

Wogs Still Out of Work: Australian television comedy as colonial discourse

Mitchell, Tony "Wogs still out of work: Australian television comedy as colonial discourse", *Australasian Drama Studies*, No. 20, 1992, pp119-133.

by Tony Mitchell

In his studies of the representation of ethnic minorities in the news media, the Dutch sociologist Teun A. van Dijk has suggested that the reader or viewer of mass media texts stores "hidden information" about the world and other nationalities in the form of "models" and "scripts". The former are personal impressions based on individual experience, while the latter are "culturally shared, and hence more social... which feature the stereotypical information members of a culture or group share about everyday events and episodes". (1) These notions, in so far as they relate to ethnic stereotypes, can be extended to fictional modes of representation, particularly comedy, which traditionally has involved a high degree of caricature and stereotyping of ethnic groups, and relies on an audience's recognition of certain shared "models" and "scripts" relating to both their own and other nationalities. This stereotyping is not necessarily always negative; in the case of a comedy show like Wogs Out of Work there is a dynamic of affectionate caricaturing of ethnic minorities, or "out groups", aimed primarily at members of those ethnic minorities, but in a way which challenges the dominant Anglo-Australian "in groups"'s "scripts" and "models" of ethnic minorities. Wogs Out of Work however, despite being the longest ever running live theatre show in recent Australian history, after touring the country for 3 1/2 years, and reportedly playing to more than 25% of the population of Griffith (2), appears to be the exception that proves the rule.

Most representations of non-Anglo-Saxon migrant groups in Australian comedy, both on stage and television, confirm received Anglo-Australian negative stereotypes, whether generated by Anglo (or autochthonous, to use van Dijk's term) or non-Anglo (or alechthonous) comics. (In terms of the dominant Anglo-Saxon culture of Australia, Aboriginal groups, despite being autochthonous, or Indigenous, must be included in the alechthonic group.)

A Note on Con the Fruiterer

Between 1988 and 1990, the entirely Anglo-dominated TV show The Comedy Company became the most highly rating Australian TV comedy series. Arguably its most popular character was Mark Mitchell in the role of Con the Fruiterer, conceived as an attempt at "proportional representation" of NESB migrants involving a blond, Anglo-Saxon actor "blacking up" his hair and facial features (in a similar mode to that in which white actors put on black make-up to play Aboriginal roles), putting on artificial chest hair, and assuming a working-class Greek migrant accent. In the words of Comedy Company writer Ian McFadyen, Con the Fruiterer was an attempt to represent "that whole immigrant subculture which until recently has been totally ignored except as a stereotype token wog". (3) But it is difficult to see Con the Fruiterer as anything other than a "stereotype token wog." Even his name (Con as in "con man", Dikelitis as in "dickhead") suggests a wiliness made harmless by stupidity, which renders harmless the threat to Anglo-Australian hegemony represented by non-Anglo migrant cultures. In contrast, the use of the parodied Greek surname "Suckapenis" in Wogs Out of Work could be seen as a far more realistic representation of the pain experienced

by Greek and other NESB migrants at having their names mocked at school by Anglo pupils and teachers. Much of the comedy of Con's character derives from his incorrect English, which is used as a butt of humour, as in the following sketch where Con is waiting for his wife Marika to have a baby:

The doctor says to me that Marika is having the contradictions. And if the baby no come out soon, we gunna have to seduce her. I say to the doctor, no way, that's how we got in trouble in the first place. So we still waiting, waiting, waiting. No wonder they call him the eternity ward. (4)

As humour this is very effective, but as a comic representation of the language difficulties experienced by many middle-aged NESB migrants it is less than charitable, and is based on an assumed cultural superiority of an autochthonous, English language speaking position. Con the Fruiterer's comedy relies on transgression of what Robert Young, explicating the theoretical position of Homi Bhabha, has described as "colonial discourse... as an apparatus of power". (5) Correct English is the discourse of power in Australian society, and migrants of non-English speaking background signal their difference and lower social status by a perceived inability to speak correct English. As an Anglo-Australian actor representing a Greek migrant, Mark Mitchell, who appeared elsewhere in *The Comedy Company* as a blond Anglo-Australian speaking correct English, stigmatises NESB migrant speech as a comic variant from an English colonial norm. There are situations where this representation of migrant speech could be subversive to the norm of colonial discourse, as in the case of a genuine NESB migrant deliberately speaking transgressive English (as appears in *Wogs Out of Work* with terms like "skip"), but *The Comedy Company*'s Anglocentricity ensures that the norm is upheld. Con is a caricature of what Peter Shergold has outlined as the three main areas of difference seen as typifying NESB Australians by Anglo-Australians: physical appearance; culture, customs and habits (as when Con spits into plastic bags before putting his fruit and vegetables into them) and

language. (6)

