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# **From Mild Colonial Boy to Jake the Paed: Rolf Harris and Australian Celebrity**

## **Masculinity in the UK**

**Tanya Serisier**

### **Introduction**

In the summer of 2005, the Australian children's entertainer, painter and recording artist Rolf Harris was commissioned by the BBC to paint a portrait of Queen Elizabeth II as a birthday present from one major British institution to another. The portrait, which the then 75-year-old dubbed the 'most important' commission of his decades long celebrity career, marked the beginning of a period of official recognition for 'Britain's best-loved Aussie' (Panther and Armstrong 2011, p. 30). Shortly after completing the portrait, voted in 2007 as one of the public's most popular, he was made a Commander of the British Empire, one of the United Kingdom's highest honours, and in 2012 he performed at the Queen's Diamond Jubilee. A year later, however, Harris was on trial for multiple indecent assaults against under-age girls, and by 2014 he was convicted and imprisoned. In the trial the central complainant described how Harris's continued celebrity had compounded her distress, motivating her to call the police: 'It was like he'd invaded my home every time I switched the telly on... That's when I decided I wasn't going to have any more of it' (Walker 2014a, p. 6). Midway through the trial it was revealed that his portrait of the Queen had disappeared and neither the BBC nor the Royal Collection would admit to knowing where it was. By the time of his sentencing, most other cultural products produced by Harris had met a similar fate, his decades long career effectively over.

Harris's arrest occurred as part of Operation Yewtree, a British police investigation into historic and celebrity sex offending launched in the aftermath of posthumous revelations of

the prolific sexual offending of BBC star Jimmy Savile, and of the institutional complicity that had enabled it (Furedi 2013). While most of the literature on this period treats the cases of Harris and others as merely addendums to the Savile case, there is more to be said about Harris's downfall and its relationship to his celebrity performance of an Australian 'bloke' in the UK. Although it came after the exposure of several other prominent British celebrities, the revelations of Harris's offending were frequently described as the 'most painful' of this period (Hattenstone 2014, p. 32). Whereas other celebrities such as Savile were retrospectively seen as creepy, Harris, it was repeatedly said, had been above suspicion, a 'slightly embarrassing but harmless joke uncle' (Purves 2014, p. 14). In general, this image meant that Harris, one of Britain's most famous children's entertainers, was accused of betraying not just his victims 'but the very notion of childhood innocence' (Hattenstone 2014, p. 32).

In this chapter, I investigate these widespread narratives of shock and betrayal through a discursive analysis of print media in the UK and Australia, beginning with the portrait commission in 2005 and ending with Harris's conviction in 2014. In the first section I explore constructions of Harris as quintessentially innocent. I argue these constructions rested on a set of British colonial tropes of white Australian masculinity that Harris's celebrity both relied upon and reinforced. While relatively unknown outside of the UK and Australia, within Britain Harris was not merely a celebrity Australian but famous for being 'the Greatest Living Australian' (Milmo 2005). In his most famous songs, such as 'Tie me kangaroo down, sport', and 'Jake the Peg', Harris performed tropes of the Australian outback and convict past respectively, working to figure 'Australian-ness' for the British public. Phrases like 'as Australian as Rolf Harris' (Marks 2006, p. 24) found routinely in the British press indicate the extent to which he functioned as a metonym for a dominant vision of Australian culture

that is simultaneously valorised and devalued in postcolonial British culture. In the second section I revisit the shock that greeted his arrest and conviction, arguing this shock operated at the level of individual pathologisation rather than interrogation of the cultural processes that coded Harris as 'innocent'. Dominant reactions focused on Harris's 'deception' rather than the fact that culturally sanctioned models of white masculinity, in both Australia and the UK, are bound up with widespread and sexual violence. I conclude by reflecting on the disappearance of Harris from British popular culture as a mode of avoiding the broader meanings and questions that surround his celebrity and his downfall.

