

*The Jackson Jive: Blackface Today and the Limits of Whiteness in Australia*

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**Abstract:** Blackface has had something of a renaissance in the United States. There it is invested with a postmodern, selfconsciously parodic quality. In Australia there has also been a renaissance of blackface. Here, however, it appears to continue to be invested more straightforwardly with racism. This article focuses on the notorious Jackson Jive sketch on *Hey, Hey It's Saturday* in 2009. In that sketch six men blacked up and wore cheap Afro wigs performing as if they were the Jackson Five. They claimed that the sketch was simply humorous. Australians were divided; many found the sketch offensive while many considered it enjoyable. A similar division in the population occurred when Sam Newman, an ex-Australian Rules footballer and knockabout comedian, blacked up in 1999 and pretended to be the Indigenous footballer, Nicky Winmar. In Australia blackface continues to reinforce the privileges of whiteness-even when, as was the case with the members of the Jackson Jive, most were in Australian terms either non-white or marginally white. In this case, blackface reinforced these men's honorary whiteness.

**Keywords:** blackface; Jackson Jive; Nicky Winmar; larrikins; bogans; racism

**Introduction**

It's October 7<sup>th</sup>, 2009. On Channel 9 there is a reunion episode of a series that ran for twenty-seven years between 1971 and 1999. *Hey Hey It's Saturday*, a variety show with elements of vaudeville and light entertainment, had been highly successful. It won a Logie for Most Popular Light Entertainment Program nine times, including for the year the show finished. The *TV Week Logie Awards* provide popular recognition for the Australian television industry. The presenter for the life of *Hey Hey It's Saturday*, Darryl Somers, won the Logie for Most Popular Light Entertainment Personality five times and the coveted Gold Logie for Most Popular Personality, three times. Now there is a reunion show, actually the second of two. Essentially, these are to test the waters to see if a new series of the show would be popular. The two reunion shows are shown on Wednesday evenings but the title remained the same.

One of the segments that defined the original show, and which is reprised in these reunion shows, is called Red Faces. This was always one of the most popular segments. In it, ordinary people perform often unusual acts. This is not a talent competition. Nobody expects these acts to be discovered and go on to make the performers' fortunes. Red Faces epitomises the ethos of the show: average people performing often bizarre acts, and often ineptly, but enjoying their moment in front of the camera.

There are three judges. One of them is Red Symons. Symons, who trained as an actor, used to be best known as the guitarist in the 1970s rock group, Skyhooks, who had seven top thirty hits between 1974 and 1978. Now he has a reputation as the sarcastic and highly critical judge who holds the participants to standards far higher than the segment warrants. He is the voice of middle-class, commercial professionalism trespassing on a working-class convivial good time. A second judge in this reunion series is Jackie MacDonald. MacDonald had been a regular on the original series, playing the ditzy, high-spirited foil to Somers until she left the show in 1988. She had missed the first reunion episode because of illness. The third judge is a guest. It is Harry Connick Jr, the American actor and mainstream, adult-oriented singer. Connick comes from a middle-class background. His Irish-American father had been a lawyer and a judge in Louisiana. He, himself, had studied at both Loyola University and Hunter College but dropped out to pursue his career. Somers introduces the act, 'these boys' will perform 'a song and dance tribute to Michael Jackson'. He announces them as the Jackson Jive. Five men appear in blackface. All are wearing white jackets and trousers with cheap afro wigs and with one, white glove on their right hand. They kneel with their backs to the camera. Then one of them gets up, points to another and says: 'Yo, it's me, my main man.' Another replies, 'You're rendang'. The two then sing Sister Sledge's 'We are family' signalling the act's disco reference. The prior banter, in a mock African-American accent, both situates the performers as 'black', as if the blackface hadn't already done this, and with what some might consider humour, generates a parodic distance from the African-Americans they are performing as. Rendang is a spicy meat dish from Indonesia. The reference suggests the apparently arcane nature of African-American slang. At this point, Somers' introductory description of the Jackson Jive as 'these boys' becomes disturbing with its allusion, intended or not, to the way white Americans used to address African Americans. The parodic banter is followed by the five dancing to the Jackson Five's 'Can You Feel It' until another person in blackface enters and, clearly impersonating Michael Jackson, starts singing. Only this blackface performer, in another cheap afro wig, actually has a heavily made-up whiteface—an allusion to Jackson's increasingly lighter skin through the later part of his career.

After one verse and a chorus Symons gets up and hits the gong, which is a signal that the act needs to cease. Being gonged is a sign of the judge's displeasure for some reason with the act. Symons has always gonged a lot of acts. Somers then asks Harry Connick Jr what he thinks, and what score out of ten he would give the act. Connick, is caught between being the polite guest and his obvious outrage at the blackface. He says that he will give the act zero and then starts a sentence about what would have happened if these men had

performed the act in the United States. He doesn't finish his sentence. Instead he just shakes his head. Jackie, as everybody knows her, says that she thinks the act is cute and has great choreography. She gives the Jackson Jive seven. She appears to have no problem with the blackface. Symons asks the audience what they think. They call out, ten. He gives the act one. Later, Connick forces a surprised and rather bemused Somers to apologise on air for the act's racist blackface.

In the wake of the performance, Australia became divided over whether the act was just good fun, a humorous take-off of an iconic African-American star, or whether it was a deeply offensive slice of racism that brought back to the surface the long history of blackface, and the oppression associated with it, in the United States and, indeed, in Australia. At the same time, newspapers, television shows and internet sites in both the United Kingdom and the United States professed their shock that such a racist entertainment practice could be resurrected on Australian television.

