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‘Mr G is deffinatly bringin’ Sexy back’: Characterizing Chris Lilley’s YouTube Audience

Not so many people watch television anymore, but plenty of people watch television programs, either by downloading their favorite shows on to mobile devices, purchasing box sets, or watching clips on file repository sites such as YouTube. Offering ‘official’ fan channels that encourage comments and display images of selected shows or performers, YouTube and other such file sharing sites provide free publicity for media producers. They also invite different forms of viewer and fan engagement with shows, which I will outline. In this essay I look at the YouTube iteration of Australian comedian Chris Lilley’s recent TV comedies, asking how consuming Lilley’s material on YouTube allows for different forms of participation than the experience of watching Lilley’s work on broadcast TV. How might the uploaded clips and attached comments foster a form of entertainment different from that offered by broadcast TV? What themes emerge in user comments, what is the nature of the pleasure that fans get from Lilley’s shows? How might the YouTube material entice – or put off – audiences who have not yet encountered Lilley’s work? Apart from how they invite particular audience experiences, the YouTube uploads and especially user comments perform a valuable ethnographic function for media researchers. Simply, they evidence a show’s appeal to fan cultures and communities that tend not to be accounted for in critical and theoretical accounts. Proceeding overwhelmingly via textual analysis, studies of Lilley’s comedies have failed to recognize the diversity of fan bases that contribute to his popularity, relying on evidence drawn from textual mechanisms divorced from considerations of audience consumption. The question of specific, individuated, fan practice is not high in media satire studies generally, I would argue, in spite of various claims made about satire’s

efficacy and in turn real world effects.¹ Possibly scholars have wanted to legitimate what they feel is a marginal object of study, but such a de-contextualized approach may wind up projecting an idealized audience that does not include the full diversity of Lilley's viewership. In an earlier essay about Chris Lilley, I noted the relative popularity of Lilley's female characters with professional critics, who characterized them (especially the private schoolgirl, Ja'mie King) as easily performed, well-scripted, and credible. While this approach established Lilley's critical value, it left unexamined the pleasures available to 'ordinary', non-professional viewers. Lilley's humor, it has been suggested, holds special appeal for a youthful and possibly male viewership (Radio National 2011). Of what value is the humor for such viewers? With particular focus on the popular female and gender non-conformist characters Ja'mie and Mr. G. respectively, my approach in this essay is offered as a corrective: what do YouTube users enjoy about these particular characters, and how does their enjoyment differ from – or align with – critical assessments?

One of Australia's eminent contemporary television satirists, Chris Lilley creates TV that is capable of highlighting the best and the worst of contemporary Australian culture. Sending up the gamut of cultural institutions from public education to youth services to the contest for 'Australian of the Year', Lilley's comedies extend the purposeful tradition of satirist John Swift, who famously proposed that poor Irish parents ought to consider selling their children as food. Just as Swift exhorted an awareness of the absurdity of economic maxims of the time, likewise Lilley's satire has drawn attention to the impropriety of global attitudes to fame and celebrity and the inequities of the public school system. The purposeful understanding of satire has become particularly visible in the first decade of the twenty-first century, in attention given to fake public affairs shows like *The Colbert Report* and *The Daily Show* and to websites like *The Onion*. Noting the decline of faith in modern media forms, news, and journalism amongst educated, middle-class young adults, analyses have assessed such shows in positive terms, claiming that the enlightening and even activist function they serve replaces the function of traditional news organs (Day 2011; Jones 2010; Colletta 2009). Although Lilley's work does not earn credit for such civic accomplishments, he has gained a domestic reputation as a creator and writer of award-winning shows and been praised for creating some of the 'edgiest' enlightening comedy in contemporary Australia. Following from this acclaim, Lilley has been the topic of several scholarly studies, most of which have

¹ There are some exceptions, largely in the area of cross-cultural comedy studies. See Beeden and de Bruin (2010); Bore (2010).

situated his satire squarely within the discourses of comedy theory. Speculating about the mechanisms that allow audiences to revel in jokes that normally would not get past an internal censor, Lisa Bode for example claims it is the perceived ‘gap’ between Lilley’s own attitudes and the attitudes of his characters that, among other things, enables viewers to laugh. Functioning much the same as a reaction shot in the conventional sitcom works to draw audience attention to the fact that a social rule has been broken, character identity and actor identity in Lilley’s shows intersect and diverge in complex ways, to draw audience attention to the fact that transgression has taken place (2008, 140). Through this gap, Bode claims, the momentary permission to transgress is created, without which the comedy either falls flat or creates ire. In other words, Lilley makes us laugh at blunders, while never becoming the ‘author’ of the blunder, himself (Erhart 2013, 5).

