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Wogs as work: humour as ethnic entrepreneurship and convivial labour

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ABSTRACT

In post-war Australia, the word 'wog' was used to describe the southern Europeans who dominated the mass migration schemes, particularly Italians and Greeks. The evolution of 'wog' from slur to celebration peaked in the 1990s, led by second-generation migrant comedians. This paper sets out the history of this evolution and the societal context in which 'wog' humour was invented in a uniquely 'Australian' way. Many of the cultural texts that make up the wog phenomenon have centred on themes of work and labour – from the original Wogs Out of Work to Pizza and Housos. This paper extends its consideration of labour in these works beyond themes in the content to argue that the act of ethnic humour is a form of convivial labour and ethnic entrepreneurship.

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Introduction

'Wog'[1] humour is a particular form of Australian ethnic humour created by second-generation southern European migrants in the 1980s, and it has provided the foundation for the ongoing development of ethnic humour in contemporary multicultural Australia, such as *Superwog* (2018 – present) and Nick Giannopoulos' ongoing *Wog Boy* franchise; the most recent instalment of this was released in 2022. Many of the cultural texts that make up the 'wog phenomenon' have centred upon themes of work, labour, unemployment, and class. For example, the 1987 stage show *Wogs Out of Work*, considered to be the original text for wog humour, emerged out of the actors' experiences of struggling to find work within the creative industries because they did not fit the norm of (white, Anglo) 'Australianness' dominant in Australian film and television at the time. Further contributions of this creative team, led by Nick Giannopoulos, such as *Acropolis Now!* (1989–1992) and *The Wog Boy* (2000), have illustrated ideas of the migrant work ethic (in the contrasting cast of characters in *Acropolis Now!)* and unemployment and welfare (in *The Wog Boy*). Other, later contributions to the wog phenomenon, such as Paul Fenech's *Pizza* (2000–2007) and *Housos* (2012–2013) series, are even more inclusive in the scope of migrant groups represented, and address more recent socio-economic and migration

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phenomena, such as particular anxieties about welfarism and refugees. The wog-out-of-work stereotype that emerges from these texts written by and about the second- and third generations is frequently at odds with another stereotype in Australian immigration history: that of the model first-generation migrant worker of the post-Second World War migration boom. The further irony of this wog humour is that it is itself the result of the creative labours of its artists.

This article presents two alternative readings of wog humour to consider it as a form of labour in itself. First, it applies Wise's (2016) concept of 'convivial labour' - the unseen work performed towards social cohesion in a multicultural society – to the creative labour of ethnic humour, and the Australian wog phenomenon specifically. Ethnic humour as a form of mainstream entertainment performs this labour on a larger social scale. The discussion is contextualized within Australia's history of immigration, with a focus on the post-war era in which, it is argued, certain identifiable trends and policies have contributed to viewing migrants primarily through their labour and economic contributions. Second, this article examines wog humour as a highly specialized form of ethnic entrepreneurship, wherein individual migrants create and exploit new economic niches (Eriksen 2012, 366).

Defining 'wog' and the 'wog phenomenon' in Australia

It is first important to define and contextualize the use of 'wog' in Australia and in this discussion, as well as the way that 'wog' has evolved into a cultural phenomenon. It is, after all, an ethnic slur, the usage of which can involve complex politics of cultural licence available only to those with ethnic insider status (see, for example, Dimitriadis 2016), but even insider use can be controversial and contested (Allan 2015; Rossing 2014; see also Kennedy 1999 and Asim 2007 for detailed accounts of the politics of the n-word that share some mechanics with the use of 'wog'). Its politics are further complicated by the transnationalism of the term and its shifting meaning in different national contexts, specifically those of Australia and the United Kingdom. Wog humour has functioned in the Australian context to largely – but not unproblematically – reclaim the word as a form of identity, but its status in the United Kingdom is less ambiguous: it is still considered predominantly a slur (Moore 2016).

