

“Stirring Up Whiteness: Porcelain and Antiracism in Practice”

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Author biography

Victoria Burgher is an artist whose practice-based, interdisciplinary PhD research at the University of Westminster, London, used porcelain to interrogate ideological whiteness from an explicitly antiracist position. Her work with colonial commodities to reveal the whitewashing of British imperial history is exhibited nationally and internationally. She was awarded technē-AHRC funding for her doctoral research and has a BA Hons in Ceramics from the University of Westminster and an MA in Art and Politics from Goldsmiths, University of London. She lives and works in East London.

Abstract

This chapter analyses the use of porcelain to interrogate ideological whiteness as antiracist praxis. Drawing on empirical material including sculptural objects, participatory workshops, performance, and video, the research adopts an iterative, practice-led and autoethnographic methodology. Situated across critical race studies, material culture, and artistic practice, the chapter engages with critical whiteness and double consciousness. It argues that porcelain’s material and historical associations with purity, value, and colonial power render it a potent medium through which to expose and unsettle hegemonic whiteness. Central to the analysis is a critical tension: how to make whiteness visible without reproducing its ideological dominance.

Key words: antiracism, ideological whiteness, porcelain, practice research

I use porcelain to ponder, problematize and pervert ideological whiteness.² My art practice asks whether this ceramic material – so physically white and so historically and symbolically laden with preciousness, power, and prestige – can genuinely disrupt the 'sedimented social practices' of whiteness?³ I approach this with a sense of responsibility about what Maurice Berger called 'the most vexing and intransigent issue of our time: white racism in all its forms'.⁴ This is vital, yet delicate, work; I agree with Steve Garner that any research on whiteness must contribute to antiracist scholarship or we must stop doing it.⁵ Vron Ware and Les Back contend that the ideologically charged notion of white needs to be carefully thought through to avoid reifying it.⁶ Any deep focus on the colour white in terms of its ideological implications must contribute to an undoing of oppressive whiteness or risk further solidifying it. The contradiction inherent in this pursuit is fundamental to the development of the project – I am attempting to engage critically with whiteness, as a white artist with an elite white material, while constantly wondering if this simply serves to cement its hegemonic position. While not expecting to resolve this tension, my practice attempts to think through it, and this essay plots some of those thoughts.

A highly sought-after luxury commodity, inextricably linked with colonially extracted wealth, the 'white gold' of imported East Asian porcelain mapped the movements and motives of early Western imperial expansion. It became both a currency of diplomatic powerplay and a symbol of aristocratic status and wealth in Europe.⁷ Porcelain was first produced in China during the Tang Dynasty (618–907 CE), with Jingdezhen in the south-east, a region rich in deposits of the crucial ingredient of kaolin, becoming the

¹ Stuart Hall's advice to a Black community group grappling with considerations of how best to engage in antiracism, in Gillborn 2016, 'White lies: Things we're told about race and education that aren't true (Part 2)', Leeds Beckett Annual Race Lecture (2016). <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Ma7oM46b2g> [Accessed 3 April 2024].

² I am referring to whiteness, not as a skin colour, but as a false and socially constructed racialized consciousness that informs the practice of white superiority through everyday beliefs, emotions, thoughts, choices, behaviours, and actions. I am influenced here by Eduardo Bonilla-Silva's conceptualization of whiteness as 'embodied racial power'. Doane & Bonilla-Silva 2003, 271.

³ Mouffe 2007. <http://www.artandresearch.org.uk/v1n2/mouffe.html> [Accessed 16 April 2022].

⁴ Berger 2017, <https://archive.nytimes.com/lens.blogs.nytimes.com/2017/04/05/controversy-contexts-using-emmett-tills-image/?action=click&contentCollection=Blogs&pgtype=imageslideshow&module=RelatedArticleList®ion=CaptionArea&version=SlideCard-3> [Accessed 18 June 2023].

⁵ Garner 2007.

⁶ Ware & Back 2002.

⁷ Cassidy-Geiger 2007; Berg & Eger 2007.

country's porcelain capital.⁸ The uniqueness and desirability of porcelain made it a very valuable export, and the secret of transforming white rock into prized porcelain was closely guarded for centuries. Europeans did not master the process until 1709, but once they began production their tableware often reproduced tropes of white supremacy. These included depicting semi-naked enslaved Africans bound and shackled or in servitude to their European owners.⁹ This sinister fashion reached its peak during the Second World War in the pure white figurines mass produced by Jewish slave labour in concentration camps for the Allach porcelain brand. Germany's Nazi regime prized porcelain because they believed its qualities reflected their ideas about Aryan culture.¹⁰

So porcelain, cherished as it is for its 'purity', is perhaps an apt medium with which to embody and expose hegemonic whiteness. My practice-based research explores how porcelain's material properties – its fractiousness and vulnerability when raw, its strength, whiteness, and translucency when fired – can interrogate terms such as white fragility and white innocence.¹¹ Is porcelain a useful tool for the ideological labour required to begin a deprivileging of discursive whiteness on the journey to its abolition? Whether in the form of exhibited objects, staged performance, or participatory workshop, my work aims to provide opportunities to actively and creatively encourage people to rethink how they relate to whiteness as a construct. The ideology and effects of whiteness are obvious to those oppressed by it, so it is the protagonists and those who benefit from whiteness who need to be interrogating and challenging it. 'It is more vital than ever,' suggests Daniel Blight, 'that individual white people who benefit from histories and structures of socio-economic extraction make these structures intelligible and accountable.'¹²