Clarifying further how Lilley’s satire works, Marguerite O’Hara maintains that it is socially unacceptable attitudes of racism, sexism, and self-importance, rather than differently-positioned individuals themselves, that are the butt of his jokes. Praising Lilley for bringing media attention to the plight of teachers in schools, O’Hara writes: ‘The criticism that the series [*Summer Heights High*] makes fun of disabled and ethnic students, and public schools in general, seems to be quite wrong; it is the characters whose attitudes are the butt of the jokes and yes, they are all there in schools’ (2007, 72). With such a comment O’Hara makes clear the distinction between conventional, unreconstructed ‘ethnic’ jokes and the humor that, in *Summer Heights High*, results from Ja’mie’s blighted attitude to refugees. While approaches such as Bode’s and O’Hara’s explain the complex mix of scorn, laughter, delight in taboo-breaking, and un-ease that characterizes some viewing experiences, they tend to essentialize the pleasures offered by Lilley and possibly cringe television as a whole.² In an article assessing how diverse audiences perceive satirist Stephen Colbert’s political affiliation, Le Marre, Landreville, and Beam (2007) assert that both audiences with conservative views and audiences with liberal views believe Colbert’s allegiances to line up with their own, in other words, that audiences pick out what they want when they consume satirical comedy. Although no comparable study exists of Australian satire, if La Marre et al are correct, it would mean moments in Lilley’s comedies that are viewed as ‘critical’ by reviewers and academics could be utilized quite differently by others. In other words, what is

² ‘Cringe’ is an Australian colloquial term that, when applied to entertainment, describes performances or events whose principal purpose is to make the audience cringe with discomfort. On ‘cringe television’, see McFarlane (2009); Erhart (2013).

needed are studies of audience pleasures drawn from data other than the texts themselves or critical appraisals of those texts.

From Audience to YouTube Fan

Interest in the 'audience' and its ability both to make meaning and add value to the scholarly enterprise, originates in work emanating from the Birmingham School of Cultural Studies and in research of scholars such as Janice Radway, Ien Ang, John Fiske and others. In her influential study of the American TV show *Dallas*, Ien Ang, for instance, analyzed written responses of forty-two individuals to the show. In what was at the time a significant turn in media studies (then dominated by film studies), Ang asserted the importance of the letter-writers' experience and in turn the reciprocity between the 'producers' and the 'consumers' of the show. Claiming that the viewers needed to be seen as something other than the 'passive victim[s] of the deceptive message of soap operas' (1985, 119), Ang countered the idea that the meaning of a text could be derived via an analysis of the text alone. In doing so, she prioritized the contribution of the 'concrete social and cultural context in which the programs function' (121). While not ethnographic in methodology, John Fiske similarly asserted the significance of the complexity of social relations in analyses of TV texts. He wrote: "'viewing,'" then is an active process that brings to television the social relations of the viewer (his/her point of view) and the material situation: viewing television news will be quite different for the woman who is cooking the family meal than for the man slumped in an armchair in front of the set' (1987, 17). In so doing, both Ang and Fiske highlighted the importance of the audience to the interpretive exercise, introduced the idea of TV as polysemic, and took seriously the ability of audiences to contribute productively to cultural discourses and processes in ways that had previously been ignored.

In these initial formulations, the term 'audience' was key; the idea of the 'fan' did not achieve critical recognition until 1992, when Henry Jenkins's *Textual Poachers* appeared. Occupying a more specific, visible, and dedicated category than 'audience' in critical media literatures, fans are often associated with deviance, abnormality, and extremism in popular understandings. Fan 'acts,' we should remember, include Mark Chapman's shooting of John Lennon, the 2001 trampling of 120 people in the soccer stadium in Accra, and the death of football fan Jiang Xiaoshan in 2012 after going eleven nights without sleep while watching the World Cup. Fandom is furthermore associated with addiction, as made clear in Jenkins's 'Introduction' to Fans, Bloggers, and Gamers: 'Hello. My name is Henry. I am a fan' (1). In

spite of these negative connotations, the significance of fandom to both the critical and later the commercial enterprise cannot be underestimated. A precursor to Jenkins's *Textual Poachers* is his 1988 article 'Star Trek Rerun, Reread, Rewritten: Fan Writing as Textual Poaching'. In it, Jenkins offers a counter to what he calls the prevailing stereotype of media consumers as cultural 'dupes', describing the powerful, imaginative, and creative ways fans re-write some of the Star Trek stories in production methods that include largely female-produced fan-fiction and fan-zines. Oppositional in intent, such productions are offered as correctives to 'flaws' in existing shows, which result from a myriad of factors including network and producer mishandling (55).