Although there is some speculation about its derivation from 'golliwogs' (Wilton 2004), wog seem to be a predominantly twentieth century British and Australian term responding to both increased immigration and to a variety of military exercises that saw British and Australian troops stationed in countries with non-white populations. Moore (2014) suggests the term was in use in the United Kingdom as a term to refer to foreigners as early as the 1920s. Currently, the only material evidence in support of its use at that time is the publication of the saying 'wogs begin at Calais' in Nancy Mitford's novel, *Love in a Cold Climate* (1949), which draws heavily on her family's childhood in the 1920s and 1930s. In the same year that this novel was published, British Labour MP George Wigg also used the saying in a parliamentary debate (House of Commons 1949). One story claims that workers on the Suez Canal wore the letters 'W.O.G.S' on their shirts to signify 'working on government service', but Wilton (2004, 95) argues that this is a 'fanciful, but untrue tale'. These and other acronyms – such as Westernized, Wily, and Wonderful

Oriental Gentlemen – are likely 'backronyms'; that is, a phrase assigned to a word to create an acronym after the invention of the word itself. During the Second World War and likely influenced by their interactions with the British, Australian soldiers used 'wog' to refer to both locals encountered in the Middle East and to the practice of buying goods from them (Moore et al. 2016, 1759). This usage was then brought back to Australia by these soldiers and, as Baker observes in his lexicon of Australian language and slang, 'Towards the end of the 1950s, we began to hear [post-war migrants] described as *wogs*' (Baker 1978, 175, original italics). Prior to this, appellations such as 'dago' were more commonly applied (Andreoni 2003), but this appears to have been largely superseded by 'wog', perhaps in part due to its reinforcement as the dominant term and identity through the cultural texts that comprise the 'wog phenomenon'. While less popular or perhaps even less well-known to contemporary Australian society, 'dago' has continued to be used strategically by some wog humourists in part as a play on words (see, for example, the stage show *Il Dago* (2007), which plays upon the name of the pop-opera group Il Divo). This may also be in part due to the trademarking of 'wog' by Nick Giannopoulos in the late 1990s (Oreglia 2019; Dimitriadis 2019; discussed below). Nevertheless, 'wog' remains the dominant term and the defining adjective of this form of humour.

The 'wog phenomenon' is defined here as the various cultural texts, including stage performances, television shows, and films, written by and about 1.5- and second-generation performers that use ethnic humour, and that have gained particular cultural cache in Australia since the 1980s. In the earlier part of the phenomenon, these cultural texts were mainly produced by the successive generations of post-war European migrants, such as Italians, Greeks, and Spanish. *Wogs Out of Work*, first staged by Nick Giannopoulos, Simon Palomares, and Maria Portesi in 1987, and the subsequent television show *Acropolis Now*, are exemplars of this early stage and the main reference point for the phenomenon as a whole. As these wog humour productions evolved over time, they came to incorporate other migrant groups, such as Asian Australians (see, for example, *Wog-A-Rama* in 1993), as well as First Nations people (see, for example, the Pizza franchise; Paul Fenech is of both Maltese and Indigenous heritage). The most recent addition to the phenomenon, *Superwog*, features Greek-Egyptian Australian brothers, Theodore and Nathan Saidden. Interestingly, the participation of Arabic and Middle Eastern performers returns 'wog' to its historical origins.

As this paper draws upon a broad variety of texts, including stage, television, and film, and ethnic humour generally, wog humour is the term used throughout. By contrast, Lesley Speed (2005) uses 'wogsploitation' and 'wog comedy' interchangeably to refer to wog humour films, such as *The Wog Boy* and *Pizza*. The term suggests a particularly multicultural iteration of the Ozploitation genre. Ozploitation is characterized by controversial content, cheap production costs, and particular target demographics and is perhaps more traditionally associated with the horror and thriller genres (Martin 2010; Ryan 2010, 2018; Ryan and Goldsmith 2017). Speed argues that it can also encompass the kind of vulgar comedy frequently deployed in wog humour, particularly the *Pizza* franchise (Speed 2005); her connection between this kind of comedy and Ozploitation is important, as it highlights the deliberate commodification of ethnic identities and cultures for consumption.

