

## **Loved and Despised: Imaging the Golliwog Doll in the Australian Context**

*by Donna Leslie\**

*This article is written within the context of the visual arts. It explores the Golliwog doll and its interpretation as a racist symbol, its origins and the problems it presents today. It includes a special reference to an encounter between a group of Aboriginal Australians in the state of Victoria, Australia, with images of the Golliwog doll on tea towels at a market stall. The experience, which was reported in the Melbourne newspaper, The Age, was responded to in a vigorous online debate, consisting of written commentaries by approximately 114 individuals. Their responses reveal contemporary Australian attitudes to the doll and its relationship to history.*

*For historical accuracy, some outmoded, derogatory, or sensitive terms which may be considered offensive when included in other contexts, are used in the following text or quotations (e.g. 'Golliwog', 'white', 'black', 'Piccaninny', 'Negro', 'Nigger', 'Sambo', 'race', etc.). Some spellings may differ when quoted (e.g. 'Golliwogg', 'Golliwog', 'Golly Wogs').*

On 29 March 2016, a news article by Liam Mannix titled, 'Racist tea towels shock professor at Mornington Peninsula market', appeared in the Melbourne newspaper, *The Age*. Mannix reported that Ian Anderson, a professor at the University of Melbourne, had attended a market stall on the Mornington Peninsula (Victoria) with a group of young Aboriginal friends. While browsing among the market stands, they came across tea towels for sale, emblazoned with screen-printed images of the Golliwog. The tea towels were also branded with the words "Piccaninny" and "Good Golly" (Mannix 2016). Anderson was reported to have said that the group felt sick to their stomachs. It was an unexpected experience, and also "jarring", because it had seemed to Anderson like a kind of "photocopy of an idea from our colonial past" (Mannix 2016).

Commentaries written by approximately 114 members of the public in response to the Mannix article were passionate and polarised, however many respondents were in favour of the Golliwog doll. One respondent who named herself "an angry black girl" (Anon 9. 2016) contributed twelve comments. Quotations from twenty-six respondents were selected for this article because they are considered by the author to be representative of the range of views expressed. Since some of the respondents could not be identified as named individuals because they referred to themselves by nicknames or with their first name only, it was decided that all respondents would be referred to anonymously and given a number for the purposes of this article, and to indicate their unique voice. This article begins however, with the origins of the Golliwog doll and the problem it represents today and in the Australian context.

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## The origins of the Golliwog doll

The Golliwog doll originated from a series of children's books written by Bertha Upton (1849-1912) and illustrated by her daughter Florence Kate Upton (1873-1922), who was the Golliwog's creator and illustrator. Florence Upton was born in New York in 1873. Her parents had emigrated to America three years earlier, but after the death of her father when she was in her mid-teens, the family returned to England, their home country. It was there that Florence was unable to afford the tuition fees required to attend art school, so she decided to illustrate children's books, hoping with her mother's support, to raise enough funds to pursue her dream (Davis 1992: 1-8). In 1895, their first collaborative book, *The Adventures of two Dutch Dolls and a Golliwogg*, (1895), was published, with two "Dutch dolls" named Peg and Sarah Jane, as the main characters alongside a Golliwog doll character which was described by Bertha Upton in the book's verse as "a horrid sight, the blackest gnome" (Upton 1895: unpaginated).

The mother and daughter team had numerous children's books published on the Golliwog's adventures in the years that followed (Upton 1896; Upton 1898; Upton 1899; Upton 1900; Upton 1901; Upton 1902; Upton 1903; Upton 1904; Upton 1905; Upton 1906; Upton 1907; Upton 1909).<sup>1</sup> They created a series of Golliwog books that have been described as involving "whole-hearted, exhilarating participation, a variety of elaborate costumes, catastrophes in which everyone crashes in spectacular ways, and suspenseful rescues" (Olsen 2000: 75). The "Golliwogg" character, described as "a big thinker and go-getter, was also presented as a thoughtful and considerate friend" to the Dutch dolls (Olsen 2000: 75).<sup>2</sup>

Significantly, the books were "the first English picture books with a black protagonist", and they were extremely successful. In the years that followed their first publication, there were "ubiquitous spin-off toys", including "greeting cards, games, dolls, and household items" (Olsen 2000: 73) relating to the Golliwog, although the Uptons did not hold the "licensing rights or any control over how their character was used" (Olsen 2000: 92). The Golliwog doll became extremely popular and of interest around the world.

## The problem of the Golliwog doll

Since Golliwog dolls had originated from children's stories in the late nineteenth century, they embodied, as Marilyn Olson contends, "the spirit of the age" in which they were first made (Olson 2000: 73). The problem of the Golliwog doll however, is that it was a direct caricature of a minstrel and was inspired by the minstrel doll. Historically, minstrel dolls, and other variations of the black doll were often bizarre caricatures rather than naturalistic representations of African Americans depicted as attractive or beautiful. Stereotypical features included red, oversized lips and frizzy hair, which were

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<sup>1</sup> While Florence K. Upton, the original creator of the Golliwog character, invented the name and spelling "Golliwogg" as indicated by her illustrated books, the spelling "Golliwog" is now commonly in use.