It so happens that this was not the first time that this group of men had performed on *Hey Hey, It's Saturday* in blackface as the Jackson Jive. Twenty years earlier, in 1989, they had presented pretty much the same act on *Red Faces*, using the same Jackson Five song. Then, the five backing dancers had worn grey jackets and trousers and the man playing Michael Jackson had also been in blackface rather than whiteface. His change to whiteface was intended as a humorous commentary on Jackson's own transformation. Their appearance on the reunion show was, in part, an element of the program's nostalgia. Indeed, Somers played a clip from the earlier show after the performance. That first presentation of the act had garnered no critical publicity. Later, we must think about what had changed in the intervening twenty years.

### **Recent Blackface in Australia and the United States**

Given the furore that it caused, it may come as a surprise to find that the Jackson Jive performance was by no means the only recent example of blackface in Australia. Indeed, between the two Jackson Jive performances, a group of comedians who call themselves the Chaser Team, who had two humorous political commentary programs focusing on the November 2007 federal election called *The Chaser Decides*, performed in blackface as the Jackson Five to a version of that group's 'ABC' with new lyrics about the political similarities between the two major parties.<sup>1</sup> There was little, if any, critical response to this blackface. These three performances appear to be the only high profile examples of blackface minstrelising of African Americans in recent years. That only the Jackson Jive sketch provoked such a high level of response may be linked to a visiting American, Harry Connick Jr, expressing his horror at the Jackson Jive performance. This helped sanction the critical Australian reaction and, because both the act being parodied and Connick are American, this helped to raise the profile of the incident outside Australia. The lack of critical response only two years earlier suggests the silencing of progressive leadership in Australia which had occurred during the years that John Howard was prime minister under

the guise of a continuing attack on political correctness. Connick's criticism provided the opportunity for that leadership.

The other recent blackface acts have all involved the performance of Aboriginality.<sup>2</sup> Since the 1970s, a white comedian called Louis Beers has performed in blackface as the Indigenous character, King Billy Cokebottle. In March 1999, Sam Newman, on *The Footy Show*, blacked up and pretended to be the Indigenous Australian Rules football star, Nicky Winmar. In 2005, the comedian Chris Lilley ran a mockumentary series on ABC television called *We Can Be Heroes*. During this show, Lilley acted as a number of characters who had all been nominated to be Australian of the Year. These included the self-righteous and obnoxious sixteen-year-old girl, Ja'mie King and the ex-policeman, Phil Olivetti, who had nominated himself after he had saved nine children from an out-of-control bouncy castle. Another character Lilley played was Ricky Wong, a Chinese-Australian physics student at Melbourne University who really wanted to be an actor. Wong is a member of his university's Chinese Musical Theatre Group. In his section of the series, Wong is rehearsing a musical homage to Indigenous Australians called Indigeridoo. Lilley plays the Chinese-Australian Wong and then blacks up as Wong playing an Aboriginal character with the generic name of Walkabout Man. The other members of the Chinese Musical Theatre Group are of Asian descent and they more straightforwardly perform in Indigeridoo in blackface. Later, at the 2006 Logie awards, the group reprised Indigeridoo joined by Cathy Freeman, the Indigenous athlete who won a gold medal at the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games and became a role model for her people, who played herself.<sup>3</sup> Finally, in this list, I will include a little-known video clip of a rap song called 'Out Da Front' made by a white, Perth man, Simon Barker, and placed on the YouTube in 2010. The song is performed in blackface by someone claiming to be Ricky C as Flubba Bubba Wurra Jurra Noongyar. Nonngyar is the term used by the Indigenous people of southern Western Australia to identify themselves. The song, sung in first person, portrays Flubba Bubba as a foul-mouthed dope-smoking, drunken, glue-sniffer who has sex with his sisters, children and cousins. The West Australian police took Barker to court for racial vilification and lost on the grounds of artistic licence. Barker claimed he was parodying negative attitudes towards Aborigines rather than repeating them. This predominance of Indigenous blackface is intriguing given that, historically in Australia, blackface has been dominated by African-American performance.

Most recently, before the Jackson Jive blackface, the British *Black and White Minstrel Show* ran on the ABC until the late 1970s. Starting in 1958 the show had broadcast in Britain with great popularity until it was finally taken off air in 1978. In 1961 the program won the Golden Rose at the Montreux festival for television. The program seems to have been just as popular in Australia. *The Black and White Minstrel Show* was the British inheritor of the African-American minstrel blackface tradition. As Michael Pickering writes: 'While the elements of cultural parody and burlesque were lost in the transfer of minstrelsy to radio, the spectacular was ... [the] aspect of minstrelsy which was then harked back to in the televised 'candy-floss' world of *The Black and White Minstrel Show*'

(191). In 1963/64 a travelling version of the show had performed in Sydney and Melbourne. Richard Waterhouse tells us that 'almost 150,000 Sydneysiders' went to see it (135). At this time, Sydney's population was around two million.

To some extent, it appears that Connick was mistaken when he claimed that blackface would not anymore be acceptable in the United States. Certainly, in 1993 when Ted Danson went in blackface to a roast for his then partner the African American film star Whoopi Goldberg at the Friars Club in New York there was outrage. However, since then there has been a limited amount of blackface which has often been understood as pushing the boundaries of taste. As John Strausbaugh puts it, since the Danson misstep, 'blackface, unconditionally banned for decades ..., has crept back into the public arena' (14). Indeed, in 2002: 'A group of blackfaced University of Tennessee students went to a party as the Jackson Five' (20). However, it should be noted that this did not go unpunished. After complaints were filed the fraternity from which the students came was suspended. Nevertheless, in the United States blackface has made a public reappearance, often in the form of a knowing self-awareness.

