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Clemence Due

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“AUSSIE HUMOUR” OR RACISM? *HEY HEY IT’S SATURDAY* AND THE DENIAL OF RACISM IN ONLINE RESPONSES TO NEWS MEDIA ARTICLES

CLEMENCE DUE
UNIVERSITY OF ADELAIDE, AUSTRALIA

Abstract: In early October 2009, a blackface parody of the Jackson Five performed on the Hey Hey It’s Saturday reunion reached not only an audience of over 2.5 million people in Australia, but also millions of people around the world after guest judge Harry Connick Jr accused the skit and the show of racism. The incident was widely discussed within various online communities, and whilst widely condemned internationally, online comment sections and responses to online newspaper polls suggested that the overwhelming opinion within Australia was that the skit was not racist. This paper considers the way in which such denials of racism were performed in online comments to a number of newspaper articles and polls.

INTRODUCTION

To ratings of over two and a half million viewers, the Australian family variety show *Hey Hey It’s Saturday* returned to the Nine Network in Australia for two reunion shows in 2009, ten years after it was originally taken off air. The second of these shows aired on 7 October 2009 and caused a controversy surrounding accusations of racism that became the subject of national and international newspaper coverage. The incident in question occurred as part of the Red Faces amateur talent quest section of the show. On this segment, a group of doctors performed a sketch titled the *Jackson Jive*, in which they mimed to Michael Jackson’s *Can You Feel It*. The *Jackson Jive* was originally performed on the show 20 years earlier and revived as a form of tribute to the history of *Hey Hey*. The performance included a Michael Jackson impersonator with a whitened face and five back-up singers with blackened faces. Singer Harry Connick Jr, a guest judge on the segment, gave the *Jackson Jive* a score of zero (out

of ten), stating that the show would never have been put to air in America. Later, he said that if he knew the skit was going to be on the show he would never have appeared on it, and that “I just wanted to say on behalf of my country, I know it was done humorously, but, you know, we have spent so much time trying to not make black people look like buffoons, that when we see something like that we take it really to heart” (Molitorisz and Steffens, 2009, no page).

The incident made headlines around the world, as international newspapers and commentators condemned the act as demeaning (see Mitchell, 2009 for a discussion of this), mind-boggling (Hyde, 2009) and ridiculous (Kyles, 2009). In Australia, however, the response was more mixed and largely argued for the supposedly humorous nature of the skit, thereby defending against accusations of racism. For example, opinion writers stated that the performance was ignorant rather than racist (Bolt, 2009) and even Australian politicians weighed into the debate by arguing that the skit was simply meant to be humorous (Millar, 2009). A strong majority of public opinion – as reflected in opinion polls and online comments – interpreted the skit as “just a bit of fun”. Many people argued that since Australia does not have the same history with blackface as America (where minstrel shows have a long and problematic tradition), the skit could not be considered offensive (see news.com.au article *Readers say Hey Hey Jackson Jive skit ‘not racist’* for an outline of the public response to opinion polls for News Limited online newspapers).

This paper considers such responses, as seen in online comments, in order to examine how Australians defended the show and themselves from accusations of racism, and to consider the implications of humour in relation to denials of racism within Australia more broadly. Specifically, the paper considers two aspects of these online comments. Firstly, drawing upon the seminal work of van Dijk (1993), the paper uses a thematic analysis approach to consider *how* these denials were performed at the level of the text – that is, what resources the writers utilised in order to deny racism. And secondly, drawing on the work of Hage (1998) and Stratton (1998), the paper considers the implications of such denials at a broader level, in particular in relation to the identity of Australia as a multicultural society.

Before examining the literature surrounding denials of racism and Australian identity, a brief discussion of the blackface tradition itself is called for (see, for example, Gubar, 1997; Lott, 1992; Saxton, 1975; Strausbaugh, 2007 for more detailed examinations of blackface and minstrel shows). In relation to the blackface tradition, Lott argues that “while [blackface] was organized around the quite explicit ‘borrowing’ of black cultural materials for white dissemination (and profit), a borrowing that ultimately depended upon the material relations of slavery, the minstrel show obscured those relations by pretending that slavery was amusing, right and natural” (1992, p. 23). Thus the blackface tradition in America was based largely on the slavery and oppression of black (African) Americans and functioned to reinforce stereotypes of black people as inferior. Indeed, as Saxton argues, “Blackface minstrels’ dominance of popular entertainment amounted to half a century of inurement to the uses of white supremacy” (1975, p. 27).

A note regarding terminology is also required before continuing with a discussion of definitions of racism. As the skit in question, and subsequent media and online discussions, employed racial binaries of “black” and “white”, this paper does

the same. It is acknowledged here that such binaries are not congruent with the broadly supported position of race as being social constructed, and that they do not reflect real-world experiences in which lived experiences of race are broad and include much more than “black” and “white”. As Riggs argues, to refer to racial identities such as “black” and “white” is:

not to naively accept that race as a category is useful, or a biological fact, or internally coherent. Rather, to ‘recognise race’ (as in referring to someone as ‘white’) is to acknowledge that the assumption of racialized differences continues to inform how we relate to one another as people, and that this is the legacy of a long history of violence that has been perpetuated in the name of imperialism and empire against people classified as racial others (Riggs, 2006, p. 350).

