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## **‘Your Heart Goes Out to the Australian Tourist Board’: critical uncertainty and the management of censure in Chris Lilley’s TV Comedies**

Since the year 2005 when *We Can Be Heroes: Finding the Australian of the Year* first appeared on TV, Chris Lilley’s name has been associated with controversy in the Australian and international press. Making fun of disabled and gay people, drug overdose victims, and rape survivors, are but a few of the accusations which have been levied. While some of the uproar has been due to factors beyond Lilley’s control (the notorious coincidence of a real-life overdose with Lilley’s representation of one on *Summer Heights High*), Lilley has at times admitted he has gone out of his way to ‘upset and offend’ people, to push them ‘beyond their comfort zone.’ Possibly, there is an argument to be made that the hullabaloo sometimes surrounding Lilley’s work has inflated the overall volume of critical attention received – a search for ‘Summer Heights High’ on the database ‘Factiva’ for example, using the date range of the show’s airing in Australia, reveals that the Australian press referenced the show over 280 times.<sup>1</sup> And regardless of what faults critics have found with the work, these have not gotten in the way of either popular success or critical acclaim, with all of his shows garnering headline-attracting ratings and with Lilley scooping prime awards at the Logie’s during the two years he has competed.<sup>2</sup> Certainly none of the controversies thus far appear to have impeded Lilley’s ability to sell his shows overseas: Lilley’s fan base has grown steadily since 2005 and the most recent show, *Angry Boys*, was co-produced with HBO and pre-sold to BBC. With its abundance of genitalia-oriented jokes, seemingly endless litany of swear-words, plethora of racist slurs, and bracing send-ups of non-whites from other countries, including one via the employment of blackface, *Angry Boys* does not lack the potential to offend. But while individual characters have attracted condemnation and Lilley’s performance abilities have occasionally been questioned, Lilley’s domestic reputation as a writer and creator of nationally award-winning material has largely not suffered, in contrast to other shows featuring similarly provocative themes. What is distinctive about Lilley’s work that allows him to forestall accusations of ‘racism’ that other shows would face? What has occurred on the critical stage to facilitate Lilley’s avoidance of censure for performances

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<sup>1</sup> As a comparison point, a search for *The Slap* using the date range of the first six weeks of that show, reveals that the Australian press referenced the show 194 times.

<sup>2</sup> In 2006 *Heroes* won awards for Most Outstanding New Talent and Most Outstanding Comedy Program; in 2008 *Summer Heights High* won awards for Most Popular Actor and Most Outstanding Comedy Program. In 2012 ABC neglected to submit *Angry Boys* to the Logies for Most Popular consideration, see <http://www.abc.net.au/news/2011-12-15/abc-forgets-angry-boys-at-logies/3732472>

and representations that other Australian television has been roundly condemned for – or avoided altogether?

In order to address these questions, I will investigate key components of Lilley's comedies in three major contexts. Firstly I will consider the work in the framework of post-2000, Howard-era Australia. How might the depicted themes of aspiration and disenfranchisement dispose at least 'middle Australian' viewers to find favour with Lilley? Secondly, I will look at the material in the context of the subgenre of 'cringe comedy'. How do Lilley's shows build on components of cringe – the mixing of satire and empathy – to create a sense of critical ambiguity and to implicate viewers in compelling ways? A key theme that emerges throughout critical appraisals is uncertainty about the ethical value of the humour. Often within a single article, reviewers will praise the anthropological insights of the work, and then go on to denigrate it as puerile, adolescent indulgence. How might such uncertainties play out in Lilley's favour? Finally, I will examine the domestic framing of Lilley's non-white characters, contrasting critical responses to such characters (especially *Angry Boys's* S'Mouse) with the reception of another well-known performance of blackface on *Hey Hey It's Saturday*. While *Hey Hey* generated claims of racism in many critical quarters, Lilley's work has largely not. How might more contained criticisms of performance flaws and scripting weakness displace more serious charges, thereby working to protect one of Australia's own favourite television heroes? Before I move on to consider those contexts, I need briefly to recap the shows' themes and characters.