### **Mild Colonial Boy: Rolf Harris and the British 'Establishment'**

At the time of Harris's arrest, the *Sunday Times* (2013, p. 29) attempted to summarise his status in British popular culture: 'He has sung with the Beatles, painted the Queen, given the world a new musical instrument, appeared on television for more than 50 years and confirmed his iconic status at Glastonbury. Rolf Harris has been a national treasure since before the phrase had currency'. Having first become a British celebrity in the late 1950s, Harris's career had gone through multiple phases, such as recording artist, children's television host and commercially successful painter, interspersed with periods of relative obscurity. Through these different manifestations, Harris established a recognisable celebrity 'personality' that enabled him to cross celebrity genres and appeal at different points to very different audiences, from those at the Diamond Jubilee to the Glastonbury Festival (Turner 2004). As Chris Rojek (2001) argues, celebrity partakes in and reproduces cultural discourses, power relations, and stories about cultures and societies, and more than these other celebrities, Harris's celebrity was tied to a set of tropes about Australian culture and its connection to British identity that circulated in popular culture in twentieth and twenty-first century Britain. The central element of this personality was his status as 'Britain's most

famous Aussie', a status built on his origin story as the 'boy from Bassandean', an obscure suburb of Perth, forging a career in the 'mother country' (Panther and Armstrong 2011, p. 30). As scholars of Australian identity have noted, narratives of Australianness within Australia are fundamentally bound up in notions of similarity and difference to British identity (Elder 2007). What I suggest here is that Harris's celebrity illustrates a set of complementary processes in the British culture that establish a set of gendered, class and colonial tropes through the story of Britain and Australia's shared colonial history. The frequent evocation of other 'celebrity Aussies' in media coverage of Harris suggests these processes are also significant in the reception of figures such as Germaine Greer, Clive James and Barry Humphries (see Milmo 2005). However, this coverage also suggests that of all these figures Harris was viewed as the one seen to be most iconically Australian, and whose celebrity was most inextricable from this cultural construction of Australianness.

In 2006, Harris reflected in an interview in Australia on 'what it was the Brits liked about me', citing his honesty, transparency and his sense of 'childlike wonder' with the world (Kilponen 2006, p. 54). While these claims would later acquire more sinister connotations, I suggest they are a relatively accurate summation of Harris's appeal and are bound up with his performance of an archetypal form of white, Australian masculinity; the figure of the 'bush bloke' (Elder 2007, p. 40). The popularity of this archetype, particularly in international markets, is evidenced by figures such as Paul Hogan in the film *Crocodile Dundee* (1986) and Steve Irwin, the Crocodile Hunter (see Taylor 2019). It is characterised by a combination of mastery of the 'wildness' of Outback Australia with an ineptitude in navigating the complex social hierarchies of metropolitan societies such as Britain and the US. While Harris was famous in Australia, this fame was secondary to the success he achieved in the UK, and depictions of him as a symbolic representative of 'Australianness' are almost completely

absent from Australian media. Harris's particular embodiment of the 'bush bloke' was primarily legible in a British cultural context. When he told a different Australian interviewer, 'I'm just so proud to be Australian, and my whole approach to life is based on that fact', he may have been referring to the way in which his celebrity identity was built on British projections of Australians as 'wild' but essentially harmless 'colonials' (Edwards 2008, p. 5). Or, as one commentator put it, Harris projected an image of a domesticated, 'mild colonial boy' in his relationship to the 'mother country' (Murphy 2014, p. 8). This image is exemplified in the column he wrote for the *Daily Mail* describing his visit to Buckingham Palace for his portrait commission: 'Almost overwhelmed, I made a real mess of the appropriate response, executing something that was half-bow, half-curtsy, while desperately trying to get out the words: "Good afternoon, your Majesty"' (Harris 2005, p. 34). As Randell-Moon (2017) argues, royal visits to Australia make use of celebrity to legitimate the racial politics of white settler society and the ongoing colonial relationship with the UK. Harris' visit to the Queen, with its exaggerated performances of loyalty and affection for the monarch, projected a complementary meaning that he extends to the UK as a whole through, for instance, attending the Queen's Diamond Jubilee in a tuxedo shirt hand-painted with the Union Jack.

While he was intensely loyal to the monarchy, Harris – through a class-based politics of popular versus high culture – was simultaneously located as outside and even in conflict with the British 'establishment'. Egalitarianism or 'classlessness' is a central part of Australia's national mythology, and the contrast with Britain's rigid and entrenched class hierarchy is a story told in both Australia and the UK of the essential differences between the two societies (Elder 2007). In both countries, Australian 'blokes' are cast as lacking both the skills and the desire to successfully navigate the complex social hierarchies of British public culture