This article employs the terms “black” and “white” to denote those racialised differences which inform and are taken as given in the *Hey Hey* debate. These terms are used mindfully and it is recognised that they are reductive, and frequently function to maintain power relations that privilege people on the basis of features that are generally taken as denoting racial differences, such as skin colour. Correspondingly, it is also important to note here that this paper deals with an Australian case study concerning issues of race and racism. It is therefore highly localised within the Australian context of cultural and race relations and as such is not considered generalisable to other countries in which race relations will take a different form.

“MODERN RACISM” AND DENIALS OF RACISM

Overt expressions of racism such as those associated with blackface performances and minstrel shows are now broadly taboo in Western countries (see Augoustinos and Every, 2007; McConahay, 1986; Wetherell and Potter, 1992). Instead, research on “modern” or “symbolic” racism has shown that racism no longer manifests as overtly racist acts but rather in more subtle forms, such as arguments stating that marginalised groups transgress norms within communities (Augoustinos et al, 1999; Augoustinos and Every, 2007; Liu and Mills, 2006). This research suggests that racially marginalised groups are no longer overtly discriminated against on the basis of race *per se*, but are instead criticised for violating traditional values, and are therefore constructed as deserving of the criticism they receive (Simmons and LeCouteur, 2008). This notion of implicit racism directed at minority groups on the basis of cultural issues has important implications for definitions of racism. For example, Wetherell and Potter argue that, “Racist discourse, in our view, should be seen as discourse (of whatever content) which has the effect of establishing, sustaining and reinforcing oppressive power relations” (1992, p. 70). As such, racism requires both prejudice towards a group of people based on the social construction of race *and* the power to oppress those groups of people. Thus it does not make sense – at least within Australia as a country with a history of colonisation – to discuss racism from marginalised groups towards dominant ones. This definition is important in that, whilst acknowledging that individual acts of racism can and do occur, a broader definition of racism involves discourse which functions to further marginalise groups who are already disadvantaged.

The more implicit nature of “modern racism” has led to increasing taboos surrounding overtly racist opinions or actions. This taboo means that accusations of racism, such as those made by Harry Connick Jr in relation to the *Hey Hey* skit, carry a lot of weight, and the people at whom such accusations are levelled are strongly invested in refuting them. This means that even though overt forms of racism are considered unacceptable, denials of racism continue to have an important function while racism exists in more “symbolic” forms. In relation to such denials, van Dijk argues:

In general, a denial presupposes a real or potential accusation, reproach or suspicion of others about one’s present or past actions or attitudes, and asserts that such attacks against one’s moral integrity are not warranted. That is denials may be a move in a strategy of *defence*, as well as part of the strategy of positive self-presentation (van Dijk, 1993, p. 180).

Thus denials of racism respond to a perceived accusation of racism and can both defend the speaker from such accusations and present oneself (or in this case, a television show or one’s country) in a positive light. Previous work considering the denial of racism argues that a number of techniques are available to people when they attempt to defend what could otherwise be considered racist behaviour (Wetherell and Potter, 1992; van Dijk, 1993). In a seminal work used widely in the study of racism (see, for example, Simmons and LeCouteur, 2008; LeCouteur and Augoustinos, 2001; Augoustinos and Every, 2007; Saxton, 2004; Johnson and Suhr, 2003), van Dijk (1993, pp. 179-82) argues that techniques for the denial of racism include: the denial of racist *intent*; trivialising the seriousness of the racist incident; reversals of racism in which dominant (typically white) group members become the targets of discrimination; and positive self-presentation. Although the work of van Dijk (1993) is now 17 years old, his work in analysing denials of racism remains centrally important in studies concerning race and racist discourse since, as Augoustinos and Every argue, “contemporary race talk... is strategically organized to deny racism” (2007, p. 126). Given this, van Dijk’s techniques for the analysis of denial provide analysts with critical tools for examining how such denials are mobilised. In the context of this paper, such tools allow for a detailed examination of the ways in which humour is used to deny racism, or to justify discourses that could otherwise be seen as racist. Each of these techniques can be utilised in order to deny that a particular incident was racist. These will now be discussed in further detail, followed by a more general discussion regarding race in Australia.

By “reverse racism”, van Dijk (1993) refers to the tactic by which dominant group members turn charges of racism around, and argue instead that it is *they* who are being discriminated against and who are the victims of political correctness. In Australia, for example, non-indigenous Australians are often depicted as discriminated against due to policies which supposedly give Indigenous Australians “more than their fair share” (Augoustinos and Every, 2007). However, van Dijk (1993), Hage (1998), Saxton (2004) and Wetherell and Potter (1992) have argued that true reverse racism is impossible in countries like Australia since both prejudice *and* power are required in order to oppress groups on the basis of their race. Importantly, and as discussed previously, such definitions of racism are contingent upon context and, of course, are also dynamic. A definition of racism as requiring both prejudice

and power is salient in the context of Australia as a colonial country in which, as discussed throughout this paper, there remain residual effects of a desire for Australia to be seen as a “white” country in which those located as “white” people are seen to be “native” (as opposed to Australia’s First Nations peoples).