These areas of difference in the social and cultural definition of NESB migrants are often fetishised by Anglo-Australian comedians in a scenario which reveals an ambivalence towards what Bhabha has described as "that 'otherness' which is at once an object of desire and derision". (7) Bhabha's adaptation of the Freudian notion of fetishism is applicable here: Con the Fruiterer reflects an Anglo-Australian fascination with the physicality, behaviour and speech of Mediterranean migrants which at once acknowledges the threat they are seen to pose to Anglo-Australian values and security and mocks their difference in an attempt to render it harmless. The sexual connotations of this fetishism are particularly evident in Mitchell's portrayal of Con's wife Marika, where he assumes a falsetto voice and "soft" mannerisms while retaining Con's portly stature, dark features and even facial hair. In one particular sketch, which appeared in the opening program of a new series of *The Comedy Company* in November 1989, Mitchell portrays Marika wearing a sexy black negligee (which she has bought from a "lingering" shop) reading a sex manual and making preparations to seduce Con on their wedding anniversary. The scene culminates with her spraying on perfume and going into the bedroom, while Con is shown jumping out of the window in horror. This "primal" seduction scene combines a fascination with the rituals of female sexual behaviour with a fascination with ethnic otherness in a dual fetishisation of the double personality Mitchell enacts.

An important "ethnic" comic predecessor of Con the Fruiterer is the Italo-Australian character of Sergio Pacelli as portrayed by the Anglo-Australian actor Will Bluthal in the ABC sitcom *Home Sweet Home*, which was first broadcast in 1981, and repeated regularly over the past decade, most recently on Channel 10 on Saturday afternoons in 1991. *Home Sweet Home* was in turn strongly influenced by the comic novel *They're a Weird Mob* (1957) by Nino Culotta (John O'Grady), which was filmed by British director Michael Powell in

1966, with Italian actor Walter Chiari in the lead role of an Italian migrant experiencing Anglo-Australian customs and idiosyncrasies and eventually adopting them and rejecting his ethnic background. Both film and sitcom portray a caricatured Italian male learning stereotyped Anglo-Australian male values and rituals, which are largely centred in pubs and feature busty blonde barmaids. In both cases, accented English, dark Mediterranean physical features and a background of sexual repression are prominent; the major difference is that O'Grady's Nino is played by a genuine Italian actor. In Franco di Chiera's important documentary film study of the portrayal of Aboriginal people and NESB migrants in Australian cinema and television, A Change of Face (SBS, 1988), the producer of Home Sweet Home, John O'Grady Jnr, admits:

I can only agree Pacelli is a stereotype. I feel sad about that. If I were doing the program now I would do it differently. But it doesn't mean it was racist. (8)

O'Grady's final point is an important one, in revealing that Home Sweet Home was an Anglo-Australian comedy which attempted to portray Italian migrants and their difficulties in adapting to Australian norms in affectionate if somewhat inaccurate terms. Despite Pacelli's wife and one of his daughters being portrayed by Italian actresses, the series was virtually a "minstrel show". The strong fascination that Con the Fruiterer has exerted on television viewers is shown by his rapid ascent to the status of media personality above and beyond The Comedy Company. In 1989 he was crowned king of Melbourne's Moomba Festival, and he frequently appeared in newspaper and TV commercials - especially for Ford's E-con-ovan. He even appeared sandwiched between Bob Hawke and John Howard at a Boy Scout Jamboree which was televised on the ABC on December 30, 1988, which suggests he had achieved a quasi-ministerial status in the world of Australian comedy. As a result he became a universal point of reference for NESB migrants in Australia, a fact which appears to have polarised the Greek community in Melbourne: some seeing him as an insulting caricature,

others as an emblem of a new acceptance of Greek migrants in Anglo-Australian culture. The range of responses from Melbourne Greek community leaders represented in The Age and The Sydney Morning Herald during the Moomba Festival is worth recording. Dr Andrew Theophanous, Caucus Immigration Committee Chairman: "It's not that we can't take a joke... but you are talking about a major festival... a very stereotyped and false image". Mr Fiv Antoniou, director of the Greek Australian Antipodes Festival: "It is saying that we are mentally low and all talk in broken English". (8) Ms Ann Paralís, president of the Greek Orthodox Youth of Australia: "It's all done in fair fun, although there is some danger that people who have not been exposed to the Greek community and culture might assume that it is reality and not see beyond the stereotype." (9) Dr Dimitrius Ktenas, president of the Greek Orthodox Community of Melbourne and Victoria was reported in both The Age and the SMH of 9th February, 1989, as saying "Greeks were 'better at satirising themselves than any other race' and said the choice was not an issue" (9), but the SMH of 2nd February had further reported him as saying "that it was acceptable for Greeks to laugh at themselves. But this was 'a different story' and it was possible that the community might boycott the festival by not entering a float in the parade through the city on the last day of Moomba." (8) (Dr Ktenas' first remark, which incidentally suggests that Greeks are better at satirising themselves than Mitchell's attempts, either seems to have been taken out of context, or he changed his mind during the week.) This predominantly negative sample of responses, presented as a balanced range of views, contrasts sharply with the self-congratulatory description of Con's impact on the Greek community expressed in The Age by Doug McLeod, the head writer of The Comedy Company:

