of the joke (403). The joke therefore faces *inwards*, towards oneself, avoiding confrontation with the audience. Her research contributes to the theory that comedians in a minority group tend to be less aggressive in their approach to humour and, thus, less likely to make another demographic the butt of the joke. This is a claim also found in Germaine Greer's 2009 publication, *The Unfunnier Sex*: that those who feel they cannot dominate the social hierarchy evade persecution in the entertainment industry by holding their own physical or emotional characteristics into account (57). Openly gay entertainer Allan Carr successfully woos his predominantly heterosexual crowd by including frequent references to his sexual orientation. Greer claims that these references are often played grotesquely, reinforcing the audience's sense of superiority (ibid). As mentioned previously, if self-deprecation is successfully employed by comedians as an equalising tool, then it can be used by members of low-power groups to establish a collective rapport by reclaiming stereotypes and redefining the tension associated with them. It allows the assertion of one's minority and the diffusion of common hostility (ibid). Ellithorpe's article neglects to evaluate the consequences that subjecting these stereotypes to ridicule may have on the comic's wellbeing despite its pro-social achievements.

Gina Barreca's book, *They used to call me Snow White but I drifted* (2013) is perhaps the most significant piece of literature questioning female-identifying comedian's employment of self-deprecating humour. Barreca's book fiercely defies the notion that women are only funny when their gender is the consistent target of their humour, and equally that women can be funny without gender being a part of their shtick. Barreca draws attention to the quotes of women comedians and their critique of the conflicting expectations of women in comedy. Julia Klein stresses that "Comedy is itself an aggressive act; making someone laugh means exerting control, even power. But a woman cannot come off as overaggressive or she will lose [...]" (19). She risks losing the approval of her audience, and making them nervous, "nervous people don't laugh" (ibid). Robyn Brown notes that that there is a learned presumption that women are more self-conscious than men, thus when a female-identifying comic is on stage, the audience is more likely to feel nervous for them (Hampes 2006, qtd. 116). The female-identifying comic must quickly refute the idea that she is 'taking herself too seriously' which often leads to self-deprecation (119). Screenwriter Pamela West echoes that women in comedy are too scared to come across as hysterical or 'whiney bitches', or anything they are constantly being accused of; if women can make light of such complaints, then they'll be tolerated, "they won't shut you off as quickly" (qtd.

Barreca 21). Barreca asserts that by relying on self-deprecation, women comedians are also solidifying their lowly position in the power structure. Those in the margins have learnt to defuse a situation through self-effacing diversions, sacrificing important parts of themselves in order to make others happy (109).

Evaluating the Harm of Self-deprecating Humour

Ellie Tomsett's Comedy study, 'Positives and Negatives: Reclaiming the Female Body and Self-Deprecation in Stand-up Comedy' re-evaluates Barreca's claims. Tomsett reiterates that self-deprecating humour as a mode of articulating the women's experience remains a paradoxical tool (7). Women must meet the conventions of male-dominated humour whilst also critiquing them (Pershing, 1991, qtd. Gilbert 203). If a woman maintains a confrontational approach, she runs the risk of only being an outsider or not reaching those who she is critiquing, if she continues to accommodate through self-deprecation, she remains silent (Sullivan & Turner 130). Self-deprecating humour is a tool to gain liberation from oppressive attitudes, yet it can also simultaneously reinforce these attitudes by announcing them in a comedic context.

It is these paradoxical qualities that have prevented scholars from reaching any definite conclusions on self-deprecation as a productive form of humour. Tomsett rebukes this, arguing that it is self-deprecation's ability to placate and engage the dominant culture whilst also including the marginalised that makes it the most productive form of humour ("Reclaiming the Female body" 9). By including all groups, self-deprecating humour promotes itself as the most efficient way to provoke conversation. Kiri Pritchard McLean describes self-deprecation as a shorthand way to make a connection; by saying phrases such as the aforementioned "I know what you'll all thinking", a rapport with the audience is immediately built based on the shared knowledge of how the speaker looks (qtd. 11). The comic therefore addresses the 'elephant in the room' in order to win the room. Yet, in doing so, does it cause potential harm to the wellbeing of the speaker? Tomsett refers to the earlier conclusions of Lisa Merrell and her argument that women historically had to demean themselves to gain access to male humour (13). Merrell argues that self-deprecating humour is still an extension of this devaluing, though perhaps less blatant than previous examples. She continues with the claim that self-deprecation asks women to critique themselves more than they would in other contexts (qtd. 13). Yet by controlling the critiques by critiquing herself first, she prevents uncontrolled critiques from her audience, making the male-dominated comedy arena tolerable (Gilbert 70). The physical act of a comic writing a set with the intent of finding things to critique about themselves is an uncommon one; the constant public narration of these flaws through touring gigs may prove harmful to the comic. Tomsett notes the difficulty of gaining a solution for the harmful effects of self-deprecating humour. Due to its paradoxicalities, the comics themselves must have an awareness of their emotional threshold ("Reclaiming the Female Body" 15).¹⁵ The conscious choice by the comic to self-deprecate implies a knowledge of its potential harm, and therefore it should be monitored by the comic themselves.

However, Tomsett argues that if self-deprecation is avoided with the intent to not make oneself the butt of the joke, many comics would lose an essential strategy to protect themselves from criticism – which also in turn may cause the comedian harm (13). If the parts of the comedian's set that increase its palatability are made subconsciously, then the comic is only able to identify the potential harm through eventual self-evaluation. If the comic remains unaware that their comedy reflects patriarchal conditioning, their ignorance may protect them from perceiving their actions as harmful.

The Editing Process

In attempting to navigate the comedy arena, female-identifying comics are likely to pay close attention to the vocabulary used in their sets. Danielle Russell labels this editing process and the subsequent inclusion of self-deprecating humour as self-censorship (Russell 17). She argues the accommodation process starts long before their routines do (18). Female-identifying comics, according to Christie Nittrouer, adhere to self-effacing material and recognisable structures and gimmicks so there is no doubt that they are producing stand-up comedy. This method fulfils expectations yet binds comedians to problematic and male-created depictions of representation (24). Carol Siskind notes that when female-identifying comics are talking about something that people don't commonly talk about publicly, "you have to be more careful" (Steinem, 1972 126). Siskind discusses a line she dropped from her set because it might have been construed as hostile: "I think some of the guys we date, if they were women, we wouldn't want to have lunch with them", instead Carol used "I just broke up with someone after three years. It was a love-hate thing. We both loved him and hated me." It sounds, at first, like self-deprecation but it is more subtle, a double jab: at men, for their narcissism, and at women for their lack of self-esteem (ibid). Through divvying up the deprecating comments equally, the comic increases their chances of appearing likeable.

The Likeable Comic – Subversive Tactics

The act of yielding and critiquing power whilst not 'coming on too strong' is a dangerous balancing act in a profession which relies on likeability. A comedian who carefully navigates their status may have the best chance of getting an audience to listen. Disclaimers can be a comedian's best tool when trying to navigate their status. For example, if a comedian were to introduce themselves as an 'uptight' person from the beginning they provide an excuse for the tone or content of their set. By announcing this perceived flaw to the audience, they are asking the audience to acknowledge this flaw and not take it too seriously.

A comic's likeability can also be increased by their use of subversive tactics. By showcasing an ability to laugh at oneself, the comic maintains an appearance of unaffectedness, which reverts the status quo and makes the dominant culture uncomfortable (Gilbert xv). Sevda Caliskan's "Is There Such a Thing as Women's Humor?" draws attention to a more allusive form of self-deprecating humour amongst female-identifying comics: the double text (54). Caliskan draws on Nancy Walker's definition

of the double text as a performance which appears to conform to patriarchal expectations, yet the alignment with such expectations proves to be superficial, allowing the subversion to take precedence by subtly unsaying those things which initially prevent offence from the patriarchal observer (ibid). This method interweaves subversive discourse into the status quo, gradually deconstructing it (Finney 1994, Gilbert 154). This collates with strategies put forth in Hannah Gadsby and Daniel Sloss' sets, *Nanette* and *X*. In *Nanette*, Gadsby begins with stories that are reminiscent of her old stand-up, with funny self-deprecating anecdotes, she then releases any tension that her anecdotes may cause with a clever punchline. By the first anecdote the audience appears to be in the palm of Gadsby's hand. When Gadsby starts to transition into discussing the negative effects of self-deprecating humour for those in the margins, she has her audience's full attention. This tactic is also used by Daniel Sloss in his most recent *HBO 2020* comedy special, *X*. Sloss argues that for comedy to be effective in making change, the comic must get the audience on their side. Sloss begins his set with a masquerade strategy, presenting himself as a "as a comedian whose got a reputation for having a dark sense of humour" (1:44- 50). He self-deprecates by saying a dark joke and then reminding the audience that he is a monster for thinking such things; 75 minutes into his 90-minute set, the audience has warmed to Sloss through their loud fits of laughter. Sloss then shifts his approach and starts deconstructing his set by telling the story of a close friend who was raped by his friend of 8 years. He confesses that despite seeing his friend's problematic behaviour for multiple years, he neglected to call him out on it.

I knew this man for eight years and he [...] did it. There are monsters amongst us, and they look like us. If you're sick of the narrative that's currently going on about men feel free to get involved [...] Being good on the inside counts for absolutely nothing. You have to actively be good and get involved. Instead of having a hero complex, instead of saying 'I'm going to beat up a rapist' prevent one, stop one, because I know it can be done, because I know I failed at it. If I'm being 100% honest – were there signs in my friend's behaviour over the years towards women that I ignored? The answer is yes. (1:20:55- 121:47).

Sloss then goes on to say that for this part of his set to effectively call men to action, he had to appear likeable, by exposing his flaws he presented himself as remarkably human. Sloss reinforces his strategy with a metaphor (based on a scientific test), "if you take a frog and put it into boiling water the frog will jump out immediately because it knows it's about to die, but if you take the same frog and put it into cold water and slowly heat the water up, the frog is unable to tell the difference in the change in temperature and slowly boils to death" (1:22:45- 1:23:02). Sloss continues, "so what I do is I put on a little comedy show and spend the first 75 minutes starting off very cold and getting the men on side with jokes that I know they'll agree with, "I'll say things like 'alright boys do you like kids and are not a paedophile?', and they'll think, 'I do like kids, and I'm not a paedophile, that's very well observed, interesting, I want to listen to more of what my twin brother has to say'" (1:23:02- 1:23:29). Self-deprecation or the obvious display of one's flaws allows the audience access to the comedian's 'inner life',

helping them to understand how they personally experience the “intersections of privilege, oppression and resistance relative to their social location” (Rodgers 162). Sloss’s technique advocates for self-deprecating humour’s ability to befriend those responsible for the continuous policing of patriarchal systems and behaviours – by doing so, there is a greater chance that these behaviours can be broken.

Safe vs. Risky Environments

Another strategy used to avoid patriarchal expectations is the creation of safe spaces to harbour and grow comedians. Vicki Walker notes that the birth of groups such as *Girl’s Gotta Eat* and *Hen’s Teeth* in 1980-90’s New Zealand provided a supportive environment for women to write without being influenced by fear (48:38-44). There was obvious safety in performing to a female-identifying demographic than to the wider public. Rosan Jordan’s survey in *Women’s Folklore: Women’s Culture* (1985) showed that women told a large majority of their jokes to women, a smaller number to men, and the smallest number to mixed groups of men and women, with the female teller presenting 21.76% of her humour to a male audience, 61.63% to a female audience, 16.59% to a mixed audience (169). Barreca notes that autobiographical comedy for women first existed at slumber parties or movie nights in a female’s adolescence or early twenties: stories of, “hysterical defloration, first-periods premature-ejaculation, and, of course, everyone’s tiny or enormous-penis [experience]” (151). The ‘what was said in this room stays in this room’ rule grew a culture of secrecy, influenced by the patriarchal expectation that to say those stories publicly would be improper and unfeminine. Safe spaces are perhaps an extension of those sacred bedroom conversations. Rose Matafeo draws attention to the risk of always working within a safe space. “I think sometimes you can get in an identity politics bubble [... you’re] performing in an echo chamber” (84:29-40). Joanne Gilbert suggests that many of these female-only comedy events and groups contribute to the binarizing of women in comedy – through television networks continuously producing names such as *Girls night Out*, *Ladies of Laughter* or *Funny Girls* on New Zealand’s *TV3*, ‘women’s’ humour maintains its position as a subgenre to the concept of comedy as a whole (whereas comedy by males does not) (36).¹⁶ A safe space is essential however for comics who want to develop their skills without having to convince others of their standpoint. Yet if those who do occupy a space that isn’t specifically designed for their demographic succeed in befriendng their audience, they may contribute to change in the industry at a faster rate. If the comic is critiquing those who oppress them, are they not also asking they be a part of the audience? In response to the aforementioned interview given by American comic, Liza Shlesinger (see p. 37), *Conan* writer Laurie Kilmartin responded with a series of tweets,

Early in my career I also wanted to be THE female comic that changed men’s minds about women. Then I realized there were tons of [...] funny women and it didn’t matter to sexist men if I was funny. They remained their awful selves. [...] My fav audience members are ones who want a good show. I don’t want “compliments” from men who think they’re doing me a favor by

giving it. [...] Trying to 'change minds' is exhausting. It will break you, one day, because it's an unattainable goal (Kilmartin, @anylaurie16, 2017)

Kilmartin's advice reminds female-identifying comics that it is not their responsibility to contribute to the change the hearts and minds of those who oppress them. However, a marginalized comic may choose to placate their audience if they want their feminist agenda to reach a larger demographic.

Changes in the Green Room and Post #Metoo

In the prologue reflecting on 20 years since the first publication of her book, *They used to call me Snow White but I drifted*, Gina Barreca remarks that she still worries about female-identifying comics, but she worries less than she did two decades ago. Her fear now lies on the learned traits that are seemingly hard to notice, self-deprecation still exists in abundance but it's more subtle now- which is perhaps more dangerous (xxxviii). A'Court notes that audiences are less apprehensive now when a woman walks on stage, the imperative word being 'less' ('Where are all the Female Comedians?', 2013).

Alice Snedden notes that it is important to discern that the tangible change hasn't happened, but the awareness has begun – "it would be foolish to throw a victory parade" (45:39-46:06). In light of recent events, Snedden's scepticism is well-grounded. In July of 2020, Ruby Esther - an emerging New Zealand comedian based in Auckland - published an article on her personal blog *Rubywrites* called "I am going to be raped". Her article details the 'laughable' amount of sexual assault in the comedy industry. Esther directly addresses event hosts who consistently hire men that have sexually assaulted their female-identifying employees. She concludes her article by noting that, despite desperately wanting to speak to this issue, for fear of losing her credibility as a comedian she tried for weeks to get her article published anonymously. A similar article was published in *The Guardian* by Rachel Healy in August of 2020. Healy stresses the industry is still deeply rooted in sexism and the persistence of misogynistic jokes "emboldens sexual predators and prevents women from speaking out." Scottish comedian Fern Brady is interviewed by Healy and she claims that in order to fit in, you laugh at insane jokes and play down your femaleness.¹⁷

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Figure 10: Ruby Esther as the winner of the 2017 Raw Comedy Fest (comedyfestival.co.nz).

Despite comics like Urzila Carson exclaiming that women comics have it better now (69:29-37), it appears that the behavioural systems put in place by the patriarchy are still very present in the comedy industry. With concern for their safety, female-identifying comics may be more calculated towards how they act on stage as it may determine how they are treated off stage- highlighting the timeliness of a contemporary investigation into the comedic choices made by female-identifying comics navigating the male-dominated comedy industry.