In this sense, whilst acknowledging other conceptualisations of power in relation to racism – such as Foucault’s (1977) arguments concerning power as dispersed and circulatory rather than centralised – this paper maintains a definition of racism which requires not only prejudice but also power in terms of the maintenance of a differential allocation of privilege and disadvantage. In Australia, such power is located in the hands of white Australians and remains evident in the continuing effects of colonisation upon Indigenous Australians, in institutional practices such as those seen in mainstream news media and the political arena, and in the effects of restrictive border control policies that adversely affect asylum seekers and immigrants seeking to enter this country who may be labelled as “Others”. Nevertheless, the argument that the dominant (white) group in Australia is being unfairly treated when compared to marginalised groups is frequently strong enough to defend against accusations of racism, particularly in light of changes within Australia (such as policies of multiculturalism) which led to a perceived sidelining of majority group needs and a foregrounding of marginalised interests (Ahluwalia and McCarthy, 1998; Hage, 1998).

Next, denials of racism based on “mitigation” are predicated on the ability to down-play or trivialise the seriousness of the event or talk in order to mitigate the possible negative consequences resulting from it (van Dijk, 1993). In relation to humour, accusations of racism are frequently mitigated by arguing that, for instance, the speaker was “only joking”, and that the *intent* of the humour was not racist (Billig, 2001). Thus mitigations of racism are tied closely to denials of racism based on arguments of intent. Van Dijk (1993) argues that denials of racist intent are able to diminish the responsibility of the person accused of racism, and therefore to defend against accusations of taboo, overtly racist, attitudes or opinions by arguing that the speaker or actor did not *intend* their speech or actions to be racist. This is also discussed by Riggs (2009) who analyses the denial of racist intent in the 2007 series of the UK’s *Celebrity Big Brother* reality television show. Riggs argues that such denials overlook the social *consequences* that racism may have, regardless of the initial intention, and therefore denials of racist intent are predicated on the speaker’s denial of the effects of entrenched racism in colonial societies. Similarly, Liu and Mills argue that what they term “plausible deniability” is

theoretically central for the communication of modern racism... Plausible deniability is a communication tactic that is used to warrant or defend public discourse about minority groups against accusations of racism by constructing statements in such a way that the speaker can convincingly disavow any racist intent (Liu and Mills, 2006, p. 84).

Thus, the denial of racist intent is central to modern racism in that such denials work to protect people from accusations of an overt racism that is now increasingly taboo. Those who do not wish to be seen as racist or as defending racist behaviour are therefore invested in being able to deny racist *intent* whilst still maintaining (or defending) an argument or position which discriminates on the basis of race.

Finally, denials of racism can also be made through reference to positive self-presentation. In the case of Australia, Hage (1998) argues that positive self-presentation is frequently achieved through discourses of “tolerance”. Thus, Australia presents itself as valuing tolerance in its treatment of those considered “Others” despite legislation such as the White Australia policy, which privileged the intake of immigrants from Britain, Ireland and New Zealand until 1972 and therefore effectively reinforced the dominance and centrality of whiteness in Australia. As such, discourses of positive self-presentation in relation to white countries are therefore frequently tied to the rhetoric of nationalism discussed above in which differential treatment of those depicted as “Others” is, rather than being considered racist, instead re-framed as necessary for the good of the nation. Augoustinos and Every (2007) argue that positive self-presentation is able to protect the in-group as a whole from accusations of racism, and is tied to negative other-presentation. Using the above example, Australia’s “tolerance” can be compared to the “intolerance” of other countries which *do* ostensibly have racist immigration policies.

AUSTRALIAN HUMOUR, RACE AND NATIONAL IDENTITY

It has also been argued that “modern” or “symbolic” racism can be conceived of as an expression of nationalism, in that negative attitudes or restrictive immigration policies towards those considered “Others” are able to be expressed as a desire to maintain national security, a sense of national identity, and to defend the interests of the (white) nation against some outside threat (Augoustinos and Every, 2007; Hage, 1998; LeCouteur and Augoustinos, 2001). To this end, Augoustinos and Every point out that “the category of nation is increasingly taking over from race in legitimating oppressive practices toward minority groups and, indeed, as a means by which to sanitise and deracialise racist discourses” (2007, p. 133). Thus racist opinions or practices now materialise (alongside more “traditional” forms of racism) in the form of patriotism or pride in a country on the basis of a particular set of values that may discriminate against and exclude minority groups of people. Again, this form of “modern” racism is considered not to be predicated on overt discrimination against racially marginalised groups, but instead such groups remain marginalised due to practices which foreground the interests of the (white) nation, and its supposed values and norms.

