

Decolonising Sambo

SECOND EDITION

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Decolonising Sambo: Transculturation, Fungibility and Black and People of Colour Futurity

SECOND EDITION

BY

SHIRLEY ANNE TATE

University of Alberta, Canada



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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

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Chapter 1

Introduction: Sambo's Social Etymology and White European Settler Colonial Transculturation

There it was and I was not even looking for it. After all, why would I want to look for sambo as a descendant of enslaved people in Jamaica? Yet, here it was in Church Square, Cape Town, South Africa. I came across it as I was being taken on a whistle stop tour of the sights. sambo. Writ large on the granite pillars which commanded the location of the colonial slave market. How could it be here when it belonged in the Caribbean, the Americas and the United Kingdom? What had happened? How had it happened and why? This chance encounter led me to engage in an ethnography of 'looking for sambo' through the routes of white European settler colonialism and contemporary culture. This involved voyages both real and metaphorical to Australia, South Africa, Trinidad and Tobago, Florida, Jamaica, Spain, the former Danish West Indies, the Dutch West Indies, as well as parts of the United Kingdom, archival searches, museum artefacts and dipping into popular cultural representations of sambo. I did not do this as a journey where I searched for myself. I simply was not there to be found. Rather, I searched for the white sambo psyche. White European settler colonialism's making of sambo as a category of utter negation into something so normalised that we are inured to it. We can even profess to love it and see it as a part of who we are as nations and people without being troubled by its past or present life. Other people with whom I spoke about the topic of this book found it equally troubling even today because it is a signifier of colonial subjection and present day racist derision. My unease led to this book. As I research and write it is with unease. There is no comfort from sambo. There never was and never will be. No love here but no hate either. Just a studied indifference to this white sambo psyche construction. I begin this journey of looking for sambo with Stuart Hall's (1997, p. 7) questions in mind. 'Do things-objects, people, events in the world-carry their own one true meaning, fixed like number plates on their backs, which it is the task of language to reflect accurately? Or are meanings constantly shifting as we move from one culture to another, one language to another, one historical context, one community, group or sub-culture, to another?'

Decolonising Sambo: Transculturation, Fungibility and Black and People of Colour Futurity, 1–11

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Introduction

The Other [sambo] is cited, quoted, framed, illuminated, encased in the shot/reverse-shot strategy of a serial enlightenment The Other [sambo] loses its power to signify, to negate, to initiate its historic desire, to establish its own institutional and oppositional discourse. ... it [sambo] is always the good object of [white] knowledge, the docile body of difference that reproduces a relation of domination. (Bhabha, 1994a, p. 31)

I begin with the auto-ethnographic reflection and Homi Bhabha's words to start thinking about sambo as an (un)known part of colonialism and 'post-race' racism within which professions of sincere love for the racialised other are an active aspect of (post) colonial states' self-deception about being 'post-race' (Goldberg, 2015). Such professions are also part of the racist consumption of a commodified Other. I say (un)known to reference the fact that sambo is known well enough. However, it is obscured by a continuing self-deception engaged in by (post)colonial European states and individuals within these societies as they attempt to develop 'post-race' credentials. I use sambo throughout to show that this is a colonial European construction, not a person, but a *thingification* (Césaire, 2000).

Ann Laura Stoler (2009, p. 259) asks a question that is apposite here. 'If the modern produces self-deception as one of its political requirements, and colonialism is the "underside of the modern", then are imperial dispositions the template for modern politics?' This question is important because it leads to an observation that I will come back to repeatedly in my search for sambo. That is imperial dispositions led to sambo's emergence globally within white European settler colonialism and enabled its continuation as a signifier of subjugation and utter negation. This is shown by Bhabha's (1994a) shot/reverse shot strategy of a serial enlightenment above. In white supremacy's production of sambo as the docile body of difference that produces white superiority, we continue to see imperial dispositions, 'at once ways of living in and responding to, ways of being and seeing oneself, ways of knowing which shape which sentiments are activated, and the affective states which circumscribe what one can know' (Stoler, 2009, p. 255). In my 'sambo ethnography', I delve into the Racial Contract's 'epistemologies of ignorance' (Mills, 1997); libidinal economies (Wilderson, 2010); racialising assemblages and their power relations of superiority/inferiority (Weheliye, 2014); whiteness as property (Harris, 1993) and who defines who counts as human (Wynter, 2003) that whiteness (Yancy, 2015) constructed during colonialism, imperialism, enslavement, indenture and global racial capitalism (Robinson, 1983). Whiteness, understood here as the suturing to white supremacy (Tate & Page, 2018) of state, society, institutions and individuals, still keeps sambo in place as a tool of racial governance and Black subjection.