In Australia, as I will argue, opinion over the acceptability of blackface divides roughly along cultural lines that are linked with class. In order to understand this we need to examine the history of blackface and the way it was, and is, positioned in Australian society. As in both the United States and Britain blackface minstrelsy was immensely popular in Australia during the nineteenth century. Waterhouse, whose book on the social history of minstrelsy and vaudeville remains the keystone for work on blackface in Australia, tells us that:

Between 1838, when 'Jim Crow' was first danced at the Royal Victoria and the end of the century, the Australian colonists seemed to find minstrel songs, jokes and sketches endlessly amusing. Not only did British and American troupes enjoy extended and profitable tours but the influence of minstrelsy extended far beyond the professional stage. (98)

Blackface, with or without the minstrelsy aspect, was a core element in public entertainment until the early years of the twentieth century and, as I have indicated with the example of *The Black and White Minstrel Show*, remained an element in commercial entertainment until much later.

To take other examples, Benjamin Miller has discussed Charles Chauvel's silent film, *The Moth of Moonbi*, made in 1925, in which he

appears in a cameo role—as the Aboriginal stockman. His performance, and especially that of his on-screen wife, falls within the genre of an Australian blackface minstrelsy. The female Aboriginal is a drunken, blundering fool ... (145)

Miller also discusses the rather more sophisticated use of blackface in Chauvel's most renowned film, *Jedda*, released in 1955. In *Jedda* the two key Indigenous characters are played by Indigenous actors but the narrator, an assimilated Aboriginal stockman, who mediates between the Indigenous characters and the white film audience, is played by a white actor in blackface. These films form part of the tradition of Indigenous Australian blackface. The blackface image of Aboriginal drunkenness and stupidity returns in 2010 in the Barker 'Out Da Front' video. My point here is that, while the popularity of blackface minstrelsy, and blackface on its own, decreased from the early part of the twentieth century, it did not disappear and, in Australia, the apparent increase in blackface over the last decade or so may well be only an illusion that disguises the continuity of the form, though a continuity that has generally speaking shifted its focus from African-American to Indigenous blackface. In an American context, and working off of an argument from W. T. Lhamon Jr's *Raising Cain: Blackface Performance from Jim Crow to Hip Hop*, Strausbaugh argues that:

Lore recycles if it continues to serve some function in the culture. Blackface and other forms of ethnic humor persist because they continue to say something to us about relations among us below the polite surface of today's multicultural discourse. (26)

We must think about what that function might be in Australia.

### **Blackface History**

Blackface minstrelsy is usually considered to have originated in the United States sometime in the early years of the nineteenth century. One key date is 1832 when TD Rice performed his blackface dance 'Jim Crow' on the New York stage.<sup>4</sup> Waterhouse, as I have noted, informs us that 'Jim Crow' was danced in Australia in 1838, a mere six years later. However, Rice and the new blackface minstrels did not invent blackface. Dale Cockrell has researched its earlier history and argues that blackface was a common feature of premodern European festivals:

Although the whole notion of blackface masquerade among the common people of northern Europe might have first followed from direct contact with dark-skinned Moors (but probably did not), the facts seem to be that the rituals using chimney sweep soot soon lost much if not all of the racial association, and blackface masking became a means of expressing removal from time and place through disguise. (52)

Cockrell adds that: 'Nonracial folk blackface masking was common in nineteenth-century America too, and strove to achieve similar ends' (52). His point is that before blackface became linked with a kind of parodic representation of African Americans it had a long

history as a marker of carnivalesque inversion. As he writes: 'To black up was a way of assuming "the Other," in the cant of this day, a central aspect of the inversion ritual' (53). In the premodern world carnival, when the world was turned upside down, was a time of release when peasants were able mockingly to ape the world of their betters (see for example Stallybrass and White). It is said that at the British surrender at Yorktown, a defining moment in the American War of Independence, the ballad 'The World Turned Upside Down,' which had been written in 1645 as a commentary on Parliament's success in the English civil war, was played by the British army band where it served as an observation on the consequence of the British defeat.

If, as was the case, this use of blackface had been taken to the American colonies, then it was without doubt a part of early vernacular Australian experience and was an element in the association of blackface with larrikins which will be discussed below. And, I will argue, it remains a way that many people today understand blackface in Australia—albeit with the important difference that, as in the United States, while carnival remains, inversion, which was a key carnivalesque element in premodern societies with a fixed hierarchical structure, is no longer present. That is to say, those people who do not see the racism in the Australian use of blackface often understand it in terms that relate to carnival. Indeed, this can be a way that we can make sense of the claim that, as Somers put it distinguishing the positive Australian reaction from Connick's response: "'The Jackson Jive was just a bit of fun — it was a tribute to Michael Jackson and from an Australian audience point of view they'd see the lightness of it'" (quoted in Bachl). Indeed, the pre-history of the Jackson Jive sketch can also be located in carnival. In 1989, the members of the Jackson Jive were medical students. They first performed the sketch at the University of Sydney Medical Revue, a theatrical revue that specialises in contemporary popular cultural parody. In 2010 their show, called *Cadavatar*, riffed off of the massively successful film, *Avatar*. I will come back to Cockrell's remark about the importance of the Other, later.