In Australia, one such norm or value which serves to supposedly “define” Australians and differentiate them from others is that of humour. “Aussie” humour is meant to be self-deprecating, “ocker”, defiant, and ironic (Rainbird, 2004). This form of humour has largely been seen as uniquely Australian, and one that separates Australia from other countries, thereby becoming fundamental to the Australian identity. Importantly, and as will be elaborated in more detail later in this paper, this value of Aussie humour is one which is largely associated with a white, “mainstream” Australian identity. Indeed, certain aspects of Aussie humour – such as its anti-politically correct stance – have been argued to play an important role in maintaining the centrality of this white identity in Australia by fighting against the rise of policies such as multiculturalism which were seen as prioritising marginalised voices at the expense of the “ordinary Aussie battler” (Rainbird, 2004).

Indeed, many researchers have argued that race and racism still play a central role in Australia. For example, in his book *White Nation*, Hage (1998) argues that the

dominant group in Australia (i.e. white Australians) perceive themselves to be normatively “Australian”, and therefore able to set the norms and values to which those seen as “Others” must adhere. Thus, whilst Australia claims to be multicultural, the reality of this is that there is a dominant white majority that see themselves as managers of the national space who are able to “tolerate” Others. Whilst obviously restrictive immigration policies such as the White Australia Policy are no longer in operation, Hage (1998) argues that current policies surrounding multiculturalism maintain the dominance of white people in Australia. Stratton argues along similar lines in his book *Race Daze* (1998) in which he asserts that policies of multiculturalism in Australia are conservative, and leave whiteness as central and as a benchmark against which all other people are measured. Furthermore, Stratton argues that within multicultural Australia there is a myth that the concept of race has disappeared, when in fact it has become a signifier of culture and therefore possibly of difference. In making this argument, Stratton echoes Etienne Balibar’s (1991) concept of “neo-racism” in an Australian context. The concept of “neo-racism” in which culture replaces the biological notion of race has important consequences for this paper, since, as Balibar points out, matters of racism based on culture will differ depending on national situations, thus again highlighting the highly contextualised and localised nature of discussions of race and racism.

The present article therefore discusses each of the aforementioned techniques for the denial of racism in turn, and illustrates the way in which they played out in relation to the *Hey Hey* racism debate. Furthermore, the paper examines how such denials were frequently made on the basis of the incident simply being about Aussie humour and considers the construction of a mainstream Australian identity portrayed within such arguments.

METHODOLOGY

Data

Much has changed in the world of media since *Hey Hey It's Saturday* was originally broadcast in the 1970s, 1980s and 1990s. A skit performed on an Australian TV show can be broadcast around the world courtesy of video sharing websites such as YouTube. Similarly, the advent of online journalism has made it easier for people to contribute to discussions surrounding news items through online opinion polls and “reader’s comments” sections. Comments left by the general public in response to news items allow for an insight into public opinion surrounding a topic that, though obviously not able to be generalised to all people involved, nevertheless does provide a reflection of public sentiment.

This paper analyses online comments written in response to articles published online on news websites from three of Australia’s major news providers; News Limited’s *Herald Sun* (broadly considered a conservative newspaper), Fairfax’s *The Age* (considered a more liberal newspaper), and the national news website *news.com.au* which also publishes content from the News Limited press. The first of these articles was entitled *Controversy for Hey Hey It's Saturday over Jackson 5 Skit* which was published in its original form on the *Herald Sun* website on October 7, just hours after the show was aired. This article received a total of 1088 comments, and was later updated as *Acting Premier Rob Hulls says Daryl Somers right to apologise*

over Jackson Jive sketch. Secondly, comments on an article published on *The Age* blog website, entitled *Hey Hey Uproar* (a total of 737 comments) were considered, and finally comments on an article published on *news.com.au* entitled *Hey Hey It's Saturday in Red Faces Racist Row* (a total of 371 comments) were also included in the data set for this analysis. These articles were chosen in order to provide an overall picture of the response provided by online comments to articles published in major newspapers. By virtue of their nature as online comments, however, it is important to note again that this data set does not necessarily provide a representative sample of public sentiment in relation to this issue. The data set does, however, provide an important snapshot of the (vocal) Australian public reaction to the accusations of racism made by Harry Connick Jr. The comments examined in this paper are included verbatim.

Analytic Notes

In order to analyse this data corpus, the current paper utilised a thematic analytic approach (see, for example, Braun and Clarke, 2006) in which the online responses to the three relevant articles were analysed for the dominant themes appearing in the texts. Thematic analysis was chosen for this analysis due to the rigorous nature of Braun and Clarke's approach, which enabled the large data corpus to be analysed thoroughly and consistently. In particular, the first stage of analysis involved data familiarisation and therefore involved reading over the corpus of online comments. Secondly, the data was systematically coded for interesting features, and these codes were then collated to reveal potential themes in the third step. Fourthly, these themes were reviewed to determine whether they were indeed reflective of the entire data set and then the themes were named. Finally, extracts were chosen which contained representative and compelling examples of the themes in question. It is noteworthy therefore that the broader theme of the denial of racism was the most salient theme within this data set. This is not to say that there were no instances of comments in which people wrote to support the claim of racism made by Harry Connick Jr, however these comments were not common enough to be considered a theme in and of itself.