My search for sambo – my continuing 'sambo ethnography' – over the past several years has taken me to colonial archives, city streets, rural spaces of enslavement's deracinated memorialisation, museums, internet stores, novels, films, newspaper 'funnies' and comic strips and television. sambo is a white European settler colonial discursive cross gender surfacing of racialised, domesticated

bodies which emerges in enslavement shipment manifests, plantation stock records, lists of names of workers on Australian outback cattle stations, history books, anthropological observations, newspaper articles, for example. sambo has dirty affects attached such as disgust, contempt, aversion, hatred and a peculiar love of the racialised other contained in affective attachments to a colonial children's book, sweets and contemporary memorialisation. sambo's racialised affects enable the governance and governmentality of body, psyche, epistemology, society, morality, value and virtue. sambo spread through the routes and roots of white European settler colonialism like a highly portable virus with each slave ship, letter home from the colonies, each crack of the whip of enslavement and servitude, each iteration as naming of negation. It was also part of the objects and discourses spread through the routes and roots of white European settler colonialism such as the Black Atlantic (Gilroy, 1993). Thus, sambo was not about constructing mimetic Europeans like that other British device of colonial domestication and disparagement, the 'western oriental gentleman'.

sambo began as being much more about the production of social engineering through constructing categories to account for racial mixing in contexts where the focus was on whiteness and lightness as signs of racial privilege and freedom. Blood quantum had to be carefully enumerated (Chapter 2) in the 'New World' (the Americas and the Caribbean) colonies as lack of virtue, beauty, morality and freedom were read on the skin and through descent with the addition of more African descent in 'racial mixing' being seen as racial regression. sambo left that particular geopolitical context of emergence and flowed along the routes of white European settler colonialism and racial capitalism to appear as signifier of racialised inferiority in the Caribbean (Chapters 2 and 8), Canada (Chapter 3), South Africa (Chapter 5), Australia (Chapter 4), colonial India and the United States (Chapter 3) and the United Kingdom (Chapters 5 and 6). This shows sambo's fungibility in terms of the bodies to which it attached and its transculturation across white European (Spanish, British, Dutch, Swedish and Danish) settler colonial sites. I try to capture this flow by engaging in a 21st-century search for sambo in an ethnography which tries to construct a transcultural archive of the present based on the past while thinking about what this means for possible Black/People of Colour (BPOC) futurity (Chapter 8). Let us now turn to the boundaries of such transcultural engagement.

Engaging with Sambo's Archives Transculturally

Colonial administrators were prolific producers of social categories ... [But] producing rules of classification was an unruly and piecemeal venture at best.... Grids of intelligibility were fashioned from uncertain knowledge; disquiet and anxieties registered the uncommon sense of events and things; epistemic uncertainties repeatedly unsettled the imperial conceit that all was in order, because papers classified people, because directives were properly acknowledged, and because colonial civil servants were schooled to assure that records were prepared, circulated, securely stored, and sometimes rendered to ash. (Stoler, 2009, p. 1)

As a socially constructed category sambo was part of the racialised taxonomy of transcultural colonial subjection that enabled the machinery of imperialism, racial capitalism and white European settler colonialism to function. I use transcultural here following Fernando Ortiz (1995) who in the 1940s wrote about transculturation in the Cuban context of Spanish conquest of Indigenous people, African enslavement and the South Asian 'coolie trade'. He saw transculturation as a dialectical interface of de-culturation and dynamic neo-culturation rather than acculturation. Transculturation attends to racial formations – Indigenous, African, white European and South Asian – and the power dynamics that were the foundation of the interactions between these groups. Born within the Caribbean in the aftermath of Spanish colonialism and the beginning of US American influence in Cuba, transculturation helps conceptualise the portability of sambo from one white European settler colonial context to another. Its ease of travel and adaptation can be explained by the necessary maintenance of white European settler colonial power it enabled and by its dynamic neo-culturation from Spanish to English to Dutch to Danish to Swedish as it moved across bodies in different global colonial contexts.