<sup>2</sup> Dutch dolls are a simple wooden doll that originated in the Netherlands. They were made with jointed arms and legs and simply constructed with peg joints to allow movement. (Museum Gherdëina 2017)

colonial stereotypes of African slaves. Minstrel dolls had originated in America in the 1820s. Thirty years later blackface performance was a “common entertainment in Britain” (Varga & Zuk 2013: 650). A white performer would apply “blackface” with the use of burnt cork mixed into a paste (Varga & Zuk 2013: 650). He would then paint “a broad band of white or red around his mouth” (Varga & Zuk 2013: 650). He would “put on elongated shoes to represent the supposed ape-like feet of blacks” and dress in “a tailcoat and top hat as mockery of incomplete civility” (Varga & Zuk 2013: 650). Black performers performing as minstrels were also expected to do the same, “imitating white people who imitated black people” (Varga & Zuk 2013: 650).

Florence Upton had not created her Golliwog out of pure imagination, because when she was a child in America, she had owned a “Negro minstrel doll” (Pilgrim 2000). When this history is examined, it is remarkably offensive in one sense and yet seemingly benign in another, because Florence had played with her minstrel doll, and it can be assumed had enjoyed doing so as a child. In David Pilgrim’s online article, ‘The Golliwog Caricature’, 2000, Florence is described however, as a child who had used her minstrel doll as target practice (Pilgrim 2000). She played a game that involved trying to knock her minstrel doll over by throwing rubber balls at it. Florence herself remembered her minstrel doll as having been physically “ugly”, and it can be imagined that it was not unlike the many variations of the minstrel doll that were produced in nineteenth century America (Pilgrim 2000). The “black ragdoll from her childhood” was an American rag doll (Olson 2000: 74). It had a “leather face and rather stiff-looking body” and had been “purchased at a fair” (Olson 2000: 74).

### **Embodied racism and the minstrel doll**

While, it can be imagined that Florence enjoyed her minstrel doll, as children do take pleasure in their toys, her treatment of the doll as a child can be interpreted as symbolic of the mistreatment of African Americans that the child must have learned (Pilgrim 2000). As Donna Varga and Rhoda Zuk state in their article, ‘Golliwogs and Teddy Bears: Embodied Racism in Children’s Popular Culture’, 2013, it would have been “impossible to miss” the extensiveness of racism evident in popular culture at the time (Varga & Zuk 2013: 653).

Upton’s treatment of her minstrel doll during play as a child however, is not unlike the kinds of behaviours reported by Jayna Brown, in her review of Robin Bernstein’s ground-breaking book, *Racial Innocence: Performing American Childhood from Slavery to Civil Rights* (2011). Brown refers to “a plethora of examples of white girls abusing their black dolls in particularly sadistic ways” and the disturbing nature of associated narratives (Bernstein 2011; Brown 2013: 484). Bernstein argues that these were presented in fictional representations of black children in “advertisements, collectibles, children’s books and toys, and especially dolls” (Brown 2013: 482), which were common prior to World War One. As “scriptive” items, they prompted behaviours including violence towards black dolls that had the potential to be carried, at least attitudinally, into adult life (Brown 2013: 482). While soft toys were developed to be held and cuddled, they were also made to “withstand abuse” (Brown 2013: 483).

## Contemporary interests in the Golliwog doll

Throughout the twentieth century however, Golliwog dolls survived changing times and shifting attitudes. In the 1960s and 1970s, the Golliwog was popular in England and Australia, later seemingly disappearing from the public eye, possibly because people had begun to realise that for African Americans and other dark-skinned groups they symbolised the racism present in society and in popular culture. When considered for their negative characteristics they “illuminate Eurocentric ideas about African personhood” (Varga & Zuk 2013: 647).

In recent years however, a resurgence of interest in the Golliwog doll has taken place, evidenced in Australia for example, by the ‘All Things Golliwog’ website, and popular dolls made by Kate Finn, Elka, and Mel and Steff. Sellers of the Golliwog doll enjoy a thriving business (Mannix 2016). The Australian website ‘allthingsgolliwog.com.au’ sells a wide range of merchandise relating to the Golliwog. The owners of the website explain that the “much maligned Golliwog was never meant to be a symbol of political incorrectness or racism” (All Things Golliwog 2017). It is a toy that existed for more than a century, loved by children throughout the world. It represents in the minds of many adults who loved them as children, the innocence of childhood (All Things Golliwog 2017). The image of the Golliwog has featured on “postcards, jam jars, paperweights, brooches, wallets, perfume bottles, wooden puzzles, sheet music, wall paper, pottery, jewellery, greeting cards, clocks, and dolls” (All Things Golliwog 2017).

In recent years, the image of the Golliwog has been reclaimed as a positive symbol not only by some African Americans but by others who do not associate the doll with its problematic history in relation to racism. Thriving businesses that sell the Golliwog doll operate online. Some African Americans today have also become avid collectors (Hall 2006). One of the problems relating to the positive appraisal of the Golliwog doll today however, is the disconnection that has occurred between historical realities and contemporary interests.