Within the broader theme of the denial of racism, the themes returned using this approach included: a) comparisons between blackface and whiteface, with associated arguments that if the latter is not generally considered racist then the former should not be either; b) accusations of excessive political correctness; c) claims that Australia does not have the same racist past (or history of blackface) as America, and that the comments made by Harry Connick Jr were therefore irrelevant in the Australian context; and d) references to Aussie humour as a way of denying racism. These four main themes are considered in this paper in the context of Van Dijk's techniques regarding the denial of racism, and their function in building a particular image of Australian identity.

Analysis

As mentioned previously, denial of racism in the skit was the most common response from the public in Australia. According to an article entitled *Readers say Hey Hey Jackson Jive skit 'not racist'* published on the News Ltd *news.com.au* website on 8 October (the day after the show went to air), almost thirty thousand people voted in

online polls and more than fifteen hundred left comments on News Ltd sites in relation to the *Hey Hey It's Saturday* news story. Poll results ranged from 53 per cent saying that the skit wasn't racist at *couriermail.com.au* to 81 per cent saying that the skit wasn't racist at *perthnow.com.au*. In light of this response and the techniques discussed earlier, this paper examines how such denials were mobilised, and how they functioned to build on and reinforce a particular image of Australian identity.

REVERSE RACISM, MITIGATION AND 'PC GONE MAD'

As outlined earlier, van Dijk (1993) argues that racism is frequently justified using a technique called "reverse racism", in which dominant group members argue that in fact it is they who are being discriminated against or disadvantaged rather than marginalised groups. One way in which such justifications or denials were seen in online comments was through the argument that it would not equally be considered racist if a black person were to impersonate a white person. Examples of this argument are seen in the following comments. Throughout this analysis, the names of the respondents have been removed and replaced with numbers.

- R1: It's strange that Harry Connick Jr seems to think white men dressed as black men is racist. When 2004 US movie 'White Chicks' has black men dressed as white girls is not seen as racist. (*Herald Sun*)
- R2: This has been blown totally out of proportion. It's a tribute. They had done this before and they weren't mocking any race or disrespecting mj.... I would also like to point out that there was a white painted face as well. Is that being racist too? (*Herald Sun*)
- R3: Man I love double standards. Making fun of anything but white people is bad, but once it's racism towards white people then bam! It's a-okay. Racism is a matter of perspective and opinion, if people stopped taking everything so seriously when it wasn't necessary (i.e, comedy) then there would be no racism. (*news.com.au*)
- R4: It wasn't a racist act when it was first performed 20 years ago and it wasn't a racist act tonight. Just another uptight American with no sense of humour. I would not be offended if five black men appeared on Red Faces with white paint on their faces. (*Herald Sun*)
- R5: Black face minstrels were never part of our culture. Yes this 'art form' did belittle Afro Americans and is not acceptable now or then but I do not see this act as a minstrels act. It is just white guys doing a cover of an act by Afro Americans. Lousy music but not racist. If black Australians did Abba would we white guys be offended. No I suggest not. (*The Age blog*)

In these comments, racism is denied through arguments that black people dressing up as white people would not be seen as offensive, or receive the same response from Harry Connick Jr, and that the outcry internationally is therefore a "double standard". Such arguments are predicated on a form of "equality" which

views equal *treatment* as equality rather than equal *outcomes* (Wetherell and Potter, 1992). For example, such arguments overlook the history of racism and oppression reflected within the blackface tradition by equating painting one's face black with painting one's face white. Similarly, such arguments ignore historically unequal power relations in both American and Australian society by assuming that a black person with their face painted white has the same power to oppress and ridicule white people as would a white person with their face painted black.

As mentioned previously in relation to the definition of racism at a broader level as involving the maintenance of differential allocations of privilege, whilst it *can* be considered racist for a white person to dress up as a black person, it is not equally racist for a black person to dress up as a white person, given the differences in power relations inherent in the social constructions of these racial categories. Nevertheless, it is worth noting here that a black person painting their face white (whilst not an example of racism) can be read instead as *resistance* to racism. Gilbert argues that, in the Australian context, whiteface has been used not only “as a revisionist tactic designed to deflect - and reverse - the imperial gaze” (2003, p. 679), but also as a vehicle to render colonialism and whiteness (traditionally invisible and normative) visible. Thus not only is the use of whiteface not able to be considered racist in the same way that blackface is, but furthermore it can be considered as a method which can highlight and resist entrenched colonial racism and white privilege.