### **Interpretive Uncertainty**

The first of Lilley's three major works made for the ABC, *We Can Be Heroes* is a serialised six-part, ensemble-cast dramedy organised around a potentially real-life occurrence: the competition between five nominees to win the Australia Day contest. Airing domestically in 2005, *Heroes* introduced audiences to basic features of Lilley's performance and style that would develop and continue over the next six years: the acting virtuosity (i.e. Lilley's penchant for playing all the key parts), the mix of ridicule and sympathy, and the mockmentary style. At the core of *Heroes* and central to its humour, as with all of Lilley's work, is the 'ensemble' cast: the private schoolgirl Ja'mie King, whose nomination derives from her holding the national record in sponsoring the greatest number of starving Sudanese children; Pat Mullins, the housewife whose physical disability (one leg is shorter than the other) has allowed her to become a champion 'roller'; Phil Olivetti, the former police officer who wants to turn his rescue of children from a flying bouncy castle into a career in

motivational speaking; Ricky Wong, the physics PhD student, migrant, and aspiring actor with a keen but misguided enthusiasm for Aboriginal culture; and lastly Daniel Simms, a teenager from country SA, whose vocabulary is littered with words like ‘shit’ and ‘fag’, who has volunteered to donate an ear drum to his ‘90% deaf’ brother Nathan. Tracking the highs and lows of the contest hopefuls over the course of six weeks, *Heroes* mercilessly spoofs a spectrum of Australian cultural stereotypes as well as global attitudes to fame and celebrity, sending up not only the Australia Day contest but also reality TV, with its demands for compromised ethics, false modesty, fake compassion, and overblown egos.

Airing two years after *Heroes*, *Summer Heights High* revived not just one of the characters from the first series but many of the formal and comedic components named above: the mockumentary approach, the ensemble cast, the excruciating humour, in an eight-episode series. It shifted the location to a public high school and narrowed the large cast down to three: Ja’mie came back as an exchange student under considerable sufferance at the more ‘povo’ Summer Heights High; new characters included the megalomaniacal drama teacher Mr. G. and Jonah Takalua, an eighth-grader of Tongan descent, a break-dancer, graffiti artist, and self-appointed class clown – the proverbial student ‘at risk’. If *Heroes* was informed by reality TV, *Summer Heights* offered commentary on the world of public education, with its entrenched cultures of bullying, inability to overturn race-based stereotypes, and pedagogical impotence in the face of economic disenfranchisement. Disenfranchisement and its inversion, aspiration, are themes that colour many of the worlds Lilley creates in addition to Summer Heights; according to some economic sociologists, aspiration is a key theme in the cultural contexts in which Lilley’s first two shows appeared. Two thousand and seven, we should remember, the year that Australians first saw *Summer Heights High* on the ABC, was also the final year of John Howard’s twelve-year term in office. The second longest government under a single Prime Minister, the Howard government was marked by contradictions. On the one hand, 1996 – 2007 was a period of general economic prosperity in which government debt was repaid, surpluses were recorded, and a single quarter of negative economic growth was seen (after the introduction of the GST in 2000). On the other hand, these apparently propitious indicators coincided with large cuts to government and university budgets, a reduction in social services, and the widening of economic divides.

Charting the perceptions of ‘middle Australians’ at the end of the twentieth century, Michael Pusey investigates the increasingly negative perceptions of this group following two decades of economic ‘reform’, telling a story whereby Australia became a society in which