(Probyn-Rapsey 2008). In choosing Harris to paint the Queen's portrait, the monarchy and the BBC, representatives of privilege and elitist 'good taste' respectively, symbolically aligned themselves with Harris's 'common touch', and Harris, in his representation of the commission, performed these attributes. In the same *Daily Mail* column quoted above, he asks: 'What was I, an ordinary bloke from Perth, Western Australia, doing here, in the Palace?' (Harris 2005, p. 34). What this 'ordinary bloke' was doing, discursively, was performing a celebration of popular or common taste against middle- and upper-class dominance of 'good taste', a performance that was only enhanced in the reactions of the 'art world' to the commission, with a *Guardian* critic describing it as 'like choosing a cartoon strip character to write about Proust' (2005). For the arbiters of elite taste, Harris was 'to the art world what woodworm is to an antiques shop' and his success in the aftermath of the portrait was seen as a capitulation to crass populism (Gill 2005). A critic from *The Times* described a National Gallery exhibition of Harris's paintings as 'as crude an attempt to get inside the public's pants as I can imagine' (Januszczak 2006, p. 6). In this conflict, Harris's supposed egalitarian Australianness positioned him as the 'people's painter', a characterisation reflected in both the popularity of his portrait among the public and its almost universal dismissal by critics (Woods 2011).

However, while Harris offered a form of 'everyman' celebrity, his affiliation with the Queen and the BBC limited the extent to which he might be read as a genuinely anti-establishment figure. The 'democratising sentiments' his celebrity enacted in his conflict with the 'establishment' ultimately enhanced the cultural legitimacy of the monarchy, allowing the Queen to position herself as being on the side of the the popular as opposed to the tasteful and the people, as opposed to the elite (Marshall 1997, pp. 25-26). In other words, even if he might disregard internal British class politics, as a loyal Imperial subject, Harris's form of

Australian masculinity worked to legitimate colonial politics through, for instance, continually reasserting that London is the 'hub of the universe' (Rainey and Bingham 2014, p. 3). As Stuart Hall (1994, p. 225) notes, 'identity' is a way of describing the ways in which we are positioned within narratives of the past, and Harris's position as an 'Aussie in Britain' was intimately tied to a shared history of colonisation and a narrative of Australia continuing to be an outpost of Britishness. He consistently positioned himself in terms of colonial histories, as when he exclaimed on noticing he had painted the Queen's teeth crookedly, 'Crikey! They used to transport people to Oz for less' (Harris 2005, p. 34).

The history of transportation and colonisation positioned Harris as a domesticated subject within Britain, but also as a 'wild' colonial subject who personified Britain's historical ability to master the exotic colonial other as symbolised through the Australian outback. This masculine process of domination functions physically but also discursively through processes of naming and categorisation (Rutherford 2000). It allows the 'bush bloke' to act as an interpreter and interlocutor for his British audience, an audience familiar with mythologies of the 'deadly' and exotic nature of Australian fauna. Although the idea of a bespectacled, comic artist as masculine master of colonial space might sound incongruous, it was a key part of Harris's public persona, performed in part through identifications with and knowledge of Australian animals. As Anouk Lang (2010) argues, knowledge of and identification with native animals are a key trope of constructions of Australian 'blokish' masculinity, exemplified, for example, by Paul Hogan as Crocodile Dundee or Steve Irwin as the Crocodile Hunter. Notably, Harris consistently associated himself with the kangaroo, most obviously in his self-appellation as 'Rolfaroo', represented in his 'signature' drawing of his head attached to a kangaroo's body. Harris's most famous song, 'Tie me kangaroo down, sport', also enacts this association and makes clear its colonial connotations. The song is

narrated from the point of view of a dying ‘stockman’ who lists all the animals that he owns and gives instructions on what should be done with them, from the kangaroo who must be tied down to the cockatoo who must be kept cool. Harris’s mastery of the animals in this song stands in for a wider mastery of the land, and the song’s instructive tone enacts Harris’s ability to introduce and guide a British audience through this knowledge, inviting them to vicariously inhabit these relations of domination.