Locating wog humour within ethnic humour studies

Ethnic humour – of which wog humour is a particular Australian example – is a phenomenon commonly found in culturally diverse societies. Perspectives on ethnic humour are ambivalent. On the one hand, it can perform an important function in assisting marginalized groups to process and resist experiences of marginalization from the cultural mainstream, but on the other, there are concerns that it perpetuates rather than challenges racism and racist stereotypes (Elder 2007).

From a sociological perspective, humour acts as a formal social process that serves specific social functions in determining inter- and intra-group relations. According to Coser (1959), humour can function to maintain hegemonic social hierarchies, but can also contribute to social cohesion through inclusivity. She writes, 'To laugh, or to occasion laughter through humour or wit, is to invite those present to come close' (Coser 1959, 172). Social groups develop specific 'joking cultures' (Fine and De Soucey 2005, 1). A shared 'comic discourse' (Fine and De Soucey 2005, 1) works to establish the boundaries of the group, to identify its members, and to create the conditions of intimacy within the group. Intimacy or familiarity is considered a crucial element of the joking relationship. As Fine and De Soucey (2005, 2) observe, 'joking does not occur between strangers'. They clarify that 'To joke requires individuals who are aware of and are considerate of each other's identity' (Fine and De Soucey 2005, 3). Those individuals include both the joker and the audience or target of the joke. It is knowing each other that first gives the licence to joke, which in turn works to foster the existing relationship between the two parties. While Fine and De Soucy's observation stems from analysis of the joking culture and comic discourse within a small group of professionals, we can think about this intimacy in a broader cultural or even national sense. The imagined community of the nation (Anderson 2006) is an imagined intimacy between strangers, and an imagined understanding of a shared national identity. This has interesting implications for ethnic humour as a tool for building and testing social cohesion.

In ethnic humour, these relational dynamics take on a much larger socio-cultural significance than the small bounded social groups used as examples in these scholars' work. What is being negotiated is not simply workplace dynamics or the relationships between a nascent group of friends, but relationships between large social groups loaded with social, economic, cultural, and political baggage. To reiterate Coser in this context, humour can function to maintain social hierarchies between *socio-economic and ethno-racial* groups, but also to contribute to social cohesion between these groups. Humour can therefore play an important role in the processes of social cohesion in culturally diverse societies as a means of different groups inviting social closeness. If the social groups involved are understood to be first, ethnic groups within a society, and second, the imagined community of the nation (Anderson 2006), joking cultures and comic discourses work to both establish the boundaries of the ethnic groups in relation to others, including the perceived or actual dominant ethno-national group, and to negotiate belonging within the idea of the nation itself. This can be seen in Davis's (2009, 20) observation that Australian culture 'deploys humour as a weapon to identify those who are truly "at home" in the land and in society'. This reinforces McCallum's (2004, 204) postcolonial critique of Australian humour in both its Anglo Celtic and non-Anglo ethnic forms, which he characterizes as 'a mixture of defiance and apology for being there'.

Both Davis and McCallum's characterizations of Australian humour illustrate the 'sword and shield' metaphor commonly used to understand humour's form and function (Rappoport 2005). That is, humour can be wielded as both an offensive and defensive tool. Similarly, it can function to both include and exclude. In this way, ethnic humour can be used to both attack the dominant group – and, it must be noted, other marginalized groups in competition within the social hierarchy – and to defend the ethnic group against the dominant group and others (Juni and Katz 2001). To illustrate this, Samuel Juni and Bernard Katz (2001) quote the Jewish protagonist in *Fiddler on the Roof*: 'the joke is the weak's weapon'. Their study of Jewish humour in America illustrates how self-effacing wit can be a response to oppression. Given the relational dimension of humour, as well as its offensive and defensive functions, we can see how humour is intimately tied to power relations. It articulates and negotiates the relationships between groups, but it is also a form of empowerment for marginalized groups, such as migrant groups and ethnic minorities.