the inequities in the distribution of household income (measured by the difference between the top and bottom deciles) had become the third largest in the world – outpaced only by Britain and the U.S. Looking at the impact of such changes on experiences of work, family life, and community involvement and at self-perceptions of economic prospects more generally, Pusey paints a picture of increasing levels of stress and anxiety and overall declining optimism for Australians at the start of the twenty-first century.<sup>3</sup> What does Pusey’s analysis mean in terms of Lilley’s ability to find favour with, at least, ‘middle Australian’ audiences? Although no-one can prove that economic circumstances produce any type of media reception, it is worth emphasising that it is precisely just following the period scrutinised by Pusey that Lilley achieved near cult reputation, writing and performing *Summer Heights High*, a story centrally about aspiration, self-promotion, and unchecked grabs for power. Lilley’s humour in general contains no small amount of social and class critique, where the affluent and privileged (eg the snotty Ja’mie King) and the ruthlessly aspirational (Mr. G.; Jen Okazaki, from *Angry Boys*) are spoofed without mercy. If Pusey’s ideas are at all correct, viewers in twenty-first century Australia could be well positioned to find humour in such individuals, with their self-perception as ‘elite’, desire for social power bordering on the delusional, and deafness to social codes. With such baggage on-board, characters like Mr. G., Ja’mie King, and Jen Okazaki expose the unattainability of the Australian dream that is out of reach for ‘ordinary’ Australians, while the excess of their antics bring to light the violence and indeed criminality necessary to achieve that dream.

While the first two shows were resolutely Australian in both setting and personalities, Lilley’s third show tells the story of characters from several continents, brought together under the auspices of a farewell party that is planned to take place in Dunt, a struggling, dust-blown town in country SA. Daniel, from *Heroes*, is organising an event for brother Nathan as Nathan prepares to leave for ‘deaf school’ in Adelaide. The series introduces viewers to the trio of ‘legends’ in varying family contexts, whom Daniel hopes to invite to the party – aging ex-surf champion Blake Oakfield, American skateboarder Tim Okazaki, and an African-American rap star named S’Mouse. At seventeen, Tim is living in Japan with his mother and manager, Jen Okazaki, a so-called ‘tiger mother’ and perhaps the most frightening of all Lilley’s creations to date. Blake deals with life as a testicle-less father and middle-age has-been in coastal Queensland, while S’Mouse spends time under house arrest at

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<sup>3</sup> While a thorough engagement with economic sociology is outside the scope of this paper, it is worth noting Pusey is not writing in a vacuum. See also Hollier (especially articles by David, Connell); Greig, Lewins, and White; and Hamilton’s popular *Growth Fetish*.

his parents' home in affluent suburban Los Angeles. In addition to these three, the eponymous angry boys also include the inmates of a youth offender facility in Garingal, where the featured prison officer is Ruth Sims, Nathan's and Daniel's grandmother, known to all of the inmates affectionately as 'Gran'. Along with Jen Okazaki, Gran is the other female character played by Lilley in the series, prone to dreaming up inappropriate stunts for her charges and calling them names such as 'cocopops'; the character is key to a sophisticated satire about life inside a young offenders' facility.

As should be evident from the above descriptions, the operative comedic term for all Lilley's work is indeed 'satire', which as comedy theorists know, was originally purposeful in intent, designed to shed light on human failings and vices with the aim of bringing about improvement. Satire scholars are prone to citing Jonathan Swift's 'A Modest Proposal' in order to draw attention to this quality; the essay famously proposed that poor Irish parents ought to consider selling their children as food. The Swiftian, purposeful association between media satire and political critique has been visible in many places on television over the past decade, in fake news shows like *The Daily Show*, *The Colbert Report*, and the various shows in the *Chaser* franchise,<sup>4</sup> and is the subject of recent books like *Satire TV: politics and comedy in the Post-Network Era*, *Entertaining Politics: Satiric Television and Political Engagement*, and *Satire and Dissent: Interventions in Contemporary Political Debate*. In these books, the popularity of such satire is attributed to a cocktail of factors, including the decline of faith in modern media forms (especially television journalism) and concern about the blurring of information and entertainment within media practices such as 'newstainment'.<sup>5</sup>

Chris Lilley's work is most productively situated within the satirical subgenre that Brian McFarlane called 'cringe' television, or what Brett Mills termed 'comedy verite'.<sup>6</sup> It likewise offers commentary on what are perceived to be outmoded genres and entertainment practices, principally the conventional sitcom, but also, as I have mentioned, competition-based reality TV shows and earnest biographical enterprises such as 'Australian Story'. Like *The Office*, *Curb Your Enthusiasm* and present-day examples that would include *Modern Family*, Lilley's work is marked by a shift in television comedy production styles (handheld shooting, single-camera setup, editing that cuts in media res, opportunities for improvisation,

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<sup>4</sup> *The Chaser's War on Everything* aired 2006, 2007, and 2009, but there are forerunners of the show (including *The Election Chaser* [2001], *CNNNN* [2002; 2003], and *The Chaser Decides* [2004; 2007]) as well as spin-offs (including *Yes We Canberra!* [2010] and *The Hamster Wheel* [2011]).