Given this, it is important to highlight the fact that the members of the *Jackson Jive* skit were themselves ethnically diverse, with the man playing Michael Jackson identifying as Sri Lankan Australian. This man whitened his face for this performance, and this was picked up on in online comments, such as R2 above, and the following:

- R6: How was it racist painting your skin colour to the Jackson 5. And its not like they were all black either, the Indian member of the group painted it white... unless its racist against all nationalities (which ironically the group was extremely diverse in their cultural background themselves). (*news.com.au*)

Interestingly, the fact that the man playing Michael Jackson had his face painted white was a point of difference from the original skit. Online comments such as the one above noted this, and used it as an argument against accusations of racism, arguing that given that the Jackson character had white paint on his face, the accusations of racism could not hold “unless its racist against all nationalities.” There are several points to be made about comments such as that made in R6. Firstly, comparisons between the “racist” nature of painting one's face black to impersonate an African American and painting one's face white to impersonate Michael Jackson work in a similar way to arguments of reverse racism discussed above in that they do not account for the history of oppression associated with the blackface tradition, a history which does not equally apply to painting one's face white. Additionally, painting one's face white to impersonate Michael Jackson may do little to challenge existing stereotypes of race given the already racialised body of Jackson. Secondly, drawing on the diverse racial identities of the men involved in the skit to defend against accusations of racism allows online commentators to argue against accusations of racism due to a presumption that the blackface tradition, when enacted

by people who self-identify or are identified as not white, does not contain the same elements of racism. This is interesting given the arguments above that racism requires both prejudice *and* power, and that, as non-white people, the people involved in this skit may not have the required power of oppression. Again, however, it is arguable that the *tradition* of blackface does have this power, and when played out to a white host on a commercial television network, a skit such as the *Jackson Jive* does little to challenge existing stereotypes and more to support them.

Denials of racism based on this type of “reverse racism” could also be considered ways in which the possible racist nature of the skit was mitigated. Mitigation of racism was further seen in respondent’s comments which focussed on political correctness as the catalyst for the comments made by Harry Connick Jr. For example:

- R7: Oh for Heaven’s Sake! It was a bit of harmless fun. It was so wonderful to see Hey Hey back on telly and then this rubbish! I am of Italian and Greek Background. Do I become insulted with all the ‘wog’ jokes around? Of course not! You have to be able to laugh at yourself. It would be a very, very sad world if we all got to the stage where we were unable to appreciate humour and have a good laugh. Must we become so terribly precious and politically correct all the time? Come on you guys! Just appreciate it for the funny skit that it was and please stop taking everything so seriously. Isn’t this world serious enough? (*The Age blog*)
- R8: As an ESL teacher I work with people from all over the globe, and one thing I have learned is that every culture has its own version of humour. What is side-splitting in one country leaves another for dead. This is obviously what happened in the wonderful *Hey Hey* reunion. The U.S. is uncomfortably aware of its slavery history, leading to a degree of PC that is unwarranted in Australia. Sure, we have our racism issues, but we are also able to laugh at controversies, and at ourselves, in a way that puts matters into perspective thus allowing tensions to dissipate. Harry Connick Jr. was right to be apprehensive about how his appearance on the Red Faces panel would look to his U.S. fan base, however, *Hey Hey* was also right in allowing the six multinational doctors to revive their *Jackson Jive* skit. The fact that the medical student who played Michael is now a plastic surgeon is the kind of irony that Australians delight in. (*Herald Sun*)
- R9: If US people are offended that's their problem it was an Australian television show made for Australians. I they take offence at light hearted comedy like this which was not meant to offend but entertain then too bad. This another case of political correctness gone mad. (*news.com.au*)
- R10: Ahhhh the politically correct get on the band wagon again. It would be interesting to know how many people thought that it was funny... and THEN thought... how politically incorrect. Geez... how

refreshing to know that someone has the balls to have a crack at breaking the new ‘norms.’ Well done Daryl and co. (*Herald Sun*)

- R11: Not racist – poor taste – maybe but in reality now just the subject of too many politically correct persons with too much time on their hands. guys put it in perspective – the act was a re enactment of past skit 20 years ago. That was the whole point of the show – bringing back some of the past. does this mean we can never air any al jolson footage or even his songs because clearly the politically correct naysayers would have to now label him racist and off limits – or is it ok to be a politically correct hypocrite. (*The Age blog*)

Within these comments, the seriousness of racism is mitigated by arguing that instead of being a reaction to what he saw as racist, Harry Connick Jr’s accusation was based on overly-sensitive political correctness. These comments position political correctness as inherently a negative, restrictive force that interferes with people’s ability to find the skit funny and to “laugh at controversies”. As such, accusations of the racist nature of the skit are dismissed by locating them as the result of overly politically correct sensibilities, and therefore as an over-reaction to something which was simply meant to be humorous. Indeed, such arguments further mitigate racism by instead constructing the skit as “humorous” rather than as racist. In relation to appearances of political correctness in a right-wing German newspaper, Johnson and Suhr argue that,

adherents of ‘political correctness’ are being constructed as an outgroup which insists on subjecting the rest of the population to an ongoing process of moral blackmail vis à vis the recent German past, thereby forestalling the efforts of those who wish to ‘progress’ towards a more normalized sense of national self-identity” (2003, p. 64).