The use of racist slurs, such as wog, is not an essential part of ethnic humour, but it is not an uncommon tactic. While these slurs may be used for shock value, in a manner similar to the use of swear words, they are also part of a process of reclamation of identity, culture, and belonging. As Andreoni (2003, 90) observes, 'Those covered by such a label are aggressively taking back the naming rights and the territory'. Ethnic comedians use humour to take control of the meaning of slurs such as wog and its associated images and representation so that its power to denigrate and humiliate is diffused, if not destroyed entirely; the Other takes the sword and uses it to parry.

The politics of representation and the social context in which the power to (re)claim those representations emerges is integral to understanding the form and function of ethnic humour. Wog humour emerged in Australia in the 1980s as the children of post-war European migrants came of age and were able to claim greater space in Australian culture and society due to both education and the support of multiculturalist policies. It signalled a shift from previous representations of migrants in Australian humour that either ignored diversity completely, relied on racist stereotypes (see, for example, Con the Fruiterer, an 'olive-face' character concurrent with the early days of the wog phenomenon; Mitchell 1992), or were 'inauthentic' representations (see *They're A Weird Mob*; Carniel 2012). The following section provides an overview of Australian immigration history, highlighting the link made between labour and migration.

Migrants, labour, and class in Australia: a history

Following the Second World War, Australia embarked upon a programme of mass immigration as part of its national project of post-war development. Workers were needed for major infrastructure projects, such as the Snowy Hydroelectric Scheme, and Australia's emerging (but ultimately short-lived) manufacturing industry (Persian 2017). As a result, Australia's post-war immigration history has come to be intimately tied to its labour history. Since Australian Federation in 1901, various pieces of legislation and policy, known collectively as the White Australia Policy, worked to both restrict non-white immigration and the rights of Indigenous Australians. The *Immigration Restriction Act* was amongst the first pieces of legislation developed and passed by the newly federated Australian government in its first year, which speaks

to the importance of both immigration and white labour to the project of building the new nation of Australia. This Act responded to nineteenth century anxieties about non-white labour in Australia by working to protect the rights of white workers from the threat of cheap (non-white) foreign labour. As Jon Piccini and Evan Smith (2018) have observed, the foundations of a 'workers' paradise' were laid early in Australia's history through the establishment of a living wage and the eight-hour day; non-white workers, such as Indigenous Australians and non-white migrants, were excluded.

However, not all white labour was considered equal, and soon a hierarchy for desirable migrants based on racial and cultural criteria emerged. Efforts to attract the more desirable British, western, and northern Europeans were unsuccessful and so the first mass group of non-British migrants were the 170,000 central and eastern European displaced persons who resettled in Australia between 1947 and 1952. These displaced persons were followed by assisted migrants from Malta, Italy, Greece and Spain – the groups who came to constitute the core of the 'wog' stereotype. Migration history scholars generally characterize the inclusion of these Southern European migrants into Australia's post-war immigration programme as a pragmatic compromise of the racially-driven ideology of the White Australia policy (Persian 2017, 183). Attracted to the promise of work and opportunity in Australia, these migrants were driven by the economic and employment situation of their home countries. Officially considered sufficiently white to satisfy the racial imperative of the White Australia policy during the 1950s, it was however expected that they assimilate to Anglo Australian culture. Andreoni's (2003 work on the 'olive peril' illustrates the racialized anxieties that disrupted the nominal acceptance of these migrant groups by the Australian public, and underscores the limits of racialized understandings of cultural difference. Labour and other economic contributions to Australian society have played a significant role in the 'whitening' of these olive migrant groups. As Hage (1998, 20) has observed, 'Whiteness can be accumulated (up to a certain point) and people can be said to be more or less White and Australian'. The extent of this perceived whiteness is dependent upon their accumulated social, political, and economic capital, which increases with each generation subsequent to migration (Papadelos 2021).