<sup>5</sup> The term 'newstainment' is Craig Reucassel's, quoted in Turnbull ('Chaser' 19).

<sup>6</sup> See also Thompson.

direct-address interviews, occasional inclusion of non-professional actors, focus on diegetic sound, and finally, the absence of a laugh track). In so being, the shows mimic the style of docusoaps while still containing sitcom elements, thereby expressing a generic hybridity that seriously challenges long-held understandings of the sitcom genre (Mills).

Apart from how it undermines perceptions of the sitcom, most notable about cringe is its send-up of big ticket qualities of social regression, such as sexism, homophobia, and racism, but also more subtle breaches of social etiquette, which include cultural insensitivity, personal aggrandisement, the cultivation of undeserved celebrity, and so on. In keeping with all humour that encourages us to laugh at others – I am tempted to say all humour *tout court* – cringe contains a belligerent quality that feeds audience’s sense of superiority in the face of such infractions. Like the film genre categories ‘horror’ and ‘weepie’, the term ‘cringe’ refers to the emotional effect it produces in audiences, who absorb the embarrassing or awkward situation with a mix of horror and pleasure, identification and distance, empathy and superiority. Examples in Lilley’s work include characters like Ja’mie King, who inspires the epitome of cringe when she screams over the phone to an agent at a charity, ‘you don’t sound like a manager, you sound like a fat bitch... I’m sorry, you sound so fat!’

Because of the mix of emotions that it generates, the target of Lilley’s humour is often difficult to determine, protean in its shape, and emotionally complex in how it is received. Offensive epithets and behaviour such as I have just exemplified pepper Lilley’s scripts, generating a cocktail of laughter, scorn, pleasure in taboo-breaking, and uncertainty about the humour’s ultimate purpose. Are the jokes about ‘entertainment’ in South Australia’s Dunt (that include urinating on the bottle shop sign, urinating from the roof of the house, doing ‘mainies’ in the car) evidence of more taboo busting, or a more serious testament to the lack of opportunities for rural youth? Is Gran’s cry ‘did your mother’s heroine habit during pregnancy affect your coordination?’ a cheap chance to laugh at down and out people, or evidence of the bullying that young offenders are routinely subjected to?

Such uncertainty over the merits of the humour, how to interpret Lilley, and where to place him, is, as noted at the beginning of this essay, a recurring theme in popular reviews of Lilley’s work, which overall gives as much attention to dramatic as it does to comedic components. Indeed, all three shows enact a division between pathos and bawdy humour that is considerably untidy; the most popular characters over the trio of works are played for a kind of vulgarity but also, crucially, for empathy. Where foul-mouthed (or –minded) characters such as David Brent, Larry David, and Kim Craig tend towards a base misanthropy, such is not the case with Lilley’s characters. Many of the worst epithets issue

from the mouths of Gran, Daniel, and Jonah – unreconstructed racists and/or homophobes, all; what complicates things is that these three are arguably Lilley’s most likeable characters who generate the greatest share of audience sympathy.<sup>7</sup> Scenes exemplifying this point include the heartbreaking moment near the end of *Summer Heights*, when Jonah is forcibly removed from Gumnut cottage, or the scene in *Angry Boys* when Talib finally speaks, and Gran says softly, ‘I feel like I’m meeting you for the first time.’ When Daniel mutters sadly that his dad was a ‘legend’ and his step-father Steve’s a ‘gaylord’, the laughter that might normally follow such rude language is halted mid-speech, muted under the discovery of a depth of personality not previously revealed.

