THE PERSISTENT POPULARITY OF THE GOLLIWOG IS SYMBOLIC OF AUSTRALIA'S UNEASE WITH BLACKNESS

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the unease about notions of Blackness and difference apparent in public and private discourses in Australia. Specifically, I argue that this tension is symbolically reflected in the persistent popularity of the golliwog doll. Australia's 'race' relations legacy is a long, deep and complex one. It has systematically failed to acknowledge, embrace and manage its key relationship with its indigenous populations. And, despite attempts to embrace a wider multicultural policy agenda with the post-war and recent acceptance of visible migrants and refugees, Australia still in many ways, finds it hard to accept visible Others as full members of society. Global events have also added public fears and anxieties about visible Others. As a result, there remains a serious question mark in Australia (and in other societies) over who is included/excluded and indeed, what it means to be Australian. The persistent popularity of the golliwog across metropolitan, regional and rural regions in Australia, in my view symbolically encapsulates Australia's refusal/failure to understand the nature, significance and pervasiveness of 'race'/racism. This paper, therefore aims to inject some contemporary and critical ideas from a critical Black feminist perspective about the symbolic nature of race/racism within Australia in order to generate some much-needed debate and action.

Keywords: 'Race'/racism; Otherness; Visible Difference; Blackness; Whiteness; Golliwog

1   INTRODUCTION

As a member of a visible minority community from the UK, my journey to Australia has been in part a seemingly smooth but also a contradictory one. My position as a woman of Caribbean origin, places me firmly as a visible migrant, yet my British cultural background also privileges my entry and general acceptance into Australian society. Indeed, in some ways, my Britishness, rather than my Blackness has become more pronounced here than in the UK. As I have explained elsewhere (Henry-Waring 2004), this is not to dismiss the significance of my racial origins, but to point out the realities and shifting contexts of multiple identities, which need to be understood as being beyond essentialised notions of Otherness. This paper is an attempt to document some of these observations as a visible but privileged British migrant within a critical Black feminist perspective about race/racism in Australia.

2   DISCUSSION

2.1   THE META-DISCOURSES OF OTHERNESS

By drawing upon what I have defined elsewhere as a 'critical Black British feminism', (Henry-Waring 2004), this paper asserts that the discourses of Otherness form a key part of a damning legacy, in which Blackness is viewed negatively. Further, the resulting

picture stereotypes our commonalities, ignores our differences, denies our power and refutes our agency. This is symbolically represented by the persistence of the golliwog in Australia and elsewhere. A key starting point lies in dismantling the meta-discourses of Otherness – a highly pervasive set of ideological constructions that shape attitudes, beliefs and actions[1]. It is within these discourses where the caricatures of the golliwog and other racist cultural icons are created and refuse to be dismantled.

Using Foucault's (1981) ideas about power and knowledge, I argue that the meta-discourses of Otherness reflect an ideology that is essentially hegemonic[2]. Power and knowledge are continually reinforced formally and informally, throughout all levels of society through a number of vehicles; individually and collectively; explicitly and implicitly. Through cultural artifacts such as the golliwog, difference as Otherness is reinforced. The fact that many don't even see the offensive nature of golliwogs and simply reduce it to that of a toy is a clear implication of a lack of cultural insight that is inherent in Anglocentric discourses.

I have argued that the meta-discourses of Otherness act as hegemonic carriers of ideology and power, that for the purposes of this paper, give primacy to White, male, Anglo-Australian, heterosexual, affluent, Christian values and beliefs, at the direct expense of those defined as 'Other' (Henry-Waring 2004). At the heart of these meta-discourses lie a set of pervasive ideologies that valorize whiteness as the norm, from which Others are constructed, defined, scrutinised and controlled. Unlike Blackness though, Whiteness is never questioned or defined. Blackness is ultimately defined as a lack of Whiteness – pathologically inferior, sexually licentious and criminally deviant. Black people are therefore objectified, rendered invisible, and eroticised or demonized. It is within this context that the golliwog in Australia must be critically assessed.