## Snapshots of Australian history

Looking back within the Australian context for example, it is easy to find snapshots of Australian history that are troubling in relation to African Americans. In the 1920s for example, attitudes towards African Americans are evident in song, film and performance. In 1925, the Melbourne newspaper the *Argus*, listed “Folk Songs and Nigger Melodies”, “mid-way on a list of popular wireless items” (Sales 1974: 76). In the same year, a popular play by Edward Sheldon titled, “The Nigger”, was performed in Melbourne. It was a “shallow, sentimentalised treatment of miscegenation, evoking sympathy for a hero ruined by the discovery that he possessed a trace of Negro ancestry” (Sales 1974: 75). In 1927, when Al Jolson’s film, “The Jazz Singer”, was received in Melbourne, it “enjoyed an unrivalled 20-week season” (Sales 1974: 75). At this time, deeply entrenched racism in mainstream Australian society towards Aboriginal people was reflected not only through the White Australia Policy, but also, as the policy attested, towards people of colour from other countries.

As Peter Sales states in his article 'White Australia, Black Americans: A Melbourne Incident, 1928', 1974, in the 1920s "Black Americans were infrequent visitors to the Southwest Pacific" (Sales 1974: 76). This was reflected in the small number of certificates provided to African Americans which meant they could be granted exemption from undertaking a "dictation test" which was required at the time to enter Australia as a visitor (Sales 1974: 76). The African Americans who did visit Australia were invariably entertainers in the music and performing industry, or boxers (Sales 1974: 76). This snapshot of what was occurring in the 1920s, provides a glimpse into the relationship Australians had with African Americans and with caricature relating to them in the period just after the Upton's completed their series of Golliwog books.

Moving forward into the new millennium, this relationship does not seem to have developed much beyond what was happening just over eighty years earlier. On 8 October 2009, Thomas Hunter reported in the *Sydney Morning Herald* that the night before when "Hey Hey It's Saturday" was broadcast on the Nine Network to celebrate its second reunion special, the show's host Daryl Somers apologised to his American guest, Harry Connick Jr., who expressed disgust because "Hey Hey" had allowed a blackface skit to be aired on national television. Before "2.640 million" viewers "across the five major city markets" in Australia, five Australian men in blackface presented themselves as the "Jackson Jive", in a reenactment of the very same skit they had presented twenty years earlier on the show (Hunter 2009). The central character, who had dressed as a caricature of Michael Jackson, "had his face painted white" (Hunter 2009). The five men had been medical students when they first appeared on "Hey Hey" in the late 1980s. They were now (in 2009), medical professionals working in radiology, cardiology, psychology and plastic surgery. The online Australian response to their performance was "mixed", with some people supporting Connick Jnr., and others expressing annoyance that he had ruined their enjoyment of the skit (Hunter 2009).

### **Black Australian histories**

In Australia, our own Golliwog-like equivalents relating to Aboriginal Australia represented a bizarre disconnection from the reality of Aboriginal lives. Troubling snapshots of racism in Australia towards Aboriginal Australia are also easy to find in historical cartoons that indicate Australians had become comfortable with popular imagery depicting Aboriginal people in a range of negative and offensive ways historically. Mimmo Cozzolino presents for example, a selection of racist Aboriginal imagery used in early Australian advertising in his book, *Symbols of Australia* (2000). Historical advertising included degrading depictions of Aboriginal people (Cozzolino 2000). David Swain has also explored similar representations of Aboriginal people in his book, *200 in the shade: an historical selection of cartoons about Aborigines* (1988) (Swain 1988). By the 1880s, negative racial stereotypes about Aboriginal people were commonplace and Aboriginal people were considered by some to be nothing more than curiosities or relics of the past on their way to extinction as referenced by Jonathan King in his visual anthology, *The Other Side of the Coin: A Cartoon History of Australia* (1976) (King 1976: 84).

By 1925, only three years after Florence Upton's death, the Australian artist Margaret Preston was publishing her ideas about white Australians appropriating Aboriginal art as their own (Leslie 2015: 2-16). Aboriginal people were at this time subjected to racial categorisations and largely confined to restricted lives in fringe-camps, Aboriginal missions and reserves. Ongoing cultural suppression and destruction in Aboriginal Australia contrasted throughout much of the twentieth century with a growing market of Aboriginalia in mainstream Australian society. Items of interest featured Aboriginal people in stereotypical poses in garden sculptures, or on household items such as tea towels and ashtrays, for use by white Australians. The idea that Aboriginal imagery, including references to Aboriginal people themselves, could feature on ordinary household items, was accompanied by the view that Aboriginal art could be appropriated and created by anyone (Black 1964).

