

Africa: Moving the Boundaries

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“There are NO (Teddy) Bears in Africa!” Discuss.

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In November 2007, a middle-aged English primary school teacher in Khartoum named Gillian Gibbons was arrested and jailed for allowing her class of seven-year olds, after due electoral process, to name a teddy bear “Muhammad.” Gibbons might have thought she would be safe in Khartoum. The civil war had ended two years earlier, and Khartoum was a long way from the ravages of famine and the fighting in Darfur. But with the Rift Valley Fever epidemic starting up and the terrible floods that year, she should have known it would not be a teddy bears’ picnic (“Muhammad” teddy teacher arrested’ 2007)¹.

We know exactly what happened to Gillian Gibbons. She was reported by the school secretary, formally charged under Section 125 of the Sudanese Criminal Act, found guilty of “insulting religion” and sentenced to 15 days’ imprisonment. Ten thousand protesters took to the streets of Khartoum, demanding her execution. After eight days in jail, through the intercession of two British Muslim peers in the House of Lords, however, she was granted a presidential pardon and deported. But what happened to the teddy bear? The media never reported *his* fate. This got me wondering about all the other bears in Africa whose fate I had never before considered.² In this article I want to

¹ The BBC reported the school’s director, Robert Boulos, as saying that Gibbons has been following “a British national curriculum course designed to teach young pupils about animals,” and that “this year’s topic was the bear.” Apparently the teacher had asked one of the children to bring her teddy bear to school. Then she has asked the class to choose a name for it. “They came up with eight names including Abdullah, Hassan and Muhammad,” Mr Boulos said. The children voted; and twenty of the twenty-three children chose “Muhammad” as the bear’s name. Then each child took the teddy bear home for a weekend, during which he or she had to keep a diary about what they did with the bear. Finally, all the entries were collected in a book with a picture of the bear on the cover and a message that read: “My name is Muhammad.” It seems clear that the project was based on a research project reported three years previously that found teddy bears a useful tool to boost the motivation to learning in young children. The children’s befriending and diarising of the teddy bear not only improved their motivation but also had “a positive backwash” on the school, providing it with “a positive interpersonal context.” (Andrews, 2004, pp. 1-18).

² There is also a question – not the subject of this paper - about what happened (or will happen) to the blaspheming children. If the aim of the teddy-bear project was to improve their interpersonal skills and enhance the motivation to learning, were these skills, for example, damaged by the arrest of their teacher and the surrounding controversy concerning the blasphemy laws? According to developmental psychologist, Robert Kegan, children make meaning based on the differences they perceive between the different objects that they choose or receive to engage with, which they apprehend as having internal lives of their own. And if, as Colleen Goddard points out, “the self-appointed object is refuted, critiqued or denied in any way, attachment difficulties may arise later in life.” (Goddard, 2014). It is likely that the teddy bear named Mohammed, once stripped of his name, was also removed from the classroom. Did the parents then remove their children from the school? The Unity High School at which Gibbon taught in Khartoum is an independent school, founded by the Coptic community in 1902, and aims to provide a British-style education to children from ages 6 to 16 years of age, culminating in the IGCSE examinations from Cambridge University. In the neighbouring Islamic nation of Egypt, on March 2016, a juvenile court sentenced three Coptic Christian children to five years in prison and ordered a fourth placed in a juvenile

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think about teddy bears and their relationship to Africa, and more particularly, I want to think about how they function – what kind of cultural work they do in the production of the literary and political geographies of Africa.

Contrary to popular belief, there *were* bears in Africa once! The Atlas bear is perhaps not strictly native, having descended from brown bears imported by the Romans from the Cantabrian Mountains of northern Spain. However, it once ranged all across Northern Africa. In East Africa we have the Nandi Bear. It is a cryptid – a creature allegedly sighted on many occasions, but which has no scientific foundation. Teddy bears of course are not real bears. They are not mere objects either. The scientific categorisations – living and non-living – are not very helpful in this regard, certainly not if we allow Tristan Garcia's philosophical position that it is pointless for any thinking, feeling person (religious or otherwise) to resist inclusion in 'the flat system of interchangeable things' (Garcia 2014, p. 1). Adults encourage children to invest teddy bears with symbolic power, and child psychologists have developed a variety of theoretical perspectives about the teddy bear (Pedrick & Oberhelman 2005, p.124). It is not only children who rely upon this investment of symbolic power in teddy bears to preserve them from darkness. A survey for Travelodge in 2012 found that over a third of British adults still sleep with a teddy bear to comfort and preserve them in their sleep (*Daily Mail* 2012). However, the teddy bear's original purpose was political.