2.2   THE GOLLIWOG

The golliwog[3] has a long history within Anglocentric cultural discourses[4]. It was originally devised as a character for a children's book by Florence Kate Upton[5] in 1895 and was later created as a toy. According to the Oxford English Dictionary (online), the golliwog is defined as 'a name invented for a black-faced grotesquely dressed (male) doll with a shock of fuzzy hair'.[6] As Pilgrim (2000) describes, the golliwog is usually male, with very

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[1] I advance the notion of 'meta-discourses' to encompass Foucault's (1981) ideas about discourses of power and ideology and Higginbotham's (1992) concept of 'metalanguage' to describe a set of overriding hegemonic, largely Anglo/Eurocentric ideologies, structures and practices, which reinforce the status quo – the extent and influence of which configure Black women in Britain firmly as a negative Other. However, I also assert that the notion of meta-discourses should be not be read as so totalising to the extent that it excludes the possibility of movement outside, in between and within these meta-discourses. The term 'meta-discourses' provides a useful and initial first step to describing pervasive nature of ideologies and beliefs, which have consistently marginalised the position of Black women in Britain.
[2] Refer especially to Foucault (1981) pp109-133; pp134-145
[3] Originally, golliwog was spelt as golliwog – now it is referred to by many attempting to avoid the negative connotations as 'golly'
[4] For an excellent overview of the Golliwog - refer to David Pilgrim (2000), 'The Golliwog Caricature' at: http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/golliwog/ Last accessed 20 August 2007
[5] Upton's book was entitled *The Adventures of Two Dutch Dolls*, in 1895. According to Pilgrim, 'The book's main characters were two Dutch dolls, Peg and Sarah Jane, and the Golliwogg. The story begins with Peg and Sara Jane, on the loose in a toy shop, encountering "a horrid sight, the blackest gnome." The little black "gnome" wore bright red trousers, a red bow tie on a high collared white shirt, and a blue swallow-tailed coat. He was a caricature of American black faced minstrels -- in effect, the caricature of a caricature. She named him Golliwogg' Pilgrim D (2000) at: http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/golliwog/ Last accessed 20 August 2007
[6]   Source: http://dictionary.oed.com/cgi/entry/50096634?single=1&query_type=word&queryword=golliwog&first=1&max_to_show=10 The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language (2000),

dark skin, big red lips, white rimmed eyes, wearing a bowtie and trouser suit – and is reminiscent of the Black American minstrel. Effectively then, the golliwog is 'a caricature of a caricature'[7]. The golliwog image became popular in the 1900s throughout British colonial societies via consumer items such as jam jars, sheet music, wallpaper and pottery. Despite various backlashes about the golliwog symbolizing racist symbols from the late 1950s, the persistent popularity of the golliwog remains. Indeed, in some parts of the globe, it has become a collectors' item, fetching as much as $10-15,000 USD each.[8]

It is too simplistic to see it merely as a product of its historical time[9]. Those favorable to the existence and popularity of the golliwog doll, point to its origins as a childhood toy, as if in this way it can be disassociated or excused from its primarily colonial, imperialistic socio-cultural roots. It cannot. The golliwog is symptomatic of how societies such as Australia, (and to a lesser extent - Britain, Canada and America) continue to view those of us defined as Other. There is a lack of understanding about the potential offence of the golliwog and this failure/refusal to critique this popularity is especially symbolic of Australia's refusal to fully engage with notions of Blackness and difference[10].

2.3   THE AUSTRALIAN CONTEXT

Australia's 'race' relations legacy is a long, complex and fraught one (see Forrest and Dunn 2007; Jupp 2002; Vasta and Castles 1996). Whilst the histories and cultures of the UK and Australia share common elements, key differences remain. It has often been remarked that Australia is about 10-15 years behind the UK in terms of attitudes and this can be clearly seen in its complex 'race' relations legacy.