### **The Golliwog as a symbol of racism**

At the very core of the imagery and text that Ian Anderson described as a "disturbing stereotype of Indigenous Australia, of black people", is the image of the Golliwog which appeared on one level to be "naïve and out of place" (Mannix 2016). The cartoon-like Golliwog imagery applied to tea towels, and the visual references to piccaninnies appeared to have a sort of "superficial charm" about them, but they nonetheless symbolised for Anderson a darker history about race (Mannix 2016). They were a reminder also of items of Aboriginalia which were common in the 1950s. They related to a history of grotesque imagery which was a "particularly strong nineteenth-century strain" (Olson 2000: 76). As Varga and Zuk explain, historically

Caricatured imagery provided for simian-like elongated feet, hands and head. Alleged animal-like thickness of skin presumed immunity to pain. Coal-black skin color marked immorality; goggle eyes, irrationality; exaggerated red lips, gluttony; wild frizzy hair, the frighteningly untameable (Varga & Zuk 2013: 650).<sup>3</sup>

### **The Mannix article and how Australians responded**

Ian Anderson, whose family are Palawa Trowerna from the Pyemairrenner people in Tasmania, had simply stated publicly how he felt about the experience of finding Golliwog imagery at a market stall. He indicated that he knew that the imagery was connected to historical imaging which occurred around the world.

On the same day the *Age* article was published, an online article also appeared, provocatively asking the questions: "Are Gollywog dolls racist? Or is there nothing wrong with them?" (Mannix 2016). The online debate that

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<sup>3</sup> In 1882, one highly popular item which caricatured African American people was the "Jolly Nigger Bank", which was produced for decades in America. The bank was a small cast iron hollow sculpture of the head and torso of an African American, caricatured in blackface, sometimes depicted wearing a top hat, with its right hand cupped to receive a coin. When a lever was pressed, the tongue would fall back and the eyes would roll upwards, so that the hand would deliver the coin to the mouth and the coin could be swallowed. (Mechanical Banks 2017)

followed was extremely polarised. Was the doll truly “innocent” or was it a “racist and demeaning symbol of our past”? (Mannix 2016). 108 respondents affirmed the Golliwog as a positive presence in their childhood and lives, while a small number of respondents were against the doll, fighting valiantly to explain its deeper racist significance and meaning.

Twelve out of seventeen negative responses were entered by one single respondent, who named herself anonymously as “an angry black girl” (Anon 9. 2016). She reminded readers that the Golliwog was in fact linked to “blackface and racial stereotypes”. They were not “innocent dolls” at all, she declared, but disgustingly representative of black stereotypes such as “piccaninnies, minstrels and mammy figures” (Anon 9. 2016).<sup>4</sup> She described them as the “absolute image of the African”, which had found a home in Australia too (Anon 9. 2016). The lone respondent to most of the polarised discussion about Anderson’s encounter with the Golliwog images who called herself “an angry black girl” (Anon 9. 2016), went on to declare: “Stop telling us what we can be offended by and what we can’t, absolute truth is, people not of colour will never know the fear that runs through your body when you would confront someone about a race issue” (Anon 9. 2016).

It soon became apparent that the “angry black girl” (Anon 9. 2016) was an Aboriginal woman who wanted to stand for human rights. Her almost lone fight in the spirited online forum seemed at once saddening and inspiring. It was especially meaningful because on one level it also seemed to symbolise the plight of a minority and the struggle for justice.

Positive arguments in favour of the Golliwog were harshly judgmental of the “angry black girl” (Anon 9. 2016). One respondent declared that she had grown up in Tasmania with a Golliwog doll “long before the word ‘racist’ was known”, yet Tasmania is historically notorious for its racial violence and control of Aboriginal people in the colonial era (Anon 1. 2016). Another respondent stated that she was offended:

What offends me is that people get offended on such silly things. They are tea towels for Christ sake not bloody severed heads. That would be shocking. This over correctness is bloody stupid. Golliwog dolls have been loved for probably 100 years or more. I had one and it is a doll, a rag doll. Please, there is a lot more going on in this world that is bloody evil. A tea towel really isn’t in the great scheme of things. Get a life and stop being ridiculous (Anon 2. 2016).

Other respondents agreed, saying that “narrow minded” people against the Golliwog should “wake up” and that they were the “racists” (Anon 3. 2016). One asked, “Does that mean we need to ban rag dolls as well because they might offend white folks?” (Anon 4. 2016).

What was missing in responses such as these, was an inability to see things from the “angry black girl[’s]” (Anon 9. 2016) perspective. The point missed was that a white rag doll does not symbolise a racial stereotype constructed to denigrate another human being or indeed, an entire people.

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<sup>4</sup> To facilitate ease of reading, punctuation has been edited in all quotations taken from the commentaries.

Other respondents argued that political correctness had gone too far, because choosing to play with a black doll was an act of “acceptance” (Anon 5. 2016). One respondent declared:

OH MY GOD harden up. Get rid of Golly Wogs! Well, get rid of gnomes, (small people might get offended), get rid of Barbie (blondes might get offended). Golly Wogs are Golly Wogs that’s all. Maybe professor you need to not read anything into it (Anon 6. 2016).

Another respondent wearily declared: “I agree! When will this stupid debate stop?! The PC Brigade are at it again. Why can’t a toy just be a toy, without reading something more into it?” (Anon 7. 2016). Clearly, those arguing in defence of the Golliwog were stirred into activism and ready to fight. Anderson and others were deemed the “fun police” (Anon 12. 2016). One Aboriginal respondent also wrote in to say how tired she was of political correctness (Anon 15. 2016).