Con is an archetype rather than a stereotype. His mannerisms are so convincing that many Greeks find it hard to believe he is not Greek. They are flattered by his affectionate parodies, and forgive him for not being ethnic. (10)

McLeod's colonialist speaking position, which makes sweeping assumptions about the responses of Greek Australians, reflects a position of power from which Anglo-Australians have traditionally spoken for NESB migrants, which also mirrors the dynamic of Con the Fruiterer's comic strategies. In a survey of the portrayal of non-Anglo-Saxons on Australian television, Peter White sees Con as an original Australian ethnic stereotype who matches the New York Jew and the Vaudeville Italian, and "inevitably elicits a shock of recognition for Greeks and non-Greeks alike" in his mimicry of NESB migrants' confusion of the gender of pronouns. But he also quotes Philip Bell's observation:

The comic stereotype looks good-natured, even affectionate; yet... it 'infantilises' the ethnic group, portraying its members as abnormal and ridiculous, and thereby undermines their chances of being taken seriously. (11)

This suggests that the Greek and other NESB fruiterers who put pictures of Con in their shop windows may be employing a strategy akin to what Bhabha has described as "sly civility" (12) - a wry mockery or parody of the subservient, simple and harmless persona which Mitchell has provided for Greek shopkeepers.

One of the "archetypal" aspects of Con's personality is his often violent, lazy and inconsiderate treatment of his wife Marika, and his exploitation of his daughters (shown to great effect on his hit single "Bewdiful", which was also released as a music video clip). In serving to confirm Anglo-Saxon "models" of Greek male patriarchal and sexist behaviour, these facets of Con's character, which are presented as amusing and comic, would appear to offer comfort to those in the Australian Greek community who might condone such behaviour, since Con is ultimately harmless, gentle and loveable. But he has also provided fuel for racist tendencies elsewhere in the Australian media. John Laws, a radio talkback show host not noted for his sensitivity towards Aborigines or NESB migrants, regards Mark Mitchell as "probably the most talented comedian in Australia today,

but he is best when his talent is allowed to shine through in characters such as Con the Fruiterer." (13) This comment occurs in Laws' weekly column in *TV Week*, hard on the heels of a call for more political comedy on Australian television:

Well-aimed satire could be what's required in these troubled times to knock the pomposity and hypocrisy out of the current breed of politician, union leader and minority activist. (14)

In this context, Con the Fruiterer would seem to foot the bill as a satirical antidote to "minority activists" - in the sense of those who campaign for the rights of ethnic minorities in Australia - and fodder for the anti-migration cause represented by racist figures like Laws. And Mitchell's portrayal has not been untainted by overt political considerations. In August 1989 Con the Fruiterer assumed a directly propagandistic function when Prime Minister Bob Hawke appeared as Con's guest on *The Comedy Company* and presented him with a certificate of Australian citizenship. Con had hung an Australian flag in his shop for the occasion, and announced that his citizenship made him a "dinky-doo true blue Aussie skip", after explaining he originally thought that "citizenship" had something to do with ships. He explained the Greek origin of the word "democracy" as meaning "crazy people", and when Hawke appeared he mistook him for the cricket commentator Richie Benaud. Hawke took great delight in trying out Con's catchphrase "coupla days" in reply to Con's question as to when he was going to "fix up the country". The sketch ended with Con waving an Australian flag. The overall effect, apart from exposing a fairly blatant attempt to encourage NESB migrants to apply for Australian citizenship, was to establish Con's harmless, infantile stupidity, and to minimise any threat presented by non-Anglo-Saxon migration to Anglo-Australian employment and well-being. The Greek migrant Con, as portrayed by the blond, Anglo-Australian Mark Mitchell, was seen in his true guise as court jester to the king, supporting the status quo of an Anglophonic and Anglophile Australia, and advocating an

assimilationist conformity symbolised by citizenship.

But this patriotic portrayal of Con as an Australian citizen could also be seen as employing a dynamic similar to Bhabha's notion of "mimicry" of the coloniser by the colonised. As Robert Young explains:

The mimic man, insofar as he is not entirely like the coloniser, white but not quite, constitutes only a partial representation of him: far from being reassured, the coloniser sees a grotesquely displaced image of himself. Thus the familiar... becomes uncannily transformed, the imitation subverts the identity of that which is being represented, and the relation of power, if not altogether reversed, certainly begins to vacillate... The surveilling eye is suddenly confronted with a returning gaze of otherness and finds its mastery, its sameness, is undone...