Further, in positioning himself as the owner of Australian flora and fauna, Harris participates in the genocidal logic of Australia’s foundational myth of *terra nullius*, a myth of Australia as a previously ‘empty’ land established by Britain to erase the act of dispossession inherent in colonisation.<sup>i</sup> This concept of *terra nullius* is the ‘illusory entity’ on which white Australian nationhood relies (Elder 2007, p. 30). It is also, as Harris shows, the foundation of a shared story of British and Australian identity that grounds their contemporary relations. The story of the bush bloke’s affinity with the Australian bush is, at heart, a narrative of substitution and erasure. As Yunupingu (1993) puts it, in the dominant white stories of Australian-ness, Indigenous peoples become a smudge on the edge of the page, marginal and apparently easy to erase completely. In other words, if white men like Harris can enact an affinity with the Australian land, and interpolate that affinity for a metropolitan audience, they render actual Indigenous Australians irrelevant in both settings, particularly when, as in Harris’s case, they also master and interpolate key elements of Indigenous culture. This appropriation is particularly noteworthy in Harris’s association with the didgeridoo in British popular culture. The didgeridoo is an Indigenous wind instrument and one of the most prominent symbols of Aboriginal culture. In Britain, however, the instrument is primarily associated with Harris, who is not merely the best-known but the only famous player of the didgeridoo, and responsible for many British people’s introduction to the instrument. Indeed, Harris is

metonymically associated with the instrument so that his identity is signalled repeatedly through puns in news articles, from ‘Tell me, your majesty, how did I didgeridoo?’ to ‘Rolf Didgeri didn’t do it’ (Harris, P. 2005, p. 3; Hall 2013, p. 7). Harris substitutes for Aboriginal culture in this context, removing the need for British engagement or recognition of actual Indigenous people. It is telling, but unsurprising, that there is a wide misconception among members of the British public that Harris’s other signature musical instrument, the ‘wobble board’, which he invented, is also a traditional Aboriginal instrument (see Dent 2014). He presents himself as authentically Australian through ‘Aboriginalising’ himself while appropriating actual Aboriginality as a form of ‘cultural wallpaper’ (Sculthorpe 2001, p. 73). He has also enabled others to do the same, as in his collaborations with iconic British artist Kate Bush. Harris has played didgeridoo on several of Bush’s tracks, including ‘The Dreaming’, a 1982 top fifty hit in the UK about Aboriginal dispossession that, ironically, lacks any engagement with Aboriginal people, instead featuring Harris as the guarantor of its authenticity.

The motifs of mastery of Australian animals and Indigenous culture co-exist in the original version of ‘Tie me kangaroo down, sport’, which included a verse that began, ‘Let the Abos go loose, Lou... they’ve got no further use, Lou’, a now shocking equation of Aboriginality and animality that was enshrined in Australian law until a 1967 referendum amended the Constitution.<sup>ii</sup> While Harris claims he stopped singing the lyric in 1960, the re-emergence of the lyrics in Australian cultural memory led him to apologise for them in 2008. The apology was, however, accompanied by a diatribe about the problems of contemporary Aboriginal society, with Harris telling Aboriginals who complain about poverty and the poor state of their communities to ‘get up off your arse and clean up the streets your bloody self’. In justification, Harris explained that Aboriginals have a ‘different attitude to life’ unsuited to

contemporary, white Australia: 'The attitude is that, in their original way of life, they would really wreck the surrounding countryside that they lived in and they would leave all the garbage and they would go walkabout to the next place' (Edwards 2008, p. 5). Here, Harris presents himself as a white 'manager' of Aboriginal domestic dysfunction, symbolically asserting the legitimacy and even necessity of white rule in Australia through a gendered trope in which whiteness is associated with white masculine sovereignty and order and Aboriginality with feminised domestic disorder (Nicoll 2008).

As one newspaper columnist writing about Harris noted, unlike British caricatures of nations such as Germany or Japan, seen as economic threats and rivals, the 'cartoon-like', 'cork-hatted buffoons' who signified white Australian-ness in British popular culture marked Australians as 'essentially harmless. They were to be tolerated as country cousins: jovial, rough around the edges, part of the family, but to be patronised rather than treated as equals' (Turpin 2006, p. 52). As I have shown here, however, this condescension is accompanied by a projection of the Australian part of the British 'family' as displaying white British mastery in the colonial sphere and through the colonial project. Harris's long-standing popularity is a testament to the enduring appeal of these archetypes in British popular culture, so that it was possible to suggest in 2005 that Harris was 'loved...by more people than just about anyone else, including, perhaps, the Queen' (Smee 2005, p. 14). It enabled him to become an 'uncontroversial' and 'trusted' 'National Treasure', a status that explains the expressions of shock and betrayal that greeted public revelations of his sexual offending in the course of his 2014 trial (Pook and Jones 2006).