Through my research I aim to develop a consciousness regarding whiteness that is suitably critical. To ensure the liberatory antiracist potential of this project I need to test how whiteness can be explored without it further enacting whiteness. Revealing whiteness and its workings requires me, in the words of Toni Morrison, to 'avert the critical gaze from the racial object to the racial subject; from the described and imagined to the describers and imaginers'.¹³ *Weaponised Whiteness* [fig. 1] was an early attempt to exploit the

⁸ Foley 2014.

⁹ Childs 2016.

¹⁰ Marchand 2020.

¹¹ DiAngelo 2018; Wekker 2016.

¹² Blight 2019, 170.

¹³ Morrison 1992, 90.

seductive qualities of fired porcelain to expose a particularly toxic form of white power and identity as it is wielded by some today. Inside an unglazed but high-fired white porcelain and glass snow globe is trapped a static figure of 'Central Park Karen' and her dog, hand-modelled in porcelain, amid a swirl of watery glitter; stamped on the outer rim of the base are the words WEAPONISED WHITENESS. The Central Park Karen episode stems from 25 May 2020, when a videoed altercation between a black man out birdwatching and a white woman walking her unleashed dog in Central Park, New York, went viral. Calmly asked by the man, Christian Cooper, to put her unruly dog on a lead, as park regulations required, Amy Cooper (no relation) became increasingly confrontational, and the man began videoing her. In response she called the police, telling them that an African American man was threatening her and her dog. This act exposed her understanding of and exploitation of the power and privilege she held as a white woman in this situation; despite being the aggressor, she was confident that the police would protect her and penalize the black man. White women fabricating potentially fatal evidence against black men has a long and sordid history in the United States, the infamous murder of Emmett Till in 1955 being just one example. My aim with this work was to draw the viewer in with an object that attracted close scrutiny; a snow globe needs to be handled and agitated so that the snow falls onto the narrative scene being romanticized inside the precious glass cloche. I hoped that this initial attraction would then be met with revulsion as the realities of the toxic whiteness it revealed became apparent, but I soon realized that the 'Central Park Karen' story and the connotations of the 'Karen' label (used to slight an entitled and pushy white woman) are not as well known as I assumed. While I felt *Weaponised Whiteness* did confront and challenge whiteness directly, it assumed a general cultural knowledge of ideological whiteness that I had misjudged. Another issue is its resemblance to the Allach porcelain figurines so favoured by Hitler and his Nazi regime – could it be too focused on white supremacy?

Sara Ahmed asks, 'If whiteness gains currency by being unnoticed, then what does it mean to notice whiteness?'¹⁴ Perhaps the acute discomfort of Du Bois's 'double consciousness'¹⁵ – being forced to see the world and themselves from the perspective of those oppressed by whiteness – could have potential for raising antiracist consciousness.

¹⁴ Ahmed 2007, 149–168, 149.

¹⁵ Du Bois 2007.

Sonia Kruks questions the validity of this approach, since it does not include being subject to the violence of the oppressive white racial gaze.¹⁶ While this is true, I sense that coming to understand how you might 'think white' is a useful starting point for antiracist awareness. 'Thinking white' was a term coined by John Howard Griffin,¹⁷ for whom whiteness was a blindness to the suffering of racialized 'others'.¹⁸ This was not just a personal moral failure, but part of a larger social and political system. Griffin believed in learning to see the world from each other's perspective and putting in the hard emotional labour to understand the brutality of white supremacist racism and to act based on this raised awareness. This is uncomfortable but crucial work. It is about being conscious – the original meaning of the term 'woke'.¹⁹ The Du Boisian 'embarrassments' of whiteness²⁰ must not be shied away from. These stem from being aware of how white identity is entangled with histories of exploitation, privilege, and racial oppression. Could I do something that would help people become more aware of their whiteness – as attitude, currency, and complicity in structural power? To test how individuals would react to an invitation to identify as white, I made *White But Working On It* [fig.2], a series of glazed white porcelain badges impressed with the words WHITE BUT WORKING ON IT. The subtlety of the letters is deliberate; I want to encourage a physical proximity to promote the intimacy that is perhaps required to discuss whiteness. Perhaps it is a big ask to expect white people to question something that privileges them, but having the opportunity to awaken this consciousness is something I value and wish to encourage. The privilege of their whiteness allows them to display their politics and position on their body with little fear of reprisals. By distributing the badges as part of artist talks and workshops outlining my research, I am asking other people to do the work of confrontation and circulation for me. This also means that I have no control over where they go, if they are worn, or if they generate any discussion or consciousness raising. I ask recipients to make a donation to an antiracist organization to 'pay' for them, but have no intention of commodifying whiteness by selling or exhibiting them in any commercial setting. So what can sporting a shiny white

¹⁶ Kruks 2016, e44–47, 46.