Conclusion

Tall Poppy Syndrome in New Zealand pressures those in the spotlight to present themselves as humble or else they risk appearing unlikeable. Applied to comedy, Tall Poppy Syndrome ensures women downplay their success as the patriarchal definition of femininity (subordination, docility and self-sacrifice) would request. For female-identifying comics, with likeability often determining their success, they engage in self-deprecation to both appear humble yet also remind their audience of their feminine failure. By focusing on their feminine failure or non-normativity, the comics feel as if they cannot speak authentically to an audience of a wider demographics as their presence on stage is deemed unconventional. The creation of safe environments for comics who are marginalised or discriminated against to grow their skills is one solution. However, as those who are responsible for the continuous policing are not present in these rooms, the question is posed as to whether change can occur? Comics who are performing to wider demographics such as Hannah Gadsby and Daniel Sloss are successfully using self-deprecating humour to gain the trust of their audience, allowing the eventual inclusion of their political agendas to operate at a higher success rate. Recent publications however have shed light on the harrowing amount of sexual assault still present in the comedy industry. Scared of their safety offstage, female-identifying comics may feel compelled to present their on-stage persona with protection in mind. The following chapter investigates whether this fear-driven editing process now occurs subconsciously or consciously amongst new generation female-identifying and non-binary comedians.

CHAPTER THREE

Social and Cultural Expectations: Female-Identifying Comedians 'performing' Autobiographical Self-deprecating Comedy in New Zealand

This Chapter is an analysis of ten selected live comedy performances in central Wellington from August 2020 to March 2021. The analysis identifies the choices of comics which either reinforce or reject the theoretical framework around performances of patriarchal feminism as outlined in Chapter Two. As the comics analysed mostly remain exclusive to the Wellington comedy scene, the scope of the analysis will be limited as such. Over a span of eight months, I attended weekly comedy shows in the Wellington semi-pro comedy scene, selecting ten shows for the subsequent analysis. Five of these shows were dedicated to the work of women and non-binary comics, and five to mixed bills. For the purposes of this research, I refer to the events open to comics of all genders as 'mixed bills', and women and non-binary/non-gender-specific line-ups as 'echo chambers' or 'safe spaces'. The audiences in the mixed bills are referred to as 'mainstream' with the presumption that there are a wider range of demographics present. The term echo chamber (similar to the notion of 'preaching to the converted'), where "most available information conforms to pre-existing attitudes and biases" (Lewandowsky 353, qtd. Garrett 370) is not an attempt to refute the power of safe spaces, but rather to compare the micro choices made by comics when they are or are not in the presence of the dominant power group. The safe spaces referred to in this analysis are comedy nights where the line-ups are intentionally inclusive of marginalised comics. These line-ups often attract an equally inclusive and accepting audience. As I am an avid comedy watcher, my own subjective bias is, of course, a potential limitation to the analysis. To measure a joke's 'funniness' I also noted reactions from other people in the audience to register its efficacy. Pattern analysis determines trends in comedic choices to disprove/prove my thesis as described in the previous theoretical framework. If only one or two performance examples are presented for a theory, then it is treated as a solo incident and outlier.

This thesis discusses femininity using traditional and binarized definitions as an attempt to disband their influence by close analysis of their use within male-dominated fields. Inevitably, constant reference to these binaries also perpetuates them. The subsequent analysis does not presume every comic who is female-identifying is also femme-identifying. However, in the interest of analysing jokes about historically feminine topics, the joke and the comic's gender identity as female are discussed simultaneously. Examples presented from non-binary comics are only analysed against the traditional definition of femininity if explicit permission from the comic is given. Analysis on feminine failure will be limited to jokes that make femininity the punchline, not jokes told by femme-identifying comics about failure.

Part. II of this chapter is a thematic discussion of interviews and questionnaires completed by women and non-binary comedians from the main comedy spheres of Wellington, Auckland and Christchurch. The comics provide relevant quotes that to prove or disprove my theories about the impact of Tall Poppy Syndrome on marginalised comics.

PT. I LIVE COMEDY

The Target of Self-deprecation

Of the ten shows I attended as part of this analysis, the female-identifying comics tended to be conspicuously more self-deprecating than the male comics. This analysis determines whether the self-deprecating aspect of the joke told by these comic faces inwards or outwards. If the joke is self-deprecating but points the blame towards the larger powers at be (in this case, the patriarchy) the joke faces *outwards*. If the joke is self-deprecating and points the blame (of the perceived flaw or circumstance) towards oneself, the joke faces *inwards*. A further variable is the intention of the comic. The comic's intention can be considered *political* if they hope to spark conversations of change or bring awareness to an issue through humour. The comic's intention can be considered *personal* if creating entertainment is their only goal. Of course, those comics with personal goals may not be able to avoid including political discourse in their humour, especially if their decision to do comedy is already viewed *as* political. Marginalised comics who discuss their gender, racial, religious or sexual identity may be considered a 'political performance' by mainstream audiences who still deem their presence as unconventional. For the purposes of this analysis, I will presume that all comedians from non-dominant communities have political intentions unless specifically disclaimed otherwise.

The main Wellington Comedy venues are located around the Courtenay Place and Cuba Street entertainment precincts, away from the business sector. The multiple bars, restaurants and clubs which double as late-night comedy venues are designated leisure spots for end-of working-day or -week social gatherings. The most popular venues, and the venues discussed in this study are The Fringe Bar, San Fran, The Cavern Club and The Pow Wow Room. They seat between 50-100 audience members, with a mixture of cabaret tables and rowed seating. All the venues have a bar adjacent to the comedy stage with audiences regularly dipping out to order another round between sets. The accessibility of the venues attracts audiences from off the street, with weekly and monthly scheduled shows establishing audience regulars.

Analysis

In the mixed bill nights, women comics were more likely to discuss stories unique to the female experience, while the male comics tended to create humour from gender non-specific, commonplace observations. From my own position as an audience member, I deemed some of the autobiographical sets from male comics as observational comedy despite the clear markers that isolated it to the cis-male experience (e.g., references to phallic power and privilege). In a mixed bill night, a male comic told a story about trying role play for the first time with his girlfriend (*Medicine Comedy*, July 2020). The story referenced his penis and how its role as the ‘penetrator’ confused any attempt for him to be submissive during sex. Despite the cis-privilege and phallocentricism of the joke, I rendered his story as speaking to the universal experiences of sex and not just indicative of the heteronormative sex paradigm. A female-identifying comic on the same mixed bill told a story about her experiences as a prostitute, the crux of the story being that her vagina was both her best and worst asset. I perceived her story to target a female audience and the male comic’s equivalent to cater for everyone. This speaks to my own internalised patriarchal conditioning, where the male experience is considered synecdochical. This was also true regarding my perception of the self-deprecating nature of their humour. Both stories were self-deprecating, yet at the time I concluded the self-deprecating aspects of the female-identifying comic’s story as facing inwards (placing the blame on herself). The male comic’s story, although equally self-deprecating, I marked as a non-gender specific discussion on the expectations of sexual performance - therefore the joke faced outwards. In retrospect, I see that the self-deprecating aspects of both stories faced inwards. I attributed the female-identifying comic’s story as one of personal failure, and the male’s as relatable failure. A patriarchal and male-identified society promotes the male experience as universal (Johnson 6, 10), a man is relatable, as so many other men have come before them, women are tested against a smaller pool of stereotypes (e.g., the Madonna, the bimbo, the whore etc.) rendering their experience as ‘other’ if they do not subscribe to these narrow tropes. Women are often the subject but rarely the object of comedy.

During one mixed bill, a female-identifying comic (who was also the night’s MC) introduced the show by describing a series of negative events in her life as a result of impending ‘middle age’ – her thirties (*Medicine Comedy* July 2020). Whilst describing her tendencies to be a ‘bad mother’, she developed a series of jokes based on clichés of heterosexual couples, such as the saying, ‘we’re pregnant’ when the pain of labour is, “unfortunately, not shared”. The description of her failings as a mother emphasised her inability to meet the patriarchal expectations of femininity, yet she kept interjecting her description with a “yeah, f*** that” or “f*** you” which allowed the target of the jokes to be sent outwards despite mentions of her perceived personal failings. By connecting these jokes with quips on the sexist undertones of ‘we’ statements regarding pregnancy, she consistently pointed to a larger problem, whilst also speaking to her own lived experience. In comparison to the two other female-identifying comics performing on that night’s bill, this comic was far more likely to point her humour

outwards. As she was also the MC, her rapport was previously established with the regular audience members. Her clear experience with the crowd aided her confidence. Moreover, if a comedian like this MC reaches a sustainable level of likeability, are their jokes more likely to point outwards then inwards - as their experience in the industry would permit them to?

During a safe space line-up, another comic created a set about her increasingly desperate search for men, from which she started attending property viewings for one-bedroom flats in the hope of finding professional singles (*A Comedy Show with Good Comedians in it*, July 2020). Her constant emphasis on her inability to secure a partner rendered her comedy as self-deprecating. However, the target of the self-deprecation was often deflected by contributing her singleness to the lack of “acceptable men” available. The humour of this joke relied on exceptionalism through her identity as a woman, which at its root identifies the reasons why exceptionalism exists. The mistreatment of women by men, historically and presently, allows the critique of cis, straight, able-bodied white men to be considered ‘punching up’ (see p. 8 for definition). If the same joke was told by a male, and instead he said, ‘unacceptable women’ (which in recent history wouldn’t have been uncommon) it is likely he would be considered sexist. Is the reversal of sexist humour a sustainable form of comedy if it mimics the oppressive strategies of the dominant power group?

The headliner for the same safe space line-up performed a set where her jokes did not face either inwards or outwards (ibid). In her opening line, she announced, ‘I’m an arsehole and I’m not apologising for it.’ The comic went on to list times she had been an arsehole, the stories weren’t attached to shame however, but her lack of it. The self-deprecating tone in her description of herself as an arsehole was immediately undercut by her self-assertive lack of remorse. As an audience member, her assurance that she was not affected by her actions caused me to feel relief as I understood her comedy wasn’t from a place of insecurity. By simultaneously owning and denying responsibility for her own actions, whilst also pointing to their patriarchal root, the target of the humour shifted back and forth allowing the overall target to appear neutral. It was not dissimilar to Rebel’s Wilson character ‘Fat Amy’ in the film *Pitch Perfect*; by giving herself the label, ‘Fat Amy’ Wilson’s character assuages insults and claims confidence through self-deprecation. When asked why she calls herself, ‘Fat Amy’ she responds with, “so Twig Bitches like you don’t do it behind my back” (12:00- 12:09). Through simultaneously self-labelling the target of the joke as herself, but also those who led her to disclaim her appearance – the target becomes neutral as one party doesn’t feel more judged than the other.

The Hyper-feminine Imitation

A common trope of women comics is the imitation of themselves or other women as hyper-feminine in order to emphasise stupidity rendering femininity as the punchline. This is achieved by the comic imitating a clearly performative high-pitched and ‘whiney’ voice such as the typical ‘valley girl’, ‘dumb blonde’ /bimbo stereotypes to intentionally sound annoying or stupid. The part of an anecdote

associated with this tone becomes the crux of the joke. In Rachel Bloom's performance of "The Math of Love Triangles" from *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* she assumes a parodic persona of Marilyn Monroe in "Diamonds are a Girl's Best Friend". The comedic appeal of the persona is her ignorance which she expresses through a breathy and ditzzy voice as she sings,

'What's a girl to do when she's stuck between men?
It's like she's a barbie with two perfect kens
But wait, it just occurred to me
Maybe I can solve this with geometry
Yes, smarts can help this sitchyvation untangle
So, professors, teach me
The math of love triangles
Yay, time for book facts! (Dolgen et al. 0:01-0:30).

Bloom's character's sexiness replaces her need for smarts, therefore she is in need of a strong male figure (in this case the explicitly male professors) to protect and teach her. The objectively funniest line in this verse and the one her performance pays most emphasis towards is, "yay, time for book facts!". The intentional simplification to 'book facts' heightens the character's stupidity and promotes it to be the crux of the joke.

During a mixed bill, a female-identifying comic consistently increased the pitch of her voice at the end of her sentences, adding an upward inflection to purposely sound annoying. Almost all of her punch lines were phrased like questions: "[Is] Anyone else on Ava 30?", (a contraceptive pill) (*Medicine Comedy*, July 2020). This joke was met with silence, after which the comic elected a hyper-feminine voice and responded, "no, okay just me then - how special?" The reference to her contraceptive pill paired with her 'annoying' hyper-feminine persona, undermined the purpose of her joke and rendered it as ineffective. As the mention of the contraceptive pill intersects with her identity as a woman, the subsequent use of a high-pitched voice assumes the mention of a (traditionally feminine) birth control product as the joke. Consequently, by phrasing the second half of her joke as a question, she sought validation from her audience. This validation may be rhetorical but by adding an upward inflection the joke still emanated uncertainty. On the night, the upward inflection caused tentative laughter in the audience. If the second half of her joke had a downward inflection, it may have added certainty to her claim of being 'special' and successfully elicited laughter from the audience. Comparatively, all of the female-identifying comics used upward inflections at some point during their comedy routine, whereas less than half of the male comics did.¹⁸ Upward inflections are potentially reflective of the engrained anxiety that female-identifying comics have in an industry where historically their presence was met with anxiety. The MC on the same mixed bill also employed a similar high-pitched and hyper-feminine voice when imitating herself as a mother telling off her children. The tone lessened the harshness of the

beratement to her children, but also rendered her parenting choices as the joke. The association with stupidity and sexual attraction reflects the patriarchal expectation of femininity in which women are passive objects intended for the male gaze. Although the parodying of this archetype is humorous and can be written as satire it reflects the significant lengths female-identifying comics have to stoop to in order to not be seen as intimidating.

Micro-choices: Physicality, Tone and Pace in Mixed Bills and Safe Spaces

In the ten comedy nights selected for this analysis, I observed the micro-choices made by female-identifying comics and male comics with the different parameters of mixed bills and safe spaces. The most prevalent was the physicality of female-identifying comics. The majority of the men took up space *physically* on stage, by walking around, leaning towards their audience and placing their stool behind them. All the female-identifying comics on mixed bill nights stood behind their stool, or next to it and stayed in one spot. The one female-identifying comic who did move about the stage was the MC who had a previously established rapport with the audience. In safe spaces, the comics all stood at the front of the stage, with five of them pacing to the left and right of the stage confidently. A comic who had previously stood behind her stool on a mixed bill night, went to stand behind the stool again in a safe space and then said “oh, I’m too far away from you” and then moved the stool closer to the audience and stood in front of it (*Medicine Comedy* July 2020; *Raw Meat Monday*, Dec 2020).

Along with their dominating physicality, the male comics were consistently louder than female-identifying comics; this trend was the same for both mixed bill and safe spaces. One comic’s volume on a safe space line-up presented her as an outlier to this trend. However, when I contrasted her volume with the other comics, I read this ‘loudness’ as her adopting masculine traits to achieve a confident persona (*Raw Meat Monday*, Dec 2020). I therefore assumed that a higher volume was more likely to be employed by a male comic or those ‘playing as’ or adopting masculine personas.

Another trend was female-identifying comics’ perceptible fear of silence. Five of the comics observed spoke at a fast pace, three of which filled any pauses in their routine with linguistic speech fillers such as, ‘ummmm’ or ‘so yeahhh’. As silence in a comic routine signifies the holding of tension, which is then released through a punchline or disclaimer, does the use of ‘um’ suggest that some female-identifying comics do not feel confident in holding tension with their audience? As their presence on stage may be deemed as unconventional by some members of their audience, their presence could already hold tension. Due to the association with women and self-conscious behaviour patterns (Hampes 2006 qtd. R. Brown 116) the audience may be quicker to perceive silence in a women’s routine as failure.

Tension Disclaimers

Another tactic employed by most comedians, but particularly by culturally marginalised comedians, is the tension disclaimer (see p. 8 for definition). While this is not the rule, tension disclaimers are more

likely to occur on mixed bill line-ups as the audience may not be from the same demographic group as the comic and therefore, they may feel a need to disclaim their presence or the tension within their jokes.

