

Resistance, advocacy and education: Collecting and exhibiting 'race'

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Abstract

How do museums move beyond celebrating 'multiculturalism'? How do we utilise the questionable, sometimes painful and downright offensive material hidden in our collection stores to challenge and create change in the minds of our audiences?

A new exhibition to open at the Immigration Museum in 2011 will focus on contemporary society, the visitor and visitor attitudes and will utilise racist and anti-racist material culture in order to confront visitors with the realities of past and present racism and its effects on personal identities in Australia. Its aim is to engage the visitor in resisting racism and discrimination and become advocates for diversity.

Article

Reach into your purse or wallet, and what do you see?

An assortment of Australian coins – a five cent echidna, a ten cent lyrebird, a twenty cent platypus, a fifty cent emu and kangaroo, a dollar kangaroo and a two dollar naked Aboriginal man. His image is that of a stereotypical elder 'native' man still categorised within Australia's fauna.

According to Chris Tilley (2006, p. 4), objects are both shaped by people and in turn shape people. If we follow the anthropological concepts of object agency, embodiment, experience, reflexivity, practice and narrative (Edwards, Gosden & Phillips, 2006, p.9) each one of us who uses these coins, is tacitly agreeing with, continuing and reinforcing this stereotype and categorisation of Aboriginals as part of Australian fauna. This is called silent racism. We are taught formally that racism and prejudice is wrong. However, we also learn informally, copying the behaviour and attitudes of others without being aware of it. The objects we touch, the images we see, the sounds we hear, our teachers, parents, peers and the media all

inform our negative and positive thoughts, emotions, and attitudes almost without us realising it (Trepagnier, 2006, p.23). This is how well meaning people who identify as non-racist can perpetuate prejudicial and racist ideas, stereotypes and practices. This is confronting and difficult to accept, often resulting in denial or excuses of 'colour blindness'.

Silent racism manifests itself in two ways, through stereotypes that set up concepts of the other and highlight 'coloured' people as different to white people and through paternalistic assumptions that place white people in a position of superiority to 'others' (Trepagnier, 2006, p.24). Our Australian currency is an example of stereotyping and conceptualising the 'other'. Even in 2010, thirty three years after the 1967 referendum which decided that Aboriginal people would be counted as part of Australia's human population, Aboriginal people are still portrayed as the 'other', primitive, 'natural' and not quite human on objects we all use and are informed by in our everyday lives.

Museum collections hold numerous racist objects, mostly in the form of stereotypical imagery but also some objects that relate to paternalistic assumptions. Some are obvious and others not so. To use them in exhibitions is to either perpetuate those assumptions and stereotypes or to unpack them. A number of exhibitions have attempted this in the past, with varying degrees of success, such as Fred Wilson's 'Mining the Museum' at Baltimore's Maryland Historical Society in 1993 and Jean Canizzo's 'Into the Heart of Africa' at Royal Ontario Museum in 1990.

A new exhibition to open at Melbourne's Immigration Museum in March 2011 will focus on personal identity in contemporary Australia and encourage the visitor to focus inwardly on their own identity by posing introspective questions alongside the objects and stories explored in the exhibition. The exhibition is divided into three themes which explore how we make assumptions based on visible forms of identity, how we identify through forms of belonging through creative and collective connections and forms of not belonging through individual and collective judgements of difference,

such as prejudice and stereotyping. This last section will be the most challenging, confronting and the last theme to be encountered by the visitor. It involves the visitor being immersed in a subtly racist scenario, then being led through the history of prejudice and racism in both Australian and international contexts. The influences of our early childhood experiences and popular culture will also be portrayed. Racist, stereotypical and potentially prejudicial objects will be displayed in order for the visitor to unpack the associations, meanings and histories behind commonly and subconsciously held prejudices. The exhibition represents a range of cultural prejudices and stereotypes in past and present Australian society. However for this paper, examples will focus primarily on Aboriginal and 'Black' or African American stereotypes and appropriation of these cultures.

Assessing existing and acquiring new collections for this kind of display requires us as curators and museum workers to be aware of and admit to our own prejudices. Prejudice is only a barrier to understanding objects and other people if they remain 'imperceptible habits of thought' according to Vivian Golding. (Golding, 2009, p. 147). Everyone has prejudices based on the beliefs, traditions and environment into which we were born. The questions are not, 'Are these objects prejudicial or racist?' or even 'Are we racist?' but rather 'How are these objects prejudicial or racist?' and 'How are we prejudiced and racist?'. Once we can face our own prejudices we can become aware of how 'race' informs our ideas, words and actions in our everyday lives. So the question for museums is how do we identify and interpret these objects to create prejudicial and 'racial awareness' in our audiences?