In the United States, the revisioning of blackface to refer directly to African Americans was a consequence of the presence of the large population of Africans in the American national order. In *Love and Theft*, Eric Lott draws out the dichotomous attitudes to African Americans that underlay blackface, attitudes that included desire and repulsion, fascination and revulsion. David Roediger has argued that American blackface helped to define what whiteness was in the United States. Writing that blackface 'usually involved a conscious declaration of whiteness and white supremacy' (104), he goes to explain that

the hugely popular cult of blackface ... developed by counterpoint. Whatever his attraction, the performers and audiences knew that they were *not* the Black dandy personified by Zip Coon. Nor were they the sentimentalised and appealing preindustrial slave Jim Crow. (116, Roediger's italics)

Here we have an appreciation of blackface as both an expression of dominance and a way that the disparate migrant groups came to see themselves as 'white' in contrast to African Americans as mediated by blackface.

### **The Meanings of Blackface**

We need to remember that these arguments are being made in the context of a society which contains a large number of African-originated people, many of whom, in the early days of American minstrel blackface, were still slaves. In Britain and Australia there was no such large population—though there was a small population of African blacks in Britain and there were significantly more in Australia than the conventional histories suggest.<sup>5</sup> The starting point here is to understand that while blackface has some common meanings, especially for societies with a European heritage, it develops different meanings as it becomes incorporated into diverse societies. In South Africa, in Cape Town, for example, as part of the New Year's festival there continues to be what is called Coon Carnival. Denis-Constant Martin, who has written a book about it, argues that the anti-authoritarianism, working-class rebellion, music and dancing, all of which in American blackface minstrelsy were present in a mixed African-American and white, European culture, appealed to a Cape South African audience. As Martin explains: 'These qualities seem indeed extremely relevant to the social, economic and racial situation at the Cape and in the whole of South Africa in the 1860s, 1870s and 1880s.' Giving examples of the relevance of the performances for each of the Cape's major racial groups, Martin writes that: 'Coloured Capetonians were fascinated to the extent that the aesthetic of the New Year festivals was going to be deeply transformed by the infusion of minstrelsy' (79).

In Britain, as Simon Featherstone has argued: 'The absence of a numerically significant black population ... was only the most obvious contrast between an imperialism defined by distanced power and knowledge, and a society whose racial conflict, material and ideological, were ones of proximity within the borders of a federal state' (236). He goes on to quote Michael Pickering on the meaning of blackface:

Blackface entertainers in Britain have ... to be understood as providing examples of 'natives' who as 'half devils' and 'half children' were in need of colonial subjection, but at the same time also offering a taste of what was repressed in the name of civilisation and the imperial endeavour, respectability and middle-class cultural norms, and John Bull's nationalist pride of place in the world. (Quoted in Featherstone 237)

In Australia, the Indigenous population were among those 'natives' in need of colonial subjection. In this sense, then, they could not be considered a part of the Australian society even in the complex ways that African Americans were part of American society in the nineteenth century. At the same time, nineteenth-century blackface in Australia was

dominated by African-American blackface. So much so, in fact, that Aborigines were, at least to some extent, understood in terms associated with the minstrel black.

Miller remarks on the number of early Australian plays, such as Henry Melville's *The Bushrangers*, first performed in 1834, in which Indigenous characters appear. Often there are excuses for these characters to sing a little, or perform dances that are sometimes described as corroborees. Miller suggests that it is likely that these characters would have been played by whites in blackface and that the songs and dances would have been in the minstrel genre (142-44). Waterhouse writes about 'the Aborigine as stage negro,' notes that a similar rendering of Aborigines can be found in literary works, and suggests that, 'to some extent, at least, the prism through which Australians viewed Aborigines was one which was cut by the minstrels' (100). In this context, it is tempting to read Lilley's *Indigeridoo* musical as an updated version of a minstrelised corroboree.

However, at some point settler Australians stopped thinking of Aborigines as their own version of African Americans. An important moment was most probably when actual African Americans, playing blackface, started to become common visitors to Australia. Waterhouse tells us that in 1876, and 1877, two troupes of African-American blackface minstrels both calling themselves the Georgia Minstrels arrived in Australia. The second group, who had most claim to the name, 'enjoyed,' we are told, 'a level of popularity unmatched by the white companies' (64). Given the popularity of those white groups, the Georgia Minstrels success must have been quite extraordinary. In 1888 another group of African-American minstrels, including many of the 1877 Georgia Minstrels, entered the country. One of the new members was Irving Sayles. In common with most of the African-American minstrels who came to Australia he opted to stay. Richard Waterhouse recounts that in performance Sayles made 'allusions to an imaginary wife at the La Perouse Aboriginal camp, allusions which he knew his audience understood to be absurd' (149). So, it seems, African Americans in Australia, who Waterhouse tells us were to a significant degree accepted in Australian society, worked hard to ensure that they were not confused with Aborigines. The distinction between African Americans and Aborigines helped found the general understanding of blackface in Australia, producing an Aboriginal blackface that was grounded in the British understanding of the colonial native that I have discussed above but, it would seem, lacking any positive features—at least until Lilley's Ricky Wong's sentimentalised Indigenous blackface, and this as a kind of reworking of the similarly sentimentalised blackface plantation negro. Barker's *Flubba Bubba* blackface resumes the traditional rendering.