One comedian talked about the misfortunes they experienced as a non-binary person in comedy. They ended their set with, “if you don’t laugh it’s a hate crime, [pause], what am I going to do, call the police?” (*Carnage Comedy*, June 2020). The line ‘if you don’t laugh it’s a hate crime’ functions to both diffuse the tension and create it. While ‘forcing’ the audience to laugh may create tension, the subsequent mention of ‘it’s a hate crime’ releases this by satirically chastising the audience. The second half of the joke, ‘what am I going to do, call the police?’ adds tension. The exclamation that the comic (and/as the LGBTQI+ community) is mistreated by the justice system caused a collective, defeated ‘mmm’ from the audience. Much of the audience felt as though they couldn’t laugh, as the joke either reflected their own privilege, and also the current political climate (the protests against police brutality in the US). Although the joke is self-deprecating, the tension is not released, and therefore the joke is not dismissed as ‘just for laughs’. On the same safe space bill, a comic introduced themselves as, “blind, disabled, autistic, aromatic, asexual and non-binary - so basically, I’m greedy.” The listing of labels notes the underrepresented nature of their presence on the comedy stage and releases tension. The line, ‘so basically I’m greedy’ makes fun of the long list of labels releasing the tension furthermore (*A Comedy Show with Good Comedians in it*, July 2020). They concluded their set with, “and you’ve been laughing at an autistic person.” By satirically acknowledging that the audience has in fact been laughing at stories regarding their disability, their laughter is not villainised. This same tactic was employed by a comic who introduced her set with, “I’m Autistic, so that means I’m a bit of c**t” (*Raw Meat Monday*, Dec 2020). The joke released tension, but also made her following set funnier by contextualising her frequent bluntness.

Another kind of tension disclaimer is the use of underinflation and overinflation. One comedian began her set with, “Hi, I’m the poor man’s Tina Fey” (*A Comedy Show with Good Comedians in it*, July 2020). The joke was funny considering tickets were only \$20, but it suggested a need to align herself to an internationally established comedian to mark a point of familiarity for the audience (also her use of ‘poor man’s’ not ‘poor woman’s’ depicts the male experience as universal). One side of the joke acknowledges that the tickets are cheap, but the other categorises her as a comedian not capable of international acclaim. By underinflating her presence on stage, she mitigates the implied confidence of her profession which can be appealing to a New Zealand audience.

A few of the comics also released tension through the reclamation of negative feedback or discrimination. A comic announced that they had been called a ‘special snowflake’ in the past. The mention of this discriminatory phrase may have caused tension within the audience. The comic then reclaimed the insult by saying “of course I’m a special snowflake, I’m the prettiest and most unique.” By transforming a comment that may have caused them hurt in the past, the comic appears to be unaffected

by the audience causing a release in tension. Of a similar intent, a joke made by a comic in a safe space line-up, “I get told regularly that I’m bossy and opinionated, so I’m starting a cult because those seem like good leadership skills” released tension through the same implication of unaffectedness (*Carnage Comedy*, June 2020).

During a safe space bill, a femme-identifying comic discussed the ever-popular phrase, ‘you’re funny - for a female comedian’ by asking why nobody ever says, “you’re hot - for a female comedian”? (*Raw Meat Monday*, Dec 2020). The joke reclaims the initial insult - but also perpetuates the stereotype that funny women cannot also be attractive – which may have also been her purpose. This suggests that comics who are considered to meet the standards of feminine beauty aren’t expected to be funny, but comics who do not meet these standards are expected to be funny (and self-deprecating) as defence or self-awareness. When, in a mixed bill, the same comic made a joke about her vagina, calling it “her best and worst asset”, the joke didn’t receive many laughs. The comic then followed it up with a joke about penises calling them the “the world’s worst asset” (*Medicine Comedy*, July 2020). This joke did receive laughs and she called-back to it for the remainder of set. She told a similar joke during a safe space and due to receiving laughs from the first reference to her vagina, didn’t continue to make the joke about penises. Did she then feel the mentioning of both male and female genitalia was necessary in a mixed bill opposed to a safe space?

Conclusion

As an observer I was more likely to render female comics as speaking to their own experiences and to male comics to speak for everyone. This is indicative of my own patriarchal conditioning where I did not consider the female experience as relatable enough. Although autobiographical comedy should celebrate unique and individual experiences, the notion that comedy by women is only for women may exclude women from the umbrella genre of comedy. Experience in the comedy industry may allow some female-identifying comics to stop using disclaimers or strategies for palatability because they have a previously established trust with their audience, suggesting female-identifying comics must prove their worth before they are allowed to take risks.

A strategy identified in this analysis is the use of neutral targeting. By reclaiming insults and asserting them confidently through self-deprecation the joke targets oneself but also the insulters, rendering the overall target to be neutral. However, this may risk the perpetrators not being held responsible as they are granted permission to keep making the insult. The hyper-feminine persona promotes representations of women as stupid and annoying, reinforcing the patriarchal definition of femininity. The attributes of patriarchal femininity do not promote humour, rather the humour is derived from femininity’s inability to adhere to the qualities of masculinity such as intelligence and strength. My observation that some female-identifying comics stood back on stage and spoke at a faster pace are examples of micro decisions. Such micro decisions are formed by the fear that female comics

have to work harder to prove they're funny. Tension disclaimers grant the audience permission to laugh and in many of these cases didn't disclaim the presence of a marginalised performer but reinforced and empowered it. However, if the release of tension undercuts the importance of a joke, then it may prevent the comic from speaking authentically to their experience.

PT. II CONVERSATIONS WITH COMICS

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The Comics

Figure 11: Lana Walters is an Auckland based comic, with 5 years of experience in the industry. She was a finalist in the 2016 Raw Comedy Quest. Photography courtesy of Lana Walters' comedy Facebook page.

Figure 12: Lucy Roche has been a regular performer in the Wellington Comedy scene for the past four years. She was nominated as best newcomer in the 2016 Wellington Comedy Awards and awarded National Raw Quest winner in 2016 (eventfinda.co.nz).

Figure 13: Sarah Hughes has been doing comedy in the Auckland region for the past year and was awarded joint winner of the 2019 Raw Comedy Quest. Photography courtesy of Sarah Hughes' comedy Facebook page.

Figure 14: Lesa MacLeod-Whiting is a Wellington improviser and has been a stand-up comedian since July 2020. She won runner-up at the Wellington Raw Comedy Festival that same year, and Best Newcomer at the NZ Comedy Guild Awards (shutupanddance.co.nz).

Figure 15: Brynley Stent is an Auckland based comedian who has featured on Jono and Ben, Funny Girls, and Taskmaster NZ. Stent was nominated for Best Newcomer at the 2016 Comedy Festival and is nominated for the 2020 Billy-T Award which is pending due to COVID-19. Photography by and courtesy of Andi Crown.

Figure 16: Bridget Davies was a 2016 National Raw Quest finalist and nominated for Best Newcomer at the Comedy Guild Awards, in 2017 she was also nominated as Breakthrough Comedian. Davies mostly resides in Auckland (thespeakeasy.co.nz).

Figure 17: Audrey Porne is a Christchurch comedian with 3 years' experience in the industry. In 2019, Porne won South Island Breakthrough Comedian at the NZ Comedy Guild Awards and was nominated again in 2020. Courtesy of Audrey Porne's comedy Facebook page.

Figure 18: Angella Dravid has been a comedian for 7 years and is mostly based in Auckland. She was a finalist in Raw Comedy Quest in 2015 and won the Billy T Award in 2017. Dravid has also featured on 2018 film, The Breaker Upperers, Wellington Paranormal, Funny Girls and the first season of Taskmaster NZ (thespinoff.co.nz).

Figure 19: Hannah Campbell is a Scottish comedian and now a regular on the Auckland comedy scene, Campbell was a Raw Quest Comedy finalist in 2018 and NZ Comedy Guild Awards Best Newcomer nominee (comedy.co.nz).

Figure 20: Alayne Dick has been in the comedy industry for 2 years and is based predominantly in Wellington. She won best Script/Narrative for her comedy at the Dunedin Theatre Awards in 2015 (playshop.co.nz).

Figure 21: Katie Longbottom was a finalist in the 2020 Raw Comedy Quest and performs regularly in the Auckland live scene (aaanz.co.nz).

Figure 22: Tui Lou Christie is a Wellington based comic who has been performing stand-up comedy since she was 17, celebrating her 4-year anniversary in 2021. She is a 2017 class comedian, and 2018 Raw Comedy Quest finalist. Courtesy of Tui Lou Christie's comedy Facebook page.

Figure 23: Georgie Sivier has been a comedian in Christchurch for 3 years. In 2017 she won the South Island Comedy Raw Quest and the Outstanding Achievement Award at the Christchurch Comedy Awards (ashcolalumni.co.nz).

Figure 24: Janaye Henry has been a Wellington/Auckland based comedian for 4 years. In 2017 she won Best Newcomer at the Wellington Comedy Awards. Courtesy of Janaye Henry's comedy Facebook page.

Thematic Analysis of Interviews

The interviews and questionnaires discussed in this thesis were completed in 2020 by locally acclaimed female-identifying comedians with more than a year's experience in the New Zealand comedy scene. The comics were presented with a series of questions about their experience and perception of New Zealand comedy culture- (see p. ___ in the appendices for reference). The participants were aware of my interest or experience in the comedy industry and creating a safe space, therefore this may have facilitated a willingness to speak to issues of sexism. This could also have slightly skewed the data because of their knowledge of my own identity and/or agenda. The analysis of these questions is presented thematically and considers data saturation to draw conclusions based on a sample size of fourteen comedians. It follows the recommendations of Susan Weller's et al. article on "Open-ended interview questions and saturation" which defines saturation of data as obtaining the most salient items – those of the highest prevalence and cultural importance" (1-2). Some comics may not be named below but their input is still acknowledged in more qualitative statements. The comedians in the interview section of thesis were selected through the Comedy.co.nz database. This research has been approved by the Victoria University of Wellington Human Ethics Committee [#0000028768]. The fourteen participants included in the subsequent analysis have consented to their information and opinions being attributed to this research and that they will be named.

Gaining Trust and Underperforming

When asked about the distinctions and exceptions of their gender identity to their comedic performance, all the comics commented that, as female-identifying comics, they had to work harder and faster to gain an audiences' trust. As eight of the comics remarked, this often manifests itself in the backhanded compliment, 'I don't normally like female comedians, but you were funny.' As Scottish-born, "self-effacing and personal" ("The Classic Comedy Network") Hannah Campbell reflects,

You have to work harder to get the audience to listen to you, and you have to prove you're funny very quickly. For example, when you first go on stage a male comic can probably hold the audience's attention for around 1-2 minutes without any jokes. For a woman, you need to prove you are funny within the first 30 seconds or they stop listening (16 Dec 2020).

Brynley Stent reiterates:

It takes them a lot longer to warm up to a woman, and it's often that they're generally surprised that she's good [...] if it's a line-up of four dudes and one woman, it takes time for the audience to laugh (15:12- 15:55).

As stand-up comedy is presented to a live audience, the success of the joke can be determined through the presence or absence of laughter. Laughter itself can also be categorised through its tone and volume; dependent on these attributes, the laughter can be rendered as awkward, nervous, shocked etc. Stent, who is known for her absurdist character comedy, notes that female-identifying comics are accustomed to what in the interview we collectively coin the 'realisation laugh' (15:57 – 16:08). The laughter starts quietly and then builds quickly in volume as the audience realises the joke is funny (as if they were not expecting it to be). This kind of laughter can simultaneously induce and relieve the comic's anxiety by receiving validation for their joke from an audience that appears distrusting of their abilities. "Charming and awkward" (Margaret) Alayne Dick asserts that is often reversed for male comedians who already perceive themselves to *be* funny. A male comic may prove himself to be *not* funny, whilst a female-identifying comic must prove they *are*. Dick observes that women are likely to be more 'polished' than their male counterparts.

If you go to a comedy gig, the women onstage have clearly put more thought into their act than the guys. They tend to have a polished outfit and comedic voice while dudes are more likely to wear an old t- shirt and brag about 'winging it' [...] [It] comes down to the pressure to be exceptional when you are a minority (25 Nov 2020).

Stent questions whether this trend is a result of the audience's perception of comedic personas. She claims that audiences recognise and understand the comedic personas of male comedians before females (20:30-45). If a male comic's persona is to feign awkwardness or bravado, the audience views it as a character or role they are playing; if a female-identifying comic attempts the same persona the audience deems it as an inevitable projection of their personality and not a calculated decision. To lessen confusion, Stent asserts that the personas of female-identifying comics are 'ramped up' to appear obvious to the audience (21:40-50). Angella Dravid's on-stage persona may be considered 'risky' as it not presented as an obvious comedic choice from the beginning of her set. In 2018 I was in the audience of Angella's Dravid's Comedy Festival Show, *Barceloner*, Dravid entered the room with a bewildered expression before taking position in centre stage staring at the audience in silence. When she began her set, her volume was barely audible as she fiddled awkwardly with her clothing. For the first 10 minutes of her set, I was unsure if Dravid's nervousness was intentional. Despite such reservations, her jokes were well-crafted and still elicited laughter from the

audience. When I (and other members of the audience) understood her choices as deliberate, the originality of her persona ensured her remaining jokes were non-stop hits. Halfway through her set, Dravid alluded to critiques she received from reviewers who had not understood her persona, this provided clarification to any audience members who were still confused. Despite her eventual clarification, Dravid was determined to trust in the pay-off of her persona despite the risk of bombing.¹⁹ It should be acknowledged that Dravid “owns her awkwardness” both on and off stage, thus the line between her persona and ‘real-life’ Dravid is blurred (“Angella Dravid embraces discomfort in *Down the Rabbit Hole*”). The essential difference is that her choices are intentional and therefore a calculated risk.

Lucy Roche, whose comedy material is largely focused on sex, dating, and her career as a sex worker, (despite her parents’ reservations) reiterates that the advantage of being of a woman in comedy is that it’s a point of difference that can set your comedy apart from others - especially if there is only one female-identifying comedian in a line-up (15 Dec 2020). Roche observes that female-identifying comics progress more quickly in the initial stages. As comedy night organisers seek to add diversity to their line-up, women comics are ‘in demand’ enabling them to jump the comedy ranks quicker than males of a similar ability. This can be problematic however, as some female-identifying comics are booked for gigs they aren’t ready for, “and therefore don’t meet the audience’s expectations of how funny you should be” (Henry, 20 Nov 2020). The comic is both discouraged and hindered from developing their skills at an achievable rate, whilst their performance perpetuates the stereotype that ‘women aren’t funny’. Roche notes that if a man was also put on a gig, he wasn’t ready for, he can’t perpetuate a stereotype that doesn’t exist, so people are more likely to think, “this particular man isn’t funny” (15 Dec 2020). The pressure to be funny for the entire representation of women in a comedy as is also anxiety inducing, causing the comic to be harder on themselves if they don’t succeed.

Due to often unavoidable link of gender identity to one’s performance, the comics are granted exceptionalism towards some forms of humour. Roche notes,

I can get away with things male comics couldn’t. If I talk about sexual encounters, I am less likely to come off as creepy or braggy (ibid).

Because of Roche’s position as a women comic, she is more likely to be perceived as less dangerous or threatening. Conversely, she asserts, men appear to have more success in doing feminist jokes, as they don’t come across as ‘nagging or preachy’ (ibid). Sarah Hughes, who is described by a reviewer as an honest comic, “not afraid of her own embarrassment”, echoes that jokes about her genitals or period are considered risqué by some audiences but jokes about male genitals do not have the same shock factor when performed by men (O. Smith, 15 Dec 2020). However, in safe spaces, anecdotes about female genitalia are more likely to be received warmly than jokes about male genitalia as they reflect a subversion of patriarchal phallic power dynamics (see p. 80 for discourse on exceptionalism in comedy).

Navigating Mixed Bills and Safe Spaces

The promotional material for Lana Walters’ comedy solo show *Faking it*, described her as an “immediately likeable [...] average girl with average problems”, - “both self-deprecating yet empowering in her confident

retelling of tinder tales and ex boyfriends gone wrong” (Pickens). Considering her own experience, Walters marks that the negative reception in mixed bills towards marginalised comics compared to safe spaces is consistently decreasing (15 Dec 2020). Walters adds that venues in provincial New Zealand are more reluctant to book diverse line-ups (ibid). In her five years of being a stand-up comedian, she has only experienced two incidents where audience/industry members were overtly sexist (ibid).

