

# White Australia has a blackface history

- By Maxine Beneba Clarke
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The woman across the aisle from me on the train was reading a newspaper. She squinted at the picture on the cover, chuckling to herself. I leaned over to see what she was smiling about. Her eyes met mine and she quickly folded the paper in quarters, turned it over on her lap and stared out the window. Curious, I looked around at the other passengers. A patchwork of open newspapers stared back at me. On all the covers was a photograph of four men dressed in white suits, faces smeared in black face paint, heads covered with shiny polyester afro wigs. 'Hey Hey Left Redfaced' announced the front-page slogan.

*Hey Hey It's Saturday* had aired a skit with four blacked-up performers playing the Jackson Five, with the Michael character appearing in whiteface. American musician Harry Connick Jr, a guest judge, voiced his disgust: 'If they turned up looking like that in the United States, it would be like, "Hey, hey, there's no more show!"' He awarded the performers a zero.

Backstage, host Daryl Somers reluctantly negotiated an on-air apology with Connick. When it came, the apology was issued specifically to the musician himself, rather than to people of colour or any offended viewers.

'Are those clowns, Mum? Can I go and see the clown show?' my three-year-old responded when I absentmindedly plonked a copy of the paper down on the coffee table. I sighed, looked down at him and ran a hand through his curls – we had been here before.

If I were Winston in Orwell's dystopia, the door in the interrogation chamber would lead to a Westfield mall the size of New South Wales and I would betray family and friend alike to escape it. Yet somehow my search for an extension to my son's wooden train set had led me to Chadstone: the suburban shopping mall to swallow all suburban shopping malls.

I examined the map at the entrance and headed for the toyshop, Mali's arm straining at the socket as I wrenched him quickly past mini-skirted tweens and Bugaboo strollers.

I was talking to the saleswoman, who surely couldn't have been more than fourteen, when Mali tugged fiercely on my left arm.

'Mum, I don't want to get the extra pieces for my train set anymore. Can I please have one of those? Please, really I would like one of those up there. That clown. Please?'

He was pointing to a shelf above the shop assistant's head.

'No. You certainly can't have one of those.'

My son jumped at the venom in my voice, confused.

'Please? I like clowns.'

'You just can't.'

The shop attendant stared at me perplexed, eyes darting back to the shelf above her head. On it was a huddle of jet-black golliwogs leering down at us with garish red mouths. The whites of their eyes rolled toward my son, the straight wool lines of their hair stood out in a ludicrous mock-afro.

'But I really like clowns!'

I took a deep breath. Golliwogs. Not in some dusty antique shop in a backward country town but at the counter of the Early Learning Centre in white-picket-fence Melbourne. Golliwogs staring at my little brown son. And him, oblivious, reaching for them.

## **28 November 2009**

Sixteen-year-old Akoi Majak's mother and father weren't too thrilled to hear her dreams of becoming a writer.

'They say I should become a lawyer or a doctor,' the statuesque Sudanese teenager laughed with the small crowd at Blacktown Arts Centre in Sydney's west. 'My father says I can still write when I am not seeing the patients. He says if I want to write, I can be a doctor first.'

My mother, sitting next to me, looked across, perhaps recalling the similar conversations we'd had each summer as I came home from university with a notebook full of poetry, barely scratching the credits needed to maintain my law faculty scholarship.

'This is what I want to do ... I just ... I don't know, I really love it. I want to write.' Flanked by the other young writers of the play *My Name is Sud*, developed as part of Blacktown City Council's African Theatre Project, Akoi thanked Robert Colman, the artistic director.

'Oh my God! On the weekends, I didn't want to get out of bed because there is no school and, you know, the weekend is to sleep in so I wanted to sleep in. And every time Robert is on the phone saying, "Get up Akoi, you have to come write." Every single time I sleep in, he calls me to come and do the writing. He says, "Akoi, hurry up! We are waiting for you." Auuuurgh!'

She feigned annoyance and then flashed another cheeky grin.

'Now I am glad he did that.'

Colman blushed a little as chair Ivor Indyk moved the discussion on to another of the panellists of the African Artists Articulate conference. Distracted, I watched Akoi fiddle with the hem of her tomato-orange top. Her ringlet-curl'd weave of hair bobbed up and down as she nodded in agreement with one of the other panellists.

Her optimism was painfully familiar.

How long before Akoi Majak learnt about writing black in Australia? The obstacles that lie beyond dragging herself out of bed every weekend to write, beyond even her migrant parent's unmoving but well-intended wishes for her prosperity? How long before the sentiments of that 69 per cent – the 69 per cent of Australians that, according to News Limited, considered *Hey Hey's* blackface skit fun family entertainment – crush her aspirations?

The teenager smiled again, eyes sparkling at another question from the audience.

Roles of any kind were scarce for my Guyanese mother on her arrival in Australia from London in 1976. Though a graduate of London's prestigious Central School of Speech & Drama, she found herself, for the most part, out of work unless a role specifically required a black actress. Watching her play a leading role in *My Name is Sud*, an eloquently written and moving examination of the Sudanese refugee experience in Australia, surrounded by young and mostly untrained African actors who she had mentored, was an extraordinarily emotional event.