These constructions of political correctness were also seen in the above comments whereby it is argued that subscribers to political correctness create a “boring and sterile” world and that, rather than the skit being racist, *Hey Hey* instead has “the balls to have a crack at breaking the new ‘norms’”.

Indeed, an aversion to the politically correct has been an ubiquitous part of constructions of the “Australian identity” made through humour, in which the emergence of multiculturalism and a perceived “favouring” of minority or marginalised group interests has led to a backlash through critiques of politically correct sensibilities – notably seen in the rise of Pauline Hanson and the conservative Howard government which promised to govern “for the mainstream” (Ahluwalia and McCarthy, 1998). In particular, debate surrounding political correctness has focused on the right to free-speech, and opposition to oppression (Wark, 1997; Rainbird, 2004), something which resonates exceptionally loudly in the genre of humour and comedy. Indeed, in Australian comedy circles, political correctness has been largely criticised as irrational and as oppressive (Rainbird, 2004). Rainbird (2004) and Johnson (2000) have both argued that such a backlash against political correctness can be read as a reaction to perceived changes in the Australian identity, in which the centrality of the dominant (white, male, heterosexual) Australian is being challenged and shifted. In the context of the *Hey Hey* controversy and the comments seen above,

such arguments can be read as a similar backlash against shifting values from the 1980s to the present day, in which Aussie humour is seen as being under threat from oppressive, anti free-speech forces, especially given the fact that the skit did not receive similar criticisms when it was originally performed (see, for example, R11 above). Arguments about accusations of racism being politically correct – particularly directed toward Harry Connick Jr – therefore reinforce an identity for Australia as being able to ‘have a laugh’ at what may otherwise be read as racist or controversial.

**POSITIVE SELF-PRESENTATION, HUMOUR, AND DENIALS OF RACIST INTENT:
BUILDING AN AUSTRALIAN IDENTITY**

Each of the comments above also defended against accusations of racism by appealing to an argument that the skit was based on humour. For example, in R8 above, the writer claims an authority position by stating that he/she is an ESL (English as a Second Language) teacher, and has therefore worked “with people from all over the globe”. The writer then continues to argue that “every culture has its own version of humour”, and that this difference in humour is what led to the accusations of racism. Such arguments suggest that since the incident was intended to be *funny*, it follows that it is not also racist, as well as building on a particular construction of Australian identity based on a type of humour. This argument was frequently seen in comments in response to the news item, with several examples shown below:

- R12: After watching *Hey Hey* it was clear just how dated the show was but as for Mr Precious Harry, what a lot of rubbish. The skit was taking the mickey out of The Jackson Five and only a precious yank could have turned the emphasis to racism. How could you do a skit like that without dressing similar to the person you were taking off. Connick is a great performer but seems to be just a little superior to us colonials. Have we really all become as precious as him? I hope not, because I don't believe the skit was in any way designed to be offensive to Afro Americans! (*Herald Sun*)
- R13: Totally enjoyable show! Only downer was Harry. Us Aussies are laid back in our humour and don't look at things with a racist viewpoint - the poor guys were doing the skit for CHARITY... good on them!!! Apart from that, I loved it, my kids loved it, and my parents loved it. 3 generations of *Hey Hey* fans!! Well done guys... Thanks!! (*Herald Sun*)
- R14: I guess you could say white Australians suffer the oppression of not being allowed to have an opinion on oppression due to the lack of oppression throughout their history. Christ! How some of you survive in those tiny little narrow heads of yours I'll never understand. (*The Age blog*)
- R15: Oh that's rich. Being called racist by the Americans. I guess that we don't have enough history in being racist like the yanks. We didn't import black slaves and beat them to work for us. We didn't have "whites only" waiting rooms, buses, schools and so on. No, we just have an amazing multicultural melting pot of people that have all managed to get on with each other, and still able to poke fun at each

other. Australia is a perfect example of how to be racially tolerant, unlike other so called ‘civilized’ countries. Get a life and chill out!
(*The Age* blog)

These comments argue that “Australians” have a capacity to not take offence at everything, to poke fun at people, and to not “look at things with a racist point of view”, thus explicitly working up a particularly Australian identity based on this form of humour. As such, they effectively deny racism not only in the skit, but in Australia as a country. Here, racism is mitigated by reference to humour and a supposedly tolerant past, so that such incidences are viewed in cultural terms as part of an innate and unique “Australian value” of humour rather than in terms of racism, thus again asserting a sense of nationalism whilst denying racism. In line with van Dijk’s (1993) argument that denials of racism involve both a defensive position and a position that builds positive self-presentation, these arguments defend against racism and present Australia in a positive light; by comparing the country favourably to Americans who have a “history in being racist”. Such defences are discussed by Billig (2001) who argues that the defence “I was only joking” is frequently used to justify racism, and that those people belonging to the “in-group” may defend comments or incidents as “just a joke” which those considered “Others”, or indeed other people in general, may instead find racist.