Compared to ambivalence... mimicry implies an even greater loss of control for the coloniser, of inevitable processes of counter-domination produced by a miming of the very operation of domination, with the result that the identity of coloniser and colonised becomes curiously elided. (15)

Con's citizenship, however, like Sergio Pacelli dressing up in stubbies, singlet, and Aussie hat and speaking Strine in one episode of Home Sweet Home, involves the viewer's awareness that the character is portrayed by an Anglo-Australian actor, that this elision of coloniser and colonised is never in doubt, and the apparatus of colonial discourse is never questioned. Mimicry becomes a much more subversive dynamic in the hands of non-Anglo comedians who portray Anglo-Australian authority figures, like Simon Palomares' portrayal of the tolerant, trendy MP espousing multiculturalism as a trendy, yuppie notion of togetherness in Wogs Out of Work, or Nick Giannopoulos' cleaner describing the Anglo yuppies in his neighbourhood in the same show, or his portrayal of the "wog" kid in a blond wig, trying desperately to mimic the attributes of a surfer. In these cases the displacement is palpable and the mimicry becomes a political strategy which, like the Aborigines portraying colonial invaders in Don Featherstone's ABC

film Babakuerea (1986) becomes a carnivalesque, empowering form of comedy which mocks and undermines the colonial apparatus.

'Allo 'Allo and A Funny Thing Happened to Australian Comedy

The documentary A Funny Thing Happened to Australian Comedy, which was screened on Channel 10 on April 8, 1990, offers a paradigm of the prevalent Anglo-Australian comic tradition of broad caricature into which the figure of Con the Fruiterer neatly fits. It featured 12 Australian TV comedy performers, ranging from Barry Humphries and Garry McDonald to the more recently successful comics of The Comedy Company, Fast Forward and The Big Gig. Five of the comics featured were women, but the only one with a non-Anglo-Saxon name was Magda Szubanski from Fast Forward - a program not noted for any sympathy towards Aborigines or migrants, despite its tokenistic inclusion of a weekly sketch including Aboriginal actor and comic Ernie Dingo, who eventually left the program in disgust. Dingo's comments in an interview express a strong view of the program's cavalier treatment of him:

I didn't get to write any of the material... I'd talk in a silly voice or make some stupid comment and they would say, 'That's great, we'll use that.' That's why I cut my hair because I became Jacky Jacky, the token black on Fast Forward. (16)

Snippets from Fast Forward were included in the documentary - most notably in sketches in which the cast perform a black and white minstrel-style parody of The Cosby Show which appears to mock some of the positive gains in race relations this program has achieved, despite its relatively tame, middle-class parameters (17), and caricature Nazi soldiers in what seems a direct copy of the xenophobic British comedy show 'Allo 'Allo. Fast Forward also features Margaret Downey's parody of an SBS announcer, in which she dons a mock Slavic accent to present a ludicrous picture of the

presumed minority culture exoticism which SBS's worldwide scope is reduced to by many Anglo-Australians. One of her sketches begins as follows:

For generations, the people of the Moldavian village of Krapchuk have been saving the lint from their navels to build a giant statue of their patron, Saint Vassily of the Burning Chicken. As their great project nears completion, our special feature looks at their devotion. That's The Lint Gatherers of Krapchuk coming shortly, and I know you won't want to miss that. (18)

This strained and weak parody of ethnic otherness expresses a provincial Anglo-Australian bias against representations of other cultures which rivals the standard British notion that "all wogs start at Calais".

Within the parameters set up by A Funny Thing Happened to Australian Comedy, Fast Forward is seen as an inheritor of an "Australian comic tradition of broad farce". From the ethnic reference points of the program it can be assumed that this tradition is exclusively white and British, and the similarities between Fast Forward and 'Allo 'Allo are not accidental - they both derive from a xenophobic tradition of "broad farce" which derives from British pantomime. Andy Medhurst invokes this pantomime tradition, which frequently involves men dressing up as women in its burlesque routines, as a comic myth of origin in his apology for 'Allo 'Allo in the British Listener:

The foolish, blustering German officers in 'Allo 'Allo are merely the latest in a long comic line... a whole repository of Francophobic humour (is) seized on by the writers with evident glee... the final verdict must not be to stigmatise (it) as some kind of Carry On Concentration Camping... When all's said and done, 'Allo 'Allo is so funny because it's a pantomime. (19)