In 1902, at the end of a long and tiring Mississippi bear-hunt, the US President Theodore Roosevelt found himself confronted with an exhausted creature tethered to a willow tree, run down by hounds and clubbed into submission. The President declined the kill, judging it unsporting; instead, he ordered someone else to put it out of its misery. The cartoon depiction of the incident in the *Washington Post* a few days later was captioned "Drawing the Line in Mississippi," and was thought to refer to the President's opposition to lynching in the South. However, a Brooklyn candy storeowner with a sideline in stuffed toys picked up on the cartoon. He put in his shop window two stuffed toy bears his wife had made, with a sign that said "Teddy's Bears", and soon he was mass-producing them.

Over time, the teddy bear was disconnected from its original context of African slavery in the Americas, and today most people have no idea that the now-ubiquitous teddy bear was originally a mythological projection of the US presidency, representing compassion – and seemingly bridging the borders of both human and non-human subjects, races and species. It hardly likely they will recognise the irony of that characterisation in relation to Teddy Roosevelt's 1909 African safari, a year-long trek across British East Africa – during which he and his son, Kermit shot and killed more than a thousand African animals, including 17 lions, 11 elephants and 20 rhinoceros.

The President's pardon of one exemplary American bear – the bear that gave Teddy Roosevelt his name – is a deceiving ceremony of innocence. It speaks of sovereign

facility for a 32-second video filmed by their teacher mocking the "Islamic State of Iraq and Syria" (ISIS). They were charged with "mocking Islamic prayer rituals" and "disrupt[ing] public order." Their teacher was sentenced to three years in prison for assisting their crimes. Freed on bail, the children fled Egypt and, with the aid of human rights organizations in Turkey, applied for humanitarian visas to Switzerland (Caballero, 2016).

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power, just as the “collecting” of a thousand African trophies in name of American science does. The bear that he chose not to kill in Alabama was murdered the moment he turned his back, and the animals he killed in Africa were shipped back to Washington, stuffed and mounted for display in the nation’s capital as part of the Smithsonian Institution’s museological dioramas of American education and power.³

My reference point here is Donna Haraway’s book *Primate Visions*, which links the semiotics of diorama display in the US to the founding principle of Manifest Destiny, underwriting the War Against Terror and global capitalism today, much as it did the expansion westward and subjugation of America’s native peoples in a previous colonial period. For Haraway – and a great many other scholars since – taxidermy is a useful label to identify a diverse range of imperialist and capitalist methodologies for locating sovereignty, extending property and maintaining control by means of a kind of suspended animation. That is, by the slowing or stopping of life processes either by applying external pressure or intervening internally. The granting of a symbolic pardon is often a means to divert attention from these actions. A good example of this is China’s cancellation of a large portion of Zimbabwe’s Chinese debt last year, at the same time coercing Zimbabwe into adopting the yuan as legal currency and exempting China from its indigenisation laws, thereby enabling Chinese investors to increase their shareholding and gain increased control over the local economy (Fiskesjö 2013, p. 53).⁴ The pardon serves to boost the taxidermic powers of the pardoner.

We all know how the discourse of darkness was projected onto Africa in the previous century by Europe as a way of endowing its economic imperialism with the justificatory mission of enlightenment. Even in 1958, when Michael Bond created the now famous English immigrant Paddington Bear, the manuscript he sent to his editor stated that the hero had come to England ‘all the way from darkest Africa’⁵ (HarperChildrens.com 2007). The editor was better informed about the geographical distribution of bears and advised Bond that there were no bears in Africa, and Bond changed the text, so that Paddington now comes from ‘deepest darkest Peru’ (Bond 2016, p.3). Although Paddington has never been to Africa, he does not lack influence there. In 2014, the decision to hold the African premier of the film, *Paddington*, in Zimbabwe was reported in the British press as ‘a charm offensive’ aimed at healing ‘the rift in UK-Zimbabwean relations by demonstrating a cultural affinity between the two nations’ (Smith 2014,

³ These “became some of the most popular exhibits in the new National Museum building, now the National Museum of Natural History. Unveiled to the public in 1913, they remained on exhibit for most of the twentieth century. Today only one Roosevelt specimen, this white rhino, is still on public display.” http://naturalhistory.si.edu/onehundredyears/featured_objects/roosevelt_rhinoceros.html - accessed 9 January 2017.

⁴ Magnus Fiskesjö (p. 53) explains the power of the pardon in this way: “The power of pardon signals the location of sovereignty, which finds its expression the decisions placed directly in the sovereign’s hands: the decisions on wielding or resting the executioner’s axe (whether in specific cases, as for fellow humans on death row, or animal by animal), or in the decision to make or avoid war, whether foreign or civil. And sovereign power finds its most obvious expression in—is always reconstituted in—every concrete example of every pardoned turkey or every exemplary teddy bear, as in the case of every death row captive, and, most important of all, in every decision on whether or not to trigger the suspension of normal order, as in that exceptional state of emergency known as ‘war’.”

⁵ From a Bear called Paddington: HarperChildrens.com, retrieved on January 9, 2016 from 2007<http://archive.is/OyPbd>.