In spite of the range of positive responses in defence of the Golliwog, what became apparent however, was that some people had taken the very thought of owning a Golliwog to heart, as if they were being accused of racism personally. “We had Gollywogs growing up and loved them. Never had a racist thought or anything in our bones. We loved them like you would a teddy bear. Still love them. Get a life!” (Anon 17. 2016). It was not simply a matter of an adult choosing to buy a Golliwog and to keep it as a toy. The issue was taken to the very heart of childhood itself.

The reaction of many to the idea of being racist was strong. Dolls are commonly important to children and the memory of childhood joys are meaningful experiences that people take with them throughout life. Respondents in defence of the Gollywog simply felt that those in opposition to the Golliwog were playing a “racism card” (Anon 23. 2016). If “Gollywog dolls did not originate in Australia”, then how could anyone justify a connection to Aboriginal culture anyway? (Anon 21. 2016). Anderson’s “photocopy of an idea from our colonial past”, was indeed not directly connected with Aboriginal Australia (Mannix 2016).

An interesting aspect to the online debate was the message that some people did not find the caricature of the minstrel a negative representation of African American people. One respondent stated that “it could also be called racist if it was an embroidery of a white doll”, as if implying that such a symbol would carry the same meaning (Anon 24. 2016). The point missed was that African Americans and black people the world over, have been historically subjected to racial abuse.

One respondent declared that Anderson had “lost the grip of his hand” (Anon 25. 2016). Another felt that people were simply “whinging” (Anon 26. 2016). The very idea of racism stirred people to strongly defend their stance. Listening to the experience of racism was another matter altogether. One respondent lightened the situation, declaring:

I also have a family of Golly Wogs [which have] pride of place at the front door. Golly Dad, Golly mum and Golly daughter. The daughter has herself a Golly Wog doll too. Humm, must be about

time to add another to the family. Maybe a Golly son. What does everyone think? (Anon 30. 2016)

This humour did nothing to quench the fiery flames of the debate. The next respondent stated, "We can't do anything for fear of being called a bigot or a racist. What about reverse racism us white people endure?" (Anon 31. 2016).

Another respondent stated that she had a Golliwog as a child which she had loved. She asked, "What does it matter whether a toy is black, white, or any other colour, depiction or caricature?" (Anon 49. 2016). The "angry black girl" (Anon 9. 2016) responded with an explanation that "Golliwogs were created to look like black people" and that they were made to "look like very nasty characters (Anon 9. 2016). The word then got used as a racial slur. That's why these particular dolls are offensive" (Anon 9. 2016).

It seemed as though any criticism of the Golliwog was received as an assault upon childhood itself. Some respondents questioned the world in which the next generation of children would be growing up. One respondent suggested, "Children just see a doll, it's grownups that see something else. Maybe we should see the world as children see it. It would be a better world" (Anon 61. 2016). Another declared, "Okay! This world [has] gone crazy! What is wrong with Golly Wog dolls? Who cares if the doll is black, yellow or white? We are all humans with different colored skin. That's how God created us" (Anon 62. 2016).

Some argued that they had loved childhood stories like Joel Chandler Harris's, 'The Story of the Tar Baby', 1881, and Helen Bannerman's *Little Black Sambo*, (1899), and that their love for these stories was further evidence that the Golliwog was acceptable (Anon 5. 2016; Bannerman 1899; Harris 1881).<sup>5</sup>

As the online commentary in favour of the Golliwog continued to grow, many became all the more outraged. Then another respondent retorted in opposition to the Golliwog:

They are a racist depiction of African Americans. Gollywog is also a racist insult. Just because they are not created today with the same racist undertones does not mean they do not offend. And we cannot judge anyone by what offends them. I find the Gollywog a racist depiction of stereotypes, used to demoralise people of colour. I would not judge anyone for what they might find offensive. Anyone has the right to be offended by anything that

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<sup>5</sup> 'The Story of the Tar Baby' is one of a series of stories about a doll made of tar and turpentine which has been interpreted as symbolising black people. The Tar Baby was used by the wicked Br'er Fox to trap Br'er Rabbit. When Br'er Rabbit became entangled in the Tar Baby, the more he physically attacked it, the more he was stuck fast by sticky tar. The only way Br'er Rabbit was able to free himself of his sticky adversary was by tricking Br'er Fox by pleading with him not to throw him into a briar patch (or thorny shrub). The cruel Br'er Fox did just what the rabbit had pleaded with him not to do, and Br'er Rabbit was then able to escape (Harris 1881); *Little Black Sambo* is the story of a small black child who was given smart new clothes by his parents. He soon encountered tigers in the jungle who threatened to eat him. He persuaded each tiger not to do this if he gave each of them an item of his new clothing, until he was wearing only his underpants. When the tigers began to fight over the clothes they had acquired, they madly chased each other until they dissolved into ghee that was collected by Little black Sambo's mother to make pancakes for the family (Jeyathurai 2012).

may make them feel uncomfortable, demoralised or upset by. Think of it through another person's eyes. When people degrade someone for their colour or cultural background, they may not be mentioning it to me or about me, but I see it as a stab at all people that are of different colour, race, religion or culture (Anon 79. 2016).