Twenty years and several Star Trek shows later, with the advent of the Internet and subsequent explosion of DIY digital participatory culture, fan activity has seen an intensification via blogs and other sites such as tumblr, YouTube, Facebook, GetGlue, iCheckMovies, and countless other social fan sites that will no doubt emerge since this essay was submitted for publication. Due in part to the proliferation of video-creation and –editing hardware and software (webcams; Windows Movie Maker), fan expression, including the creating, posting, altering, accessing, watching, and sharing of fan objects, has never been easier. As one of the larger and older on-line video sharing social spaces, YouTube is an established and important player in the construction and fostering of this participatory culture. The fastest growing repository of user-generated images on the planet, YouTube contains a utopian potential that has not escaped critics, who have lauded its apparent ability to simultaneously serve as a forum for alternative content (Strangelove 2010; Lothian 2009; Russo 2009; Juhasz 2009), function effectively as an archive (Gehl 2009; McKee 2010), foster the creation of on-line community (Burgess and Green 2009), and contribute to civic engagement (Burgess and Green).³ In Henry Jenkins's words, YouTube is the 'epicenter' of today's participatory culture (Burgess and Green 110).

In addition to the role it has played as a repository for video objects, YouTube as I have said provides a storehouse for fan responses, via the 'comment' function. The ability of fans to explicitly shape and contribute to a show's popularity has been noted. Remarkable on the rise in popularity of a German-language soap opera, in particular the popularity of a gay-love-affair subplot, Karen Hellekson identifies YouTube as a major determinant in the growth of

³ Articles in Snickars and Vonderau's edited anthology (2009) exemplify each of these functions.

the show's fan base to include English-speaking audiences. During the period of time scrutinized by Hellekson, an English-language version of *Verbotene Liebe* (VL) was not commercially available; the only means for English-speaking audiences to become aware of the soap was through fan-posted and -subtitled clips on YouTube. Detailing the explosion in international interest in the show over a certain period of time, Hellekson identifies how fan labor, specifically editing, subtitling ('fansubbing'), and posting VL clips, allowed the show to attain international popularity. In addition to the show's highly motivated fan base, what further contributed to the show's new popularity, according to Hellekson, was the copyright holder's apparent lack of concern with carrying out clip takedown (2012, 182).

Although Lilley's work hasn't been 'fansubbed' as VL has, there is evidence that the ABC, BBC3 (where Lilley's work screened in Australia and the UK), and HBO (which co-produced Lilley's third show *Angry Boys*) contributed to Lilley's on-line presence by posting a number of YouTube videos themselves, largely in the form of para-show materials (bonus scenes, character portraits, previews, and music videos).⁴ From this it would appear that the relevant broadcast bodies are well aware of the significance of a YouTube presence for their product and expect to benefit commercially from it. As is well known, YouTube is a commercial website that was launched in 2005 and purchased by Google in 2006 for \$1.65 billion. The YouTube business model, it is usually said, consists of the delivery of audiences to advertisers (Strangelove 2010, 6; Wasko and Erickson 2009, 375; McDonald 2009). YouTube's relation to commercial media tends to be conceived in protectionist terms, that is, in terms of its interest in making sure copyright infringement does not occur. The story of US media conglomerate Viacom's billion dollar lawsuit against YouTube and Google, claiming copyright infringement (Hilderbrand 2007, quoted in Burgess and Green 32), is well known, as is the story concerning Warner Bros Music Group, which removed its music videos from YouTube after the breakdown of negotiations between the two companies (Andrejevic 2009, 407).