Migrants, labour, and class in Australia: representation

The place that migrants have had in Australian labour and social history has in turn influenced how they have been represented in its cultural texts. This is perhaps best encapsulated by Bertone, Keating, and Mullaly's (2000) report into non-English speaking background (NESB) representation in theatre film and television for the Australia Council, *The Taxidriver, the Cook and the Greengrocer*. The report's title refers to the stereotyped roles that NESB actors found themselves relegated to in the Australian creative industries, drawing also on Jakubowicz et al.'s (1994, 75) observation that 'NESB Australians ... are usually subservient (e.g. cooks, waiters, grocers)'. Similarly, Greek Australian actor Lex Marinos (1995, 39) noted in his essay, 'Robert de Niro's Waiting', that in the Australian entertainment industry, Italian American actor Robert de Niro would likely have had 'a stint in a soap as a fruiterer, and an occasional role as a taxi driver. He would probably have had to supplement his meagre income by being a taxi driver. I doubt that he would

ever have played the lead in *Taxi Driver*.' Such representations underpin the humorous premise of Giannopoulos' third instalment in the *Wog Boy* franchise, *Wog Boy Forever* (2022) in which the character Nick is working as a taxi driver. Screen Australia's 2016 inquiry into diversity in Australian television drama reports a reduction of stereotyping in occupational status and yet, characters with non-English-speaking backgrounds were still strongly represented in 'manual, retail, and small business roles' (Screen Australia 2016, 11).

Pieter Aquilia (2001) has argued that the 'use' of diversity by White multiculturalist film and television producers nevertheless contributed to the development of cultural diversity in the industry; that is, the act of commodification can nevertheless be used to satisfy positive goals in multicultural representation. The place of wog humour within this is, however, complicated. Although wog humour is an act of self-representation, its use of ethnic stereotypes in the comic format can open it to criticism as a form of ethnic buffoonery – an ethnic caricature that was primarily the source of mockery (Shteir 2005, 18). Rappoport (2005, 151) counters this, arguing that ethnic humour 'plays with stereotypes and exploits them, but it does not create them.' Self-representation is key to this dynamic because the power of play and exploitation involved rests with the ethnic performer.

Thematically, the various texts that comprise the 'wog phenomenon' frequently centre on work and labour, and two of the key contributions to television – *Acropolis Now* and *Pizza* – specifically depict labour in the service industries, the very type of representation critiqued by Bertone et al (2000). A key difference, however, is that the representation of this labour and of the migrant and multicultural workers comes from within the group itself, allowing for more nuanced and even subversive depictions. For example, in *Acropolis Now*, the Greek café's cook is an Australian (nicknamed 'Skip', a colloquial, sometimes derogatory term used to refer to Anglo-Australians derived from the iconic Australian television series, *Skippy the Bush Kangaroo*). The café itself is the result of the hard work of main character Jim's father who leaves the business to his son when he returns to Greece for his retirement; the reward for his hard work in Australia is retirement and prestige in Greece, a not uncommon trajectory for Greek Australian migrants at the time the show was developed (Bottomley 1984). Jim himself is depicted as a spoilt member of the second generation flashing the accoutrements of his inherited social mobility. His lackadaisical work ethic is contrasted with the serious-minded Ricky who, despite appearances, has 'failed' the expectations of his migrant family by quitting university to help Jim run the café. Similarly – albeit with darker humour – the pizzeria in *Pizza* is owned by an Italian migrant woman but run by her son, Bobo. While Jim is somewhat of a dilettante, he is nevertheless depicted as a well-intentioned manager and entrepreneur. By contrast, Bobo is corrupt, exploitative and abusive of his workers, and ultimately criminal. Where *Acropolis Now* seeks to present a more nuanced representation of the intergenerational migrant success story situated in a fairly genial, cosmopolitan Australia, *Pizza* depicts a carnivalesque, multicultural working and welfare underclass struggling in the context of neoliberal Australia (Stratton 2020). Both are them are responsive to the socio-political and socio-economics contexts in which they were developed, providing commentary on the social relations between the various groups comprising Australian society.