Another respondent in favour of the Golliwog referred to those who found the Golliwog inappropriate, as a lack of maturity, stating: "No one with a MATURE mind relates these innocent cute characters to past history any more, especially children. Get over it" (Anon 89. 2016). Those in opposition to the Golliwog were also considered "do Gooders" apparently out to destroy "general society" (Anon 90. 2016). "People have too much time on their hands these days and 'do Gooders' stir up trouble when the general society just want a peaceful and healthy life" (Anon 90. 2016). Again, another respondent did not understand the historical relationship between white and black, stating: "Make them in white felt, see if we get offended. Grow Up. Nothing to do with Australians" (Anon 91. 2016). One of the overriding responses was the view that there are far more important things in the world to be complaining about than the Golliwog. The decision to embrace the Golliwog was also considered a life choice. Someone asked, "What about other people of various colour having white dolls?" (Anon 95. 2016). Another respondent stated:

Golliwogs were an enjoyable part of my childhood with pleasant memories of mixing with children in play who came from many different nationalities, and dare I say, colour. They certainly didn't put me on the road to racism and bigotry but helped give me a balanced view of my world as I grew into adulthood (Anon 103. 2016).

Another respondent said: "I love the Golliwogs. They are so cute. I do not see them as dark-skinned people. Should we also ban everything black? No black bears, no black dogs, no black sheep, etc. etc." (Anon 105. 2016). And, yet another respondent declared: "If these are racist, then so are Ken and Barbie, any doll hugged by a child, any piece of human form sculpture. The statue of David. Greek antiquities. The Statue of Liberty" (Anon 108. 2016).

### **Problems in the Golliwog debate**

When this unfolding story is examined carefully, it becomes evident that people were angry because they felt that their child selves had been accused of racism. They were ready to fight for the innocent children they once were. They were furious at the thought that they could be drawn into an interpretation that labelled them racist. They felt that they were not to blame for the historical reality of blackface, the minstrels or the Golliwog. As children they had been unknowingly and symbolically connected through the Golliwog to an historical narrative relating to the minstrels and African slavery. In the nineteenth century, the growing popularity of Social Darwinism had of course placed the so-called dark races on the lower rungs of the evolutionary ladder, and this also contrasted with ideas of moral innocence which were believed at

the time to be an inherent part of “white” childhood (Varga & Zuk 2013: 651). The angry adults who were fighting to defend their own innocence seem reminiscent of Florence Upton herself, and her innocent play with her minstrel doll when she was a child. The Golliwog, a rag doll inspired by the fond memories of a minstrel doll Upton had played with as a child, was a “horrid sight, the blackest gnome”, yet she had also become fondly attached to it (Upton 1895: unpaginated). Her children’s books had given the Golliwog a particular status.

If books are used to help “introduce children to the concept of childhood and its norms”, then such texts had been related to and remembered as acceptable (Forster 1989: 59). In her article, ‘Nature’s outcast child: black people in children’s books’, 1989, Imogen Forster explains that racist children’s literature was part of a “legacy, in part, of a vast pro-slavery and colonialist literature which, because it is written for children, is privileged against criticism” that “thus guaranteed survival in the imagination of the dominant class”, even though “the causes it served were legally and historically reversed” (Forster 1989: 74). Such stories “contributed insidiously to contemporary attitudes towards black citizens” and to “the whole non-European world” (Forster 1989: 74).

As Brooke Collins-Gearing contends in the Australian context, historical representations of Aboriginality in Australian children’s literature were “understood to be purposive” (Collins-Gearing 2006: 61). This needs to be analysed today not only in relation to ethnocentric themes or an author’s racism, but in regards to the “ideas they signify and what thematic or didactic purposes of the text they serve” (Collins-Gearing 2006: 61). The evaluation of stereotypes opens up new ground to better understand a “dominant society” and the ways it can “articulate its ideologies” and justify harmful past policies (Collins-Gearing 2006: 61).

What was missing in the responses of those in fierce defence of the Golliwog doll, was an expression of empathy for those who found the toy offensive. The commentaries did not seem to indicate a willingness to truly listen to histories relating to the Golliwog, the minstrel doll, or blackface. The “angry black girl” (Anon 9. 2016), who was virtually alone in opposition to the vast majority of commentators in the online debate eventually stopped posting. She had informed people of the historical links between the Golliwog, “blackface” (Anon 9. 2016) and the minstrels, but they did not appear to be listening.

It had been the “really disturbing stereotype” of “black people” generally that Ian Anderson had responded to (Mannix 2016). The image of the Golliwog on the humble tea towel had reminded him of Australia’s racist past. Anderson’s reaction to the Golliwog imagery was not isolated, however. Change in favour of banning the Golliwog had already arisen in recent years in Australia and internationally.

### **Change in favour of banning the Golliwog in Australia**

On 26 July 2016, the Beechworth Sweet Co., in Beechworth Victoria, a business known for its iconic confectionary removed its signage because it had featured images of the Golliwog. The former owner of the shop was reported to have been “devastated” because the “advertising standards board

pulled her add because it featured golliwogs” (Carmody 2016; 3AW 693 News). She explained that her signage was “meant to remind people of their childhoods and wasn’t meant to offend” (Carmody 2016; 3AW 693 News). The story is reminiscent of the international decision made in 2001 by Robertson’s to remove images of the Golliwog from their jam and marmalade labels. While Robertson’s intention was not meant to offend, after 91 years of using the Golliwog symbol on their labels, it was decided it was time to stop (BBC News).