### **‘Jake the Paed’: Harris as child abuser**

In 2012, Harris opened the Glastonbury Festival, performed in the Queen’s Diamond Jubilee concert, received a BAFTA fellowship, and was the subject of a retrospective exhibition in a Liverpool contemporary art gallery. His ongoing celebrity seemed guaranteed until police confirmed in early 2013 that he had been interviewed in relation to Operation Yewtree. The subsequent trial resulted in his conviction on twelve counts of indecent assault against four separate victims. Read, however, as a ‘popular trial’ in the media rather than a legal trial in the court, the outcome was less about a formal finding of guilt or innocence than about public judgements of who Harris was (Hariman 1993). As the *Sydney Morning Herald* noted early in the trial, ‘each side will try to paint a picture of Harris’s. The question would be: “Is he the beloved national treasure, unfairly caught up in the post-Savile maelstrom, stung by false accusations, guilty of nothing more than a handful of sexual misdemeanours? Or is he a predator?”’ (*Sydney Morning Herald* 2014, p. 36). In the end the latter interpretation won out and he finished the trial with his reputation ‘not so much sullied as blackened beyond repair’ (Rainey and Bingham 2014, p. 2). He was now the ‘mild colonial boy who simply went bad’ (Murphy 2014, p. 8).

At one level, the widely expressed shock at Harris’s arrest and conviction can be understood in terms of the cognitive dissonance that occurs when the public encounters celebrities ‘out of face’ and realises their ‘personality’ is a performance (Rojek 2001, p. 17). In Harris’s case, his victims themselves testified to experiencing the cognitive dissonance Rojek describes. In her testimony, one stated that when she met Rolf: ‘[at first] I thought he was exactly what he was on television’. When this changed, her experience was one of disbelief: ‘In my wildest dreams I didn’t expect that behaviour – from one moment being charming and what you see on the television, and the next moment to have his hand up my skirt trying to get into my

pants' (Arkell 2014). This reality simply could not be reconciled with the figure of the 'ebullient but apparently harmless entertainer, tea-time fixture for generations of enthusiastic children, and favourite of the Queen' (Peachey 2014). As numerous commentators attested, and as I discuss above, 'innocence was Harris's hallmark' throughout his career, so much so that 'not one person who had ever met him, ever doubted his motives: his love for children; for animals; his utter devotion to the public who made him a star' (Rainey and Bingham 2014, p. 3). His frequent public statements to himself be a 'big kid' were largely accepted and were part of his identity and popularity (Rainey and Bingham 2014, p. 3).

In much media surrounding the case, this dissonance was presented as so extreme it could only be explained in terms of a split identity. This construction insists the cultural affection for Harris was the result of an error; in other words, the public was fooled by Harris's pretend innocence before the more sinister truth was revealed. For instance, one columnist referenced a description previously given of Harris by talk show host Michael Parkinson: 'The public are not daft. They decided a long time ago that Rolf Harris was a good bloke and they were right'. As the column wrote: 'He was wrong. We were all wrong' (Purves 2014, p. 14). In order to explain this wrongness, how the public could have possibly misrecognised 'Jake the Paed' for an avuncular children's entertainer, media discourses made use of the 'Jekyll and Hyde' framework offered by the prosecutor (Walker 2014b, p. 1). A new narrative emerged of Harris as a deliberate deceiver, someone whose 'whole schtick was a smokescreen for a darker personality' (Williams 2014, p. 30). What had long been taken to be Harris's actual personality was now dismissed as 'just pantomime' (Williams 2014, p. 30).

As the trial went on, Harris's 'dark side' was presented as increasingly deviant, with headlines such as 'Vile star trawled "little girlies" websites; paedo Harris's depraved life laid