Some media scholars have argued for a different definition of copyright infringement and indeed alternative construction of such practices. Mark Andrejevic for example claims that what appears a localized battle over intellectual property and revenues is in fact a struggle over the question of who gets to shape the media environment according to the imperatives of

⁴ The nominal form 'YouTube' (to refer to YouTube videos) derives from Strangelove (2010).

advertising (409). Furthering the discussion about copyright infringement, Burgess and Green describe protocols put in place by YouTube that encourage users to post short clips and prevent simple file sharing of programs, such as the ten minute upload time limit. While such contributions succeed in re-positioning the activity of YouTube posters of commercial content, they leave unchallenged the idea that YouTube's revenue model is as I have said exclusively advertising-based.

What financial benefits stand to be gained from commercial media's presence on YouTube, is a discussion that is most productively taken up by Paul McDonald. Describing the relationship between content-producing multinationals and video-sharing users as one of 'hate-love-hate', McDonald details a process of fragile reciprocity by which media conglomerates like CBS tentatively entered into partnership with YouTube, providing it for a time with high quality, licensed content such as archival television (2009, 395). Perceived as positive from the perspectives of advertisers (who were reluctant to be associated with either original or unlicensed content), many such arrangements either broke down, failed to progress, or were non-renewed. Focusing solely on American consumption and litigation, McDonald describes the climate from 2007 – 2009 when YouTube was trying to operate as tense, shifting, and unstable. In his formulation, productive, lasting relations with commercial content producers have continued to be a challenge to achieve.

It is possible that the Australian Broadcasting Corporation's relationship to YouTube and specifically, its attitude to the uploading of Lilley's material has been somewhat more cooperative than the relationships between YouTube and any of the U.S. companies mentioned above. While the YouTube landscape is constantly changing, scores of clips from Lilley's shows have been available for some time for YouTube viewing as have (at the time of the initial draft of this paper) all eight episodes of *Summer Heights High*. With regards to this material, there is evidence that it did initially work, in ways similar to the VL clips described above, to lay seeds for global appreciation of what was at first exclusively Australian broadcast content. What do the YouTube clips accomplish? How and in what ways do such manifestations engage fans?

Lilley Online

At the time of this writing, typing the words ‘Chris Lilley’ into the YouTube search bar yields approximately 17,400 results.⁵ The nature and origin of these uploads is diverse, comprising interviews and award show clips, scenes from Lilley’s work on earlier shows like *The Big Bite* (including appearances of pre-*Heroes* characters such as Extreme Darren), original-footage ‘niche’ tube *homages* to Lilley and/or mashups of Lilley’s work,⁶ and a number of red herrings.⁷ The majority of results appear to link to unmanipulated clips from Lilley’s three most recent ABC shows, ripped and minimally edited; all are accompanied by user comments, typically numbering in proportion to view count. Looking principally at user comments attached to widely-viewed, unmanipulated clips featuring the characters Ja’mie and Mr. G., I want to begin outlining some of the engagement opportunities provided by the clips, as well as their recurring themes and purposes.⁸ The first thing to be said about the user comments is that, at upwards of 400 comments per YouTube, the data they provide is voluminous, chaotic, and unwieldy. As even the most casual YouTube user knows, the environment cares little for spelling or grammatical expertise, inviting a range of contradictory contributions, from single emoticons to carefully constructed paragraphs, which carefully argue an author’s position. One thread that emerges above the fray in nearly all comment trails is fan appreciation. While many expressions are general in nature, exclaiming sentiments such as ‘Chris = legend’ (chrissieImka, ‘Ja’mie King’s Panic Attack’), ‘Hilariouuuuuuus’ (MsBrittix, ‘Ja’mie King’s Panic Attack’), ‘This whole scene: Genius and so perfect in every way possible’ (xAsianRejectx, ‘Ja’mie King’s Panic Attack’), others cite very specific aspects of Lilley’s performance, traits in supporting characters that are deemed funny, and/ or moments (sometimes seconds) in a scene when humor is said to peak. Although the geographical location of most fans is either undisclosed or Australian, many

⁵ This is in line with the number of results generated by another popular Australian TV comedy, *Kath and Kim*, (17,100 results).

⁶ Niche tube examples include videos which set Lilley’s songs to original animation (‘Angry Boys S.Mouse Slap My Elbow with Animation’) and sports footage of the New Zealand rugby team (‘NZ All Blacks.Haka’).