sambo's archive exists on many registers – for example, from written colonial records in Spanish (*El Archivo de Indias*, Seville), English (The National Archives, Kew, UK), Danish (The West India Debt Liquidation Directorate, *Rigsarkivet*) and Dutch (*Nationaal Archief*, The Hague), to music and the stage, television, film, children's books, contemptible collectibles, museum exhibits and memorials. As a white European settler colonial construction sambo aimed at the intersections of affect, racial ontologies and the construction of a racial common sense shared across European empires in order to maintain colonial governing arrangements. As a racial classification sambo became so known as to not need explication because it became embedded in the 'structure of feeling' (Williams, 1977) of the Western Hemisphere and was/is a 'North Atlantic universal' (Trouillot, 1995).

Simply put, the ontology of sambo in white European settler colonies was subjugation even if the body and the space changed globally. sambo's corporeality was protean. sambo was fungible (Hartman, 1997), but its subjugation globally was fixed and unquestioned by white European settler colonialists. sambo's application across empires shows the use of European colonialism's generated categories to manage emergent becomings in colonial contexts. Thus, its ontologies are productive of subjection and responsive to white supremacist need to show domination and racial subalternisation, servitude, dehumanisation, ownership, un-freedom and negation, simply with a word. Emerging first as 'zambo' in Spanish to name the 'mixed race' children of Indigenous and African parents, sambo in its English translation became a description for Black mixed racedness in which one parent was 'mulatto' and the other 'African' (Chapter 2). Thus, sambo could function as a 'Mediterranean myth' because

As Mediterranean myths tell us, thinking about One is not thinking about All. These myths express communities, each one innocently transparent for self and threateningly opaque for the other. They are functional, even if they take obscure or devious means.

They suggest that the self's opacity for the other is insurmountable, and consequently, no matter how opaque the other is for oneself (no myth ever provides for the legitimacy of the other), it will always be a question of reducing this other to the transparency experienced by oneself. Either the other is assimilated, or else it is annihilated. That is the whole purpose of generalization and its entire process. (Glissant, 1997, p. 49)

zambo/sambo could not be assimilated into Spanish/UK whiteness, so it was annihilated through naming as racially other, beyond white recuperation, degenerate (Chapter 2). From its New World birthplace, zambo/sambo became a transcultural North Atlantic Universal (Trouillot, 1995) and a foundational fiction (Stoler, 2009) of colonialism as global white European enterprise (Chapter 2).

As transcultural North Atlantic Universal, sambo is a colonial artefact delimited by non-whiteness and racial subjugation. sambo is understood only through a range of concepts with the common denominator being its position on a 'lower moral and ontological position' on the racial hierarchy (Mills, 2007). Indeed, sambo is positioned as non-human to the extent that whiteness was seen as co-extensive with humanity. This produced common attributes across white European settler colonies that continue to resist erasure of empire's governance and governmentality. sambo was part of a colonial reason which became common sense within empire's citation of subjection in its colonial and ongoing archives of infra-human kind in which everyday racism is conjoined with the politics of states structured through racial dominance.

(Post) colonial European states attempt to erase their sambo past in the present through concealment, erasure, silencing and 'epistemologies of white ignorance' (Mills, 1997) when sambo is so cemented into the psyche, folklore and popular culture that it refuses being consigned to oblivion. By epistemologies of white ignorance, Charles Mills (1997, 2007) means white knowing ignorance linked to white supremacy which 'covers false belief and the absence of true belief [in which] the white delusion of racial superiority insulates itself against refutation' (Mills, 2007, pp. 15–19). This can have a 'black-faced manifestation in black consciousness' as well (Mills, 2007, p. 19). This white ignorance, a 'non-knowing', is one in which

race-white racism and/or white racial domination and their ramifications- plays a crucial causal role [and] the mechanisms for generating and sustaining white ignorance on the macro level is socio-structural rather than physico-biological. (Mills, 2007, p. 20)