Moments such as these make the satire nuanced and multi-sided, and the object of the satire uncertain. The same could be said about Lilley’s ability to repeatedly and consistently pass off politically incorrect content as if it is the creation of on-screen characters. While this quality is hardly new in Cringe or indeed other television comedy, the lack of distance between Lilley the performer (playing all key characters), Lilley the creator/ scriptwriter, and the offensive material removes nearly all margin of error, that is, makes all the more pressing Lilley’s success in carrying this off. In a comprehensive article about race and the national imaginary in *We Can Be Heroes*, Lisa Bode explores such qualities, framing Lilley’s ability to ‘negotiate’ such rules as ‘self-reflexivity’. Referring specifically to Lilley’s performance of Ricky Wong in the wildly incorrect, insensitive show ‘Indigeridoo’, the article notes how Lilley distinguishes between the ‘naïve’ performances exhibited by Ricky and the ‘contemporary, nuanced, and transgressive’ performance that is his own. In so doing, Lilley provides opportunities for laughter at cultural blunders, indeed laughter at blackface, without ever becoming the author of the practice. Such moments I believe implicate viewers in more complex ways from how they are implicated in earlier cringe shows I have mentioned.<sup>8</sup>

I have spent some time outlining the components that position Lilley in a favourable way, that include elements of class critique and interpretive uncertainty. I now want to turn to the critical positioning of racial ‘drag’ in the shows, especially the performance of blackface. In Australia these issues are vexed and controversial, indicating a degree of critical anxiety, especially in the face of the characters’ reception overseas. In order to track these sentiments, in what follows I will engage closely with domestic reviews of Lilley’s characters and with the reception of another controversial racial drag event – the infamous

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<sup>7</sup> Fans of Gran include Addy; fans of Gran, Nathan, and Daniel include Blundell; Ross; Schembri. Jonah is named as the ‘emotional centre’ of the show (Patrikios) and as the ‘most sympathetic’ (Warburton).

<sup>8</sup> As Larissa Dubecki puts it, the comedy is not reducible to its ability to offend: it spoofs characters in ways that I have mentioned, without ‘annihilating every shred of sympathy for them’ (‘Critic’s View’).



blackface performance on *Hey Hey It's Saturday*. Apart from the anxiety that such reviews demonstrate, they may potentially serve a management function, working to forestall or stave off more serious charges of racism that the variety show did not escape.

### **Domestic Framing of non-white characters**

While audiences have grown used to seeing Lilley perform in all manner of drag, that is, as characters who are female or non-white (and sometimes female and non-white), the reception of these different drag performances has not been uniform.<sup>9</sup> Although the 'racial drag' characters have elicited critical anxiety that I have mentioned and which I will go on to discuss, the 'gender drag' characters have been popular and seemingly easy to relate to. For example, of all the characters in Lilley's first two shows, Ja'mie is said to be the 'one to watch out for' (Adams), a 'stand out' (Carlyon), the 'highlight' (Tsitouris), the 'most well drawn' (Adamson), and 'well rendered' (Devlyn). Ja'mie is the character that 'works better than others' (Williamson and Spence), who is both 'utterly, utterly convincing' (Houston) and 'outrageously true... as real as Rundle Mall at 4:30 pm' (Goers, 'No offence'). Conversations about Ja'mie favourably note how 'recognisable' she is: 'lots of mums have said they have daughters like Ja'mie,' writes Elissa Doherty, while Courtney Gibson, ABC Head of Arts, Entertainment, adds, 'we all know a Jamie' (quoted in Selemme). The school-girl character has furthermore brought praise to Lilley for his acting abilities, who, according to Robin Oliver, is 'in his element' when playing her. Similar commentary arises with respect to characters Pat and Gran, who have also earned Lilley accolades. Peter Goers for example exclaims enthusiastically that watching Gran move is pure 'poetry in motion' ('Chris Lilley's *Angry Boys*'), while Petra Starke writes of the prison-officer that her 'interactions with her juvenile detainees seem so close to real life, they're more heart-rending than humorous'.

