

# Identities across borders

## What could a TV variety show have to say about colonial ideology and Australian national identity?



This was just one of the areas covered during a 'virtual seminar' run by the WUN International Network in Colonial & Postcolonial Studies, which brought together academics from Sydney and Leeds to discuss globalisation and literature.

One of the presenters at the seminar, University of New South Wales lecturer Benjamin Miller, has just completed his PhD on blackface entertainment in American and Australian culture. So he was interested to see the outrage provoked by the inclusion of a blackface skit in a recent reunion episode of a long-running Australian variety show. One of the performers later admitted they wouldn't have considered doing the routine in the US, because things were 'a bit different in America' in terms of what blackface means.

"The reality is that historically, blackface was actually very well known in Australia as troupes of American and British performers moved here from the USA when the California gold rush ended," said Miller

He maintains that this form of entertainment, based on slavery in America, came also to reflect white people's image of Aboriginal culture and society and that this transnational colonial racism was one of the elements which helped to form Australian national identity.

Miller cited, as one example, a play written during the early 19th Century, which had an anti-authoritarian main character embodying many elements of emerging Australian nationalism, but also included parodies of Aboriginal characters, most likely

performed by white actors in black woollen body suits, with blackened hands and faces.

"The dominant colonial ideology had to dehumanise Aboriginal people to justify the theft of the land," said Miller. "While emerging Australian nationalism defied the colonial authorities in most aspects, it took on colonial racism as part of its own self-justification. This ambivalence is still reflected in current debates about Australian nationalism and foundational myths."

Miller's co-presenter at the seminar, Lizzy Finn, focused on more recent interactions between culture and identity. A doctoral student at the University of Leeds, Finn is currently at the University of Sydney as part of the WUN's Research Mobility Programme, working towards her PhD on Indigenous women's writing and Australian multiculturalism.

"Indigenous writers are forced to consider how they wish to identify themselves," said Finn. "While there is an increasing acceptance of Aboriginal writers within Australian literature, many Aboriginal writers dislike being categorised in this way and prefer to see themselves as part of a transnational Indigenous literature."

A recurring theme in Aboriginal literature has been the 'quest' narrative, which is characterised by the main character's search for an authentic Indigenous identity. But this is changing as Indigenous literature gains a wider audience, according to Finn.

"By identifying Indigenous literature as transnational, rather than in relation to a

national literature, writers are able to look at wider, more global themes," said Finn. "But a common thread that runs through Indigenous literature is the tension that arises between local Indigenous communities and the increasingly multicultural, globalised nation."

One novel cited by Finn – *Steam Pigs* by Melissa Lucashenko – exposes the 'identity crisis' faced by some Indigenous women, who feel forced away from Aboriginal communities through domestic violence but then find it difficult to adapt to life elsewhere.

"In the novel, even the supposedly inclusive ideology of feminism, while providing safety from physical violence, does not allow the main character to be herself. The self-effacement of her identity which is required for her to 'fit in' is another form of violence against her," said Finn.

Professor Graham Huggan, Director of the Institute for Colonial and Postcolonial Studies at the University of Leeds co-chaired the seminar with Professor Robert Dixon in Sydney. Huggan noted how both presenters invoked a different kind of transnationality. "Ben Miller's work shows how a transnational ideology of race underpinned colonialism and Lizzy's discussion on Indigenous literature shows that a transnational ideology of anti-racism underpins postcolonialism," he said.

"In fact," he added, "the WUN seminars which link academics across the globe to discuss these issues are an exercise in postcolonial transnationalism in themselves."

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