Wog humour as convivial labour

Labour is both a theme and a crucial element of ethnic humour in Australia. That is, the humour not only addresses experiences of working, unemployment, and class, but is in itself a form of labour in the writing, production, and performance of the texts. Further, it constitutes an artefact of intergenerational social mobility by migrant groups; that is, these cultural texts are generated and performed predominantly by the 1.5- and second-generations who have benefited from access to education and from greater socio-economic mobility. In addition to this, wog humour constitutes an additional form of intangible labour – Wise's 'convivial labour' - the work of living with and negotiating difference.

Wise (2016, 482) defined her concept of 'convivial labour' as 'the enacted, negotiated, practiced and cumulative labour that goes into provisionally successful situations of lived difference'. Conviviality, as developed by Gilroy (2004, xi), encompasses 'the processes of cohabitation and interaction that have made multiculture an ordinary feature of social life', particularly within urban centres. As Noble (2011, 157–58) has noted, conviviality acknowledges that 'people are capable of acting in both cosmopolitan and racist ways at different moments in different contexts'. Living with and negotiating difference, Wise (2016, 482) reminds us, can involve both '"happy" togetherness' and everyday racisms. Wise's findings from her research into the role of humour in culturally diverse workplaces in Australia mirror those of Coser: it assisted workplace bonding, but also reinforced particular social structures, including creating exclusions. Nevertheless, ethno-racial jabs that might seem racist to an external observer were frequently seen as 'a sign of trust and acceptance' (Wise 2016, 484) amongst the workers.

Where Wise's original conceptualization of convivial humour examined humour *at* work *as* work in a multicultural society, this examination of wog humour conceives of it as a doubling of the labour: it is humour *as* work in the creative industries and *as* work in a multicultural society. The convivial labour of ethnic comedians is to 'force us to confront these elements of folklore and popular culture, in the context of humour' (Rappoport 2005, 151). Their work is not just in the entertainment, but in assisting the audience to see how and why particular stereotypes and ideas function within multicultural social relations. As Mary Coustas, famous for the character Effie in *Acropolis Now* and the wogs stage shows, says: 'There's always an agenda with me … More often, it's through the comic capsule that I prefer to tackle the difficult issues in a way that makes them approachable. I want to make people laugh *and* think. I want to make a difference and I want to do something real' (Jonk 2021). Rappoport (2005, 155) goes so far as to suggest that by offering 'an informal, liberating intellectual experience', such as that described by Coustas, 'it is not unreasonable to recognize successful performers of racial-ethnic humour as minor culture heroes.' The outcomes of this labour is social change, whether it is within the creative industries by making space for marginalized identities, or whether it is impacting how audiences think and feel about issues of race, ethnicity, and identity. For example, as Lou Pardi, George Kapiniaris, and Simon Palomares recall, '[P]eople are always coming up to us and saying, "good on you for making it easier for me to go to school, for making it cool to be a wog"' (quoted in Davis 2009, 20).

Wog humour as ethnic entrepreneurship

Traditional perspectives on the economy of ethnicity focus on an equally traditional conceptualization of the economy and labour: occupations and entrepreneurship. Economic systems frequently exhibit observable ethnic lines determined by the cultural resources that equip a group for particular activities, and structural factors, such as systematic power differences (Eriksen 2012). Australian migrant recruitment policies, social structures, and cultural and professional resources frequently resulted in particular migrant groups being represented in certain employment sectors, such as construction and manufacturing (Ricatti 2018). There was a greater diversification of labour trends in the successive generations, such as the movement of these children of migrants into more white-collar occupations. There was also a significant trend in ethnic entrepreneurship amongst post-war migrants; some elements of this, such as the development of ethnic cuisines, are foundational to contemporary experiences of Australia as a multicultural nation. However, Collins (1996) emphasizes the importance of resisting narratives that suggest high levels of migrant entrepreneurship in Australia stem from the supposedly inherently entrepreneurial cultures of these cultures; rather, many moved into entrepreneurship because they were blocked from other pathways of professional success due to racialization. Conversely, other racialized minorities have been equally blocked from turning to entrepreneurship because racialization limits them to low-paid work that makes it difficult to obtain start-up capital (Collins 2003).