Josie Adams argues that New Zealand audiences are more subdued than others, as proven in James Acaster’s Auckland 6-night season of *Cold Lasagne, Hate Myself* 1999, in the 2019 *NZ International Comedy Festival*. During the final night, Acaster confesses that this is only the third show that he has finished, the other three ended 20 minutes early as the audiences didn’t laugh loudly or long-enough for James to hit his 60-minute mark. Dravid explains that “no wants to be the lone laugh in room [...] there is an overwhelming fear of being labelled and mocked by your laugh, or in some way given an unwanted spotlight” (qtd. Adams). Dravid continues, ‘no one likes the confident heckler in the room [...] but it’s a dichotomy of giving the performer undivided attention and laughing as a response’ (ibid). Adams notes that audiences are awkward in these moments often responding with a passive humble chuckle. Subdued audiences can increase the likelihood of heckling, pauses in laughter encourage the heckler to prove they’re funnier than the comedian. Australian comedian, Aaron Chen argues that heckling is still rare, however, the more likely negative response is a quiet audience (ibid). Brendon Green exclaims “a kiwi audience will sit in silence for an entire show, and then tell you afterwards it was the best thing they’ve ever seen. And they will mean it!” (ibid). Sexist heckles are now more frequently policed in both mixed bill and safe spaces. Wellington comedy event organisation, *The Humorous Arts Trust* stresses its performers read their code of code of conduct (called the ‘The Green Room Handbook’) before agreeing to be booked. The following expectations apply:

The Humorous Arts Trust is dedicated to providing a harassment-free performance experience for everyone, regardless of gender, age, sexual orientation, disability, physical appearance, body size, race, or religion (or lack thereof). We do not tolerate harassment of any kind including sexual harassment. Harassment can be in any form such as:

- Offensive or intimidating verbal comments
- Deliberate intimidation
- Unwelcome physical attention
- Non-consensual photography or recording
- Sustained disruption or heckling
- Unwelcome sexual attention
- Stalking
- And more

We value your safety and security. If another participant is engaging in behaviour that makes you feel unsafe, please advise the venue manager at the performance. If you do not feel it appropriate to alert the venue manager at that time, email contact@humorous.co.nz within 24 hours of the incident. (*The Humorous Arts Trust: The Green Room Handbook*, Jan 2017).

This is by no means a new initiative, but it's obvious and frequent placement on the company's website in red font suggests an increase in its enforcement. If aggressive and/or drunken heckles are decreasing in frequency, then identifying the patriarchal receptions in audience members towards female-identifying comics may be more accurately measured through the audiences' non-verbal and paralinguistic reactions.²⁰ In contrast, Ruby Esther's *I'm Going to be Raped* reveals that inequality is not just present in the micro choices of audience and performers but are still operating at a larger scale. Esther's article pleads with bookers to stop hosting men who are known sexual assailants whilst her only autonomous action is to "angry react" the Facebook posts which advertise the line-up (rubywrites.co.nz). Such publications reflect the need for safe spaces, allowing comics who are typically marginalised to develop their comedy at a sustainable pace. Stent discusses that there is a noticeable difference in her comedic choices in all-female groups to mixed spaces:

I can be louder and more domineering when I'm playing [(improvising)] with men [...] because you've got to fight for your space, but with an all-female group it's a little bit gentler and a little bit more generous... I can chill out a little bit and take a little bit more time vs. when I'm playing with the dudes it's more 'top, top, top', more domineering, more of masculine energy (7:31- 8:10).

With seven years in the industry, Stent doesn't consider the difference in these environments as an impediment to her growth, but more likely to hinder those who have recently entered the industry:

I had a lot of friends who were pulling away from *Snort* lots, and I asked 'why?' And I thought maybe that they were going through a hard time, but when it came down to it, they were just not confident to perform. I wasn't sure exactly why that was, but as soon I put them with a group of women, they came alive again (9:58- 10:10).²¹

Stent states that although that the culture of open mic nights is changing, it is slow and inconsistent, making safe spaces essential (hence her creation of *HEARTTHROBS*, a collective of womxn comedians and comedy actors in Auckland, NZ) (11:15-25). Endearing, yet gently spoken comic Lesa MacLeod Whiting echoes that the comedy nights for women and non-binary comedians such as Wellington's *The Humorous Arts Trust* monthly, *Raw Night at the Cavern Club*, and *Hugo Grrrl's Gigs, A Comedy Show with Good Comedians in it* are necessary for new comics to gain experience and exposure (29 Jan 2021).²² When speaking about venue safety, Roche notes that inappropriate behaviour is rarer in Wellington (25 Dec 2020). Wellington has developed a reputation as a city that celebrates diversity and difference, allowing the live entertainment industry to have higher expectations for their audience and performers. The 2000 publication, *Dynamic Wellington* supports the claim that Wellington has long-time supporter of the arts. The population's migrant origins proved "Wellingtonian" interests 'as anything but provincial', their wish being to analyse societies problems and seek solutions to them" (Macconchie 333). Although there is little factual evidence to support the claim of Wellington as a progressive-thinking city, *Vote Compass*, an election tool created in 2017 identified Wellington as the nation's most left-leaning city (1 NEWS). For the purposes of this study, the

discussion of venue culture should note that mixed bills in cities should not be considered as the equivalent to mixed bills in provincial New Zealand.

To avoid the potential threat of sexist audiences or performers, Dick is selective over the gigs she takes (25 Nov 2020). In her experience, performing in crowds that appear to favour males heightens her nerves, causing her to underperform - creating what she calls 'a self-fulfilling prophecy' (ibid). The paradox is, if a female-identifying comic performing in a mixed bill is aware she must prove herself, then she is more likely to be anxious and underperform, confirming for some audience members that she 'isn't funny'. Validation from a supportive safe space audience may pad the comic's ego, providing them the confidence they might need in a less-supportive mixed bill.

Although safe spaces are essential for such reasons mentioned above, they may contribute to the ghettoising of female-identifying comedians. Safe space venues, comedy companies or collectives are often given a gender-specific title such as 2013 Las Vegas Comedy tour, *Ladies Night Out* or *TV3's, Funny Girls*. This categorises it as women's comedy, for women and by women- which may and often is their intention. 'Women's Comedy' then becomes a sub-genre to the genre of 'Comedy' as whole. Comedy made by majority male-identifying comedians falls under the umbrella definition of comedy suggesting the male experience as synodical. In *Hugo Grrrl Gigs, A Comedy show with Good Comedians in it*, the use of 'A Comedy Show' without gender-identity specific pronouns reinforce its position as part of umbrella definition of comedy.²³ However, the presumption that the title, *Funny Girls* creates a sub-genre of comedy renders the reading of 'girls' as the immediate disqualification from the wider definition of comedy. If a necessary step for such comedy nights to not be ghettoised is the exclusion of female-specific pronouns, is it reinforcing the patriarchal belief that females are not 'market-ably funny'?

Femininity on the Comedy Stage

A Question that was posed to the comics in the latter half of the questionnaire/interview was, 'If you do, how do you approach discussing or performing femininity on stage?'²⁴ With the objective of looking, 'funny' Stent describes the difficulty of knowing what to wear as a female-identifying comic.

If someone says to me, 'come do this gig' or whatever, I'm like, how do I dress? How do we dress? [...]. You want to look good but not too good' (24:23-30).

This reiterates the paradox mentioned earlier: the 'hot - for a female comedian' joke. As discussed in the live comedy analysis, comics who meet society's standard of feminine beauty aren't expected to be funny, but comics who do not meet these standards are expected to be funny as a form of defence or self-awareness. To just look good (but not too good) may shield the comic from having to disclaim their appearance through self-deprecating humour whilst also neutralising it. Equally, a female-identifying comedian who dresses in stereotypically masculine clothing may be subject to the presumption that they're gay.²⁵ However, as the patriarchal definition of masculinity permits humour as desirable quality, the cultural association with masculine dress may emphasise their potential for funniness. Neutralising one's appearance - which in this

example, refers to the stifling of femininity - may prevent the comic being judged as 'unfunny' before they enter the stage.

It's something to work on, going out and there and thinking 'I feel good, and I look feminine'. [...] Putting it in a sketch or a character, that is the easiest way of doing it, find a character and push it to its full limits of that thing- of femininity (Stent, 43:22 – 53).

Through choosing instead to portray a feminine character, the comic can maintain separation between themselves and these feminine traits, thus maintaining the feminine masquerade. In many cases, hyper-feminine characters (such as Elle Woods from 2001 cult-classic, *Legally Blonde* or the more recently created Alexis Rose in Emmy-award winning show, *Schitt's Creek*) reinforce the bimbo archetypes. However, Stent argues that when she creates the hyper-feminine bimbo-type character is not to render the comic possibilities of femininity as narrow, but to provide social commentary:

It's not just that it's funny, but it's more of a 'why do we act like that?' Why do I look at women that way? (46:44– 55).

However, if the audience does not register these archetypal characters ironically does it perpetuate patriarchal stereotypes through collective laughter? Roche explains that as her comedy is sexual, she contrasts it by dressing "rather demure through not showing a lot of skin" (25 Dec 2020). Roche exclaims,

I think also when I talk about 'sex work' people think I'm lying because [...] I'm not dressed in a clubbing dress or fishnets (ibid).

Does her choice of dress make the content of her comedy more palatable, or force a clashing of stereotypes which successfully confuses the audiences and causes them to confront their perception of female sexuality?

In addition to the pressure of appearance, comedy based on topics that have historically been considered 'women's issues' have been limited to a female-identifying audience, and therefore rendered unrelatable. Hannah Campbell asserts that when discussing subjects which a mainstream audience would render feminine; you must keep it "punchline heavy" (16 Dec 2020). Likewise, Audrey Porne whose comedy bio labels her comedy as dark and absurdist, claims to discuss femininity in "facetious manner" (15 Dec 2020). Hughes considers it unrealistic to expect her audiences to see her jokes without the lens of her identity as a woman - even if her jokes intentionally don't intersect with her gender identity. Conversely, Roche claims that it's fun to play with the patriarchal perceptions of femininity,

Sometimes it's fun to sort of write/perform a smart joke in a dumb/ ditzy way, so I'm getting a point across without coming across as too preachy, like it's still funny (15 Dec 2020).

As the crux of this thesis suggests, Roche consciously employs a hyper-feminine persona to make her feminist agenda more palatable. The nature of her choices being *conscious* is an essential point of difference. Roche considers these tactics as a necessary sacrifice; in comparison to a subconscious choice, she remains in control

(ibid). Roche can therefore self-monitor the level of 'palatability' in her comedy and ideally avoid causing herself harm.

Dick remarks that she doesn't often create jokes that discuss her identity as a woman. She suggests this is because she is more concerned with jokes about, "being queer, depressed and not so confident socially":

It doesn't occur to me that my period would be funny material, but it probably would be funny to talk about my moon-cup - I have a kind of tenuous relationship with being a woman through my queer identity (25 Nov 2020).

The intersection of one's queer identity and patriarchal conditioning of traditional gender roles can elicit a fear of femininity. A femme-identifying or presenting queer women may exude a heightened femininity but this is not intended for the masculine gaze (Brushwood Rose and Camilleri 2002, Hoskin and Hirshfield 2018, Valcano and Dahl 2008 qtd. 687). However, whilst it may their intention to be feminine without intersecting with patriarchal expectations of femininity, it presents issues of 'passing' across sexual orientations and gender identities (697). Passing considers a person's ability to not be identified as a marginalised individual (ibid). Participants in Hoskin's study revealed this can lead to feelings of authenticity and imposter syndrome amongst the LGBTQ+ community (698). For femmes, passing and invisibility causes a straddling between privilege or oppression (ibid). A participant stated that although passing "may grant reprieve from social stigma" through cisgender-privilege or femme-privilege they are not exempt from as another participant claims, "sexism, misogyny, homophobia in the world at large" (ibid). All of which may create, as Dick describes, a tenuous relationship with femininity amongst queer women (25 Nov 2020)- causing the topics that intersect with femininity to be avoided by queer comics.

Georgie Sivier, a Christchurch comic who celebrates mess and catastrophes through razor sharp wit and foul mouth (*Playspace*) recounts that embracing femininity without fear is something which came with experience in the industry:

I was so scared that if I discussed anything 'female' or dressed particularly feminine I would be seen as a 'female' comedian as opposed to a comedian. I think what audience members have said to me in the past really plays into that. Now, I'm not afraid to embrace my femininity on (or off!) stage. I'm quite bold in the way I approach it now, almost a kind of 'if you don't like it, f*** off' kind of way (15 Dec 2020).

Sivier reflects that her initial fear was the ghettoising of women's comedy. Her current approach suggests that by confidently discussing femininity (without disclaimers or palatability), it is not rendered as taboo, or shocking and can therefore be more readily be inserted into the mainstream. Dravid claims that she confronts patriarchal expectations of femininity, "through sex" - echoing Sivier's claim that persistence is essential in disbanding the claim that femininity is only for "women's comedy nights".

I know there's an assumption that female comics only talk about periods and sex, but sex through the female gaze is still relatively new [in comedy]. We must keep talking about sex and femininity until audiences stop seeing sex as something only men enjoy and do (Dravid, 14 Jan 2021).

Dravid's comments reflect the fragile popularity of feminist humour. Sex through the male gaze has been a consistent and popular form of humour – sex and sexuality through the female gaze is already presumed unoriginal. This does not mean that every joke about female sexuality is funny, but that comics should not have to work harder for it to be so. Janaye Henry notes there is a key difference between performing femininity and being feminine (20 Nov 2020). Henry's stage presence is joyous and bubbly (Ferguson). She unabashedly provides social commentary amongst hilarious pop-culture references - exuding self-confidence (ibid). As Henry is femme-identifying she claims that femininity is a natural emanation of her personality. To intentionally lessen her femininity, or 'masc' herself up to be a part of the 'boys club', she claims would read as inauthentic. Henry's perspective is a relevant counterargument to the theory of the feminine mask in Chapter 2. By simply being feminine, it is not a mask but an authentic portrayal of herself a feminine woman. Henry does not feel as if her femininity has to be heightened or lessened in order to create humour.

Discussing topics regarding femininity boldly and frequently may prevent such topics being ghettoised. As previously concluded, this tactic may not allow one's feminist or political agenda to reach those with conservative opinions. Without strategies to increase palatability, some members of the audience may, 'write the comic off'. However, this is dictated by whether the comic is concerned with converting those who do not share their viewpoints. They may instead seek to perform such comedy to a room full of like-minded individuals and revel in the comradery.

Navigating Ego through Self-deprecation

The final series of questions in the survey asked comics to discuss ego in comedy, and its relationship to Tall Poppy Syndrome as a female-identifying comic. As predicted, when asked, 'do you think ego plays a role in comedy?', the overwhelming answer was "yes". MacLeod-Whiting suggests that the solo aspect of stand-up marks it as egotistical,

I think the comic is putting themselves in both a very vulnerable and powerful position by stepping on to the stage particularly given the solitary nature of stand-up (29 Jan 2021).

Henry asserts that ego is important in comedy as it acts as self-preservation:

I always joke I have 2 egos, but the reality is I just have a big ego when it comes to comedy and I think it's so important because if you go out on stage and bomb, you need to be able to go home and still love yourself. My ego acts as self-protection and often when I've acted on thoughts from my ego, e.g. I need to be paid more, usually the result is I get paid more. (20 Nov 2020).

Henry argues that ego can be used to combat the difficulty of working in an industry which relies on likeability (ibid). If a comic underperforms, their ego may prevent them from self-sabotaging and rendering themselves a failure. However, Roche claims that, for comics to succeed, self-awareness should be balanced with ego:

It's about having enough ego to get up there and take risks but not too much to think you're perfect and untouchable (15 Dec 2020).

Walters agrees, stating that "if you consistently 'kill it' each gig, you can 'get lazy and bulletproof, bombing (see p. 8 for definition) quickly brings you back down to earth" (15 Dec 2020). Walter's use of 'bulletproof' suggests an expectation where New Zealand comic must expect to be critiqued without complaint. If the comic is ignoring helpful and constructive criticism because of their ego this is potentially destructive behaviour. However, if Walters is referring to hecklers or negative criticism, should New Zealand comedians still be expected to take it on without complaint?