### **Thinking About Blackface in Australia**

How, then, can we think about blackface in Australia? As with Britain, the most significant contextual difference between Australia and the United States has been the lack of a large number of introduced people who were perceived to be racially distinct and homogeneous and, importantly, separate from and subordinate to the dominant, racially defined group. In

addition, unlike the United States that had been independent since 1776, Australia remained a set of colonies until the establishment of the Australian state in 1901 and continues to hold the British monarch as Head of State. In relation to this second point, I have already argued that Aboriginal blackface can be read in terms of the colonial construction of the native, and more, to echo Cockrell, as the native Other. At the same time, like the United States, post-1788 Australia has always been a country of immigrants which, at the same time, has been very preoccupied with whiteness. We need to remember that having a unified border policy for whom could enter the country was one of the driving forces behind federation and that one of the first acts passed by the new parliament was the Immigration Restriction Act which functioned as the corner-stone of the White Australia policy until that was gradually dismantled through the late 1960s and early 1970s with the *coup de grâce* during Gough Whitlam's government in 1974.

If, then, we think about the application of Roediger's ideas to the Australian situation we can begin to understand blackface in Australia in terms of the establishment of whiteness against an excluded Other, an absent Other who has been excluded from Australia as well from Australian society. To put it differently, blackface in Australia constructs an Other against which Australians identify their whiteness. Aborigines are historically a special case of the excluded Other because of their presence within Australia. In her discussion of Sam Newman's blackface of Nicky Winmar, Karen Brooks notes that, when *The Herald Sun* conducted a poll to determine whether Newman should apologise: 'Of the voters, 1445 people did not believe Newman need apologise and 465 believed that he should' (38). Brooks comments that: 'Once again, the marginal status of indigenous people in Australian society was reaffirmed' (38).

Central to Indigenous blackface, as to all blackface, is the matter of power. In order to understand this we can examine the Newman blackface in more detail. In 1999 Winmar was a highly respected footballer. But he was more than this. In 1993 he had become a symbol of the Indigenous fight against racism in Australian Rules. Winmar played for St Kilda. On Saturday, April 17<sup>th</sup>, of that year St Kilda played against a much more heavily fancied Collingwood team at the Collingwood home-ground of Victoria Park. At the end of a very tight match, St Kilda ran out the winners by twenty-two points. Their best players on the day, and the ones that saved the match, were both Indigenous, Gilbert McAdam and Winmar. In the face of a torrent of racial abuse from the Collingwood supporters which continued after the final siren, Winmar pulled up his guernsey, pointed to his torso and is said to have said, 'I'm proud to be black.'<sup>6</sup> The action was captured by a photographer called Wayne Ludbey. The image became iconic in the fight against racism in Australian Rules. So, by the time of Newman's blackface, Winmar was far more than a great Indigenous footballer.

Winmar had been invited to appear on *The Footy Show*. What happened next is unclear. Either he turned down the invitation or, in the version suggested by Newman in blackface, Winmar agreed to appear but then didn't show up. Either way, his lack of presence gave

Newman the opportunity for his blackface of Winmar. In blackface, Newman apologised for the mix-up and said how happy he was to be on the show. Thus, through the very act of blacking up as Winmar, Newman helped perpetuate the myth of the unreliability of Aborigines—here, Winmar apparently saying that he would be on the show and then not appearing. Further, in presenting Winmar as blackface, he became a figure of fun thus undermining his status as a fighter against racism. In other words, Newman's blackface can be read as a power ploy, an attack on an Indigenous footballer highly regarded for his actions both on and off the field. The uncritical acceptance of the blackface by a large proportion of the Australian population signals the continued Othering of Aborigines.

However, as I have noted, unlike the United States, Australia has had no large non-indigenous population of non-white people. Historically, non-Aboriginal blackface has referred to people excluded from Australia. This should not just be understood as people of African background, or more specifically African Americans. Waterhouse has described how the American shift from the dominant blackface image of the sentimentalised rural Jim Crow to the urban, and aggressive, Zip Coon had been accepted by Australians towards the end of the nineteenth century. Waterhouse links this change in Australia to the increasing stridency of debates over limiting non-white migration which, as I have noted, was linked to the movement for federation. He writes:

These new racial images were both mirrored and fortified by the changing character of the Australian minstrel stage Negro. For, as the minstrels abandoned slavery themes the stage Negro was no longer specifically identified with Afro-American character and culture but stood as a symbol of all allegedly inferior ethnic groups. At the same time the growing popularity of 'coon songs' in the 1890s was a further indication that Australians viewed not only Afro-Americans but all 'non-whites' not only as culturally inferior, but also as violent and threatening. (106)

This anxiety towards the racial Other has continued to play an important role in white Australian attitudes. Quoting Phillip Adams and Patrice Newell from their 1996 book of Australian jokes, Jessica Milner Davis writes that:

Even Adams and Newell were surprised by the absence of reader-outrage at the many offensive (and racist) jokes they printed, concluding that Australians 'fear the "other", what they deem to be foreign or alien, and so tell savage, uncivilised jokes about Aborigines, Jews, migrants ... Jokes that are bigoted, blasphemous or phobic outnumber all other categories'. (37)

Australian blackface, then, can be understood as a way of managing anxiety about those identified as non-white, historically those not allowed to migrate to Australia.

As I have explained, the majority of recent blackface in Australia has related to Aborigines. Blackface such as *The Black and White Minstrel Show*, which we need to remember was a British production, broadcast in Australia at a time when, because of the White Australia policy very few Australians would have seen a person of African descent in their daily lives, offered the older, sentimentalised image of the happy-go-lucky plantation Negro.<sup>7</sup> In the main, though, there was little non-Aboriginal blackface until the Jackson Jive portrayal of the Jackson Five in 1989.