Fast Forward also parallels 'Allo 'Allo in combining homophobia with xenophobia in its use of homosexuals as a butt for a highly discriminatory form of humour - as in the former program's sketch about a gay airline steward striking for "ring allowance". Sexism

and racism are accepted as twin staples of this "Australian comic tradition", as is clear from A Funny Thing's emphasis on Barry Humphries as a spokesperson for Australian humour. Humphries' misogynist caricature of a lower-middle-class suburban housewife, Edna Everidge, has largely been devised for British audiences, who see her as a confirmation of their prejudices about the gaucheness and lack of taste and "class" of colonial Australians, and Marika in The Comedy Company can be seen as a direct descendant of this comic strategy. Significantly, the only time the subject of ethnicity and humour is broached in A Funny Thing is in relation to Con the Fruiterer, when Humphries asks whether anyone in Australia has found him offensive. Humphries then describes Con the Fruiterer in his role as King of Moomba as a "worthy successor to Rolf Harris and Sir Robert Helpmann", placing him firmly within an Anglo-Australian tradition of popular entertainment.

From Wogs Out of Work to Acropolis Now

In the rare cases in Australian comedy when the unequal balance between autochthonous and alecthonous speaking positions is redressed, and NESB migrants are given the opportunity to speak for themselves, the tendency has been to mimic dominant Anglo-Saxon representations of NESB migrants in order to get secure laughs, due to the pressure of both an Anglo-dominated tradition of comedy and Anglo-dominated market forces. This is evident in the work of the Italo-Australian comedians Vince Sorrenti and Joe Dolce, both of whom work mainly in live theatre. Sorrenti, who specialises in dirty jokes and comic references to his mother in the Sydney western suburb of Punchbowl, wrote a series of articles for the Sydney Morning Herald in 1991, reflecting on his recent trip to Italy, and caricaturing male Italians' most widely stereotyped behaviour patterns: driving fast cars, spending large amounts of money and exhibiting macho tendencies in their dealings with women. Dolce's most well-known production was the 1980 pop song hit "Shaddap Your Face", which caricatured

commonly supposed Italian mispronunciations of English. In both cases, self-deprecation and the complicit replaying of common received Anglo-generated stereotypes of NESB is the predominant comic strategy. The same is largely true of the first ever Australian TV comedy series to foreground non-Anglo-Saxon migrants portrayed by non-Anglo-Saxon actors, Acropolis Now.

The Greek protagonists of Acropolis Now, despite being portrayed as young NESB migrants rejecting both the cultural pressures of their parents and the dominant trends of Anglo-Australian "skip" culture, are caricatured and stereotyped to a degree which makes them almost indistinguishable from Con the Fruiterer - a resemblance indexed by the highly "Brechtian" casting of British actor Warren Mitchell - well known to Anglo-Saxon viewers as the right-wing racist Alf Garnett in Til Death Do Us Part - as Kostas, the father of Jim (Nick Giannopoulos) in the series' opening episode. The first series of Acropolis Now appeared on Channel 7 in August 1989, and the second in August 1990, where it was programmed immediately before 'Allo 'Allo and Fast Forward, which served to reinforce its racial stereotypes and caricatures. At a conference on Scriptwriting and Multiculturalism held at the Australian Film, Television and Radio School in September 1990, Simon Palomares, the Spanish born writer of both Acropolis Now and its stage predecessor, Wogs Out of Work, stressed that the main priority of the former show had quickly become to "keep it on the air", and maintain a kind of comedy which kept the audience ratings as high as possible:

Whatever the criticisms of the show are, (they) pale in comparison with its main success... that it's on air. If Acropolis Now is not there, there's nothing to replace it... You've got to have a platform. If you lose that platform because you're too loud, or... too radical, or... waving too many flags for too many different causes... you've got nothing to say. And our main concern now is to keep Acropolis Now on air. If we have to do it through comedy,... or stereotypes... or racism, sexism... we'll do it. Because it's keeping ethnics on television. (20)

But at what cost? Palomares' justifications, which involve an Uncle Tom-like obedience and subservience to the permissible parameters dictated by commercial television, were answered by the Greek Australian performance poet PIE-O:

I don't care about your ratings. I don't care if you're making a million dollars or ten cents. You're offending me... You are the buffoons that we as whites and as blacks and as migrants can all laugh together (at). (20)

This notion of quasi-sacrificial migrant "buffoons" points to a degree of caricature in the show which debases the dignity of its Greek migrant characters to an extent which intellectuals like PIE-O and the writer George Papaellinas find offensive. Palomares justified the show's caricatures in terms of what he saw as an internal "balance" - ranging from the extreme sexist behaviour, loud clothes and generally gross, quasi-moronic behaviour of Memo (George Kapiniaris), to the slightly less exaggerated antics of Jim and the female character Effie (Mary Koustas), to the relatively "straight" and rational demeanour of Rick, the character Palomares plays, to the ocker caricature of the Anglo-Australian cook Skip (George Vidalis) and the "straight" Anglo-Saxon female character Liz (Tracey Callander). But there are more complex dynamics at play. The show's producer, Peter Herbert, has described Liz as

the Anglo-Saxon voice of reason in the wog chaos (who) represents the signposts of normality among the culture clash of the Greeks and Spaniard. Liz unravels the mayhem. (21)