In contrast to the positive assessments that the white female characters received, the non-white characters attracted some censure. Of Jen Okazaki, Glen Humphries worried that she seemed 'too close to the racist cliché of Asians being driven to excel', while Peter Warzynski added 'here's the cringy bit – [Lilley] ... sports a rather offensive accent as Japanese stereotype Jen Okazaki'. About Ricky Wong's character, Brett Debrtiz likewise

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<sup>9</sup> I recognise here that the word 'non-white' is problematic, however the range of characters and contexts Lilley depicts is too vast to be described by a single term. For example, while S'Mouse is both African-American and a 'person of color' in US parlance, these terms have little meaning outside of that country, that is, with respect to Jen's, Jonah's, or Ricky's characters, for example. And while both Ricky and Jen are 'Asian,' Ricky is furthermore a 'migrant,' which Jen, in Japan, is not.

found something ‘unsettling’, while Des Partridge and Vicki Englund noted that viewers had been ‘squeamish’ in their responses to him. Judy Adamson claimed simply that she found the character ‘dull’. In the same way that Ja’mie’s character drew praise for Lilley’s acting prowess, responses to both Ricky and Jen also commented on this aspect, but in negative terms, intimating an inability to ‘connect’. Writing about Jen and the rapper S’Mouse, Peter Goers speculated, ‘both characters [Jen and S’Mouse] fail, perhaps because they are too far from his [Lilley’s] cultural milieu’ (‘Chris Lilley’s *Angry Boys*’). Of Ricky, Robin Oliver stated that ‘we still need convincing’, while Scott Ellis named him as the character that seemed especially a ‘stretch’ to play. Although Michael Gadd found Lilley’s performance of the character plausible, this was deemed to be due to the Chinese supporting cast rather than to any acting virtuosity on Lilley’s part.

When reviewers turned to discuss S’Mouse’s character, similar themes emerged. In general, the character elicited negative commentary. S’Mouse was said to be ‘hard to adopt’ (Ritchie), ‘the show’s weakest incarnation’ (Kalina), a ‘miscalculation’ (Sutcliffe), and simply ‘plain annoying’ (Dubecki, ‘Critic’s View’). Reception issues were in the minds of a number of reviewers. Lilley himself acknowledged that Australian audiences ‘struggled’ with S’Mouse (Williams), while Richard Clune commented that the character could ‘lead to some backlash’. Concern about overseas responses were also voiced by Kerri Murphy, who added ‘the connotations of “blacking up” are uncomfortable and don’t even get me started on using the N-word (goodness knows how this will go in the U.S)’. One article was especially succinct in naming the problem: ‘your heart goes out to the Australian Tourist Board’ (‘The Moral of the...’). Throughout responses, scepticism about Lilley’s abilities in performance and scripting continued to be present; of the African-American rapper, Michael Idato wrote that he is the ‘one character for whom Lilley appears to have little understanding and even less sympathy’. Larissa Dubecki queried the matter of the character’s credibility outright and complained about what she termed the ‘bad American accent’ (‘Critic’s View’). Starke likewise raised concerns about believability, disparaging Lilley’s performance and scripting: ‘his hit song Poo on You... is so ridiculous as to be completely unbelievable’. In the same way that Ricky Wong’s character attracted concerns about scripting, Paul Kalina insinuated S’Mouse was not only the show’s ‘weakest incarnation’ but also difficult to write.

Running through many of these critical characterisations is a notion that the white, female characters are well-scripted, easily performed, familiar to audiences, and credible, in contrast to the non-white characters (whether male or female), who are perceived as more difficult to play, unbelievable, less recognisable, and less convincingly scripted. In so being,

such commentary makes clear the labour necessary to perform racial drag on Lilley's part, and the work required by audiences to embrace such characters. This is in stark opposition to what critics believe is needed for Lilley to perform (and for audiences to appreciate) the gender drag characters, especially Ja'mie. Remember Lilley is said to be 'in his element' when playing the Sydney schoolgirl, who is so 'utterly, utterly convincing,' audiences are likely to forget that they are watching a performance.<sup>10</sup>