As Dick discusses, the representation of ego onstage is a difficult task in comedy, particularly in New Zealand:

I think there's a level of self-confidence that you need to be a good performer, because the audience needs to feel that they can trust you to make a good show. But you also can't come across too confident! Because New Zealand audiences do not like that. (25 Nov 2020)

Brynley Stent echoes this point:

You have to be confident, but yet New Zealanders aren't Americans and so they're not going to say, 'I'm the best person, I'm amazing.' (18:02- 12)

To achieve this difficult equilibrium, some comics claimed to use self-deprecating jokes or personas:

My humour is pretty self-deprecating so it's not super egotistical - I have had to walk a fine line between being sassy/confident and playing the underdog. (Walters, 15 Dec 2020)

Walters use of 'I have to' suggests that, in her experience, New Zealand audiences are not ready for a 'sassy/confident' comedian who does not balance this confidence with self-deprecation. MacLeod Whiting reflects that, although her persona is 'overall high-status', she 'leans into' an anxious/fast-talking persona (29 Jan 2021) – making the high status more palatable. Hughes echoes that she is also self-deprecating on stage, claiming it gives her more room to 'punch-up' (15 Dec 2020). By presenting oneself as low ego, the comic may be less confronting and therefore jokes that critique the dominant power groups may be more likely to land in mainstream audiences.

Stent suggests another tactic is to present a persona that is hyper-confident, as the obviousness of the persona distances this over-confidence from the comic themselves (18:30-55). This is reminiscent of the concept of overinflation in Chapter 3. Stent considers the comedy of her friend Laura Daniels, in which the shtick of her show, *Two Hearts* is that they think they're famous musicians, "I'm sure if she was playing

herself people might say that it's a bit off-putting" (19:03-55). Of similar intent, in Stent's 2019 show, *Filthy Little Goblin* she entered the stage to the opening credits –"best comedy show you'll see all year" and "winner of the Billy T" (this was prior to her win in 2021) (28:23-33). When Stent's peer and fellow comic came to the show he said, 'these are clearly jokes you're making about yourself to weirdly undercut what you're about to do'. Stent notes that "blowing one's horn to a comical level" is just another genre of self-deprecating humour (coined in this thesis, as ironic overinflation) (28:33 – 57). If the audience believes in the confidence of the comic's persona, they trust them to be funny- if they also understand the complimentary phrases towards themselves as sarcastic, they can distance the confidence from the comic themselves. Stent concludes that this tactic is linked with both Tall Poppy Syndrome and Imposter Syndrome.

I get 50% of my income from comedy writing, but I still wouldn't say that because it makes me look like a bit of a wanker. [...] It's so full-on, with so many of my female friends you'll ask them, 'what do you do' and they'll still beat around the bush because they're scared of putting themselves out there. (35:17-53).

By diminishing their abilities through self-deprecation, the comic employs anti-elitist tactics to navigate the pre-existing hierarchy in the historically masculine boss-employee relationship (Holmes 1). Self-deprecation is an obvious compromise to avoid the conflict which may arise from disrupting the gender hegemony. For a female-identifying comic to assert they are a professional comedian, they may be subject to micro-aggressions as a woman in power whilst also being labelled egotistical.

In contrast, Henry claims to not use self-deprecation in her humour or off-stage, as it would "fabricate insecurities", which is potentially the reason why it used by others:

I'm always working on parts of me; however, I don't think it serves the audience or me to discuss them onstage. If in the build-up to a story I say, 'Oh I'm cute...' and someone laughs I will make a point of acknowledging that person and asking why they laugh - this isn't to be confrontational, but I think it's important the audience acknowledge what they're actually laughing at or who they're laughing at. The only time I'd self-deprecate on stage would be if I were to flip it on its head and make a comment about why we shouldn't self-deprecate (20 Nov 2020).

Through physically asking her audience members to confront why they laughed, Henry forcibly ensures that they are self-reflective. Her tactic is perhaps unusual as it doesn't rely on the audience to be reflective of their own accord, but to do so in a public setting avoiding her joke being misinterpreted. If the audience is embarrassed, however, the opposite effect may be caused through their resentment building over time. If an audience member is sexist and/or misogynistic then calling out their behaviour is necessary, but it may prohibit them from undergoing productive change in the long-term.

Conclusion

The comics identified that they have to work harder and smarter than male comics to earn laughs from their audience. As a result, the persona of a female-identifying comic must be obviously heightened so it is not deemed as an inevitable projection of their personality but rather a calculated decision. This is not always the rule as proven by David, but the expectation felt by emerging comics without established reputations.

Although part one of this chapter established that through a patriarchal lens the female experience is not as 'relatable' as their male counterparts, the comics stress that when a female-identifying comic is on stage her performance speaks to the entire representation of 'funny women' as a whole. An unfunny male comedian represents himself, but an unfunny female-identifying comedian reinforces the sexist stereotype that all women aren't funny. The awareness of this may induce anxiety in female-identifying comics and cause them to underperform. Due to line-ups seeking diversity many emerging female-identifying comics perform for larger venues before they are ready, and their justifiable nervousness contributes to same sexist stereotype.

The recent discourse on the lack of venue safety for marginalised comics reinforces the need for safe spaces. Safe spaces allow comics to hone and develop their craft amongst like-minded and supportive people preparing them for mainstream audiences (lessening their chances of underperforming). Some of these safe spaces risk ghettoising women in comedy by using gender specific pronouns in their show titles. By doing so, the show is isolated as only for woman and not considered a part of the umbrella genre of comedy. Conversely this suggests that the mention of female pronouns is not marketable, if a comedy night used gender pronouns specific to males the show may not be ghettoised as their experience is considered synecdoche in a patriarchal society. However, event creators and managers should also consider that the use of solely she/her pronouns or cis-women markers excludes marginalised comics who use other pronouns.

The comic's decision to discuss their femininity boldly without presenting it in a 'hyper' mode allows it to be separated from its patriarchal definition (as it is not rendered the joke.) However, this could risk a comic's political agenda from being written off by conservative audience members. This risk should always consider the intention of the comic. Many of the comics interviewed would not desire to change the minds of their conservative audience members. Others may wish to breakthrough to such members and therefore make agenda to be more palatable- these decisions should be consistently monitored and re-visited to prevent the comic from making dangerous compromises. The essential question in regard to self-deprecating humour is whether female-identifying comics are speaking to legitimate insecurities or fabricating them to increase palatability and avoid disrupting gender hegemony.

CHAPTER FOUR

A Phenomenological and Auto-ethnographic Investigation

A Phenomenological and Auto-ethnographic Approach

This chapter is a phenomenological and auto-ethnographic script analysis of *Horny and Confused* and a performance reflection of *Horny and Confused 2*, the comedy shows created by myself and my comedy partner, Charlotte Glucina through our company Big Estrogen Energy. Auto-ethnography is “a particular form of writing that seeks to untie ethnographic (looking outward at a world beyond one’s own) and autobiographical (gazing inward for a story of oneself) intentions” (Schwandt 2007, qtd. Le Roux 198) In “Exploring Rigour in Auto-ethnographic Research”, Cheryl S Le Roux consults Howard and Manning’s two umbrella orientations of auto-ethnography, analytic and evocative (199). Analytic auto-ethnography uses empirical data to develop a theoretical understanding of a social phenomenon; Evocative auto-ethnography aims to evoke an emotional response (Anderson 2006) through aesthetically valued, evocative and vulnerable stories, “with little concern about objectivity and researcher neutrality” (Manning & Adams qtd. Le Roux 199). Those who engage in analytic auto-ethnography are more likely to complete objective writing and analysis, whilst research using evocative auto-ethnography is introspective, willing the reader to reap meaning from their emotions and experiences (ibid). The auto-ethnographic investigation of *Horny and Confused* and *Horny and Confused 2* exists on the spectrum between analytic and evocative. The script analysis is written objectively with the subsequent conclusions and performance reflection attempting to elicit an evocative response from the reader.

The spectrum of auto-ethnography allows diverse orientations, and this should be considered when asking, ‘what makes good auto-ethnographic research?’ One of the criteria Le Roux considers for rigorous auto-ethnography is *self-reflexivity*,

There is evidence of the researcher’s intense awareness of his or her role in and relationship to the research which is situated within a historical and cultural context. Reflexivity points to self-awareness, self-exposure and self-conscious introspection (204).

As an emerging female-identifying comedian I recognise my position in the industry to both compromise and strengthen my research. My involvement in the comedy sphere will encourage informed conclusions based on my knowledge formed across this thesis and from my regular performance experience. My closeness to the study also risks the conclusions being contrived based on predicted outcomes. My

solution to this is to regularly consider both introspective and extrospective analysis by consulting my comedy partner, and other members of the audience. A further criteria in Le Roux's article is *resonance*,

Resonance requires that the audience is able to enter into, engage with, experience or connect with the writer's story on an intellectual and emotional level. There is a sense of commonality between the researcher and the audience, an intertwining of lives (ibid).

The subsequent (see page 6) creative intention of *Horny and Confused 2* is to build a connection with the audience, based on our own emotional investment in the show and its autobiographical nature. The third criteria is *credibility*,

There should be evidence of verisimilitude, plausibility and trustworthiness in the research. The research process and reporting should be permeated by honesty (204).

The scripts of *Horny and Confused* and a video recording of *Horny and Confused 2* are companion pieces for reference per request to the researcher. This forms the criteria of *contribution*:

The study should extend knowledge, generate ongoing research, liberate, empower, improve practice, or make a contribution to social change (ibid).

The timeliness of this research is proven by the recent influx of publications on the safety of marginalised comics (See Esther 2020 and Healy 2020). By dissecting the comedic choices made by myself and other New Zealand comedians I hope to contribute to a wider social awareness of patriarchal conditioning in comedy. No ultimate solutions will be presented for a 'new wave of comedy'. Rather what will be identified is evidence of patriarchal femininity through auto-ethnographic examples. This specific identification hopes to extend the knowledge of those in the industry and generate ongoing research.

Part I. is a micro- analysis of the *Horny and Confused* original production script and performance with reference to the key discourse provided in past chapters. As the first season of *Horny and Confused* was created before Charlotte and I discussed the discourse of this thesis, analysing the script provides examples of our unadulterated comedic choices. Part. II compares these choices to the informed choices of *Horny and Confused 2*. Although the primary focus of this thesis is performance, not process, when discussing the origin of our comedic choices, the rehearsal process is critical to categorising our sub-conscious and conscious choices. As this is not a practice-led project, my performance does need to be assessed to answer this thesis. Instead, I am testing and illuminating my own work to gauge action/reaction as a point of analysis.

PT. I SCRIPT ANALYSIS

Horny and Confused

Autobiography

In 2019, Charlotte and I were part of the 300 level Comedy and Improvisation course, THEA 321: 'Pass the Mic' at Victoria University of Wellington (2019). Despite self-doubt that we could 'be funny', we discovered our affinity for entertaining others through both comedy, song and stand-up. We were encouraged by industry professionals to pursue comedy careers. As Charlotte and I considered the prospect of solo careers daunting, a friend in industry suggested we become a duo-act: within a week *Big Estrogen Energy* was formed. We began building a repertoire of comedy bits, performing regular 10-minute gigs to test material on Wellington audiences. The material that proved to be successful would be amalgamated into a full-length script that was performed in the 2020 *NZ Fringe Festival* programme.

Our comedy falls largely under the genre of autobiographical storytelling. Charlotte's comedy is informed by her experiences of toxic, abusive relationships with men in the past and by the often-debilitating effects of endometriosis. These experiences have heightened Charlotte's frustration towards her gender identity as female. My comedy is inspired by my relationship with my conservative Christian family, the teaching of sexual shame and experiences of homophobia. This miseducation resulted in my teenage self being sexually repressed as I grappled with my sexuality and gender identity. My main comedic influences as a child were my friends' fathers whose attitudes paid heed to the cantankerous blokey archetypes popular in provincial New Zealand. I still struggle with creating autobiographical stand-up that doesn't disregard the weight that my upbringing had and still has on my well-being.

As I discovered my schtick as a comedian, I recognised the comedic potential of my upbringing and sought to create a comedic persona based on sexual repression. In my first set, 'dry patch', I introduced myself as a product of the South Island, whose sexual repression had resulted in series of unfortunate events in my sex life. To aid the South Island stereotype, I emphasised the 'bogan' qualities of my accent and maximised on provincial New Zealand phrases (Giddy, Bloody good etc.) My relationship with my family was used as a plot device that I regularly called back to throughout my set.



Figure 25: Performance of Horny and Confused at the 2020 Fringe Festival. Photograph by and courtesy of Chelsea Hideki.

Initially, Charlotte's comedic persona was deadpan, using dismissive nonchalance to present an 'over it' attitude towards the patriarchy. When we came together as a duo, Charlotte's deadpan persona didn't gel with the extroverted elements of my persona. By channelling Charlotte's nonchalance into her position as the 'alpha' of our friendship we allowed ourselves more comedic potential. The important themes and the feminist agenda of our comedy stemmed from the core values within our friendship - female sexuality and platonic intimacy. To present our feminist agenda as more palatable in *Horny and Confused*, I intentionally adopted masculine-reading characteristics. Previous chapters have suggested that female-identifying comics either stifle their femininity, heighten it or adopt masculine traits for fear of appearing un-funny, or less appealing to a wider demographic audience - avoiding its expectations or making it the butt of the joke. As Tall Poppy Syndrome is understood to be a patriarchal ideology that ensures women downplay their success to adhere to the traditional definition of femininity, female-identifying comics engage in self-deprecating humour to increase their likeability and prevent their confidence from being excessive. In retrospect, there are key aspects of *Horny and Confused's* comedy that both perpetuate and challenge patriarchal femininity. The following script analysis examines sections of the script that could be inferred as a product of patriarchal conditioning and compares them to the creative intention of Charlotte and I.

Script Analysis

KATIE

Yeah, so ah, word on the street, is that the *Flight of the Conchords* are actually the male versions of us.

CHARLOTTE

Yeah, and that's quite nice because they're actually pretty funny for men. So there will be music tonight...

Figure 26: Script Excerpt 1 (*Hill & Glucina, Horny and Confused 2*)

In the introductory part of our set, Charlotte and I engage in the similar kind of ironic overinflation used by the Flight of the Conchords. The joke, “the Flight of the Conchords are actually the male versions of us” pre-emptively undercuts and praises our performance. By claiming that the globally acclaimed Flight of the Conchords are mere imitations of us, we claim to be confident in our comedic abilities. The comparison, however, is obviously hyperbolic as we are not internationally successful, or old enough to be the FOTC predecessors. The hyperbolicity reveals the opposite to be true, as a more realistic comparison would be to label ourselves as the female version of the FOTC. The initial implication of confidence is suggested to be false. As the audience understand the comparison to be unrealistic, they ideally lower their standards for the quality of the performance.

As mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, our comparison to the Flight of the Conchords in our sets and marketing material was intended to reject comedic duos as simply being cis, straight men. Upon reflection, the comparison also served a familiar point of reference to our audience that we hoped would increase our likeability. The successful comedic schtick of the FOTC is to merge bravado with awkwardness. By clearly allowing their bravado to be false, their confidence is likely to be viewed as more palatable to a New Zealand audience. By adopting a similar ironic schtick of combining self-assurance with ungainliness, whilst also introducing ourselves with a direct comparison to a successful male comedic duo, we allowed ourselves a greater margin for error. Although our confidence physically manifests through a comedic display of over-confidence, the converse awkwardness allowed our confidence to not be excessive. Additionally, it allowed us to turn error into humour though suggesting it to be a consequence of our awkwardness. For example, in our 2020 show, a blunder was made during a comedy song; Charlotte and I were able to create a successful riff with our audience by saying, “this wouldn’t happen in a FOTC show”

In opposition to Charlotte, by adopting a style of faux masculine bravado through sitting with my legs open and walking with a performative swagger, I avoided presenting myself though a feminine

lens. A persona of feminine bravado was less known to me as the performative tropes of swagger and bravado are more commonly associated with male performance. As my intention was to adopt traditional masculine characteristics to appeal to wider demographic it is more reflective of patriarchal conditioning than of redefining the expectations of female performance.



Figure 27: *Horny and Confused* Poster 2020 (Researcher's own collection). Photography by and courtesy of by Roc+ Photography.