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n.p.). Paddington is a quintessentially English bear and on occasion a very useful armchair ambassador to boot – a figure of “soft power.” But he is also a spokesperson on occasion for immigration, and it is worth remembering that the first publication of *A Bear Called Paddington* in 1958 came at the height of the African-Caribbean immigration to London. The most famous English teddy bear never to visit Africa in his literary lifetime is of course Winnie the Pooh. It would have been easy enough for him to go there. After all Christopher Robin spends an entire morning on an adventure to Africa without leaving the house. However, Pooh never set foot in Africa. Still, it could be said that he makes no sense without it.

Frederick Crews’ satirical work focuses on Pooh’s ill-fated attempt to sneak up on a beehive and rob its inhabitants of their honey by attaching himself to a balloon and disguising himself as a small black cloud. He realises too late that they are ‘the wrong sort of bees’, (Crews 2006, p.91) and that he has made no escape plan if they decide to attack, which of course they do. Crews’ satire of postcolonial criticism goes like this: since Pooh has blackened himself for camouflage, it is obvious that the bees must also be black, metaphorically speaking. In other words, they are “Africanised” bees, whose defensive action is underwritten by Cesaire and Fanon. A footnote alerts us to the fact that lately, there has been widespread racialised panic in the US concerning attacks by “Africanised” killer bees. This is the empirical evidence that the swarm of bees that attack the teddy bear is really nothing more than a hallucinatory vision of the racial hysteria that he himself exemplifies as a character of the English imagination.

Of course, the instrumental force of an object such as a teddy bear does not always live up to its imagined symbolic power, and in narratives where this occurs the end result is invariably tragic. This is one way to look at the death of the protagonist, Sebastian Flyte, in the quintessentially English novel, *Brideshead Revisited*, by Evelyn Waugh (1945). Sebastian is a charming but deeply troubled English lord, who seeks solace, but finds ruination in alcohol, and who fetches up finally in Tunisia, hoping to find redemption through suffering and self-abasement. With him to the end is his faithful friend and protector, a teddy bear named Aloysius (after the patron saint of youth). However, the teddy bear’s protective power is not equal to Sebastian’s desire for self-destruction. The novel encourages us to imagine Sebastian ending somewhere in North Africa, torn to pieces by angels and demons – or if you prefer, by his own contradictions, his devotion to ministry in Africa on the one hand, and his devotion to rum on the other. Aloysius serves as a proxy for God, and the inability of the teddy bear to save Sebastian signals the tragedy of Christianity in the modern world, a loss of power underpinned by the general decline of faith. Sebastian’s tragedy is symbolic in another way, for it is also the tragedy of a misguided missionary. A postcolonial reading of the teddy bear’s failure to save him might argue that the bear’s power only operates in the savage zones, whereas (as Sebastian’s sister tells us) he leaves England to *escape* the savages, *not* to join them.⁶

Space constraints prevent discussion of other teddy bears who operate in the symbolic domain of Africa – teddy bears on safari (e.g. Smythe 1995), teddy bears lost and found (e.g. Ichikawa 2001), or who journey to Africa simply to show the African animals what

⁶ My dissatisfaction with Waugh’s novel, however, is not that I have to infer the fate of Sebastian, for which I am given plenty of clues, but that I am given no clue whatsoever as to the fate of Aloysius in Africa.

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a bear is (Mrs Moose & Pauley 1993). There is a bear who marries a meerkat, only to be blown up by a terrorist bomb (Murdoch 2016). And there is another who is falsely accused and imprisoned in the US on 9, 678 different criminal charges including terrorism, sodomy, witchcraft and treason, and who only begins to understand what has happened to him when he travels to Egypt (Chase 2006). But what happened to the teddy bear at the centre of the Khartoum Blasphemy case? The arrest of Gillian Gibbons certainly had some unexpected repercussions. Within days, a whole sloth of bears called “Muhammad” appeared for sale on the Internet. Most of these were located in the US and were being sold as part of a counter-discursive strategy to oppose Islamic fundamentalism. One advertisement on ebay claimed that, by ordering the teddy bear you would be showing your support ‘for American freedom’. Another seller provided a character reference for his teddy bear: ‘He violates no laws nor has he any religion. He does not mean anything except that his name happens to be what it is.’ But the reference soon became a rant: ‘This is America and you better start believing that if we do not stand up and name our bears what we want you may not have a choice, as all the good names will be taken.’ The rant ended with a warning: ‘American bears bite and claw till the last . . .’ Another seller offered a nameless bear with a ‘beard and moustache conversion’ kit guaranteed to ‘make any bear Mohammed’ (“Plight of Gillian Gibbons”, n.p.) Within a very short time, Mohammed the Teddy Bear from Sudan had become a weapon of international ideological warfare, a media sensation and a global marketing phenomenon.

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