Critical race theory asserts that race and whiteness are products of the modern period but 'would have had "uneven development" in the processes of racialization in different countries at different times' (Mills, 2007, p. 20). White ignorance ranges from individuals' racist motivation to that racism which is impersonal social structural so it is not just about ignorance of 'facts' but can be group based ignorance in terms of moral situations (Mills, 2007). sambo as part of the epistemology of white ignorance precludes a perception of racialised others as

human while white supremacists refuse to see how they have benefited materially, psychically and affectively from sambo within global racial capitalism. White supremacist refusal read as ‘motivated irrationality’ (Mills, 2007, p. 34), erases white privilege and its foundations in white terror, inhumanity and what Cheryl Harris (1993) calls ‘whiteness as property’. Whiteness has evolved from ‘color to race to status to property as a progression historically rooted in white supremacy and economic hegemony over Black and Native American peoples’ (Harris, 1993, p. 1714). The status of being white is a valuable asset, property, legally protected and affirmed so that ‘historical forms of domination have evolved to reproduce subordination in the present’ (Harris, 1993, p. 1714). Whiteness as property is built on exclusion from white racial privilege exemplified through sambo.

sambo continues to seep into our lives because it was produced by white European settler colonial states themselves and their metropolitan centres as essentially formed in opposition to whiteness. This is the position of *thingification* and subjection (Césaire, 2000; Fanon, 1984; Glissant, 1997) where one is *always for* the Other. sambo’s (post)colonial archive maintains colonial knowledge, affect, power, being and memory through its continuing racialising assemblages (Weheliye, 2014). In racialising assemblages reside, ‘Agamben’s bare life, Foucault’s biopolitics, Patterson’s social death, and, to a certain extent, Mbembe’s necropolitics, [lived as] the violence, subjection, exploitation, and racialization that define the modern human’ (Weheliye, 2014, pp. 1, 2). sambo’s (post)colonial archive resists a focus on the injustices of a white European settler colonial past or relegates it to the pages of a history which cannot, indeed, must not, be remembered and so is produced as amnesic-aphasic remembering (Chapter 5).

Faced with such amnesic-aphasic remembering, the task of Black decolonial feminism and its Black feminist decolonial critique (Tate, 2023) laid out by sambo must then be to engage in examining what Stoler (2009, p. 35) terms ‘social etymologies’. This is so because

social etymologies trace the career of words and the political practices that new categories mark or that new membership in old categories signals. Most importantly, social etymologies attend to the social relationships of power buried and suspended in those terms. Such etymologies index how social kinds were produced and what kinds of social relations were construed as plausible evidence of membership. Social etymologies, then, are not just about words. They trace practices gathered into intelligible forms. They seek those histories that have found quiet refuge in them.

Read as a social etymology of sambo, this book shows the racialised category as assignable across racially othered bodies within the colonies and metropolises to manage subject peoples, maintain white governance and shore up privilege through racist common sense and negative affect such as contempt, pity, hate, tolerance, disgust and even love. While sambo was known, it was also subject to change across bodies, space and time so that the emerging sambos of white European settler colonialism were products of sambo as colonial archival artefact and simultaneously its object constantly being rewritten.

sambo's social etymology can be looked at genealogically. As such, its archive should be approached in a

patiently documentary [way]. [This is necessary because sambo] operates on a field of entangled and confused parchments, on documents [and objects] that have been scratched over and recopied many times. (Foucault, 1980, p. 76)

Furthermore, sambo was looked for

in the most unpromising places, in what we tend to feel is without history- in sentiments, love, conscience, instincts; [such looking] must be sensitive to [sambo's] recurrence, not in order to trace the gradual curve of [sambo's] evolution, but to isolate the different scenes where [sambo] engaged in different roles. Finally, [sambo's] genealogy must define even those instances when [it is] absent. (Foucault, 1980, p. 76)