The poster for our 2020 show was also an example of ironic overinflation. By giving ourselves the 5-star rating, it is invalidated as a non-biased testament of our talent. Although it showcases confidence in ourselves, the reader may infer that it is a result of not receiving a 5-star rating from professional reviewers (as does the imaginary review of 'brave by everyone') The irony within this tactic of ironic overinflation has a cyclical effect, the comic claims it be true, but because of its obvious hyperbolicity it cannot be. Or in some cases, such as Brynley Stent's "Billy T Award Winner" joke (see p. 71) it is something that the comic may wish to be true but has not yet achieved. The use of ironic overinflation in the marketing material and introduction of *Horny and Confused* is an example of performative tension disclaimers- these are used by comics to prepare their audience and release tension

that their presence on stage might cause. Unlike the 'I know what you're thinking' tactic, ironic overinflation renders the comics' confidence as intentionally hyperbolic. As a result, the comic is perceived to have a palatable level of confidence.

CHARLOTTE

So, one of the best things about dating me is...

KATIE

(improvised line): ya bum.

CHARLOTTE

... is that I'm really good at being impressed by things. Like sometimes, Katie, there's Katie, will be like "Why are you dating him?"

KATIE

Why are you dating him?

CHARLOTTE

Just like that. And I'll be like, he washes his hair once a week. Dream.

KATIE

Boat.

Figure 28: Script Excerpt 2 (Hill & Glucina, Horny and Confused 3).

The flippant comment, "ya bum" was an improvised line created in rehearsals. This excerpt allows Charlotte to transition into a song called, "I'm so attracted to you (for no reason)". The song gradually critiques men for their tendency to perform at a minimum in romantic relationships. Whilst writing this song, I stressed that if we are going to critique men, that we do so intelligently, so we are not simply reversing the common sexist humour that those in the dominant power group have used on us. Charlotte stressed that this could be achieved by targeting the specific menial actions of men that we have both been known to experience. The targeting of 'the menial actions of men' is a generalisation that is only acceptable because Charlotte and I are women. By 'punching up' we are targeting the actions of those who are hold more privilege than us. This is an example of exceptionalism in comedy - the joke is only funny because of the historical and contemporary mistreatment of women. The song, "Let's Generalise About Men" in the Emmy nominated musical-comedy drama, *Crazy Ex-Girlfriend* riffs off the currently popular blanket statements, 'I hate men' or 'men are trash'.

'All men are emotionally stunted
When asked how they feel, every man's always grunted
And why do men never listen and only think about themselves
As opposed to women

Who always listen and never think about themselves?

Ooh, I hear you girl!’ (Brosh McKenna et al. 1:24 -1:39).

The lyrics make fun of the comedy intended to empower to women that uses reversal language, not liberatory alternatives. For example, the sexist comment, “you’re funny for a female comedian” may be subverted for comedic effect to, “you’re funny for a male comedian” However, as the joke is only a reversal of the original comment, it is the most obvious joke to make. The comments on the Youtube music video present relevant discourse about the perception of reversal language in comedy, where cis straight white men are still dominating the field. User, ‘Sam’ posts the comment,

‘This song manages to be feminist and anti-feminist at the same time. I love how it feels like there's some freedom in women getting to call men out on awful shit, while it also mocks how it's part of straight culture for women to generalize about men like this, almost as a ritual to make them feel better. It mocks hypocrisy but is also so extremely over the top that it's sort of a celebration to just letting go and being judgy with your friends over a glass of wine sometimes’ (2019).

User ‘Evon’ replies,

‘I don't necessarily think that ‘bitching about men’ is feminist. Every feminist I know agrees that toxic masculinity (not all masculinity, just the parts that are toxic,) hurts men, too. You can hate the sociological implications of male privilege without hating men, just like you can hate the sociological implications of white privilege without hating white people’ (Youtube channel creator, 2020).

User ‘Sam’; suggests that collective grouping of men’s actions should be met with the realisation that they are generalisations, but this doesn’t mean they aren’t funny, or cathartic (especially amongst friends). User ‘Evon’ rejects this, arguing that the consequences of male privilege and toxic masculinity should not enable a collective ‘hatred of men’ in the form of ‘bitching’. However, because the critique of men (in this case the critique of all cis, straight men) is still considered ‘punching up’ in comedy, comedy such as the song Charlotte and I have created is still accepted in the comedy scene.

“I’m so attracted to you (for no reason)’ begins with surface level observations, such the attraction of a man reversing whilst touching the back of the seat and having more than one sheet on their bed. As the song continues, the lyrics begin to target more emotional qualities that men often present at the bare minimum. The culmination of the song is the monologue by which Charlotte alludes to the patriarchal gender conditioning that pushes women to take on the emotional labour in the relationship (as this aligns with the traditional expectations of femininity, whereas masculinity does

not). The song creates humour out the menial actions of men, but also our tendency to find these things attractive despite them reflecting a minimum level of responsibility. In spite of the song using the absurdity curve (see p. 8 for definition) to present the song in a palatable progression, I felt a desire to sexualise the content furthermore. Upon reflection, adding a throw-in line such as, “ya bum” was intended to lessen the severity of the targeting, but also physicalise the embarrassment onto myself. The inclination to do this stemmed from the knowledge that Charlotte and I were performing in a place where our audience demographic would be unpredictable. Although many like-minded peers would be attending (‘preaching to the converted’), much of our audience was made up of unknown demographics. I considered that there could be men in the audience who the song targets, and therefore I needed to lessen the severity of the critique to increase our likeability.

Post-show, “I’m so attracted to you (for no reason)” provoked a discussion between Charlotte and I around ‘who our comedy was for’. We wanted to create comedy for individuals who shared our same viewpoints, but also comedy that would sow seeds and educate those who our comedy critiques. When creating comedy for a mainstream audience (indicative of multiple demographics), we closely monitored our performance choices to reach a broader audience. As a company we deemed these choices to be necessary to see obvious and effective progress towards our feminist agenda.

Charlotte suggested that it is a somewhat unrealistic goal to make comedy for everyone – “I’ve experienced sexism enough in my life to not expect to change everyone’s mind [...] there are some opinions that aren’t malleable enough to reach” (“Horny and Confused Post-Show Discussion”, 18:19-21 & 19:48-52). Although likeability is essential in comedy, calculating the audience’s response prior to the authentic telling of one’s story could be viewed as unproductive. The rule being (which is generally agreed upon in most performance sectors) is that you can’t compromise the story in anticipation of audience response. A fundamental difference is our comics choices were subconscious or conscious, the inclusion of “ya bum” was a subconscious choice, where I recognised my intentions upon reflection (determining its potential patriarchal root).

CHARLOTTE

So, I went on a date this year. I don't know about you, but I actually thought that I'd meet my soulmate by the time that I turned twenty-one.

Pause.

I went on a date this year because I have to uphold my reputation of being a 'stud'. I actually love the word 'stud' because it seems to be working the same linguistic job as the word 'slut' but it gets paid more...

Anyways because I'm an experienced dater in twenty-twenty I wrote a song called dating in twenty-twenty...

[sung]

This guy was like

I go to the gym and I'm so tough

And I was like wow

I thought carrying around that massive ego would be enough

He thinks that future marriage is on the table

And our relationship is healthy and stable

BUT he doesn't believe in... labels

I really thought he was the one,

Until he looked expectantly at my vagina and said... "did you cum?"

[spoken] you date men long enough and this shit writes itself.

[sung]

Dating, dating, dating in twenty-twenty!

I'm a feminist that wants you to pay for me

It's got nothing to do with gender roles I'm just, worth it!

Dating, dating, dating in twenty-twenty...

[spoken]

So now that I've clearly got the dating thing down, just imagine how good I'd be at marriage.

[sung]

Now my weekend plans are going to Briscoes to buy a toaster

And yelling at Gerald because he didn't use a coaster

[spoken] You know that's my good coffee table Gerald.

[sung] Without the attention of a wedding I feel less real

So, I guess I'm going to have to get pregnant and have a... gender reveal

[spoken] Fuck... there's only one problem though

[sung]

Sex feels like one of my many boring obligations

And the only word I get turned on by is... renovations

[spoken] Shall we get the grey or the charcoal tiles Gerald???

Long Pause.

Turns out he wanted the Spanish white tiles, so we got divorced.

[sung]

Dating, dating, dating in twenty-twenty!
My mum says there are plenty of fish in the sea
But it's twenty-twenty and the sea is polluted Mum, watch the fucking news.
Dating, dating, dating in twenty-twenty...

[spoken]

I think that maybe I'd be a bit too good at marriage, so maybe I'll just remain single for the rest of my life?

[sung]

And I mean, that would be okay,
I don't hate any of my friends enough
To make them my bridesmaid
I'd lead the beautiful life of a non-dater
And invest in a robust vibrator

I'd go to bougie restaurants and get a table for one
Then dye my hair purple to have "a bit of fun"
I'd have no man dirtying my Egyptian cotton sheets
And spend my money on yoga retreats
[spoken, melancholy] I fucking hate yoga...

[sung]

Dating, dating, (crying) in twenty-twenty
All the options seem so shitty to me
Dating (crying), dating (crying), dating and crying
In... twenty-twenty.

Figure 29: Script Excerpt 3 (Hill & Glucina, Horny and Confused 7-10).

In the first two lines of the spoken introduction to Charlotte's song, "Dating in Twenty-Twenty", "So, I went on a date this year. I don't know about you, but I actually thought that I'd meet my soulmate by the time that I turned twenty-one", the targeting of humour appears to be internal. This is quickly undercut by her mentioning of the gender inequality present in the connotations of words, 'slut' and 'stud'. By pairing these two sentences together, the song, although on Charlotte's unfortunate dating life, places the blame on the outward forces, not Charlotte's own failure to meet the societal expectations of relationships. In verse one Charlotte targets a specific, egotistical, selfish kind of man. During a rehearsal we asked a male contact from the comedy industry if he felt targeted by this song. He responded that 'no' as he knew that he wasn't the 'type of man' we were targeting. I spoke to another male friend and he admitted that although he didn't feel that song targeted him specifically, he still felt estranged from the conversation. Charlotte asserted that her intention was to be true to her story knowing other content in the show would reinvoke men to be a part of the conversation. This verse reflects the difficulty of not estranging those whose actions are being called into question; whilst also remaining true to one's experience of the consequences of those actions.

In verse two, Charlotte presents a bleak outlook on the prospect of her own marriage by referencing stereotypes of heteronormative, middle-class, 'nouveau riche' marriages. Charlotte allowed

her voice to imitate stereotypical middle-aged-women from New Zealand by increasing it in pitch and adding a nasal tone. It is not uncommon for the portrayal of hyper-feminine stereotypes such as the nagging mother, the crazy ex, the bimbo or the Madonna to have high pitched and nasal voices to increase their comedic appeal. These traits allow the characters or personas to sound more ‘annoying’. In the final verse, Charlotte reaches the height of the absurdity curve and resigns herself to being single all her life. Despite some of the lyrics such as, “the beautiful life of a non-dater” suggesting that this a celebration of singleness, Charlotte’s melancholic tone and use of high notes suggest that she is defeated, which in turn suggests that (for her) being single is a failure. To render singleness as failure considers the patriarchal expectation that women should be attached to a man - or it simply reflects the human desire for love, or connection. However, the line: “My mum says there are plenty of fish in the sea, but it’s twenty nineteen and the sea is POLLUTED MUM WATCH THE NEWS” makes a quip at toxic masculinity, depicting the failure as out of her control- the joke therefore remains outwards.

KATIE

Right, on to one of favourite childhood topics, sexual repression! I call this story the 'leftover pasta disaster.'

Yeah, I am 10 years old. This particular morning, there was left over plain macaroni pasta in the fridge. That's an important detail because plain pasta has possibilities, you don't just risk eating plain pasta in the Hill family household yeah? It could be potentially turned into some sort of pasta bake for that night's dinner, I didn't wanna risk it. So, I skated down to the parent's bedroom for that second opinion.

Figure 30: Script Excerpt 4 (Hill & Glucina, Horny and Confused 6).

KATIE

(In reference to an improvised joke about youtuber, Jake Paul) Yeah sorry to all you boomers in the audience that was a bit of a niche gen z joke, so it feels a bit out of reach even for me, but don't worry there are jokes for everyone here tonight.

Figure 31: Script Excerpt 5 (Hill & Glucina, Horny and Confused 10).

Excerpts 4 and 5 are from my set called “Dry Patch” which was performed for the first season of *Horny and Confused*. As mentioned in the introduction of this thesis, I played into my identity as a South Islander to create an almost bogan obliviousness which gradually deteriorated as I spoke into my sexual repression. The syntax of my set makes use of a similar laconic and colloquial language to the comedy voices that were particularly prominent in the South Island of New Zealand, and that were shown to me by my parents – such as Fred Dagg and Murray Ball. Mirroring Rose Matafeo’s *Conan* set, the frequent use of “yeah”, and my strong New Zealand accent allowed my comedy to be met with familiarity from

the audience members. A reviewer noted, “I think it’s [Hill’s] thick kiwi accent that puts the older audience members at ease, as her Boomer jokes send ripples through the whole audience” (C. Brown). The reference to ‘boomer’ identifies my intentions to make note of the different demographics (many of which were in dominant power groups) in our audience, whether or not they were the butt of the joke, I felt that exclusively discussing feminism through comedy may cause separation - by acknowledging their presence in the room, they could remain a part of conversation.

Additionally, Excerpt 4 is situated in a very domestic setting, the mentioning of my family often having a pasta bake for dinner and the use of words such as ‘household’ is reminiscent of the suburban comedy that created humour out of common place names, such as the suburban comic character of Lynn of Tawa. These domestic signifiers work to increase familiarity and localise my comedy to a New Zealand sphere. By including the context as a domestic setting, it humbly situates my comedy and equalises myself with the audience- claiming, ‘I’m just like you.’ By allowing the audience to see themselves in my anecdote, despite how absurd the story might be, I denied any status that my position on stage might imply and therefore increased my chances of appearing likeable.

KATIE

Despite talking about it heaps I do not engage in sex very often, that was also a complete lie, it’s been a productive month. This particular year, 2017, I was having a dry patch, which is kind of like a veggie patch, ‘insert name’ but the bees haven’t visited for a fucking long time. Here is the thing, when I have a dry patch, I forget everything that’s gone before, I forget how to function. Well, that fateful evening I had successfully broken my dry patch, I’m kind of a legend. Unfortunately, the fellow participant if you will, was quite good. Now when someone is quite good at something what would you say?

KATIE interacts with the audience and riffs on their response.

Yip, nice, normal, congratulations. Pretty vanilla though. I however opted for something quite quirky.

Long pause.

(low whisper) Crikey. Yeah, the word I opted for during sex was crikey. An Australian safari-man had taken over my body and there was nothing I could do to stop him. I said crikey 27 times in the space of two hours, I know this because I started counting it in my head after about six.

Story doesn’t stop there. As the night came to a climax, I opted for my longest, most extended, most satisfactory crikey of the night. I said crikey as I orgasmed (ad-lib with audience).

Story doesn’t stop there. As he left the premises, I decided I needed to justify my crikey-gasm. As he left, I chuckled him some finger guns, and said, ‘Hey, I bet you’ve never gone to bed with Steve Irwin before.’

Crikey.

Figure 32: Script Excerpt 6 (Hill & Glucina, Horny and Confused 7).

Excerpt 6 is a good example of self-deprecating humour that did not rest on a hyper-masculine or hyper-feminine markers to succeed. The humour of this anecdote rested on the sexual repression caused by my childhood upbringing. As I continued to create sets out of this topic, I realised it was causing me harm. By making fun of the things that had caused anxiety towards my sexual performance, and the effects of engrained guilt I felt as if I was not speaking truthfully to these experiences. It is highly unlikely however that the audience would have been able to infer this that I was uncomfortable with making myself the butt of the joke. Any sign of reservations was masked carefully by my nonchalant, masculine-inflected persona created through the tactics discussed above.