In this role as an Anglo-Saxon, quasi-Derridean deconstructionist of the program's "wog chaos", Liz becomes a middle-class anchor figure for Anglo-Saxon audiences, at once sanctioning (but occasionally reprimanding) and interpreting the predominantly sexist behaviour of the working-class Greek males and representing a norm of behaviour against which their extreme antics can be judged. Her status as the voice of the colonial power apparatus is

affirmed by Nick Giannopoulos: "She is virtually our translator. Our ethnic eccentricities go through her and her understanding is like the audience understanding." (22) Liz and Palomares' "straight man" Rick, who is educated and relatively sophisticated, combine to represent a norm of acceptable behaviour against which the transgressions of Memo, DJ and Effie, the "wog girl", can be measured. Palomares' stated models for the program are American sitcoms such as Happy Days (whose Italian American protagonist Fonzie, he points out, is also a "wog") and The Cosby Show, both safe, middle-class programs with an assimilationist focus. Acropolis Now, he pointed out, "ran out of things to say about ethnicity after the first seven episodes":

We've got 22 minutes a week to do a show. We would be trying to put in a minute of something that really says something about the culture we come from, that makes a difference. The rest of the time we have to spend making a gag every ten seconds, otherwise we won't stay on air. (20)

There is no doubt that Acropolis Now has an enormous appeal to its target audience - NESB teenagers of predominantly Greek extraction. In December 1990 I interviewed some of the 600 Sydney migrant teenagers who came nightly to see Acropolis Now On Stage at the Enmore Theatre in Newtown, most of them travelling from inner western suburbs. The vast majority of them saw nothing offensive or even unrealistic in Memo, who was the favourite character of most, and rejected the suggestion that the show might confirm Anglo-Saxon prejudices about Greek Australians. Many of them admitted characters like Memo were "exaggerated", but that this was necessary to make the show "funnier". Some had seen Wogs Out of Work, and saw little difference between that show and Acropolis Now apart from a transfer to television which caused its language to be less explicit, and its format sitcom rather than sketches, and virtually no one hesitated to refer to themselves as "wogs" in a positive sense, although acknowledging that "depending on how it was used", it could still be a term of abuse. It was clear that as far as its target

audience was concerned, there was nothing in the show that contributed to racist attitudes.

The portrayal of the series and its characters in the Anglo-Australian press, on the other hand, reveals an ambivalent assumption of token NESB viewpoints by Anglo-Australian journalists, which includes an appropriation of the term "wog" in its newly liberated mode as a term of defiance and self-assertion for non-Anglo youth. Frank Gauntlet, for example, the British born theatre critic of The Daily Mirror, wrote a feature article on Wogs Out of Work headlined "The Cosy Nostra: Woggy Web just keeps on working", which sanctions its title by quoting George Kapiniaris:

Wogs was a killing word 20 years ago, now it's become something else and I think this show has done a lot to take the edge off that. The word wog used to be derogatory but now it's basically a way of saying that's what we are. (23)

Gauntlet goes on to discuss the "sinister connotations of the Wog invasion" which are the amount of employment which Wogs Out of Work and Acropolis Now have provided for NESB actors - 14 actors and 14 musicians had performed in different versions of the stage show. The term "sinister" evokes a yellow peril style depiction of a NESB takeover of the acting profession that is only faintly tongue-in-cheek, while Gauntlet's description of these actors as a "comic cosy nostra" suggests an incestuous in-group akin to the "gay mafia" which is often accused of dominating Sydney theatre. Another British journalist, Robin Oliver, described the 1990 series of Acropolis Now in the SMH Weekly TV Guide under the banner "Wogs, Wags and Gags", followed by the explanatory disclaimer "the trio of comics who made 'wog' a title worthy of pride are about to begin a new season on television". (22) One by-product of this shift in meaning of the term "wog" was its continued usage with impunity by some Anglo-Australians.