The first thing to note about this performance, and the 2009 one by the same men, is that there were actually six of them. This excess suggests the historical excess of carnival, here refigured in *Hey Hey's* vaudevillian heritage. We should also note that the purpose of Waterhouse's book was to show how vaudeville in Australia evolved out of the minstrel shows and that blackface acts continued to perform in vaudeville until well into the twentieth century. Indeed, as Waterhouse points out, when the travelling production of *The Black and White Minstrels* performed in Sydney and Melbourne, it did so in the Tivoli theatres which had been home to Australian vaudeville. Having blackface on *Hey Hey, It's Saturday* was in keeping with the show's background.

What might underlie the members of Jackson Jive's decision to perform in blackface, and to perform as the Jackson Five? Certainly at that time the Jackson Five, and Michael Jackson as a solo artist, were extremely popular. Indeed, Michael Jackson was at the peak of his popularity and, also, his celebrity power. His album *Thriller* had been released in 1982 and *Bad* had followed in 1987. With sales of over 100 million copies, *Thriller* is the biggest selling album of all time. A blackface Jackson Five sketch on *Red Faces*, and indeed a sketch that played to the 'happy Negro' image rather than the threatening Zip Coon image, reduced the Jackson Five to a joke—made him safe, we could say, for white Australians. We need to remember that the White Australia policy had only been fully discarded fifteen years earlier. In 1989 race became a significant issue again in Australian politics when the Prime Minister, Bob Hawke, announced in response to the Chinese crackdown on protesters in Tiananmen Square that Australia would give residence visas to Chinese living in Australia. Asylum applications from Chinese subsequently increased by about 10,000 in 1990 from a figure of 1260. In 1991, applications increased again to 16,740. Also in 1989, changes to the Immigration Act introduced mandatory detention for asylum seekers and other illegal entrants.<sup>8</sup> The first boat carrying asylum seekers since 1981 arrived in November. Within this frame the 'joke' of the Jackson Jive 1989 blackface functioned to deflate white Australian anxieties over Michael Jackson's success and express tensions related to the non-white Other's increasing, and seemingly threatening, presence in Australia.

In addition, the blackface reinforced the whiteness of the audience. We now need to think about this audience. As I have noted, there were no complaints about the Jackson Jive's blackface in 1989 and, in 1999, negative responses were heavily outweighed by people who thought that Sam Newman had nothing to apologise for after his blackface of Nicky

Winmar. Similarly, the Jackson Jive's reprise of their act in 2009, while producing outrage outside of Australia, had very many supporters within the country. I have described *Hey Hey, It's Saturday* as being in the Australian vaudeville tradition. So is *The Footy Show*. Brooks explains that in this program: 'For the audience, [football] the primary locus of desire is displaced from the centre to the periphery—to the 'outer' as event, entertainment and spectacle' (28). She tells us that this supposed sports program 'has become one of the highest rating *comedy* programs in Australia' (28, Brooks' italics). This entertainment program, in which footballers dress in drag, play musical instruments badly, play practical jokes on each other, and so forth, is clearly in the same, do-it-yourself vaudeville tradition as *Hey Hey*.

### **Blackface and Bogans**

So, who has been, and is, the audience for this tradition? On the website, "Things Bogans Like", a satirical look at bogan culture, *Hey Hey, It's Saturday* is number 126 on a listing that is in no particular order. In its discussion of *Hey Hey*, the site remarks on the Jackson Jive sketch:

In the Red Faces segment of the show, the bogan applauded a Jackson 5 "blackface" skit, and Harry Connick Jr did not. The bogan later learned that it had something to do with history or slavery, and bellowed that political correctness had indeed gone mad. The debate died a natural death within a week or so.

In this sardonically humorous analysis bogans are uneducated and lack a sense of morality, placing enjoyment above a concern for giving offense. Jonathan Bradley also links *Hey Hey*, and the Jackson Jive sketch, with bogans. He also offers a more detailed explanation of what a bogan is:

There are, naturally, cultural associations that accompany being a member of the various classes. The term largely used to refer to that working class culture, "bogan", is both derogatory and celebratory. We have a strange habit of celebrating this culture- which is part of the reason "Kath and Kim" was a cultural phenomenon here, while it didn't last past a season in the US.

So a show like *Hey Hey it's Saturday* (or *Today Tonight*, or a considerable number of other Australian-produced shows) is designed to appeal to this sensibility and this audience. It's part of "bogan culture". When it was on in the 1980s, it was part of bogan culture, and now it's back, a kind of naff bogan nostalgia.

Consequently, when the show is criticized for being racist- which it definitely was, make no mistake about it- it can feel like a criticism not just of the skit, but of working class culture more broadly.

For Bradley, then, a bogan is a member of the working class and bogan culture is working-class culture.

There is little published academic work on bogans. Kay Frances Bartolo, a linguist, claims that the term 'has circulated in mainstream society since the 1980s' (8-9). Wikipedia is more specific, arguing in its entry for 'Bogan' that: 'The term's popular usage emerged in Melbourne's outer-western and -eastern suburbs in the late 1970s and early 1980s.' Wikipedia goes on to argue that the term was popularised through its use by Mary-Anne Fahey's character, Kylie Mole, on the television comedy show, *The Comedy Company*, in the late 1980s. There would seem to be general agreement that the term gained popular currency during that decade.