Over the past year she had scrubbed the boards as the black servant Calpurnia in *To Kill a Mockingbird* and the Barbajian maid Tituba in *The Crucible*. There was talk of her playing Juliet's nurse for one Shakespearean production. Bit parts. Stereotypes. Slim pickings.

Blackface performing originated in the United States around 1789, with white performers liberally applying black greasepaint or shoe polish and using distorted dialogue, exaggerated accents and grotesque movements to caricature people of African descent. Blackface contributed heavily towards preventing black actors from treading the boards for over a hundred years in the US. Later, many black actors were forced to black up rather than be recognised as actors in their own right.

Given this, and the stark reality of being a black stage performer in Australia, it is no small irony that the four blacked-up performers in Channel Nine's *Hey Hey* skit, who were themselves of Indian descent, represented a large percentage of Australian television's abysmal yearly quota of brown-skinned performers.

In the aftermath of the *Hey Hey It's Saturday* reunion, politicians and the mainstream media mostly defended the right of Australians to bear blackface. Deputy Prime Minister Julia Gillard – at the time on an official visit to the first Western country ever to elect a black president – spoke with great nostalgia of her childhood spent watching *Hey Hey It's Saturday*.

'Whatever happened was meant to be humorous and would be taken in that spirit by most Australians,' the Deputy Prime Minister said, not realising that considering it as humorous, in itself, was the problem.

Rather than speaking with someone of African descent, the *Age* chose to interview Izzy Dye, famous across Australia for his popular show *Mammy*, in which he wears blackface in tribute to Jewish-American singer and blackface legend Al Jolson. The interviewer noted that Dye's family had severely suffered in the Holocaust, as if that credentialled him on matters of discrimination. Dye then hailed blacking-up as a harmless performance option.

The morning after the show, television personality Prue MacSween voiced her contempt for any criticism of the blackface skit. She held up her 'little friend', a golliwog, on national television and said that political correctness had gone mad.

Left-wing news source *Crikey* published commentary from *Hey Hey*'s Red Symons, who differentiated Australia from America: 'Americans are offended by blackface. Australians are largely not. It's culturally specific and we have no particular history in regard to minstrel shows and the portrayal of black people in these shows depicting them as buffoonish, lazy, superstitious "coons" who were thieves, pathological liars and lascivious devils.'

Although Simon's distinction was common among talkback commentators and blog-squatters in the days following the incident, it denies not only the increasing presence of

people of African descendant in Australia – and, in particular, in the Australian arts community – but also the fact that white Australia itself has a blackface history.

Henry Melville's 1834 play *Bushrangers* included an Aboriginal character known only as Native. The character was played by a white actor in blackface. 'Me want baccy and bredley [tobacco and bread] – me long time – me got very old blanket,' whined Native pitifully. When 'Blacky' (as he was endearingly referred to by white characters) was told to dance a corroboree in exchange for the goods, the blackfaced actor up and jigged obligingly. While Charles Chauvel's 1955 film *Jedda* was the first Australian film to use Aboriginal actors, the character Half Cast Joe was played by a white man in blackface. Purportedly comedic blackface occurred on Australian prime time television as recently as November 2007, when *The Chaser's War on Everything* presenters performed a political ditty to the tune of the Jackson Five's *Blame It on the Boogie*.

Not only does white Australia have a blackface history, the present is also looking fairly boot-polished.

### 3 December 2009

Sixty or so revellers were crammed into the foyer of the Sidney Myer Asia Centre to celebrate the launch of edition eight of *Peril*, an online Asian-Australian arts and culture magazine. Tom Jones' 1968 hit 'Delilah' blared from the speakers at full volume.

The opaque white make-up shovelled liberally onto the performer's brown face was garish, the effect more sinister than mime attire. The thin red slash of her mouth pointed comically downward in Joker-like derangement and the coal-black suit and pristine white shirt added a film noir feel. She looked pleadingly into the audience and crooned:

*I could see that that girl  
was no good for me,  
but I was lost like a slave  
that no man could see.*

Her shoulders hunched, Mohiniattam-trained dancer Raina Peterson (one third of Melbourne anti-racist performance troupe Ladies of Colour Agency) crept across the stage with all the tip-toed obviousness of an animated villain.

Although the audience's understanding of Raina's whiteface subversion had no doubt been bolstered by the recent *Hey Hey* incident, the show conjured other images. For those who remember the black-and-white 'Delilah' video clip of Jones surrounded by an orderly, slow-dancing crowd of white youths as he crooned gently about killing a woman for spurning him, the drag, reverse-minstrel performance is staunchly feminist. Others may have been recalling the inappropriateness of Jones' more recent chart-topper 'Black Betty', thoughtfully dedicated to Leadbelly. Some might have been thinking of Australia's very own Delilah from decades back – a stereotyped alter ego created by African-American singer Delilah for Campbell's Cash 'n' Carry, all long red fingernails and flowing weave. A few might have even heard the oft-whispered rumour that the darkly tanned Tom Jones is, in fact, an incognito black man, passing in order to appeal to white music lovers.