For over 200 years, Australia has systematically failed to engage fully with indigenous peoples[11]. Whether it is events such as the initial invasion, bonded labour, land dispossession and the stolen generations, or the recent Federal government interventions within the Northern Territory, all are part of a long and chequered history of Australia failing to understand, to consult and to empower indigenous Australians.

Australia has also had a difficult relationship with those viewed as visible Others. The legacy of the White Australia policy reflects a damning indictment of exclusion of non-white peoples to Australia. The global climate of fear after the US September 11 and Bali attacks also increased tensions about visible Others, specifically for those of Muslim/Islamic/Arabic origin (Poynting 2004; 2002). Under the Howard federal government, the politicizing of refugees aboard the Tampa in 2004 reflected a country

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defines Golliwog as a 'doll fashioned in a grotesque caricature of a Black male'. Refer to www.bartleby.com/61/66/G0186600.html as cited by Pilgrim D (2000)

[7] Some visual examples of the golliwog can be viewed at this link here - Pilgrim D (2000) at: http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/golliwog/more/ Last accessed 20 August 2007

[8] Pilgrim D (2000) – 'The Steiff Company is the most notable maker of Golliwog dolls. In 1908 Steiff became the first company to mass produce and distribute Golliwog dolls. Today, these early Steiff dolls sell for $10,000 to $15,000 each, making them the most expensive Golliwog collectibles. Some Steiff Golliwogs have been especially offensive, for example, in the 1970s they produced a Golliwog who looked like a wooly haired gorilla. In 1995, on the 100th anniversary of the Golliwog creation, Steiff produced two Golliwog dolls, including the company's first girl Golliwog'. Source: Pilgrim D (2000) at: http://www.ferris.edu/jimcrow/golliwog/ Last accessed 20 August 2007

[9] For example, refer to the web site: www.golliwogs.com/history/ Last accessed 20 August 2007 or Rudd D (2000), Enid Blyton and the Mystery of Children's Literature, Macmillan

[10] I was amazed when I arrived in Australia to find terms used here which were effectively banished from British popular discourses, albeit it at times in different contexts such as the term 'wogs' to refer to those of mediterrean origin. In the UK, the term is an offensive racial slur for Black people.

[11] See Reynolds H (2001) – An Indelible Stain?: The Question of Genocide in Australia's History Viking; A Markus (1994), Australian Race Relations, 1788-1993, Allen & Unwin St. Leonards, NSW

very ill at ease with visible Others. Yet, there have also been periods within Australian history where the country appears to have been open and embracing of migrants and refugees in the name of multiculturalism. These inconsistencies are what Hesse (2000) refers to as 'unsettled multiculturalisms' and is a feature of many settler societies such as Australia.

There is an assumption that modern Australian society is largely egalitarian, but as Kobayashi and Peake (2000) argue, there is a 'normalcy of racism' within Australia. As in the UK, this normalcy represented the shift away from crude biological forms of 'racism' to so called 'new' and 'cultural' forms of 'racism' in the 1980s, which included concepts of 'ethnicity' and 'multiculturalism' (see Anthias and Yuval-Davis 1992; Brah 1997; Gilroy 1987; Hall 2000, Hesse 2000; Parmar 1989). Dunn (2003) aptly describes racism as being quite prevalent in Australian society - its manifestation is everywhere different. Pedersen and Walker (1997) refer to new forms of racism as those which 'defend the privileges of the dominant culture' (p565). The persistent popularity of the golliwog reflects this type of racism – it is upheld as the rights of the sentimental majority. It is the fact that Anglo-Australians have cultural privilege over Others that is a key feature of this paper. This reflects the view that visible Others have to fit into the cultural standards and values of the majority Anglo Australian community.