In an essay entitled "Some Theoretical Notions and Preliminary Research Concerning Derogatory Ethnic Labels" (DELs), the

American sociologists Greenberg, Kirkland and Pyszczynski conclude that

DELs are verbal expressions of prejudice with psychological impact that can encourage negative behaviour toward out groupers. Clearly there is an urgent need to know much more about their causes and effects, because the ethnic prejudices to which they seem to contribute continue to encourage conflicts throughout this heavily armed multiethnic world. (24)

This tentative conclusion is based on a study of the usage of specific terms such as "nigger", which has undergone a similar shift of emphasis in American Black communities through its use by rap groups like Niggers With Attitude. Greenberg and his colleagues include the more generic term "wop" (deriving from "without papers", denoting an illegal immigrant) but the term "wog", being a predominantly British DEL, is not mentioned. Thought to originate from "golliwog", it has been used in Australia as a term of racist abuse for any non-Anglo-Saxon out group, but by 1987 it had begun to be used increasingly by those out groupers themselves as a defiantly positive self-descriptive term. Although this shift by no means eliminated the use of the term "wog" by Anglo-Saxons as a term of racial abuse, a good deal of responsibility for this change of emphasis in the term could be claimed by Wogs Out of Work. After filling the 700-seat Athenaeum Theatre in Melbourne with predominantly Greek and Italian migrant youth from the western suburbs of Melbourne for nine months in 1987, Wogs Out of Work played at the Enmore Theatre in Sydney for 16 months, and toured all over Australia. Its sympathetic portrayal of the dilemmas of young Australians from non-Anglo-Saxon background proved a rallying point, and as Hilary Glow pointed out in her review of the show in New Theatre Australia, displayed

ideological concerns... not the least of which is its re-appropriation of the term 'wog'... In much the same way as the term 'black' was re-appropriated into the discourse of the Black Movement, here, too, there is an attempt to invert the denigratory connotations of 'wog'. To some extent, the show still uses

recognisable representational practices ('wogs' as excitable, or stupid, or obsessed with food etc.) but it is concerned to move beyond the reproduction of stereotypes and to challenge the attitudes and assumptions that underlie them. It is no small part of this show's success that 'wogs' become the subject of celebration rather than denigration. (25)

Largely due to the show's sympathetic portrayal of a wide spectrum of young second generation Mediterranean migrants, migrant women workers, and social outcasts, together with its satire against Anglo-Australian yuppies who affect a token concern about "new Australians", it brought new audiences into the theatre. The term "wog" became for many young Australians of non-Anglo-Saxon origin a positive expression of their deviation from the norm, which was represented by the slang term "Skip", which Wogs Out of Work also introduced. As George Papaellinas has said of the show:

It was... some of the most sophisticated humour I've ever had the privilege to watch, simply because it took the whole 360 degrees and spoke affectionately about where these people lived and... came from, and that's a class and gender issue as well, not just something called ethnicity. (It) spoke out of a lot of pain at... the people who had caused the pain, but also involved them in it. But Acropolis Now? No. (20)

Acropolis Now appears to have undone both its predecessor's involvement of gender and class issues and Anglo-Australian guilt and its shift of emphasis in the word "wog". In his review of Acropolis Now in the Sydney Morning Herald, Simon Kent praised the show for its

abundance of self-deprecation that can only help to endear the program further to viewers who may have once shied away, taking heed of the warning to beware of Greeks bearing gifts. (26)

Kent's assumption that self-deprecation is a desirable comic mechanism to woo Anglo-Australian audiences reflects the change in focus between Wogs out of Work and Acropolis Now towards a "court jester", buffoon-like mode in which Anglo-Saxon viewers are permitted to

take a condescending view of stereotyped Greek behaviour which confirms outmoded prejudiced "models".

A 1990 TV Week article provides evidence that the show's Greek protagonists are complicit in this shift in emphasis from defiant affirmation to self-deprecation. Called "Every Skip's Guide to Wogtalk", it uses the term "wog" no fewer than 13 times, draining it of all but its most deprecatory connotations. The article consists of a mock glossary, compiled by Nick Giannopoulos and George Kapiniaris, of terms used by "wogs". These include "Wog breath: A person who should brush his/her teeth with toothpaste, not garlic", and the term "wog" is defined as "People of Southern European origin or Middle Eastern persuasion (Maltese, Egyptianese, Arabese, Turkeys, Lesbianese)". (27) The negative connotations of the word "wog", as it is used in racist Anglo-Saxon discourse, seem to have returned in full force, a tendency which was confirmed in the show by gags like Memo's "I'm not stupid, I'm Greek", and puns on "Cretan" and "cretin".