⁷ As an activity, fan posting and commenting are subject to the same ebbs and flows as the file-sharing site itself. As YouTube’s popularity has expanded since its inception and contracted with the introduction of competitor sites, posting activity has likewise risen and fallen accordingly. For example, if we enter the phrase ‘Chris Lilley We Can Be Heroes’ as a search term, we get the lowest number of results of all three ABC shows (1,410), in accordance with the fact that the show’s domestic airing (mid-2005) pre-dates YouTube’s inception by a full five months *and* with the fact that the show went by a different name (*The Nominees*) outside of Australia. Initially airing domestically during what was arguably YouTube’s heyday in 2007, *Summer Heights High* (specifically the phrase ‘Chris Lilley Summer Heights High’), returns the highest number of results of all three shows (3,090). Given its materialization in 2011 when YouTube’s dominance was beginning to fracture, ‘Chris Lilley Angry Boys’ not surprisingly generates results squarely in the middle (2,620).

⁸ By ‘widely-viewed’ I mean YouTubes with view counts in excess of 500,000; I take ‘widely viewed’ to be one measure of popularity, if a somewhat flawed one. Burgess and Green problematize the link between popularity and the category of ‘most viewed’ (34); Juhasz also criticizes how search mechanisms prioritize ‘most viewed’ objects, further compounding the difficulty of the lesser viewed objects to gain higher view counts (146).

non-Australians make laudatory comments, self-identifying as they do: ‘Me and my pals love this show From Scotland’ (XXgav123xx, ‘Should Lesbians’); ‘dude im american and this show makes my day’ (telam92, ‘Should Lesbians’). Conversations with overseas users touch on many themes, including the merits of Australian comedy vs. comedy from overseas, the ‘Australian-ness’ of Lilley’s humor, and on occasion the perception that overseas fans may not ‘get’ Lilley’s jokes.

Henry Jenkins has noted the links between knowledge and prestige in the information economy of the net (2006, 125). Focusing specifically on YouTube, others have written about the site’s informational qualities (Lingel and Naaman 2011; Huberman et al 2009) and the intellectual capital of YouTube fans (Penrod 2010). The display of user knowledge would likewise appear a key component in the Chris Lilley YouTube user comments. Users write, ‘this show is amazing. Where can I see more???’ (guacamoleroxmysox, ‘Should Lesbians’); ‘if you live in the US its on hbo’ (ladiegreen01, ‘Should Lesbians’). There are numerous queries from viewers unfamiliar with the shows about the fact that Lilley plays all the principal characters, with more knowledgeable fans offering clarification. There are components of ‘one-up-man-ship’, meaning knowledge hierarchies are established and maintained, with ill-informed remarks attracting swift correction. Comments provide practical details regarding upcoming broadcasts, how to download shows, and how to evade international download restrictions. There are queries from non-Australians, about Australian slang such as ‘pash’ or ‘root’, that are speedily elucidated. Though at times subject to inaccuracies, most of the information seems genuinely helpful in nature, designed to assist fans achieve their ultimate and shared goal, which is the easy and prolific consumption of Lilley’s work.

Littered amongst conversations that are otherwise edifying (eg, whether Summer Heights is a public or a private school; whether Ja’mie is a ‘trannie’ or a ‘dude’; what ‘foxtel’ is; what ‘bogan’ means) are singular and seemingly unmotivated events of name-calling. In the YouTube environment, insults are frequently traded, anti-social language is prevalent, and even apparently friendly discussions are likely to be peppered with words that appear homophobic, racist, and sexist.⁹ Quips like ‘puck you sir you said put my balls on the

⁹ I am certainly not the first to note the presence of ‘strong’ language on the internet (Lindgren 2011; Suler 2004; Crystal 2001), nor the first to recognize the limitations of on-line forums as conduits for constructive dialogue (Coffey and Woolworth 2004). Indeed, at the far end of impropriety, offensive or ‘flame-like’

ground’ or ‘fuck off or I’ll get the dog wanker on you ;)’ appear practically everywhere, potentially putting off casual visitors to the clips. But do they? As genuine fans would know, such comments are not *ad hominem* in nature but referential in intent, acknowledging specific language in the scripts of *Summer Heights High* and *Angry Boys* respectively (bigchees63001, ‘PUCK YOU’; mattvideos101, ‘Angry About Angry Boys’). In these and other instances, what appear initially as inappropriate or flame-like utterances turn out to be fan banter, indicating high levels of insider knowledge.¹⁰ As the presence of the winking emoticon ;) in the above comment demonstrates, the comments are not without the irony noted by Lisa Bode at the beginning of this essay, designed to signal that the author is laughing and others should do so as well.