According to Barbara Trepagnier (2006, p.85), race awareness encompasses understanding three facets of racism. Firstly race awareness requires knowledge of the racism that has occurred throughout history. Secondly it requires recognition of whites peoples' advantage over non-whites in today's society, this is called 'white privilege'; and thirdly it requires insight into our own personal silent racism. To use this framework in an Australian context we also need to acknowledge the complexity of cultural and

religious prejudice and stereotyping that occurs alongside racism in this country.

Following Trepagnier's model of learning race awareness, the exhibition will display a succinct timeline of race theory and racism in our scientific, political and social lives both in an international and national context from the beginnings of the Atlantic slave trade to the present day. Toni Morrison noted: "Slavery broke the world in half, it broke it in every way. It broke Europe. . . . They had to dehumanise, not just the slaves but themselves. They had to reconstruct everything in order to make that system appear true. It made everything in World War II possible. It made World War I necessary." (Morrison, 1994:178)

The exhibition timeline will show that the Trans-Atlantic slave trade, along with scientific theories such as eugenics and social Darwinism, helped to make possible immigration restriction and massacres of Indigenous populations in settler nations such as the USA, Australia and New Zealand, Apartheid in South Africa, and the systematic removal of Aboriginal children in Australia. Embedded within the timeline are objects and images which will draw connections between Australian and international policies and events across time. It will also demonstrate how these events, movements and thoughts echo across time to today showing that Australia has not escaped its racist past.

A shift towards viewing human intelligence as being derived from actions of the human body and its interaction with the material world in recent years (Gosden, 2006, p.427) has implications about the way we see our interactions with racist objects and the way we learn how to use these objects in our daily lives. According to Michael Tomasello (2006, p.62), "joint attention studies" show the complex interaction between people and things. Adults act as models and a social reference point for infants aged between nine and twelve months who begin to follow the adult's gaze and interaction with objects, observing and copying the way adults act on objects. Our relationships with material things are translated into social relations, the way we attach values to

things help create the values we attach to people and vice versa.

While the timeline shows the connections between the historical, political and personal spheres of prejudice, a mass display of objects will communicate the way we relate to each other and things popular culture to visitors. A multimedia screen with advertising images and TV commercials across time will complement the objects. This correlates to Trepagnier's three facets of learning race awareness – that of historical awareness, an awareness of white privilege as it operates today and an awareness of our own 'silent racism' and prejudices when we use and are entertained by these objects.

The popular culture showcase will be divided into three sections with the aim to surprise, intrigue and challenge the viewer into thinking about what makes these objects racist, the relationships they have with each other and with the viewer.

For instance, the visitor might remember a parent or grandparent using "Nigger Boy" steel wool pads or perhaps "Piccaninny floor polish" and be encouraged to think about the reasons why such imagery was used to market such products and the effect that had on their own stereotypes about dark skinned people. Leading, we hope to understanding why dirt is associated with dark skin and reflecting on why cleaning staff of our institutions, schools and offices continue to be dominated by migrants, especially those with darker skin tones.

An understanding of the historical context of stereotypical images is also useful to explain the importing of stereotypes into Australia and their continuing offensiveness to both indigenous Australians and ethnically diverse minorities in other countries.

The presence of Nigger Boy steel wool soap pads, the Piccaninny floor polish, 'Abo' Brand mulga wood cribbage scoring board from the 1930s, the Coles Creole Creams biscuit packet and the 10 Little Nigger Boy tambourine all point to the connections between stereotypes of African Americans and Australian Aboriginal people. Insults such as 'Nigger' and 'Abo' were once

accepted to market particular products in Australia and the word 'Nigger' was removed in 2009 from a Queensland stadium after much protest, publicity and legal action by an Aboriginal man, Stephen Hagan ('Nigger Brown', 2009). This year Tourism Northern Territory was also exposed as having paid advertisements connected to the Google search term 'Abo' (Grace, 2010). Such recent examples of the use of these terms will also be noted in the labels for these objects to give them a contemporary perspective.

In Australia in the 1950s we could snack on Nigger Boy Licorice (Barnes 2008b) while in 2010 we can snack on Allen's *Chicos*. These sweets currently available in Australian supermarkets builds on the picaninny stereotype imported from the USA. These chocolate flavoured black baby shaped sweets embody the way we continue to relate to the 'other' dark skinned person and shows how highly 'whiteness' is valued today.