The question to ask here is 'Why is the golliwog so sentimental for Australian and other Anglocentric discourses?' Isn't it a luxury for those not typecast as visible Other to be sentimental about a character that demeans someone else's existence/sense of worth? The golliwog is after all a children's storybook character, yet what is most interesting is as Pilgrim (2000) points out, that 'the resurgence of interest in the Golliwog is not found primarily among children, but instead is found among adults…' Further, the popularity of the golliwog is not evident amongst visible Others. As a prominent UK Black writer and broadcaster Darcus Howe states, 'When I was a child in Trinidad, my parents associated the golliwog with colonial pomp and banned it from the house. I continue to take the same position…Golliwogs have gone and should stay gone. They appeal to white English sentiment and will do so until the end of time".[12] The image/symbol of the golliwog is no longer appropriate in a multicultural society such as Australia, and yet there remains an insistence to its presence. Calls to bury the golliwog are often dismissed.

Supporters of the golliwog attempt to shout political correctness as a way of sinking the issue[13]. But isn't the real point about being political correct a realization and understanding that language is neither neutral nor fixed? Language and the ways in which we symbolically express ideas, beliefs and actions are highly significant forms of being human. It should not be underestimated. The old adage – 'sticks and stones may break your bones, but words can never hurt me' is a complete fallacy. Words/symbols can and do have the very real potential to hurt, to harm and to destroy. It is not insignificant that the NAACP organized a ritualistic burial of the N-word in July[14]. What is disappointing is that within Anglocentric discourses of Otherness, there is a refusal to see such words/images as powerful symbols of negativity – the question that needs to be asked is why not?

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[12] Refer to Guardian News at: http://www.guardian.co.uk/racism/Story/0,2763,339201,00.html
[13] Similar comments are made about calls to change the name of the 'Nigger Brown' stand in Toowomba and 'Coon Cheese by Stephen Hagan – refer to: http://www.stephenhagan.net/about.php and also to Sydney Morning Herald – 'Remove 'nigger' sign, says UN' http://www.smh.com.au/articles/2003/04/23/1050777290365.html, Last date accessed: 20 August 2007
[14] Refer to: http://www.naacp.org/news/press/2007-07-09-2/index.htm, Last date accessed: 20 August 2007

2.4 THE GOLLIWOG AS SYMBOLIC OF AUSTRALIAN RACE RELATIONS

The historical legacy of Australia is one firmly rooted in racism. As contentious as it may sound, Australia along with many Anglocentric societies remains heavily implicated with racism today.

Throughout this paper, I have maintained that the persistent popularity of the golliwog is symbolic of the current state of race relations in Australia. There is an unwillingness to openly and fully embrace Blackness and visible difference within Australia today, just as in the past. This also means that there is no clear understanding of, or desire to understand, whiteness in Australia. Instead, the meta-discourses of Otherness work to maintain the status quo where visible Others are continually seen as outsiders. As not quite, Australian. Recent attempts to curb immigration and to assert a discourse of Australian values is highly problematic and does not allow for real forms of inclusion[15].

The failure to reconcile its past with indigenous Australians and the continual symbolic and real forms of exclusion of certain visible communities remains a key flaw in Australia's ability to construct an open set of relationships with visible Others. This is not due simply to politics at the governmental level, but to the politics of everyday life. This requires radical interventions on all levels to generate some badly needed debate and action.

3 CONCLUSIONS

Its high time that Australia bury the golliwog, once and for all. It's an important, necessary and symbolic gesture towards getting Australia to acknowledge and understand the significance and pervasiveness of race/racism. In order to do this effectively, the meta-discourses of Otherness which see the golliwog as merely a sentimental toy, needs to be completely dismantled. Only then, will racist cultural images/icons such as the golliwog have nowhere to return to.

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[15] Refer to 'Our Values or Go Home: Costello' by Josh Gordon and Jewel Topsfield, in The Age, February 24, 2006 at: http://www.theage.com.au/news/national/our-values-or-go-home-costello/2006/02/23/1140670207642.html

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