Ethnic entrepreneurship is primarily framed around ethnic businesses – that is, businesses that capitalize on ethnic difference or culture in some way. Accordingly, much literature on ethnic entrepreneurship traditionally focuses on particular economic activities that primarily centre on the exchange of goods and services, such as the food, hospitality, clothing, and beauty industries, or import and export services. Many of these first served niche ethnic markets before potentially expanding into broader, mainstream markets (Aldrich and Waldinger 1990). Such definitions have functioned to largely exclude the cultural industries from understandings of entrepreneurship. For some groups, this can result in a 'fallacy of invisibility' (Basu and Werbner 2001, 241) that renders economic activities, innovations, and success invisible.

Several scholars have thus argued for an expansion of this definition of ethnic entrepreneurship to better incorporate the diverse economic activities of minority groups that might otherwise be overlooked, including activities belonging to the cultural industries (Basu & Werbner 2001; Wang, ogilvie, and Richardson 2021). Wang et al. (2021) call for a more inclusive definition of entrepreneurship that moves beyond an understanding fixated on 'petty traders' or venture capital in order to better encompass how diverse and minority groups demonstrate entrepreneurship and to acknowledge non-technologically-focused innovation in the creative industries. After all, as Aldrich and Waldinger (1990, 112) argue in their germinal framework for understanding ethnic entrepreneurship, entrepreneurship is simply 'the combining of resources in novel ways so as to create something of value'. Combined with Basu & Werbner's 2001, 257) conceptualization of culture as 'the product of structurally evolving opportunities', the definition of ethnic entrepreneurship can be effectively broadened to encompass a much broader range of activities, including those of the cultural industries, and particularly: ethnic humour.

Australian wog humour is useful to explore this application of ethnic entrepreneurship to cultural industries and productions. It combined resources – cultural labour, cultural capital, and, controversially, discriminatory labels – into a lucrative product that appealed first to a niche ethnic audience, and then to a broader mainstream audience. It addressed the dearth of employment opportunities experienced by minorities, and established a genre in multicultural entertainment in Australia that other performers were subsequently able to labour in and contribute to. Wog humourists illustrate Brubaker's (2002, 166) idea of 'ethnopolitical entrepreneurs … who live "off" as well as "for" ethnicity', a concept Shereen Idriss (2016) also applies to the strategic use of creativity in community arts by Lebanese Australian men to deal with broader experiences of race relations and discrimination.

The original stage show, *Wogs Out of Work*, can be understood as a response to a specific climate of economic opportunity, or lack thereof. The show's title plays upon both the moral panic about unemployed migrants on welfare and the creators' impetus for writing the show because they found their opportunities in film, television, and theatre were limited by Anglo-centric writing and casting practices. Accordingly, *Wogs Out of Work* might further be conceptualized as a form of self-employment that sought to challenge structural impediments the creators found within their industry: they wrote a stage show to perform themselves to address their difficulty in finding acting work. Entrepreneurship was thus viewed as an alternative to unemployment (Collins 2003). Further, the show's initial success with 1.5- and second-generation audiences (Mitchell 1992) illuminated a niche in the economic market: this was an audience who wanted to see themselves and their stories portrayed – and portrayed in an entertaining and humorous way. Yet its appeal expanded beyond this niche to attract non-ethnic markets and the growth of the cosmopolitan consumer 'at home' in multicultural society who increasingly sought representations of this desirable, globalized society.