The 'Piccaninny' floor polish and Griffith biscuit tin showing naked Aboriginal children from the 1940s provide the Australian historical context for the contemporary sweets. If we build the historical and international lineage of this racist image we can see how the production and consumption of these sweets continues the dehumanisation of dark skinned people, especially children, through the picaninny stereotype (Pilgrim, 2000). In the USA, picaninnies were dirty, badly dressed or naked and were objects of mirth and contempt. Likewise during the 19th and early 20th centuries Aboriginal children were also called picaninnies and were portrayed as dirty, naked or barely clothed and close to nature. The Griffith biscuit tin portrays Aboriginal children innocently naked and as a part of the natural environment, subtly categorising Aboriginal children as part of Australia's fauna. The ambiguity of the image on the 'Piccaninny' floor polish conflates African American and Aboriginal identities. These two items and an image of the Nigger Boy Licorice advertisement provide a context for where we inherited the image of the picaninny from and why it was and is still acceptable to sell, buy and consume sweets in the form of black babies.

Where are the white baby sweets? What sorts of values do we teach each other about dark skinned children by selling, buying and consuming Allens *Chicos*? These are the questions we hope our audiences will consider when they see this object with its contextual objects.

The way that stereotypes have shifted across time will also be illustrated, especially in the way coffee and chicory essence is marketed in Australia. Chicory essence became popular as a coffee substitute during the Great Depression of the 1930s. The plant is grown around the Mediterranean and became associated with the British occupation of India. Scotland had and continues to produce Camp Coffee with imagery based on colonial India, while in Australia in the 1940s and 50s, there was Turban brand coffee and chicory essence, drawing on the stereotypical image of a turbaned Sikh and exotic palaces and palm trees. During this period, Bushells also marketed a coffee and chicory essence but used the image of a man wearing a Turkish fez in a 1950 advertisement from the supplement to *The Argus*. It is this image which remains on Bushells coffee and chicory essence bottles available in the supermarket today.

Juxtaposing the historical with the contemporary will also show the conversations which occur across time and space between objects and between human generations. The popularity of golliwogs and their recent resurgence will be referenced with a homemade golliwog dating to the 1950s and a golliwog acquired from an Australian maker in 2010. The contemporary golliwog is an important aspect of understanding racism as it demonstrates white privilege in that 'white' people are able to be nostalgic about items which hurt non-whites. This is a form of 'silent racism'.

Another group of objects that demonstrates white privilege are items that imitate and appropriate culturally specific patterns and motifs. An example is 'Abo' art (Healy, 2008, pp.79-99), which includes both tourist souvenirs, such as a Willow Brand barbeque from 1970, an oven mitt and boomerang from 2010 and Aboriginal inspired fine art, such as a Guy Boyd Studio vase from 1956-57. The appropriation, particularly of dot

painting as well as the representation of Aboriginal men holding spears is a development of the concept of 'primitive art'. These kinds of motifs have not only been stolen from Aboriginal artists but also keep emphasising Aboriginal art as 'primitive' which represents Aboriginal cultures as timeless, unchanging, traditional, collective, irrational, ritualised and 'pure' (Meyers, 2006, p.268). These designs on artefacts that are removed from any original context represent a safe version of Aboriginal culture made for a non-Aboriginal audience who choose to be ignorant of actual Aboriginal people. The way these motifs have been placed on mass produced, touristy kitsch items also speaks to the way our society devalues Aboriginal art and culture. The commercial use of Aboriginal cultural property without financial compensation is offensive. However, Aboriginal inspired fine art of the 1950s and 60s contributed to the foundations for the acceptance and celebration of Aboriginal art from the 1980s (Healy, 2008, pp. 84-89). Cultural appropriation then, is a way that 'white privilege' continues to work in our current society in very complex ways.

The complexities of cultural appropriation will also be illuminated by the 'Wogboy' and 'Woggirl' novelty registration plates. At first glance, the use of the word 'wog' is an insult for people of a Mediterranean background. It is a continuation and reinforcement of 'white privilege' in the not so recent past. However, due to the success of shows like Nick Giannopoulos' *Wog Boy* and *Wogs Out Of Work*, the term has been reclaimed and is often used as a badge of pride by people of a Mediterranean background.

The exhibition sections about racial theories and popular culture will provide the tangible evidence of historical and contemporary cultural prejudice and racism, contextualise 'white privilege' in the past and present and highlight examples of 'silent racism' in the cultural representations and appropriations we see in our everyday lives. Through gentle questioning, humour and the sometimes surprising juxtaposition of objects and images visitors will be asked to reflect on the embedded racism in the material and visual cultures that surround us. It is hoped that these objects and experiences will ready visitors for their

own prejudicial and 'racial' awareness and allow for honest self-reflection. Visitors will reflect on their own prejudices and the prejudices they inherited from their parents, peers, and their environment as part of their journey to understanding racism and difference. They will also be asked to reflect on their own privilege and 'silent racism' in order to enter into respectful dialogues with each other and be ready to transform those prejudices and understand a little more of their own identity.

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