This means that as I look for sambo what I should expect to encounter is 'not a timeless and essential secret, but the secret that [it has] no essence or that [its] essence was fabricated in a procedural fashion from alien forms' (Foucault, 1980, p. 76). This is certainly my experience as I have searched through sambo's archive. It is an archive of a white European settler colonial construction of 'mixed race' bodies, both female and male, in the Hispanophone Latin and North America and Caribbean as well as the British, Dutch and Danish Caribbean and North American colonies. sambo also emerges from the colonial archive as a darker-skinned Black 'coon' in the United States, a darker-skinned Indian in colonial India, Indigenous people in Australia and enslaved Indian and South East Asian bodies in South Africa. What this search has shown is that there is no pure form, no essence. This is so because sambo as we know it is a white European settler colonialist construction.

sambo's origin within the white European settler colonial supremacist psyche, discourse on racial classifications and everyday practices of domination enables 'a field of knowledge [on sambo] whose function is to recover it, but always a false recognition due to the excesses of its own speech' (Foucault, 1980, p. 79). When applied to *subjugated people*, sambo's inflection was about inhumanity in its analysis of 'mixed race' descent or 'pure inferior racial type' against which whiteness emerged as essentially racially pure. In colonialism as in contemporary times

descent attaches itself to the body. It inscribes itself in the nervous system, in temperament, in the digestive apparatus, it appears in faulty respiration, in improper diets, in the debilitated and prostrate bodies of those whose ancestor committed errors. (Foucault, 1980, p. 82)

sambo has been conceived by white supremacy as faulty from its inception but continues to have value in the white supremacist order of racialised things.

However, sambo's continuation in the 21st century as a racialised assemblage threatens, fragments, ruptures, whiteness's 'post-race' (Goldberg, 2015) pretensions, sensibilities and wilful forgetting of past white wrongs. This white fragility (DiAngelo, 2011) is held at bay by the peculiar white love and continuing white loathing within (post)colonial states. Thus, a decolonial genealogy of the social etymology of sambo, of its archive is

an *analysis* of descent [which] is situated within the articulation of the body and [white supremacist] history. Its task is to expose a body totally imprinted by [white supremacist] history and the process of [white supremacist] history's destruction of the body. (Foucault, 1980, p. 83)

Furthermore, such analysis recognises that sambo 'establishes marks of its power and engraves memories on things and even within bodies' (Foucault, 1980, p. 85). It also recognises that sambo's racialised affects have a history. This book as a Black feminist decolonial reading of sambo's genealogy through the interstices of social etymology entails 'reversals of a relationship of forces, the usurpation of power, the appropriation of a vocabulary turned against those who once used it' (Foucault, 1980, p. 88). The aim of this interstitial Black feminist decolonial reading of sambo's archive is a disalienation (Césaire, 2000) from sambo's negation. This aims to introduce 'discontinuity into our very [Black/ white] being - as it divides our emotions, dramatises our instincts, multiplies our body and sets it against itself' (Foucault, 1980, p. 88). That is, this reading of sambo's archive will help us to notice the 'detailed production of social kinds, the archival power that allowed its political deployment, and the grafting of affective states to these inventions' (Stoler, 2009, p. 53). Such detailed production extends from empire, colonialism, enslavement and indenture into the 21st century.

Conclusion – Why Sambo, Why Now?

Looking back to Stuart Hall's words in my reflections above, the question emerges of why sambo and why now? This question is urgent because sambo is not dead and buried, long gone and best forgotten. sambo as a good object of white engineered colonial knowledge continues as 'the Other', the difference reproduced in continuing relations of racial domination. We are not within 'post-sambo' times because sambo lives on in psyches, written texts, images, films, national histories, places, museum collections, sweets, contemptible collectables and folklore, for example. In sambo's continuing life, colonialism, enslavement, indenture and empire are erased from memory, and if they still exist, they are sanitised remainders of centuries of cruelty and trauma. This erasure ensures that the connection between enslavement, colonialism, indenture, genocide, dispossession and contemporary racisms refuses to be built. If we go back to Mills' (1997, 2007) epistemology of white ignorance, we can see that what makes such erasure possible