Self-reflexively enlisting and re-articulating character language for the purpose of interacting with fellow fans, users demonstrate admiration and, as I have said, tremendous amounts of affection for beloved characters. Indeed, most important about the socially ‘inappropriate’ speech I have noted is the great taboo on directing it towards the characters Lilley plays, including gender non-conformist ones like Mr. G., whom, in a work place or school yard setting, we might predict to be a target for epithets or even hate speech. Let me consider user engagement with the character. While the gender and/ or lifestyle traits of the drama teacher made some reviewers uncomfortable on account of their stereotypical alignment with gayness, on-line engagement with this character shows such concerns to be unwarranted; in the YouTube environment, users barely note such traits, let alone take pains to denigrate them. While Mr. G. is acknowledged as ‘weird’ by a handful of users, most of the highest view-count clips of the character feature scenes of him in the classroom, with the majority of users expressing admiration for his humor and noting how enjoyable it would be to be his student (‘Summer Heights High – Mr G pink bag’; ‘Mr G Dance Class’; “‘Where have you bloody been?!’”; ‘Summer Heights High – Mr G’s drama drills’). The comments attached to the upload ‘Mr G Dance Class (Summer Heights High)’ are indicative of this. With 779,457 views, the clip is one of the highest viewed of all Chris Lilley clips on YouTube, attracting

language has spawned a flourishing area of study for communication scholars. While some have suggested the anonymity provided by an on-line environment can support negative interactions (Baek et al 2012), others argue against a media-determinant view that sees computer-mediated communication as the cause of flaming (Lange 2007; Vrooman 2002).

¹⁰ As Jenkins writes of fan activity, it is common for fans to appropriate media texts and to re-fashion them in forms to suit their purposes. His description of the activity of a Star Trek fan is applicable: ‘Star Trek is not something that can be reread; it is something that can and must be rewritten to make it more responsive to their needs, to make it a better producer of personal meanings and pleasures’ (2006, 40).

1,274 comments at the time of this writing. Showing Mr. G. performing a campy ‘interpretive’ dance routine for students while wearing various animal masks and dancing suggestively with a pink ball, the clip could be expected to elicit sniggering or perhaps scorn from users. However of all the comments, a mere seven make mention of the matter of sexuality. And of those that do so, many do so in a non-hostile way (‘not gay at all???’ [therichestmanever]; ‘gay much’ [Jess Toth]; ‘this is what happens when you hide in the closet for too long’ [petacavanagh]), with only three leveraging the performance to create a strong homophobic slur (eg ‘looooool what a FAG’ [CTurbinado]). In contrast to the relative paucity of homophobia-laden remarks, a vast number express desire to ‘be’ a student in Mr. G’s class. ‘How could you not laugh if you were in his class???’ (The2012skittles); ‘Thumbs up if you wish Mr. G were your teacher!’ (MsCraftastic30); ‘I wish he was my teacher, so bad’ (JordanMulvaney2011); ‘the most talented educator in Australia today. Perhaps the only educator’ (TheIrish39); ‘I wish my drama teacher was like him’ (WhittyWayWoo); ‘faark I wish he was my teachr’ (Rachel Mafi); ‘I wish I was in this class’ (Ruby Dussek) are but a few of the many, many remarks that are voiced along these lines. Alongside comments expressing appreciation for Mr. G as a teacher and desire to be in his classroom, are a spare few which go so far as to engage with the character in an erotic way. ‘Mr. G is deffinatly bringin’ Sexy back’ (Vote4Ringo); ‘I wish I was that ball’ (kassiegabriela); and ‘omg hes the hottest thing ever’ (Brianna Borrayo) are some of the comments pegged to the YouTube discussed above, indicating an ambiguous mix of attraction to the character, attraction to the actor behind the character, a mix of the two (and, it must be said, an expression of irony).