In Australia, there have been other cases in the food industry, too. On 27 October 2009, Joshua Hoey reported in the *Sydney Morning Herald* that Coles had made the decision to remove the name of one of its products, a Coles brand “of chocolate and vanilla biscuits, called Creole Creams” (Hoey 2009a). The “word Creole” was “used to describe a person of mixed European and African ancestry” (Hoey 2009a). It was “racially-loaded” and connected to histories of oppression (Hoey 2009a). The biscuits had been named after the “Creole cuisine style” and they were “not intended as a racial reference” (Hoey 2009a). This was reminiscent of the decision by Australia’s iconic biscuit company, Arnott’s, to rename its “Golliwog” biscuits “Scalliwags” before the company decided to discontinue the biscuits completely in the 1990s (Hoey 2009b). The Golliwog biscuit was first sold in the 1960s to reflect the popularity of the Golliwog doll at that time (Museum Victoria 2017; Arnott’s 2017).

In 2009, in celebration of the 60<sup>th</sup> birthday of “Noddy”, a central character in the books of Enid Blyton, it was decided by Sophie Smallwood, Blyton’s granddaughter, that Golliwogs would no longer feature in Noddy’s world depicted in new publications. “The original Noddy stories featured golliwogs who lived in Golly Town, including Mr Golly, one of Noddy’s best friends who ran Toyland’s garage and looked after Noddy’s car” (Nikkhah 2009). Blyton had written 24 Noddy books between 1942 and 1963, and after her first Noddy book was published in 1949 “more than 200 million copies” had been sold and “translated into 27 different languages” around the world (Nikkhah 2009).

On 9 December 2010, the *Herald Sun* reported that a Melbourne doll shop had removed a Golliwog from its display “to avoid offending the Oprah Winfrey roadshow” (Herald Sun 2010). The “store removed the ‘Mamee’ washer woman dolls after a visit by Oprah’s production company” (Herald Sun 2010).

On 20 May 2012, in the article, ‘Golly: Indigenous leaders warn about racist dolls impact on race relations’, Kathleen Donaghey reported in *The Sunday Mail* that while Gollywogs were “making a comeback”, the “dolls re-emergence had “shocked Queensland’s indigenous community who warn[ed] their acceptance would be a step back in race relations” (Donaghey 2012). Bob Weatherall, Aboriginal elder and chairman of the Centre for Indigenous Cultural Policy advised that the “dolls were offensive and should be banned” because they do not “bring unity within a community” or “equity” (Donaghey 2012).

On 20 December 2015, in an article titled, ‘Brown wooden figurines with fuzzy hair being sold at airport shop as ‘lucky Aboriginal dolls’ slammed as racist’, Rachel Eddie writing for the *Daily Mail Australia*, reported that “Australian Aboriginal Lucky Doll[s]” had been removed from a store at the

Brisbane International Airport after a complaint that they were “racist” (Eddie 2015). This was responded to as an appropriation made to profit from stereotypes. One respondent complained that the “key-chain as a ‘Lucky Doll’ was the source of people’s anger, given the conditions in Indigenous Communities regarding health, life expectancy and high imprisonment rates” (Eddie 2015). The managing director of Australian Way, the business who had sold the doll, was reported to have explained to the *Sydney Morning Herald* that the “dolls ended up in our business by what [he] believe[d] was an error of judgement made by a stockist” (Eddie 2015). He confirmed that “the dolls were removed from all stores” (Eddie 2015).

On 5 February 2016, Katie Burgess, in an article titled, ‘Golliwogs removed from sale at Canberra hospital after online condemnation’, reported that Canberra Hospital had “removed Golliwog dolls from its kiosk, after its auxiliary came under fire for selling them on hospital grounds” (Burgess 2016). A non-Indigenous woman working in health promotion had commented that the presence of Golliwog dolls in the hospital “undermines all of the fantastic work Aboriginal health workers do every day and increases the barriers Aboriginal people face in accessing mainstream health care” (Burgess 2016).

On 9 September 2016, in an article by Petra Starke titled ‘Golliwogs have no place in society - or at the Royal Adelaide Show’, in *The Advertiser*, Starke reported that she had encountered the Golliwog at Adelaide’s Royal Show and was “utterly shocked to discover” it “proudly on display” (Starke 2016). It should have been, she wrote, “consigned to the rubbish bin of history where it belongs” (Starke 2016). “How appallingly racist”, Starke declared. “How offensive and upsetting this display must be for indigenous visitors, for our many African-Australian residents” (Starke 2016).

In December 2016, in an article published in the *Byron Shire News* titled, “‘Golliwog’ collector slams decision to pull doll”, it was reported that a Terry White Chemist had removed a display at Clifford Gardens, Toowoomba, because it featured Golliwogs for sale with a sign above the dolls which said, “Experience a white Christmas” (Byron Shire News 2016). The managing partner of the Terry White Chemist where this had occurred, apologised unreservedly for selling the doll and removed it from sale. A reader poll online which was attached to the article asked the question, “Do you find golly dolls offensive?” 92% of respondents said “no” and 7% said “yes” (Byron Shire News 2016). While the poll (like the online response to Anderson’s comments) had only reflected the views of those who chose to contribute, the fervour with which people responded indicated a trend quite unlike that seen today in countries like America and England (Byron Shire News 2016).