As I was aware of the effects of self-deprecating humour, I needed to monitor my own emotional threshold and well-being. However, the validation of the audience laughing dismissed the harm caused by speaking nonchalantly to my trauma as a necessary sacrifice. This is the most critical general finding of this thesis - comedians should monitor their own well-being through editing the content they allow an audience to laugh at, relying solely on their audience's perception of them to feel validated is both harmful and unsustainable. If it wasn't human nature to seek validation, then this solution could prove successful - this is however, an obviously inefficient and unrealistic goal. This solution oversimplifies the potential of comics not recognising the harm of their comedic choices (especially if those choices are made subconsciously). Can a comic focus on feminine failure if she simply finds it funny? If the answer is yes, then is she exempt from the effect it might have on her audience?

KATIE

So yeah, I don't really know what I'm looking for in a woman, being bi-sexual sort of divides my flirting game into two very distinct characters. I really do struggle with the concept of masculinity and femininity that the patriarchy are so fond of, for example I like to wear dungarees and often walk with my crotch first, but I also enjoy things that are considered traditionally feminine like floral arrangements and scented candles and getting paid less for the same work. Which, don't get me wrong none of those things should define masculinity or femininity, and it's something I'm working on but there's no doubt that I still struggle not to see myself as two separate humans.

For example, when I approach women, I suddenly put on this air of masculine nonchalance. I think I want to be the mysterious beer chinking Swedish woman, but obviously you'd have to swap out the accent with some bogan kiwi, but I'm sure there's a market for that. If I see a woman that I think, is you know, incredibly... beautiful intellectually, I'll switch from my usual approach of, 'oh my gosh hey!! So nice to finally meet you!!' You know, Glassons/Jays-Jays worker type dialogue. To, hey 'what's up?'

KATIE chooses a member of the audience to uncomfortably flirt with.

However, when I flirt with dudes, all of sudden I find myself doing the pre- 2000's Disney princess voice, sort of angelic and desperate mixed together, "you study politics? Wow, you must know a lot about the world.

KATIE starts to giggle, CHARLOTTE says 'no' until she thinks the giggle is correct.

And, then I'll go to touch his arm in a 'oh my goodness, you're so funny' But guys it's so important that you pause just before you make contact, so he has time to tense his bicep.

Short pause.

I also really struggle to have sex with men, crikey. Because at this stage, I'm receiving something the entire time during sex, and that doesn't sit well with me, because I've always known that I am a giver not a taker, I'll stay it again, "I'm a giver, not a taker.", Say it with me, 'I'm a giver, not a taker.'

KATIE gets the audience to say, 'I'm a giver not a taker' with her until she feels validated.

Figure 33: Script Excerpt 7 (Hill & Glucina, Horny and Confused 6).

I have included this excerpt in my analysis as it does not focus on feminine failure, as some of my other punchline heavy excerpts do, but acts as a conversation on my struggle with gender identity. The humour derives from the extremity of my masculine and feminine personas and their contrast against one another. Prior to the self-deprecating description of these personas, I suggest the reason I feel I need to belong to one binary is due to the traditional and patriarchal definition of masculinity and femininity. By claiming, "it's still something I struggle with", I remain true to my lived experience. The final section of the set, diffuses the tension by requesting the audience recite back to me that, "I'm a giver, not a taker". By giving the audience permission to disregard the previous parts of the set and focus on tension diffuser, I subconsciously lessened the significance of the previous conversation.

Despite discussing my struggles with the patriarchal expectation of masculinity and femininity expectations, I still gave masculine traits precedence deeming them having more comedic potential.

Conclusion

Ironic overinflation in comedy presents itself as a more nuanced form of self-deprecating humour. In a culture where 'showing off' is discouraged, ironic 'showing off' is a potential solution, this is at the mercy however of the comic celebrating their successes. The adoption of an ironic masculine bravado inspired by the Flight of the Conchords (as the male example, but also the quintessential example) was not in this instance the redefinition of female performance. The difference was that I was not adopting masculine traits to expand the binary definition of femininity, but to avoid the patriarchal expectations of female performance.

Charlotte's ability to create inward and outward targeting comedy allowed her to speak to feminine failure without making it the punchline. In excerpts, 4, 5 and 6, I used self-deprecating anecdotes with reference to my feminine failure to ensure the target of my comedy remained inwards. The additional use of commonplace kiwi references with a heightened southland accent increased my likeability factor for an older demographic. The salient difference is that these choices were not made to

make our feminist agenda more accessible, but to avoid any potential criticism from the audience. In excerpt 7, I use self-deprecating humour but hold the patriarchy responsible, however unlike Charlotte I released tension by undercutting my political discourse – which accumulatively lessened the significance of my feminist agenda. Comparatively, Charlotte’s choices enable a genre of humour that doesn’t target oneself entirely but speaks truthfully to one’s experiences, thus it is less likely to harm to the speaker. Strategies used to increase the likeability of comedy should be used with the intention to promote one’s feminist agenda, not to compromise it.

Reversal language creates generalisations about the behaviour of men. In the song, “I’m so attracted to you (for no reason)”, Charlotte and I don’t solely reverse sexist humour, but make nuanced observations of micro-aggressions from truthful experiences. However, is the blanket use of ‘men’ not also an example of reversal language to the common sexist collectivising of ‘women’ (‘oi women!’ etc.) for example? The inclusion of “ya bum” was a subconscious ploy to increase the song’s palatability by releasing tension. If this choice was consciously made to prevent the alienation of some men, then it may be a necessary step for a wider understanding of our feminist agenda.

PT. II PERFORMANCE REFLECTION

Horny and Confused 2



Figure 34: *Horny and Confused 2* Poster 2021 (Researcher's own collection). Roc+ Photography.

Production Details

Show Title: *Horny and Confused 2*

Venue: BATS Studio Theatre as a part of the 2021 Comedy Festival Programme

Date: 4-8th May | 7:30pm

Show Length: 60 mins

Show synopsis:

Horny and Confused 2 merges the conventions of musical comedy, stand-up and dramatic theatre to narrate best friends, Charlotte and Katie's individual journeys of sexual discovery. This includes tales of problematic relationships, late-blooming orgasms and religious sexual repression. The show culminates with both comedians confessing to the audience that much of their content stems from trauma. Whilst creating comedy as best friends helped validate and heal their individual experiences, to leave their trauma unacknowledged would not speak authentically to its difficult origins.

Comedian, Writer and Publicist: Katie Hill
Comedian, Writer and Composer: Charlotte Glucina
Director: Austin Harrison
Producer: Beth Taylor
Lighting and Sound Operator: Jasmine Bryham

Creative Concept

The following excerpt is in the marketing pitch and media release for *Horny and Confused 2*, which includes a description of the creative concept for our 2021 production. This excerpt considers the intended effect of show on our audience and its feminist agenda.

The 2021 International Comedy Festival season of *Horny and Confused 2: The Second Cumming* will be the second show by emerging production company, *Big Estrogen Energy*. The development season of *Horny and Confused* was shown at *The New Zealand Fringe Festival* in 2020 and was nominated for 'Best Emerging Company.'

Performers, Co-founders and best friends Katie Hill and Charlotte Glucina started their University Improv and Comedy Course with no hope for their comedic abilities. However, through a joint realisation of their comedic talents, Glucina and Hill discovered that writing songs and telling embarrassing stories was the best way they could embrace the trials of femaleness and sexuality.

It is this focus on friendship, that allows the show to speak to self-deprecating humour. It is Hill and Glucina's responsibility to hold one another accountable, they will not make light of their trauma unless their laughter is their own. As an audience we grow to understand how two friends used comedy to discuss and tear apart their experiences, bringing healing through laughter and platonic intimacy.

It's 2am crying into your friends chest, it's 5am laughing so hard that you spray your adult hot chocolate all over your friend's face. Hill and Glucina are laughing so we are too, it's not a show about us, it's a show about them, and that's precisely why we're there.

(Hill & Glucina, '*Horny and Confused 2 Media Release*').

In our post-show discussion for *Horny and Confused*, Charlotte and I argued about the burden of having a feminist agenda and whether trying to 'win over' those with patriarchal opinions is a necessary goal. We concluded that, at this early stage in our careers, our attempts to win over those audience members was a form of self-protection (to avoid heckling or negative feedback). Charlotte suggested that our feminist agenda is not any less valid because it is targeted for like-minded individuals. This is the critical discovery of *Horny and Confused 2*.

Performance Reflection

This reflection focuses on the opening night of *Horny and Confused 2*, as per the video recording attached to this thesis. After the development season of *Horny and Confused* in March 2020, Charlotte and I began performing regular gigs in the local Wellington comedy scene. The Wellington crowd is generally an eclectic mix of those who work in the corporate sector looking for a laugh after their 9-5 shifts, and other comedians, or performers. In the mixed bill gigs, it is more likely the audience will reflect an age range of 30-50's. Due to our regular gig work, *Horny and Confused 2* drew in crowds that also reflected this eclectic demographic mix. But, considering our age, and the content/marketing of our show, this came as a surprise to Charlotte and myself. Unlike *Horny and Confused*, we felt the feminist discourse in *Horny and Confused 2* was created with our own demographic in mind, and therefore would not be as appealing to older demographics. Knowing that this may reduce laughter from approximately 1/3 of our audience raised our anxiety, causing our on-stage personas to fluctuate each night we performed.

During a discussion on our revised feminist agenda, I confessed to Charlotte that to offset her feminine appearance I presented myself as unauthentically masculine. For example, I refused to wear red lipstick, curl my hair or wear anything that could be read as traditionally feminine. By playing to the contrasting definitions of masculinity and femininity, our duo had an obvious contrast that I believed the audience could find familiarity with. I was not playing to masculine traits because they closely aligned to my gender identity, but because I feared the patriarchal perception that femininity is not synonymous with funniness. To counteract this, Charlotte suggested I gradually start to embrace the things I had previously rejected, gig by gig. Within a year, I was wearing red-lipstick, curled hair and a tight red mesh top.²⁶ However, when getting ready for the opening night, I became frustrated that my curls looked unnatural (and they were). By having tight unnatural curls, I worried the audience could not view my comedic persona as 'chill' or nonchalant because my appearance looked 'high maintenance'. Intriguingly, my solution was to make sure the curls looked almost doll-like, in hindsight I realise that by existing in the extremes, in this case the hyper-feminine, my appearance could be viewed as a comedic choice, and not a natural inclination. As Brynley Stent discusses in her interview, by pushing my persona to the extreme, it is more obviously understood to be a persona. The audience is free to infer that my persona does not represent my entire personality and that I can reveal other sides of myself (that

mainstream audiences might find more appealing). Although curling my hair was a micro decision compared other larger ideas in the show, it reveals how the patriarchal expectations of female performance were deeply engrained in my subconscious choices.

Another conscious choice for our second season was to embrace our ego on stage. In *Horny and Confused*, the lines Charlotte and I played as intentionally egotistical gained loud laughs from the audience. For example, in Charlotte's solo song, "Dating in twenty-twenty" she switched out the line, "it's got nothing to do with gender roles, I'm just broke" with, "I'm just, worth it" much to the audience's delight. Considering my tenuous relationship with self-deprecating humour, we felt that adopting hyper-egotism rejected the concept of putting ourselves down for the enjoyment of others. Ego presents itself as a feminist alternative to self-deprecation, defying the expectations of patriarchal femininity through confidence without disclaimers or apologies. As the following examples dictate, we did not want to embrace ego to overinflate ourselves, but to use irony in a distinctly feminist way, compared to our previous remarks equating ourselves to the 'humble' self-deprecating Flight of the Conchords (see p. 7).

KATIE

Hi, I'm Katie and recently people have been telling me I'm quite egotistical but I kind of think that's for me to decide, but yeah that's Katie with an 'ie' by the way and I won't be staying around long afterwards - so get in while you can. |

Figure 35: Performance Example 1 (Hill & Glucina, Horny and Confused 2 5).

KATIE

This next song has been a crowd favourite at all the gigs we have done in the past year, so if you don't like it that's on you.

CHARLOTTE

Well, I think it's time to do what we do best Katie.

KATIE

Musical Comedy? You may have seen it throughout the show.

CHARLOTTE

And it is what we do best.

Figure 37: Performance Example 3 (*Hill & Glucina, Horny and Confused 2 23*).

In these examples, the declaration of ourselves as talented is not said satirically. When we likened the Flight of the Conchords in *Horny and Confused*, “as the male versions of us” the comparison was so unrealistic it was obviously satirical. Despite not relying on ironic overinflation in these examples, the jokes still succeeded (as proven by regular laughs from our audiences) because our ego was presented so overtly. However, the reviewer disagreed, declaring that our “confidence border [ed] on smugness” (Adams). Although his comment speaks truths to our intention to be egotistical, the connotation of ‘smugness’ provokes a relevant discussion on the relationship female-identifying comics have with their ego. In accordance with my hypothesis, the culture of tall poppy syndrome in New Zealand forcibly encourages those in the spotlight to present themselves as humble or else they risk appearing unlikeable. For female-identifying comics, I theorise that TPS acts as a patriarchal ideology which ensures women downplay their success to meet the patriarchal definition of femininity. Our decision to embrace ego defies this theory, yet according to the reviewer it made us unlikeable. However, for female-identifying and femme-identifying persons from our age bracket, our unapologetic and unironic ego was inspiring.²⁷ As comedy was unfairly historically dominated by men, the male ego is not often challenged but accepted, by presenting the female ego without satire, the comic is asserting their rightful position on stage. Additionally, femaleness is put on pedestal and not rendered the butt of the joke

The differing receptions towards our ego provoked more discussion between Charlotte and I about who our comedy was for. Previously, Charlotte concluded that there are “some opinions that aren’t malleable enough to reach” (“Horny and Confused Post-Show Discussion”, 18:19- 21 & 19:48-52). To try and change the hearts and minds of potentially problematic audience members through placating tactics (such as self-deprecation, overinflation and palatable personas) Charlotte and I, more so myself, felt we were sacrificing our authenticity.

A song that stayed in the second season of *Horny and Confused 2* was “I’m so attracted to you (for no reason)”. The song utilises the absurdity curve to make fun of menial actions of cis men in romantic relationships. It uses large generalisations creating relatable humour that is acceptably funny as cis men are still in position of power, allowing the jokes to ‘punch up’ (see p. 8 for definition). Initially I argued that we cut the song from the second show as it risked alienating members of the audience who would benefit the most from listening (and believing in) our feminist agenda. In safe space gigs throughout the year however, this song proved to be the most popular especially amongst other female-identifying individuals. For them, the song was a relatable critique of the toxic men in their past relationships (Audience members, 15 Jan & 11 Feb 2021). As user ‘Sam’ argues in the comment section of *Crazy Ex-girlfriends* YouTube music video, “Let’s Generalise about Men” perhaps there is benefit to songs such as “I’m so attracted to you (For no reason)” to create spaces for female-identifying individuals to air their

grievances regarding the patriarchal inclinations of men, especially if that space is a comedic one- which is naturally less divisive than other performance sectors.

When I observed that approximately one third of our opening night audience was from a 30-50's age bracket, with approximately one half of those members being men, I slipped back into back into a masculine persona, heightening my 'South Island' colloquial drawl and lowering my voice. At the end of opening night, the strangers who remained in the foyer to praise our performance were other female-identifying individuals in their early twenties. I was confronted with the epiphany that my natural inclination was to placate those in the room who may not resonate with the stories told on stage rather than play to those who our comedy was written for. The reviewer, who was not from my demographic argued that our songs, such as the "Orgasm Train" and "Katie the Horny Preteen" which narrate personal stories about female pleasure were "not much more than teenage-y titillation" (Adams). This frustrated Charlotte and I, and some of our female-identifying audience, as the comments seemed to quickly dismiss the songs which narrated a naive exploration of female pleasure as "undergraduate" and incapable of qualifying as mature comedy.²⁸ In the "orgasm train" Charlotte sings about her delayed journey to achieving female pleasure and satisfaction,

[Charlotte, sung]

I heeded Katie's advice

Pause touched and engaged just right

I felt the pulsing in my mind

I felt the shivers down my spine

[orgasming] And I wondered where this had been my whole life

[Katie, spoken]

Do you ever think it's because we don't get taught about clitoral stimulation in school or the media, and your ex-boyfriends were too selfish to be up to the task so you never really had the tools to get there until you met me?