Throughout the user comments generally, the eroticization of Lilley and/ or Lilley’s characters is a recurring theme, as it is through much fan discourse. What distinguishes Lilley’s work – and the corresponding fan response to it – is the presence of the cross-gender element, that is the fact that Lilley spends much of his on-screen time dressed as a woman. The result is complexity in viewer engagement surpassing anything that has yet been noted about Lilley. Let me look closely at the example of the upload ‘Ja’mie Bloopers Summer Heights High’. The title of the YouTube is self-explanatory. The frequent motif that comes up in posts attached to this upload – as elsewhere on YouTube and indeed throughout critical responses to Lilley – concerns his acting prowess. Users express admiration that, in the words of one fan, he ‘manages to stay in character while messing up’ (omni2433); some find this accomplishment amusing: ‘Its so funny that after he messes up he still talks in Ja’mie voice’ (11danyboy11). One user hypothesizes about Lilley’s psychological aptitude, playing

a teenage girl so effectively ('If Chris has a teenage daughter he'll be able to completely understand her' [CatiCullen]), while others conjecture how enjoyable it would be to be selected to be an actor with Lilley in the scene, expressing envy of girls who could do so. There was speculation about Lilley's relationship status, and remarks about the 'hotness' of the other girls in the scene. As with the comments directed at Mr G, a number of statements made reference to sexual attractiveness – only in this instance, of the actor (rather than the character). Though a spare few registered discomfort (as one user put it: 'it freaks me out knowing ja'mie has a dick' [cebradez]), the majority expressed enthusiasm: 'I'm 23...he's 37... ooohhh I dont care, please marry me chris ! lol' (BabyPhat719); 'omg chris. GET IN MY PANTS' (thegoldenclock).

In a few instances, conversational threads concerning Lilley's 'attractiveness' dove-tailed with remarks about drag elements, with interesting results. Aware of the fact that an adult male is playing the part of a teenage schoolgirl, users were flummoxed about the nature of their attraction and the consequences for their own sexuality:

I still find Chris Lilley hot even when he dresses as females.

[LouDeppDepp](#) 1 year ago 140

I'm so glad you've said that. I couldn't agree more! Something so so sexy about that man! x

[LovelyJessica24](#) in reply to [LouDeppDepp](#) ([Show the comment](#)) 1 year ago 4

@LouDeppDepp @LovelyJessica24 If Im a straight guy that finds him attractive dressed as a woman does that make me gay?

DAMN IT LILLEY!

[moonsugar1](#) in reply to [LouDeppDepp](#) ([Show the comment](#)) 1 year ago 2

Its not just me then lol !

[BabyPhat1719](#) in reply to [LouDeppDepp](#) ([Show the comment](#)) 1 year ago

I think everyone might have that problem actually...XD

[LouDeppDepp](#) in reply to [BabyPhat1719](#) ([Show the comment](#)) 1 year ago

definitely not the only one...never thought i'd fancy another girl so much!!!!

[TabbyTwitch](#) in reply to [LouDeppDepp](#) ([Show the comment](#)) 1 year ago

In spite of the declarations of heterosexual identities, comments from both female and male users indicate levels and forms of attraction that could be considered non-straight and, more

to the point, which are completely outside the bounds of critical recognition. The candor and willingness to discuss such matters sets such testimonies apart.

Conclusion

In this essay I have tried to amplify issues that have emerged in earlier discussions about popular Australian satirist Chris Lilley, by identifying themes found in online YouTube posts, particularly involving the popular gender non-conformist and female characters, Mr. G. and Ja'mie, respectively. While there was congruence between the fan responses that I analyzed in this essay and critics' assessments of Lilley which I examined in an earlier article – namely an appreciation of Lilley's acting abilities (especially while performing Ja'mie) and his deployment of irony, there were themes and responses specific to the YouTube usership. These included aspects of user 'one-up-manship', fan-to-fan assistance, and the implementation of ironic banter to demonstrate insider knowledge. With respect to the two popular characters, YouTube users displayed strong attachments to each, expressing desires to be 'with' both characters in real-life settings. In spite of the findings that on-line environments can support negative interactions, I found a relative dearth of homophobic commentary regarding Mr. G.'s sexuality and an occasional expression of relatively open (non-straight) desire by apparently straight-identified male and female users. In offering an analysis of this data, my intention was twofold. I wanted to note some of the pleasures available to Lilley's YouTube fans, who do not typically feature in critical analyses of satirical media. In offering this fan-informed account, I hoped to add flesh and complexity to the body of theoretical literature on satirical media. Secondly, I aimed to suggest how such fans add value to the entertainment via fan posts. In examining Lilley's work in light of specific audience engagement, I re-positioned the YouTube fans as creators of cultural material in their own right.

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