In fact, criticism relating to the Golliwog was building in the 1960s internationally. This coincided with the American civil rights movement and growing racial dynamics in England. The Golliwog doll had become a “symbol of racial insensitivity”, related to oppression and slavery (SBS News).

The question of whether the Golliwog doll is harmless or symbolic of racism histories, remains controversial. Australia Post has removed the sale of the Golliwog doll from its shops. Australia Post emphasises its commitment to “providing a culture that fosters and encourages diversity and inclusion” (Verass 2016), not discrimination. The toy reflects “racist values” in the nineteenth century (Verass 2016).

## Deeper implications

In their co-authored journal article, 'Play Things: Children's Racialised Mechanical Banks and Toys, 1880-1930', 2012, Christopher P. Barton and Kyle Somerville, point out that toys were "not simply objects for play", but also "a medium of communication between children and adult" (Barton & Somerville 2012: 63). Toys are a vehicle through which adults teach children about social relationships. Historically, black toys depicting ugly characterisations and caricatures perpetuated ideologies of racism. Toy manufacturers the world over have historically created stereotypes of certain cultural groups which encourage negative attitudes and emotions, including ideas of white racial superiority. In their article, Barton and Somerville, traced such toys as "objects used by adults to expose children into a class based, racist culture" (Barton & Somerville 2012: 48). The toys were not simply about conveying fun and play to children, but about societal beliefs and behavioural systems. They were a reflection of the society in which they lived, and they needed to be examined against that background (Barton & Somerville 2012: 63-64, 53, 48-49).

In her article, 'The Doll Exhibit: A Psycho-Cultural Analysis of Black Female Role Stereotypes', 1987, Doris Wilkinson, contends that the racial stigmatisation symbolised in dolls of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, "reinforced racial awareness and self-other concept development among children" (Wilkinson 1987: 25). They were created mainly for the children of the wealthy and they did not offer African American role models that were positive (Wilkinson 1987: 25). Dolls reflected and translated the "values and customs of a society" (Wilkinson 1987: 19). They also reflected the "collective psychology" and had "implications for behaviour" and future relationships in society (Wilkinson 1987: 19). Golliwogs, which belong to the "grotesque", have characteristics that some psychologists have referred to as the "unconscious source of many childish nightmares" (Wilkinson 1987: 21). Ironically, they were introduced to children through books which present societal norms. In the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these also referred to "slavery, colonial expansion and the consolidation of imperial rule" (Forster 1989: 59-60).

On 28 April 2016, Crystal Coelho, in the news article 'Golliwogs: how are they still a thing?', summed things up this way:

Why is it so hard for white people to grasp that during their happy racism-free childhoods, Indigenous Australians and people of colour endured oppression every day? White Australians accept and normalise racism all the time, because they like to think that it is no longer an issue. White Australians believe that 'nostalgic throwbacks' to the good old racist days are acceptable because they kid themselves that we have moved beyond such racism and that we live in a post-racial society where Golliwogs should be viewed as a product of their times, rather than a racist symbol that continues to enforce racial stereotypes and uphold racism. The recurring defence of these dolls seems to be that they are simply dolls with dark skin. The problem, however, is that dolls with dark

skin and Golliwog dolls are not interchangeable, and it should be painfully obvious why - Golliwogs are grotesque stereotypes of Black people (Coelho 2016).

On 3 February 2018, in her news article “‘Ashamed to be Australian’: Tourist’s outrage sparks Golliwog doll debate’, Anna Harley, reported the response of an Australian tourist, Soyla Echeverria, at finding “deeply offensive racist symbols” in a souvenir store while she was shopping in far north Queensland (Hartley 2018). “I was extremely surprised”, Echeverria declared, “I felt very ashamed to be Australian, to come here as a white person and see that, I mean it’s 2018” (Hartley 2018). Despite the shock and need to speak out about the historical racism associated with the Golliwog doll, and the efforts by some to communicate the hurt Golliwog imagery causes, it remains well-liked.

### **Ongoing popularity of the Golliwog doll**

On 23 December 2015, Daniel Peters reported in the *Daily Mail Australia* that Kate Finn, the makers of high quality dolls in Australia had reported “a ‘revival’ in Golliwog sales” (Peters 2015). Golliwog dolls, Peters stated, were “flying off the shelves of Australian toy shops and online stores” (Peters 2015). While the doll was described by Indigenous activists as an “insensitive caricature of people of colour”, sales had recorded a “‘massive’ increase in Golliedoll sales”, with buyers placing orders not only from Australia, but from “all corners of the globe” (Peters 2015).

### **Closing thoughts**

With the hindsight of history, Australians are challenged to question their own views in relation to matters of race and the ways in which material culture can symbolise and perpetuate racist histories. Loved or despised, the symbol of the Golliwog doll has an historical reality relating to racism that cannot be denied.

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