¹⁷ Griffin 2019.

¹⁸ 'Othering' refers to the ways in which certain people are marked as different and thus relegated to inferior, marginalized, and oppressed positions in society. Frantz Fanon (2001, 2008), Stuart Hall (2021), Toni Morrison (1992), and Edward Said (1994, 2019) among others, address this concept from varying angles in their work.

¹⁹ Davies 2023, 3–54.

²⁰ Du Bois 2021.

porcelain badge stamped WHITE BUT WORKING ON IT achieve in terms of antiracism? As Ahmed spells out, simply announcing your whiteness does not make you less white or distance you from whiteness, and any admittance or confession of racism does not perform or enact any action, it merely demonstrates desired antiracist credentials and good intentions.²¹ The badges could, therefore, be read as just performative allyship,²² feeding a neoliberal and narcissistic desire for self-improvement and self-flagellation that further centres whiteness and smacks of white saviourism.

I realized that by continuing to make discrete objects I was maintaining a personal distance from the critique of whiteness, which is itself an operation of whiteness. I felt I needed to own my privileged identity to more legitimately critique whiteness so, marking a major shift in my practice, I devised a live performance called *A Provocation in Porcelain* [figs. 3-5]. Spotlit on an otherwise dark stage were hundreds of eggshells cast in porcelain – I began the performance by walking barefoot onto the stage, dressed in black, clutching a large hand-built white porcelain vase to my body, and gingerly making my way through the scattered eggshells.

Whiteness sheds tears at the sight of blond-haired, blue-eyed, pet-toting refugees displaced by war. Whiteness rushes to offer them sanctuary. But whiteness denies safety to black and brown people fleeing conflict. Whiteness turns them away.

These were some of the words I spoke as I then crushed the eggshells under my feet, which splintered violently. At the climax of the performance I knocked the pot off the plinth and it shattered loudly on the floor. The audience reaction was visceral, not just in their shock at the smashing of a ceramic vase, but also their heavy silence, while I spoke, which was fractured by the splintering of the porcelain eggshells. While the performance was an individual act, it was designed as a collective action with the audience as witnesses, who I hoped would be provoked into thought, discussion, and raised consciousness. But, despite my best intentions, was this performance an example of peak whiteness, making whiteness centre stage even if my motives were to critique it? The performance made me feel physically very exposed, and this was deeply uncomfortable, but I realize I can choose this position of hypervisibility as and when it suits me – I don't have to live it on a daily basis.

²¹ Ahmed 2004.

²² Kalina 2020, 478–481.

Naming, shaming, and shining a spotlight on whiteness, while not easy, is necessary because, as Ahmed argues, 'we need to give problems their names'.²³

Content Warning Whiteness [figs.6-8] specifically exploits the seductive qualities of liquid porcelain to address the crippling power and appeal of whiteness. An eleven-minute, silent black-and-white video tracks a white hand as it repetitively dips into and out of a black bowl of white porcelain slip. The hand breaks the smooth surface, swirls the liquid clay, withdraws coated in the creamy whiteness, and moves out of shot. It then reappears to repeat the process, and as the layers of slip build up and begin to dry, the skin becomes increasingly wrinkled and clumpy, eventually rendering the hand immobile, unable to flex or uncurl the fingers from a fist. It ends with the hand drowned and unmoving in the porcelain pool, weighed down by the sediments of whiteness. Viewers have found this video simultaneously mesmerizing and repelling, silently urging the hand not to return for more. The work consciously leverages the material allure of porcelain to meditate on how the superficial gloss of ideological whiteness masks an ugly reality of stifling oppression.

Minnie Bruce Pratt, in *Identity: Skin Blood Heart*,²⁴ reflects on her growth into consciousness and activism. She believes that to know how to act against racism, or even to know a situation is racist, requires judgement, ethics, and feeling. Developing these relies on gathering up both information and 'the threads of life that connect us to others'.²⁵ To get outside your own cultural, racial, and social boundaries you must be willing to face how much you do not know. My research with porcelain, which this essay introduces, aims to 'de-mask' whiteness²⁶ and 'unsettle innocence'²⁷ to this end. It is important that those who benefit from whiteness become increasingly conscious of their power and privilege in relation to marginalized others. Focusing on what whiteness does rather than what whiteness is, has the greatest potential for effective antiracist action. As Judith Butler said:

To be undone by another is a primary necessity, an anguish, to be sure, but also a chance – to be addressed, claimed, bound to what is not me, but also to be moved, to be prompted to act, to address myself elsewhere, and so to vacate the self-sufficient 'I' as a kind of possession.²⁸

²³ Ahmed 2015, 5–13, 8.

²⁴ Pratt 2009, available at

<https://minniebrucepratt.net/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/MBP-Identity-Rebellion-Rev2009.pdf> [Accessed 28 April 2024].

²⁵ Pratt 2009, 38.

²⁶ Blight 2019.

²⁷ Tuck & Yang 2012, 1–40.

²⁸ Butler 2005, 136.

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