

# Legacies of transatlantic slavery: racism in Manchester



Money box,  
Gallery Oldham



Punch and Judy puppet,  
Gallery Oldham



Zulu with a Black Eye,  
Gallery Oldham



Simply Read,  
Manchester Art Gallery



Robertson's golliwogs, 1960s  
© Gallery Oldham

## Robertson's golliwogs, 1960s Gallery Oldham

The golliwog was a popular childhood toy across Europe and the USA. It originated in a children's story book, *The Adventures of Two Dutch Dolls*, written by American author Florence Kate Upton in 1895.

In the story, two dolls are let loose in a toy shop where they meet Golliwog, 'the blackest gnome', dressed in red trousers, red bow tie and blue coat. He looked **crude**, with a black face, unruly hair, thick lips and wide eyes. Golliwog was, in fact, a **caricature** of the American minstrels – white men who blacked up to perform songs in a manner that mimicked enslaved Africans.

The golliwog quickly became a common character in children's books, but changed from the original ugly but lovable creature of Upton's stories into a **stereotyped** villain, mean-spirited and devious.

The golliwog went on to appear on pencils, knitting patterns, playing cards, toys and ornaments.

The golliwog is probably best remembered in Britain as the brand logo for Robertson's jams. It first appeared on product labels and advertising material in 1910 and was immediately hugely popular. After much criticism and campaigns to expose the racist history of the image, Robertson's finally dropped the golliwog from its packaging in 2001.

### 'Pass It On' by Lemn Sissay

How is it that we still smile when the pressure comes?  
How is it we stand firm when they think we should run?  
How is it that we retain our integrity?  
How is it through this maze that we keep the clarity?  
How is it that through pain we retain compassion?  
How is it that we spread but stay one nation?  
How is it that we work in the face of abuse?  
How is it that the pressure's on yet we seem loose?  
This is the story about the rising truth, when you feel closed in simply raise the roof,  
the Africans were the first civilisation born by the Nile was the first generation.  
Malcolm X had a dream we have a dream too,  
and the only way to get it is to pass it on through,  
from the day we leave to the day we arrive, we were born to survive born to stay alive,  
by all means necessary I'm an accessory, to provide the positive vibe is a necessity,  
to clasp our past to go to war with our fears, to claim and attain in our future years.  
Sometimes life can be cold and complicated more time the problem is overrated.  
Nina Simone called it the Blacklash Blues,  
even though they say it's history we all know that it's news.  
The oppressor hopes and prays for you to cry,  
to close your hearts and your minds to lay down and die,  
to be another numb number to treat and delete,  
to fall into the spiral rhythm of defeat.  
Malcolm X had a dream we have a dream too  
and the only way to get it is to pass it on through,  
no message has been stronger, no sea carried more weight,  
no army marched for longer, no wind swept off this rate.  
So pride is in my skin is in the vision I have seen.  
The pain I withstand for I have a dream.  
Know who you are, know the ground on which you stand.  
Never build your house on a bed of sand.

Lemn Sissay, 'Pass it on' Rebel without  
Applause, Bloodaxe Books Ltd 1992

### 'Pass it on' by Lemn Sissay

Lemn's family comes from Ethiopia but Lemn was put up for **adoption** when his mother moved to England. He was brought up by a white family living in a Lancashire cotton town. When he was 18 years old, Lemn moved to the city of Manchester.

In 2006, Sissay wrote an article, 'Growing up in an alien environment' about his life in Britain:

'My mother came to England in 1967... Ethiopia was a prosperous place... a comfortable time for Ethiopians. But as she found out, it was not a comfortable time for race relations in the UK. My mother, finding herself in difficulties, sought to have me fostered for a short time. However, my care worker told my foster family that it was a proper adoption. I was with them for 11 years. Although my adopted father and mother were white I believed

they were my father and mother. I had seen black people in the street or maybe even said hello but until I was 17 years old I never actually knew another black person. Throughout my life I have been very lost, I've been very confused – but I've always searched for answers and the ultimate answer is that the buck stops with yourself.'

By the age of 19, Lemn was one of only two black **literature** development workers in Britain at Commonword, a community publishing **cooperative** in Manchester. Today, a number of his poems can be found on buildings throughout the Manchester area and have become local landmarks, making Lemn a local **literary** hero. He has performed his plays and poems throughout the world, on TV and on radio programmes.



Paul Robeson by Jacob Epstein, 1928  
© The estate of Sir Jacob Epstein

## Paul Robeson by Jacob Epstein 1928 *Touchstones Rochdale*

Paul Robeson was one of the most famous, and controversial African Americans of his time. He was an actor, film star, singer and civil rights **activist**.

Robeson was born in Princeton, New Jersey, in 1898. His father had escaped from slavery as a teenager. He told Paul stories of slavery and encouraged him to achieve his potential in spite of racial **prejudice**.

Paul Robeson was an outstanding **scholar** and paid his way through Law School by working as a professional footballer and as an actor. He experienced racism in the law profession and left to become an actor. Robeson played the part of Shakespeare's Othello (in London in 1930, on Broadway 1943, in Stratford in 1959). These performances were of artistic and political importance for an African American at that time.

Robeson was also a singer and sang **spirituals** that stemmed from the time of slavery. He said: 'If I can teach my audiences who know almost nothing about the **Negro**, to know him through my songs... then I will feel that I am an artist, and that I am using my art for myself, for my race and for the world'.

He lived and worked in Britain between 1927 and 1939. In 1949 he returned to sing at the Free Trade Hall in Manchester and at the New International Club in Moss Side. The club was too small for the thousands who came to hear him sing so Robeson sang in the street for them.

Robeson's politics and his support for civil rights made life difficult for him in America. At one point he had his passport withdrawn. He died in 1976.

## Questions

- 1 How were black people generally portrayed throughout history?
- 2 What is racism?
- 3 Does racism still exist and can it be linked to the transatlantic slave trade?
- 4 What do you think it is like to be black growing up and living in Manchester?
- 5 Does slavery continue today?