It could be concluded from this evidence that the ultimate effect of Acropolis Now has been to reverse all the gains in race relations and NESB migrant self-esteem achieved by Wogs Out of Work. From the perspective of an educated, middle-class "concerned Anglo", an absence of positive portrayals of Aboriginal or non-Anglo-Saxon groups in Australian stage and television comedy continues, and pejorative portrayals or exclusion remain the norm. But this would be to ignore the speaking position of working class NESB migrant young people, for whom there is nothing offensive about Acropolis Now, and to whom it provides an important focal point for out group identity, and fuel to fight against discrimination by "skips". Evidence of a widespread tendency among teenage girls of Greek descent to dress up and imitate Effie (28) suggests a form of mimicry which is a defiant enactment of an exaggerated ethnicity which challenges both the strictures and constraints imposed by their migrant parents and their stigmatisation by Anglo-Australians. Craig Brown has claimed that "Comedy sitcoms such

as Acropolis Now are acting as successful bridging programmes, getting the networks, the public and sponsors used to the idea of ethnic culture on television" (29), but this alleged "bridging" process is extremely slow and has yet to yield any visible results. Acropolis Now may have led indirectly to gains in NESB migrant representation on television, but there is still no other NESB-dominated comedy program like the BBC's Tandoori Nights on Australian air waves. The fourth series of Acropolis Now which began on Channel 7 in February 1992 replaced the relatively rational and balancing presence of Simon Palomares as Rick with a new Sicilian character, Alfredo (Nick Carrafa), a more burlesque type of "straight man" whose supposed intellectual capacities are presented in caricatured form. The Fast Forward comedienne Nikki Wendt's frantic, slapstick style as the new waitress Suzanna similarly provided a more exaggerated version of the relatively rational role of Tracey Callander as Liz. This throws all the emphasis of the comedy on the uniformly over-the-top Greek Australian trio of Jim, Memo and Effie, an NESB version of the Three Stooges who are proceeding to cancel out many of the advances in comic portrayals of non-Anglo migrants achieved by Wogs out of Work. As Italo-Australian cartoonist Rocco Fazzari, whose caricatures of Effie have featured frequently in the Sydney Morning Herald, commented on an episode of the 1992 series of Acropolis Now:

it's worse than the scratch across my Nana Mouskouri album... One hopes that Effie and crew will try and rise to greater heights. They might be wogs in work at the moment, but they might as well be selling bedroom settings at Nick Scali's with this effort. (30)

In general terms, Australian television comedy in the early 1990s shows few indications that a further stage can be reached in migrant representation in the mass media, where ethnicity no longer needs to be foregrounded, and Aboriginal and migrant performers have space to play roles, both straight and comic, which do not require them to caricature or stigmatise their ethnicity. One example is the character of Wayne (Bruno Lucia) in Channel

9's situation comedy All Together Now. As his name suggests, Wayne is an unmistakably Australian character who plays the role of the slightly unsavoury, macho and duplicitous manager of the sitcom's protagonist, a clapped-out 1970s rock star (Jon English in what seems like a transparent self-portrait). Wayne conforms to an Anglo-Australian stereotype of the "sleazebag", and were it not for Lucia's name on the credits of the program, he could not be identified as Italian or Italo-Australian. But until every comedy series on Australian television has at least a proportion of Waynes to match the 40% of NESB people in Australia, there will still be a lot of wogs out of work.

Footnotes

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3. The Bulletin, 14.2.89, pp. 41-42.
4. Good Weekend, 15.12.89, p. 41.
5. Robert Young, White Mythologies: Writing History and the West, London, Routledge, 1990, p. 146.
6. "Ways of Seeing", Australian Film, TV and Radio School Conference on Scriptwriting and Multiculturalism, 22.9.90.
7. Homi Bhabha, "The Other Question", Screen Vol. 24, No. 6, 1983, p. 19.
8. Sydney Morning Herald, 4.2.89.
9. The Age, 9.2.89, SMH, 9.2.89.
10. The Age, 5.1.89.
11. Peter White, "Con the Fruiterer: a step ahead or a racist joke?" SMH, 27.2.89.
12. Young, op.cit., p. 151.
13. TV Week, 7.4.90, p. 33.
14. TV Week, 31.3.90, p. 25.
15. Young, pp. 147-8.
16. Good Weekend, 1.9.89, p. 102.
17. See " 'The Cosby Show' and American Racial Discourse", in Smitherman-Donaldson, op.cit., pp. 46-73.
18. Good Weekend, 29.9.90, p. 43.
19. The Listener, 27.10.88.
20. AFTRS Conference, broadcast on SBS Vox Populi, 2.12.90.
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22. SMH Guide, 13.8.90.
23. Daily Mirror, 30.11.89.
24. Jeff Greenberg, S.L.Kirkland, and Tom Pyszczynski, "Some Theoretical Notions and Preliminary Research Concerning Derogatory Ethnic Labels", in Smitherman-Donaldson, op.cit., p. 90.
25. New Theatre Australia No.2, December 1987, pp. 24-25.
26. Sydney Morning Herald, 23.8.89.
27. TV Week, 8.9.90, p. 15.
28. SMH 11.2.90.
29. Cinema Papers No.87, March-April 1992, p. 56.
30. SMH Guide, 24.2.92.