What are we to make of these discrepancies? On the one hand, responses to characters like Ricky Wong and S'Mouse signal an uncertainty about the acceptability of white satire of non-whites, specifically black- (and indeed, yellow-) face, within the reviewing classes, who may sense what they are seeing is unacceptable but cannot come out directly and say it is racist. This would appear to be supported in a recent and comprehensive article by Jon Stratton on the Australian reception and context of blackface. Analysing responses to several recent incidents of Australians 'blacking up' (the key one of which is *Hey Hey*, about which I will have more to say in a moment), Stratton suggests that Australian working-class cultures (including 'ocker', 'larrikin', and 'bogan' cultures) may exhibit greater degrees of approval of performances such as blackface that others would find racist.<sup>11</sup> Stratton's article is complex and far-ranging, tracing an intricate genealogy of attitudes to, and incarnations of, blackface in Australia from its first documented manifestation in 1838 (when it was initially associated with African-Americans) (27), to the production of Aboriginal blackface based on British understandings (30), to the coincidence between a more aggressive form of blackface at the end of the nineteenth century with debates over non-white migration (32). Unchanging throughout the history of the form is the link between blackface and power, its function as a technology to 'manage anxieties' about the power of non-whites, and its ability to elevate the performer as 'white' (regardless of their actual race or ethnicity).

The class analysis offered by Stratton gives some indication of critical dis-ease in the face of the outrageously popular comedian's performance, especially given the show's

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<sup>10</sup> Ironically, this contrasts sharply with statements Lilley himself has made in regards to *Heroes* that both the female and the non-white characters were challenging to perform (Ellis), and more recent comments that he found Gran's character most difficult to play in *Angry Boys* (Tucker-Evans).

<sup>11</sup> The issue of media satire of and by non-whites is simply too big to be recapped here; the literature would include essays on the 80s US Black-produced TV show *In Living Color* (Schulman; Cooks and Orbe), New Zealand's *bro'Town* (Lustyik and Smith), Spike Lee's *Bamboozled* (Gubar; Laski), comedy by Richard Pryor, Chris Rock, and Dave Chappelle (McAllister; Haggins; Weaver), among many, many other examples. A key condition necessary to the satire's perceived effectiveness (which I read as critical acceptance), is that it originates from within the satirised culture. As Norma Schulman attests: 'appropriating a language of blatant stereotypes in order to undermine the perceptions of the dominant order is an age-old device employed by persecuted groups to subvert the status quo' (2, emphasis added).

destiny as cultural export. Let's contrast this with the 2009 blackface performance in *Hey Hey*. To re-cap that event in brief, it comprised six men dressing up with wigs and blackened faces, singing and dancing to a Jackson Five song, while American pop star and guest judge Harry Connick Jr. took umbrage. In part because of the 'novelty' brought about by the liveness of the show, together with Connick's apparently un-scripted response, the skit created entertainment news that went viral and ultimately got an airing on shows and in blog sites like *The View* and *The Guardian*. The cringe-worthy content of the *Hey Hey* act, together with its lightening fast global transmission, fostered a cascade of domestic responses – critical as well as defensive. Amongst those who decried the event, the problem concerned the show's abdication of responsibility to stay informed and be respectful of histories of violence committed on the global stage, that is to eschew practices deemed offensive at international as well as domestic levels. At issue was also the naïvite of Channel 9 for failing to recognise the offensive nature of the content, in view of Channel 9's own history with such dealings (ten years before, Sam Newman caused outrage when he appeared in blackface on *The Footy Show* 'as' Nicky Winmar). Writing in *Crikey*, Ruth Brown's response is typical: 'Because Australia doesn't cop enough flack for being a racist backwater, the good folk propping up the reanimated corpse of *Hey Hey it's Saturday* decided last night that no nostalgia trip into the country's murky cultural past would be complete without reviving some good ol' fashioned 20<sup>th</sup> century bigotry'. The article then went on to link to several overseas condemnations of the show, bearing titles like 'G'Day, Blackface!' and 'Still Fresh and Funny in Australia: Blackface'.<sup>12</sup>