Figure 38: Performance Example 4 (Hill & Glucina, Horny and Confused 2 23).

Charlotte felt that the reviewer didn't consider that, due to the patriarchal stigma surrounding female masturbation, the discovery of self-pleasure for some female-identifying persons does not begin when they are teenagers. The reviewer argued that the jokes about menstrual cups (see p. 24 of *Horny and Confused 2*) were "closer to the mark" (Adams). Although the intention of the reviewer is unknown here, we as a duo pondered if the reference to menstrual cups was more palatable, as it is a product more often used by adult women, not teenagers. The reviewer may have perceived menstrual cups as more transgressive than masturbation and sex, as only individuals with wombs bleed thus the joke appears deliberately exclusionary. In comparison to topics of female-masturbation, the reviewer implies a product used by adult women is more capable of producing nuanced humour.

The reviewers' comments made us consider if we rely too much on shock-factor in our comedy to produce humour, Lisa Schlesinger (see p. 37) argues that too often female-identifying comics rely on the shock of talking about sex (as this historically was considered improper) to elicit laughter. She was quickly shot down by her fellow comics who argued that men talk about sex too, and it is not considered shocking, women should be allowed to talk about vaginas, periods and sex if it regularly intersects with their lives. However, this does not mean these jokes should be exempt from being well-crafted and well-delivered. Due to its title, Charlotte and I felt our show was automatically presumed to rely on shock-factor. In the BATS theatre dressing room, three comedians also performing that same week asked us if we were the 'sex show'. The title of show was initially created not because it was attention-grabbing, but because it reflected us as best friends being both horny and confused. We quickly realised however that the premise of two female-identifying comedians making a show called 'Horny and Confused' created a difficult paradox towards the perception of our humour. As the concept of women or femme-identifying individuals discussing sex boldly and openly is still considered an act of defiance against the patriarchy, it is immediately presumed to have a political undercurrent. There is an opposing stigma that because it seen as shocking, women only ever talk about sex and therefore it is an unoriginal premise. The reviewer commented that the show was not as "edgy or controversial" as we intended it to be, yet it was not our sole intention to be controversial, simplistically we wanted to speak to our delayed experiences of female sexuality and how it intersected with our friendship. Arguably, the show was 'edgy and controversial' to those who it was intended for: people like Charlotte and I who had delayed sexual awakenings. Comedy created by two female-identifying comedians in their early for twenties for other female and femme-identifying individuals in their twenties is not any less valid because it does make other demographics laugh. For other audiences' members who also went through their sexual exploration later in life due to sexual repression or patriarchal stigmas, the show was "the most relatable thing ever" and this is the salient finding of *Horny and Confused 2*. By night three, of *Horny and Confused 2*, Charlotte and I were playing to ourselves as we saw *us* represented in the audience, I did not slip into my masculine persona or hyper-feminine persona where femininity would be rendered the butt of the joke, I rejected self-deprecation to make myself appear likeable – I was as close to myself as stage as I ever been.

The political or personal intention of a comic can influence the delivery of their feminist agenda. During the first production of *Horny and Confused* I rendered my previous subconscious and conscious tactics to make my feminist agenda more palatable as necessary sacrifice to change the hearts and minds of my oppressors. Truthfully, I made these choices for fear of receiving negative feedback from sceptical audience members. The process and production of *Horny and Confused 2* taught me that my comedy was not any less professional because it was for young female-identifying and femme-identifying individuals who already believed in my feminist agenda. The most essential tool gained from this autoethnographic research was my ability to recognise what comedic decisions were influenced by patriarchal conditioning. By analysing these decisions, I can now better contribute to informed conversations about

the delivery of feminist agendas in comedy, allowing fellow comedians to make an educated decision on what is best for them.

CONCLUSION

In post-World War II New Zealand, popular comic voices, though distinctly New Zealand in their mention of common placenames, were circumscribed by the binaries of Victorian gender roles. On one end of the spectrum was the laconic-speaking, often terse farmer or bushman, and on the other, a nagging, domesticated housewife: notably in John Clarke and Ginette McDonald's 1970's creation of Fred Dagg and Lynn of Tawa. Clarke and McDonald's ability to make humour out their character's mundane lives allowed their out-of-character [‘real’] selves to be perceived as humble in the public eye. The phenomenon of Cultural Cringe promoted self-deprecating humour as a tool for proving ‘self-awareness’ of New Zealand's perceived inferiority to their international neighbours. A satirising of mundanity and awkwardness became the key markers of New Zealand humour. Coined by Nicky Perry in 1998, *Antipodean Camp* cast the ordinary and everyday as extraordinary and entertaining (qtd. Bannister, “Bush Camp” 7). *Aficionados of Antipodean Camp*, the Topp Twins utilised themes of rurality and kiwiana, allowing their comedy and their own queer and feminist agendas to reach a wider range of demographics.

Another iconic duo, *The Flight of the Conchords*, popularised the use of ‘ironic overinflation’, as coined in this thesis. Irony overinflation acts a subgenre to self-deprecating humour, where bravado or confidence is presented in excess so it can be quickly exposed as overinflation. It is an example of appearance versus. reality, except the appearance does not strive to disguise reality, rather appearance and reality work in tandem to create a palatable level of confidence. This allowed the *Flight of Conchords* to maintain their reputation of humbled, unaffected kiwis who still struggled with the same anxieties as their audience (insert source).

The live comedy sphere of the 1990s was dominated by masculine voices, causing a reactionary influx of female-identifying comics to emerge: their stand-up acts operating as ‘acts of resistance’ to misogyny and sexism. Yet, existing in the male dominated comedy arena presented a paradox for female-identifying comedians. Despite many of these comics seeking to reject and subvert popular misogynist and patriarchal comedic trends, they first had to work within these patriarchal systems to gain likability. This thesis claims that to do so, some female-identifying comics adopted self-deprecating tactics as a defence mechanism. Furthermore, the culture of Tall Poppy Syndrome in New Zealand also demanded comics maintain a persona of ‘humble kiwi’ despite the inherently egotistical conventions of stand-up comedy. Self-deprecation allowed marginalised comics to equalise themselves with their audience by emphasising their own inadequacies. Additional sub-genres of self-deprecating humour enabled female-

identifying comics to increase the palatability of their comedy for mainstream audiences or those who would seek to ‘tall poppy’ them.

An analysis of the literature suggested that Tall Poppy Syndrome ensures women downplay their success as the patriarchal definition of femininity (subordination, docility and self-sacrifice) would request. For female-identifying comics, with likeability often determining their success, they engage in self-deprecation to both appear humble yet also remind their audience of their feminine failure.

This was confirmed through auto-ethnographic and phenomenological research analysis on the performance and reflections of New Zealand female comics operating within a comedy industry, within a known culture of frequent sexual assault and harassment. This research confirmed that TPS, as a patriarchal ideology, has an impact on the subconscious and or conscious choices of New Zealand’s self-deprecating female-identifying comedians in contemporary performance. The research identified the following placating strategies used by marginalised comics

The ‘tension’ disclaimer marks the presence of a marginalised comic as unconventional. The comic may feel compelled to disclaim their presence for fear of their audience being sceptical towards humour not from the ‘quintessential’ cis-male perspective. This thesis suggests that marginalised comics actively choose to withhold this tension, forcing the audience to release it themselves.

The hyper-feminine persona marks femininity or feminine failure as the butt of the joke. This is achieved by the comic imitating a clearly performative high-pitched and ‘whiney’ voice such as the typical ‘Valley girl’, ‘Dumb Blonde’ /bimbo stereotypes to intentionally sound annoying or stupid. The satirical use of this persona still has ample comedic potential but should be used with caution. To suggest that comedy by female-identifying or femme-identifying individuals has to associate itself with stupidity and sexual attraction renders femininity as the ‘funny’ aspect and not the comic themselves.

The adoption of masculine traits is used by female-identifying comics to appeal to the patriarchal expectation of comedy as inherently masculine. This does not include female-identifying comics who may naturally exude qualities traditionally categorised as masculine. As with the hyper-feminine persona, the masculine persona can be used satirically to great comedic effect but should be abandoned if used to appeal to an audience with cis-masculine preferences.

Ironic Overinflation presents confidence in excess so it is obviously satiric to their audience, thus denying female-identifying comics genuine self-praise. Female-identifying comics should feel encouraged to embrace and assert their talent unironically, even if it makes the dominant power group uncomfortable. By doing so they are reclaiming ego on stage, rejecting its masculine roots and subverting the expectations of patriarchal femininity.

Neutral targeting is the act of creating humour where the target of the joke faces both inwards and outwards, thus towards oneself (self-deprecation), the audience or a larger power at be (in this case the patriarchy). Neutral targeting as coined in this thesis allows the comic to maintain an equal rapport with their audience as they do not feel directly targeted. Ideally, the comic directs the target of the joke towards a larger hierarchical system such as the patriarchy in which both the comic and the audience become complicit but are not directly disparaged.

From this research I have concluded that, if the comic does not feel the need to re-evaluate their comedy, they should not feel inclined to analyse their work. If, however, their comedic choices affect the wellbeing of others by disparaging their own marginalised community they should consider reversing the target of the humour. The political and personal agenda may determine the way in which they approach feminist discourse in their comedy. If the comic believes they need to make their comedy more palatable so their feminist agenda reaches their oppressors, then this is not to be critiqued. The comic may continually seek to evaluate the effects of their self-deprecation and should never compromise their own mental well-being. In opposition, if the comic wants to remove any tactics that would increase palatability for a wider demographics and just speak to their demographic this is also not to be critiqued. Both choices reflect informed decisions, and both can reflect powerful, inspiring comedy.

Through this research I have also enhanced my own practice as a comedian. Moving forward, I intend to keep provoking informed discussions in the comedy industry, so that female-identifying comics can better identify their subconscious and conscious choices.

ENDNOTES

¹ The term female-identifying is not used in this thesis to exclude non-binary or gender fluid comics. However, as femininity is a key subject, this thesis may apply more to individuals who identify with these terms. This thesis does not presume that AFAB (assigned female at birth) non-binary or gender fluid comics would wish to be included in discussions of femininity, particularly its patriarchal definition (unless explicit permission is given). In Chapter Three the joke examples from non-binary comics are not directly analysed alongside discourse on femininity.

² For examples of academic discourse dedicated to diasporic and indigenous humour see Ray Lillis's 'Funny Brown Guys: Comedy and Race in New Zealand, 2007' & 'Black Comedy: Indigenous Humour in Australia and New Zealand, 2007'.

³ Although Chapter 1's historical overview is necessary in determining the New Zealand comic voice, to gain a complete account of the history of New Zealand comedy, I suggest *Funny as* for prior reading.

⁴ The account of this story is taken from the George Grey's manuscript, 'Nga Mahi a nga Tupuna' which was dictated by Māori – it is named, 'te patunga e kae' (Royal 102).

⁵ The unadulterated comedic performances of Maori in pre-colonial society and its subsequent effect on Maori in post-colonial should be investigated in future paths of research.

⁶ Despite the 1986 film, *Crocodile Dundee* securing itself as a box-office hit, it denigrated the Indigenous Australian peoples and revealed a questionable code of ethics (Ruth & Crawford 146). Regardless of Dundee's proposed kinship with Indigenous Australians, he was depicted as the heir to their special relationship with nature which appears to reward him with the problematic ability to speak on their behalf see scene at (11:15- 12:50) and (29:10- 33:30).

⁷ Author, Nic Holmes is a Victoria University of Wellington Media Studies Academic.

⁸ The use of femininity in this sentence is not to confine menstruation as a female-only issue, or to limit Matafeo's period story as purely indicative of her career as female-identifying comic- rather it reflects the ongoing ghettoising of stories told by female-identifying comics.

⁹ Hyland analyses how Athletes Ryan Bailey and Usain Bolt utilise the power of the performative to create 'something that is realer than [the] 'reality'', presented by the curated and white-centric Olympic games.

¹⁰ In the 100 interviews conducted by Phillip Matthews and Paul Horan, 34 were women. 10 of which appeared reluctant to admit they were professional comedians.

¹¹ For definitions of the key terminology mentioned in this thesis please see the glossary on page 7.

¹² The author of 'femme resistance' Rhea Hoskin is a femme, queer-lesbian – her articles are intended to investigate femme as theory, and in particular its intersection as a label for queer, feminine women. Her definitions of patriarchal femininity and femmephobia speak to the binary definition of femininity that has an effect on most femme-identifying women, the parts of her analysis that solely describes the discrimination that femme queer women face is only discussed alongside the auto-ethnographical parts which intersect with myself and other queer femme- identifying women. This is to reiterate the intersectional purpose of this thesis, and the acknowledgement that conflating the experiences of women disregards their essential differences.

¹³ The 'valley girl' accent is a linguistic stereotype associated with upper-class women in Southern California. The nasal tone, and repetition of, 'oh my god' and 'like' reflect their position as 'young, shallow and materialistic' (Pratt & D'Onofrio 287).

¹⁴ See Peter Moskowitz's online opinion piece, 'The Nanette Problem' as an example.

¹⁵ The paradoxicalities being self-deprecating humour's ability to both subvert and reinforce patriarchal and misogynistic viewpoints.

¹⁶ See Episode One of TV3's *Funny Girls* where Rose Matafeo considers the irony of the show's title sounding like it was decided by men.

¹⁷ Read Ruby Esther's, "I am going to be raped" and Rachel Healy's Guardian article, "I've had men rub their genital against me" for their detailed account of the current level of sexual assault in the comedy industry.

¹⁸ Out of the 5 mixed bill comedy nights selected for this research, 3 out of 18 of male comics used upward inflections frequently, with 9 of the male comics employing it occasionally (3-5 times).

¹⁹ For future research on audience reception, it may be conducive to create a method which measures the amount of time it takes for an audience member to trust a comic's persona with gender-identity as a target variable.

²⁰ The reception of the audience or 'reception theory' though intrinsically linked to this thesis is not the purpose of this study and should be considered a path for future research.

²¹ *Snort* is a Comedy-Improvisation Troupe who have been performing regular shows in Auckland's Basement Theatre since 2013.

²² Hugo Grrrl Gigs was formed in 2016 by 2018 House of Drag, Hugo Grrrl who is the stage name of comedian and producer, George Fowler. The Humorous Arts is a charitable trust dedicated to stand-up comedy in the Wellington region founded by Jerome Chandrahansen, Jim Stanton and Matiaha Paku in 2010.

²³ *A Comedy Show with Good Comedians in it* was created to encourage gender-diverse line-ups (not just female-identifying comics).

²⁴ The use of 'if you do' was to ensure that those comedians who do not identify with or wish to speak to femininity were not presumed to because they identified as female.

²⁵ See Mae Martin's set in the Russell Howard Show, 'Dating men'. Martin discusses how no one believes she has dated men "because I look like a member of One Direction" (2:53-57, 2017). The topic of androgynous female-identifying comics being presumed funnier than femme-identifying comics should be researched further in academic comedy discourse.

²⁶ The physical additions to my appearance of red lip-stick, mesh top and curled hair should not be considered as the only markers of femininity, rather they represent my own interpretation of owning my femininity.

²⁷ The claim that Charlotte and I's use of female ego was praised by audience members is based off comments we received after the show in the BATS Theatre foyer.

²⁸ The claim that some audience members disagreed with the review and its dismissal of female masturbation is based off conversations in the foyer of BATS theatre.

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APPENDICES

APPENDIX A: SAMPLE INTERVIEW/QUESTIONNAIRE

“Tall Poppy Syndrome & Patriarchal Femininity: An Auto-ethnographic Investigation into New Zealand’s Comedians”

Your name:

Age:

Ethnicity:

Gender (Please circle) :

Female

Male

Non-binary

I don’t identify with any of these

Prefer not to say

1. How long have been doing comedy professionally in New Zealand?
2. Can you describe any situations where your gender identity has had an impact on the audience's response to your performance?
3. Do you think that Ego plays a role in comedy?
4. How have you negotiated or challenged egotism in your performances?
5. Do you believe Tall Poppy Syndrome still exists within New Zealand’s comedy culture?
6. If you do, how do you approach discussing or performing femininity on stage?
7. When using self-deprecation in your comedy, what do you tend to self-deprecate about?