However, it is important to remember that we are talking about a way of life and that this is not limited to people in a particular class position. Melissa Bellanta writes about the larrikin experience in the economic boom of the 1880s: 'On the one hand they participated in the expanded emphasis on self-display and leisure during the boom. On the other hand, they were excluded from the best of the boom's spoils and felt resentful about it' (677). In 2006, Mel Campbell was writing in *The Sydney Morning Herald* about the term being used for bogans who had made large amounts of money during the mining boom and were being identified as 'cashed-up bogans.' She tells us that: 'The social analyst David Chalke recently described cubs [cashed-up bogans] as being "well-heeled, skilled blue-collar workers" in their 30s and 40s. "Executive plumbers," he called them. "On over \$100,000 a year."' Campbell goes on to explain that: 'Cubs have money, and they want to spend it on flash stuff. Like cars, boats and motorbikes, luxury clothing and expensive home entertainment systems.' Campbell's argument is that we all consume but that we tend to feel a little guilty about our consumption so we scapegoat a particular group. However, as we can see now with the example offered by Bellanta, larrikins also enjoyed spectacular consumption. Both larrikins and bogans tended to keep their cultural beliefs and practices, for example attitudes towards authority, as they enjoyed their financially-based upward social mobility. To put this a different way, lovers of *The Footy Show* and *Hey Hey, It's Saturday* can be found across the class spectrum.

What might be missing now is the resentment that Bellanta found in the 1880s' larrikins. In the 1970s, before these people were identified as bogans, they were called ockers. At that time, films like *The Adventures of Barry McKenzie* (1972) and *Alvin Purple* (1973) reflected their beliefs, as did television programs like *The Paul Hogan Show* (1973-1984).<sup>9</sup> In 1998, using literary sources, John Rickard wrote about the ways that the ideas associated with larrikinism were reworked in understandings of the ocker. He notes that over the twentieth century, 'larrikin' stopped being a negative term and began to be used with some affection. Rickard argues that, 'the ocker might well be characterised as the larrikin who, bloated by affluence, has lost the sense of class deprivation which had conditioned his performance' (82). What we might say, leaving aside Rickard's negative language, is that the ocker and the cashed-up bogan—that is, the bogan who has made money from his/her

employment in an industry such as mining where wages can be very high—are both terms that identify people who have a cultural repertoire which, as these people have become more spread through society, includes a righteous and confident assertion of their beliefs in the face of what they see as middle-class weakness rather than having a resentment against the middle-class. It is these beliefs that inform the cultural logic of shows such as *The Footy Show* and *Hey Hey, It's Saturday*.

Larrikins, Bellanta writes, 'were avid consumers of minstrel shows, and also of blackface acts in other entertainment forms' (681). They took pleasure in the racist logic of what Bellanta calls the 'white superiority that ran through blackface minstrelsy' (688). Longstanding racial views inform the production and consumption of blackface in Australia today and it is out of those attitudes and practices that run from larrikins through ockers to bogans that we find the defence of Sam Newman for his blackface Nicky Winmar, the defence of the Jackson Jive sketch, and the claim that the 'Out Da Front' video is not racist. Here, we need to remember that when Symons asked the *Hey Hey* audience what number they would give the Jackson Jive they shouted 'ten', the highest. In the brief visual overview of the audience we are given after Symons asked his question, we can see that it was quite young, many appear to be in their late teens and twenties, and very white. It is impossible to say how many could be identified as bogans.

### **Michael Jackson's Australian Audience**

At this point we should ask to whom Michael Jackson appealed most in Australia. Now, little work has been done in Australia on the audience breakdown for different kinds of popular music. However, Kirsten Zemke-White has written about the audience for black American music in Aotearoa/New Zealand. She informs us that: 'It has been shown that Pacific and Maori people in Aotearoa have heartily embraced hip hop culture in all its social, cultural and musical characteristics' (98). And she goes to explain that:

the localised manifestations of hip hop are also matched by a love for and expression of r'n'b styles. Alicia Keys, Erykah Badu, Destiny's Child, Ashanti, Aaliyah, Brandy, Michael Jackson and Stevie Wonder, have arguably generated as much meaning and emulation for young Pacific people as Dr Dre, KRS-One, 2Pac or Chuck D. For every young Maori or Pacific youth writing rap in their bedroom, there is an r'n'b fan practising the vocal aerobatics of Mariah Carey and R Kelly. This is evidenced in the sales charts, where American and local r'n'b vie equally with pop, rock and hip hop. (98)

She adds: 'Pacific young people auditioning for both the Australian and New Zealand Idol shows highlighted an overwhelming partiality for r'n'b, soul and gospel singing styles and covers' (98). Zemke-White argues that, 'while r'n'b may not often explore black history or themes, it nevertheless reflects historical black experiences', and she quotes from an interview she conducted with BBoy Raw Styles: "I think it relates to the environment

people are in, islanders are migrants trying to relate; there is a history of brown/Maori vs white/pakeha, so music or rhythm being a medium of effective communication is the connection, to express or stories and journeys be told” (quoted in Zemke-White 108). In Australia, what we do know is that many hip hop artists are from non-white backgrounds. Commenting on this, Tony Mitchell writes that:

On the one hand, culturally diverse hip-hop crews in Australia such as Downsyde, South West Syndicate, TZU and Curse ov Dialect – with their wildly surreal ‘rainbow hip-hop’ – embody multiply ethnicised speaking positions which express Australian multiculturalism, pluralism and diversity. On the other, individual MCs from non-Anglo-Australian backgrounds such as MC Trey, Hau of the 2004 Aria Award-winning group Koolism, Maya Jupiter, Sleek the Elite and Comrade Kos of Third Estate, who all speak from varied positions of ‘in-betweenness’, and are the subjects of this paper, bring a unique sense of hybridity and musical syncretism to Australian hip-hop which contributes to a highly original and distinctive view of the world and participates in an expressive form of ‘transborder citizenry’.