The development of the *Wogs Out of Work* stage show in response to the limited opportunities available to non-Anglo Australian actors in the late 1970s and early 1980s (Byrne 2017) illustrates the lag between the development of multicultural policies and their effects in the creative industries. Despite the 1978 Galbally Report recommending that multicultural representation needed to be fostered in media and the arts, the power to represent was still held firmly by Anglo-Australians: non-English-speaking background Australian actors reported significant challenges in being considered for roles beyond their perceived ethnicity, and even such roles were extremely stereotyped, as detailed by Bertone et al (2000). By the 1990s, NESB characters and storylines were increasingly incorporated into Australian film and television, but these representations were still largely controlled by Anglo-Australian producers and used to serve specific national ideological ends (Hage 1998). Aquilia (2001) argues that these producers nevertheless contributed to the development of culturally diverse representation in Australian film and television, and even eased the way for ethnic filmmakers and producers to present their own narratives and characters.

Nick Giannopoulos's stage shows, television show and feature films have been highly successful – and lucrative (Andreoni 2003; Speed 2005). For example, *The Wog Boy* took over $13 million AUD in the box office (Byrne 2017). One profile of Giannopoulos couches his success explicitly in terms of ethnic entrepreneurship: 'With his combination of talents – a creative mind plus business smarts – success followed

success … .Giannopoulos, ever the businessman, created his own work' (OnlyMelbourne.com.au, n.d.). In a remarkable example of his entrepreneurship, Giannopoulos' production company, Third Costa, trademarked 'wogs' and 'wog boy' in 1997 (Oreglia). In 2019, fellow comedians alleged that Giannopoulos was pursuing lawsuits to protect 'wog' as a trademark, alleging that this was putting other 'wogs out of work' (A Current Affair 2019). Interestingly, the potential future trademarking of the word 'dago' for financial gain was satirized by Australian sketch comedy show, *The Late Show*, in 1992 (The Late Show 1992). Prior to the controversy in 2019, Giannopoulos had explained with a laugh that his lawyers had advised him to take out the trademark 'to protect [his] business interests' when wog humour had proliferated in the 1990s (Byrne 2017):

> I have the trademark certificate framed in my house, because it's hilarious. At five years old, I got called a wog in the playground, and the next thing I own the trademark. Like my dad says, 'Australia, good country. Anything can happen in Australia'. (Byrne 2017)

In this same interview, Giannopoulos also articulates the transactional, economic relationship between him as a performer and his audience: I'm conscious of the fact that my audience work very hard for their money and I am very conscious of giving them value for money and would never put myself in a position as a performer where I ever felt like I short-changed them in any way (Byrne 2017). Resting aside any moral debate around whether a term such as 'wog' can be 'owned' by anyone, Giannopoulos' canny pursuit of his business interests and brand, and his conceptualization of the performer-audience in terms of 'value for money' effectively illustrate an entrepreneurial approach to his professional role in the creative industries, and its subsequent contributions to Australian cultural productions.

Conclusion

By combining the history of migrant labour in Australia with ethnic humour, we can see how both labour and humour are forms of contingent belonging in Australian society. As a form of cultural production located within the creative industries, ethnic humour is also in itself a form of (migrant) labour. The work it performs is twofold: it is both creative labour and convivial labour. In the combination of its use of the ethnic slur and cultural stereotypes together with presenting a shared invitation to laugh together, wog humour literally and figuratively encompasses both 'happy togetherness' and everyday racism. Wog humour works in Australia because it arises from the complex social relations of a country that has used migration strategically and pragmatically as a nation-building tool, while also grappling with how to manage the resulting diversity.

Note

1. This article analyses the cultural evolution of the use of the word 'wog' in Australia. We use the term here with the caution that its history is that of an ethnic slur and is thus offensive to many Australians. We also acknowledge that it is also considered offensive in the British context, where the process of reclamation discussed in this paper has not taken place.

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