The many-coloured audience screamed with laughter as Raina's Tom Jones pulled a bloodied plastic knife from the jacket of her tux and lunged off the stage into the audience.

### 27 December 2009

A yellow-and-gold-adorned Aussie cricket fan sat in the packed bleachers surrounded by a group of merry-making West Indians playing steelpan calypso in support of their team.

'Need a tip for when you're stuck in an awkward situation?' He looked into the camera and pulled out an enormous bucket of chicken. 'Too easy!'

The West Indian crowd were, of course, instantly pacified, downing their instruments and tucking into the greasy treat.

It was a couple days after Christmas and my extended family were lolling around in the lounge in a post-pudding daze. We stared at each other as if not quite believing what we'd just seen. My brother raised an eyebrow and looked over at me. I realised my mouth was still hanging open and slowly clamped it shut.

After the disbelief came anger: at whatever advertising genius decided racist caricature was a legitimate form of advertising, at the black actors themselves for enabling the production of the commercial and, most of all, at the reaction we all knew would come. When the KFC advertisement surfaced on YouTube and became internationally controversial, the old record, only just sleeved from the blackface saga, barely needed dusting: Australians weren't racist; good old larrikin humour had simply been misunderstood; the commercial was never meant for an American audience; Americans clearly had some kind of a guilt-based hang-up about anything involving black people.

## **6 February 2010**

A crowd had assembled in the O'Donnell Gardens on St Kilda's foreshore for Yalukit Willam Ngargee (People, Place, Gathering), an annual indigenous celebration. The Charcoal Club had just finished their stirring performance of 'No Woman No Cry', sung in pitch-perfect haunting tones and with the crowd joining in, despite the other-language lyrics. The song perfectly captured both the spirit of the gathering and the extraordinary ability of the performing arts to bridge colour, country and language divides.

Mali sat on my lap, bobbing his head up and down as he clapped his little hands, the tune familiar to him.

'I think they're singing it in another language,' he shouted above the music.

The Charcoal Club finished up with their anthemic 'Red, Black and Gold'. A lone Aboriginal woman rose to her feet and made her way to the grass immediately to the front of the stage. Throwing both arms up above her in the air, she swayed back and forth to the music.

It was the next performance that we had come especially to see: *Kulin Bhumi*, a collaboration between dancers of the Natya Sudha Classical Indian Dance Theatre and local Indigenous dancers. The dancers lined up at the side of the ground-level vinyl mat that served as their stage. Dressed in aquamarine calve-length shifts that rustled in the wind, they began a slow, graceful yet strangely earthbound stamp out to centre stage.

Of all that we saw that day, this performance tugged at my heart-strings the most. The collaboration between Indian and Indigenous performers drew on the traditional dance forms of each culture and brought to mind the recent, and in some cases fatal, acts of violence against Indian-Australians in both the inner and outer suburbs of Melbourne.

The state government's response had, predictably, echoed the national response to the *Hey Hey It's Saturday* incident, with a denial of the existence of racism, even as the Indian media and government issued formal warnings against travel to Australia and applications for Indian students to study in Melbourne fell by more than 50 per cent.

The dancers swayed, weaved and glided across the stage. They separated and merged, fell to the floor and gathered the earth. Mali sat as still as I had ever seen him, his face full of wonder. As the collaboration filed off stage to thunderous applause he turned to me, eyes sparkling. 'Do you think if I practice really hard, I'll be able to do a show like that one day?' he asked. I hesitated, reminding him that he decided to take a break from his ballet classes that term. My four-year-old looked at me hopefully.

*My mother falls to her knees in Tituba's white maid's costume. 'Chicken blood,' she wails in a terrified Barbajan accent. 'I bid she drink chicken blood!'*

*Looking out from under Calpurnia's straw hat, my mother explains to Scout in a gentle Southern drawl: 'folks don't like to have someone around knowin' more than they do. It aggravates 'em. You're not gonna change any of them by talkin' right, they've got to want to learn themselves, and when they don't want to learn there's nothing you can do but keep your mouth shut or talk their language.'*

My son was staring at me, waiting for an answer.

*The camera flicks over a grinning Daryl Somers as the four blackfaced performers lampoon their way across the stage, gyrating their hips foolishly.*

*The rowdy calypso cricket crowd grows calm as their fingers dip into a bucket of fried chicken.*

I looked around at the black, red and gold flags billowing around the festival grounds.

*'Me long time – me got very old blanket,' says the blacked-up actor playing Native.*

'I could do that, couldn't I? Do a show, I mean,' repeated Mali.

*'My parents say if I want to be a writer, I can write while I am not seeing the patients' says Akoi Majak, rolling her eyes at the audience.*

'Of course,' I told my son, drawing his warm body towards me. 'Of course you could.'

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