Artists start as fans and we can see that the kinds of reasons these young people became hip hop artists are similar to those that Zemke-White outlines for Aotearoa/New Zealand. In an email interview with Tara Brabazon, Pete Carroll, an English migrant to Perth who has, at various times, been station manager for the community music station RTR and the founder of two specialist, local record labels, writes:

[Perth] would be in grave danger of being bland if it wasn't for the diversity. You can begin to see the influence in music—the Asian community have helped to grow R&B and hip hop. Australia has always been predominantly a rock and roll kind of a place, soul music and reggae don't seem to have a strong tradition here, whereas now we are beginning to see black influence emerge. (Quoted in Brabazon 184)

What both Mitchell and Carroll identify, reinforcing Zemke-White's argument drawn from Aotearoa/New Zealand, is that black American music has become the music of choice for those in Australia identified as non-white. While this was doubtless the case in 1989 when Jackson Jive first performed their blackface sketch, it was even more the case in 2009 when there is now a larger number of people identifying, and identified, as non-white in Australia and when many of those are now Australian-born. Now we can see that the Jackson Jive sketch, seen by Connick as so demeaning to African Americans, and claimed to be just a piece of good fun by white, bogan Australians, including the white studio audience, also served to undermine the legitimacy of the music liked by those described as non-white in Australia. These, remember, are the people historically excluded from Australia, the Other represented in blackface. Performing a blackface of an artist beloved by non-white Australians marginalised those people even more.

### **The Final Twist**

There is one more twist in this story. After the broadcast, amidst the uproar about the racism, or not, of the Jackson Jive blackface, a member of Jackson Jive spoke out, apologising for any offense that had been taken. It turned out that these six men were now all highly respected members of the medical profession and that, as Suresh da Silva puts it:

Out of the six of us, only one is Anglo-Celtic Australian. I'm Sri Lankan-Australian, there's an Indian-Australian, a Greek Australian, an Irish-Italian Australian and a Lebanese Australian. We're all Australians.

The 'Michael Jackson' blackface was played by the man of Indian background, Anand Deva, who works as an Associate Professor in the Faculty of Medicine at the University of New South Wales. Here, in the guise of nationally identified backgrounds we have an inventory of Australian non-whiteness, including, interestingly, the identification of an Irish background when the Irish have been considered white in Australia since around the time of federation. da Silva makes the point that: 'Apart from the odd joke when I was at school, I've never been subject to racism in Australia. In other countries, certainly, but never here.' In another article I have discussed how honorary whiteness functions in Australia to enable people identified as non-white, as Other, to be accepted into the middle class as long as they behave like whites and occupy the social roles expected of them (Stratton "Preserving White Hegemony"). The success of the five non-whites in the Jackson Jive indicates that they have done this.

But, why does da Silva tell us their backgrounds? Well, one presumes to assure us that, since they are non-white themselves they couldn't be racist. However, ironically, they were behaving precisely as honorary whites—or, more, as honorary bogans. Indeed, here we must remember Roediger's point that blackface was a means by which those who blacked up came to be identified as white. We have already seen how this worked in Australia for the Irish larrikins. In the uproar over the Jackson Jive blackface, the assumption in the responses, both positive and negative, was that the members of the Jackson Jive were white, in the Australian usage of this term. Here, indeed, blackface whitened those who practised it. Remarkably, for all the furore, hardly any reports picked up on da Silva's identification of all but one of the Jackson Jive as being non-white. The members of the Jackson Jive retained their honorary whiteness and, indeed, actually increased their whiteness by behaving in a way that placed them fully within the racialised, and racist, belief system that stretches from larrikins to bogans.

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### **Notes**

<sup>1</sup> I would like to thank Melissa Ballanta for pointing me to this episode.

<sup>2</sup> There is one exception. In 2009, the Australian comedian John Safran had a segment in his television series *Race Relations* (episode 2) in which he went to the United States and put on blackface in order to pass as an African American. This enterprise was based on John Howard Griffin's passing as an African American which he wrote about in *Black Like Me*. As the intent was quite different—passing rather than blackface minstrelsy—and as the location was the United States rather than Australia, even though the series was developed for an Australian audience, I shall not discuss this example in this article.

<sup>3</sup> A fine discussion of Lilley's series that focuses on the Ricky Wong/Walkabout Man yellowface/blackface is Lisa Bode, "Performance, Race, Mock-Documentary and the Australian National Imaginary in The Nominees."

<sup>4</sup> There is now a considerable literature on blackface and minstrelsy in the United States.

<sup>5</sup> On Britain, see, for example, Peter Fryer, *Staying Power: The History of Black People in Britain*. On Australia, see, for example, Cassandra Pybus, *Black Founders: The Unknown Story of Australia's First Black Settlers*; see also Ian Duffield, "Martin Beck and Afro-Blacks in colonial Australia."

<sup>6</sup> One account of this incident can be found in Matthew Klugman and Gary Osmond, "That Picture—Nicky Winmar and the History of an Image."

<sup>7</sup> For an account of the fascination with, and racism towards, African Americans in Australia during the early 1970s see Marcia Hines' biography, Karen Dewey, *Diva: The Life of Marcia Hines*.

<sup>8</sup> These figures come from Barry York, "Australia and Refugees, 1901-2002: An Annotated Chronology Based on Official Sources."

<sup>9</sup> A discussion of the ocker films can be found by Tom O'Regan, "Cinema Oz: The Ocker Films."

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