Defences of the skit basically fell into two camps: on the one hand, there was scepticism about the capacity of a mere 'mindless show' to be able to exude such a serious thing as racism (Szego; Howe). On the other hand, there were cries for Australian culture not to be dictated by American hegemony, i.e. claims that sensitivity to blackface is non-relevant in the Australian historical context (Hearn). While there may be temptation to mobilise the last of these charges, there are obvious problems with both defences. In terms of the first, the response is but the latest in a well-worn but ultimately inaccurate claim regarding the 'insignificance' of popular entertainment to carry serious content (Maltby). Though it does not appear as obviously 'sober' as legal discourse for example, entertainment is equally well equipped to promote ethically dubious attitudes about race, gender, sexuality, and so on. Regarding the second claim, although the desire to resist filtering Australian media through a

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<sup>12</sup> Condemnations of this sort were not just in *Crikey*. See also Graham (in *Sunday Telegraph*).

U.S. lens is understandable, Sam Newman's aforementioned invocation of blackface in order to 'perform' Nicky Winmar gives the lie to the theory that Australian producers are somehow unaware of the connotations of the practice or industrially unaffected by it. Although the number of blackface performances in the US and the UK throughout the twentieth century well exceeds the number in Australia, saturation by historical media items ranging from MGM cartoons and *The Black and White Minstrel Show* to *The Simpsons* and *Southpark*, and by work of contemporary global stars such as Ted Danson / Whoopi Goldberg, Gene Wilder / Richard Pryor (*Silver Streak* 1976), and most recently Robert Downey Jr. (*Tropic Thunder* 2008), guarantee exposure to the practice, including racist applications of it. And finally, as Stratton rightly points out, while Australia has not had the history of involuntary, large-scale migration of groups perceived as subordinate and racially distinct as occurred in the US (30), the rich history of the enlistment of blackface to ridicule Indigenous people should ensure the political relevance of the practice in Australia and the obligation of the media in regards to it.

### **Pushing Boundaries (conclusion)**

Let me return to Chris Lilley. The apparent critical sidestepping of Lilley's send-ups of racial minorities, especially via the employment of blackface, would appear to bear out Benjamin Miller's claim, in his article about blackface in Charles Chauvel's *Jedda*, that Australia lacks a 'reading method' for blackface.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, while Stratton himself is quick to name Lilley's performance of Wong playing Walkabout Man in his list of recent blackface examples at his own essay's beginning, by his essay's end, that example has significantly dropped off the list of media events that inspire 'pleasure in racist moments', which include Newman's performance, the *Hey Hey* sketch, and a video clip of a rap song 'Out Da Front' made by a white Perth man (36). Although Lilley has been repeatedly packaged and self-packaged himself as a 'boundary pusher', he has largely been protected from direct accusations of racism, with critics taking note of smaller, more containable infractions such as character credibility, scripting, performance competence, and so on. While his performances of non-white characters, S'Mouse in particular, received criticism as I have noted, given that S'Mouse was a staple character who appeared regularly on *Angry Boys*,

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<sup>13</sup> Miller is actually talking about blackface of Indigenous people. The comment emerges during the course of a discussion about the critical blindspot of *Jedda* scholars (who include Cunningham, Johnson, Langton, and Jennings) to the Aboriginal head stockman and lead character 'Joe'; Joe was played by a white actor named Paul Clarke. Venturing an explanation, Miller writes: 'Joe is the narrator – it is his story. So it is peculiar that he hardly features in the film's critical heritage. Perhaps, I would like to suggest, it is due to the complete absence of a reading method for the Australian blackface' (146).

given the critical censure on blackface, the comments have been qualified to say the least. Comparing the reception of Lilley's work with what *Hey Hey* had to contend with, at least one reviewer made note of the discrepancy, observing Lilley's ability to retain social capital in comparison with the variety show: 'when those guys appeared in blackface in "Hey Hey It's Saturday" a year or so ago, no-one stood up to claim they were pushing any boundaries' (Humphries). In this essay, I have tried to outline some of the components that have advantageously positioned Lilley's work, thereby enabling it to avoid more serious, blanket accusations that would permanently weaken Lilley's cultural capital. These components include, as I have described, an intricate and nuanced class critique, an approach to satire that makes use of interpretive uncertainty, and a displacement of 'racism' charges in favour of more limited and localised critical disapproval.

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