The denials of racism based on the intention of the skit to be humorous were also examples of the denial of racism due to positive self-presentation, and therefore played a role in building an image of Australia as anti-racist and as able to “poke fun” at oneself or others. This presentation of Australia as humorous and of America as inherently lacking in humour (or as not having an understanding of what Australians may find funny) positions Australians as fun-loving and able to laugh at themselves and others, and contrasts this with an uptight “precious” America which easily takes offence. This was particularly seen in R14 above which not only denied oppression in Australian history (thereby denying the history of policy differentiation and violence towards Indigenous Australians and immigrants seen as “not-white”), but went so far as to position *white* Australians as “suffering oppression”. Also of interest in these comments is the fact that the national categories of “Australians” and “Americans” are used frequently in these arguments without reference to race *per se* and therefore arguably function to overlook those groups of people within both Australia and America who *are* the targets of racism and who may find white people impersonating black people to be not only offensive, but also racist and discriminatory. Such comments also conflate all Australians into one category, and therefore work to imply that *all* Australians find such humour funny, rather than only certain members of the population. As such, these comments work up an identity for Australia that is predicated on mainstream values and “ordinary Aussie battlers” and can therefore be read as a reaction to more “modern” values that centre marginalised voices (for example, by considering the implications of blackface). Thus these comments reflect the move away from concepts of overt racism to categorisation of people on the basis of nationality, as discussed previously in this paper. These comments therefore highlight the flexible nature of denials of racism as outlined by van Dijk (1993). These findings are discussed further in the conclusion.

CONCLUSION

This article has demonstrated how a number of techniques regarding the denial of racism were utilised in online comments made in response to the accusations of racism within the *Jackson Jive* skit. Furthermore, this paper has shown how these denials were able to build on and reinforce particular constructions of the Australian national identity, particularly in relation to “Aussie humour” and Australia as a country free from racism. Thus the response to the *Hey Hey* incident as it appeared in these comments is able to be read not only as a denial of racism in a particular event, but a defence against racism in Australia as a country, and a construction of Australian national identity specifically through the vehicle of humour.

It is worth noting here that van Dijk (1993) has argued that the denial of either racism or prejudice can in fact be read as yet another expression of racism itself, for example by justifying acts that could be seen to be racist by not acknowledging them as such. Denials of racism therefore serve a socio-political function in that if racism is unilaterally denied, then it is perceived that there is no problem and therefore no need to take measures against it. Thus, denials of racism can present events such as the blackface skit performed on *Hey Hey It's Saturday* as “a bit of fun” in a country that does not have a problem with racism, and therefore argue that no one should take offence. Of course, such constructions effectively deny a voice to those people who *do* take offence, positioning them as excessively politically correct or sensitive, and as reacting to an offence which did not exist – as seen in the comments analysed in this paper.

Furthermore, constructions of the accusations of racism made by Harry Connick Jr as being overly politically correct are able to be read as an assertion of an Australian identity predicated on “norms” and “values” of mainstream Australia (which include the ability to “poke fun” at oneself and others), and a rebuttal of what is seen as the foregrounding of minority or marginalised voices within multicultural Australia (Ahluwalia and McCarthy, 1998; Hage, 1998). For example, the many comments seen in this paper that claimed that the skit was not racist as it was “just a bit of fun” indicate the construction of an Australian identity predicated upon an “ocker”, “battler” identity stemming from a particular concept of humour that centres values seen to be typically “Aussie” – that is, an ability to poke fun at all people equally and to laugh at what others might see as controversial. This is particularly of interest as whilst the original skit may not have drawn upon such values *per se* in its performance of the *Jackson Jive* (although of course, part of the blackface tradition itself is caricature), this mainstream Australian identity was worked up in the subsequent denials of racism in the skit as seen in these comments. Interestingly, such assertions were made in spite of the multi-ethnic background of the performers of the skit, thereby re-asserting multicultural Australia *provided* that “mainstream” Australian values are being adhered to (Hage, 1998; Stratton, 1998).

Finally, as mentioned previously, the large-scale response this incident received could be read as a denial of racism not only in the skit in question, but also in Australia more generally. Indeed, this was often made explicit in the comments analysed in which Australia was often compared favourably to America both in terms of its (apparently) non-racist past and its so-called ability to laugh at “controversy”. In light of van Dijk’s (1993) argument that the denial of racism is just another expression

of racism, denials of racism in incidents like the *Hey Hey* skit become more insidious than simply denials that a particular skit on a family variety show was an exhibition of racism. Instead, the denial of racism in Australia as a country, together with arguments that Australia does not have the same history of racism as America, work to overlook Australia's history of immigration and other policies which differentiate between people on the basis of perceived cultural differences and race; as seen, for example, in the 2007 comments by then Immigration Minister Kevin Andrews regarding the supposed "failure to integrate" on the part of Sudanese refugees (Topsfield and Rood, 2007). Perhaps even more problematically, such denials also function to further marginalise those people who *do* experience racism within Australia by denying the existence of racism altogether and instead reinforcing an "ordinary" Australian identity as a country in which people are able to "laugh at themselves and controversy".

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