bare' and the various articles that revisited Harris's autobiography for anecdotes about Harris having baths with his mother during his childhood in order to fit the entertainer within standard and widely-repeated notions of perversion (Beal 2014, p. 6; Bracchi 2014). Even as they signal social revulsion, these kinds of stories deny the disturbingly quotidian reality of child abuse by insisting that only the truly monstrous could ever perform such evil acts (Jenkins 1998; Jewkes and Wykes 2012). Consequently, they elide any wider cultural significance to Harris's offending, or the longstanding refusal to believe in its possibility. Public fantasies about masculinity and sexual violence made the notion of 'Rolf Harris, sexual predator' amazing and incredulous even as his pattern of offending was revealed. Harris could not be a sexual offender because he was a 'normal' white Australian man, a 'bush bloke' and a 'true family favourite' (Branagh 2014). Indeed, he was frequently described as part of the national family, the 'adopted son' (Rainey and Bingham 2014, p. 3) or 'anodyne favourite uncle' (Aaranovitch 2014, p. 4). In the common logic that surrounds child abuse, this familial status, intimately connected to the notion of him as the safe, colonial distant relative, disqualified him from the category of child abuser. As one columnist argued: 'One might jokingly have accused him of many things – crimes against music, art, or good taste; but that he would be guilty of the worst sort of sexual criminality would surely not have entered anyone's mind' (Brown 2014b, p. 1). Rather than accepting that child abuse might be as much a problem for the extended British Imperial family as for the nuclear family, Harris was cast in the role of deviant criminal stranger, who had somehow deceived his way into British affections. The insistence on 'not knowing' about Harris was inflected with a wider refusal to know the violence that undergirds dominant white masculinities. What was at stake was the innocent colonial identity outlined in the previous section, and so when the prosecutor put to him that he was 'pretty good...at disguising the dark side of your character'

and he answered, 'Yes', Harris would never again be an archetype of colonial innocence (Marsh 2014, p. 36).

In a sign of the failure to engage with the violence of child sexual abuse, Harris's 'dark side' was taken to include any revelation about Harris that departed from the celebrity constructions of him as an 'innocent uncle', a figure that was read as inherently asexual. As one journalist noted, the shock that greeted Harris's exposure was based on the fact that 'we no more associated Rolf Harris with a sex life than we would Paddington Bear', and that, if Harris were allowed a sex life it 'certainly' would not be a 'covert, snatched, illegitimate abusive one' (Purves 2014, p. 14). As many journalists noted, Harris's fall from grace did not rely solely on the testimony of his victims but was accomplished through his own admissions that 'Harris the entertainer' and 'Harris the joker' existed alongside 'Harris the adulterer' and 'Harris the absent, hopeless father', or Harris as consumer of internet pornography (Marsh 2014, p. 37). Harris's celebrity persona could not have survived the revelation that he was calculating, deceptive and sexually voracious, even if he had been found not guilty of the charges levelled against him. Brought into this sexual realm, the aspects of colonial mastery and affinity with the Australian outback, central to the appeal of the 'bush bloke', acquired less wholesome connotations of the primitive, colonial male who was a sexual threat to white British womanhood (Elder 2007).

In this context, Harris's association with lower class culture and bad taste also acquired an air of disrepute. As one art critic concluded: 'We were right from the start. The man was never cool at all. He was, and remains, an embarrassing curiosity' (Wright 2014, p. 9). Harris's lack of 'cool' was linked to his offences in articles that described Harris as a 'terrible artist as well as a creepy entertainer' (Street-Porter 2014, p. 17); or, as another wrote: 'Perhaps it all goes

to show that the middlebrow is inherently corrupt. What goes on in Tracey Emin's bed is far more honest, far more decent, than what has gone on in the name of bland entertainment and mild art, it turns out. Chocolate box art is a lie' (Jones 2014, p. 2). In this reassertion of cultural hierarchies, it is Emin's high-brow cultural status as an elite contemporary artist, rather than her gender, that differentiates her from Harris. The message of Harris's downfall, like his fame, is ultimately taken to reassert traditional colonial and class-based hierarchies, rather than calling for a reckoning with the cultural normalisation of sexual violence.

All of these characterisations locate the source of Harris's offending in his distance and difference from the centre of British society alongside a positioning of the British public as collective 'citizen victims' of his sexual offending and duplicity (Apostolidis and Williams 2004, p. 18). There was, a *Guardian* editorial argued, 'something uniquely offensive about the hypocrisy of his avuncular public persona, which suggested to children that there were friendly adults out there' (2014, p. 34). Put more strongly in the *Sun*'s editorial on the case, Harris 'tainted all of our childhoods' (Dunphy 2014, p. 8). Because of Harris's deception, 'happy childhood memories are somehow sullied' and 'another nail is driven into the coffin of childhood innocence' (Brown 2014a). British culture was cast as a victim, and, to the extent there are lessons to be learnt, they are: to be more 'wary' and to use the example of Harris to detect the early warning signs of strangers who pretend to be part of the culture, or comforting, ordinary figures who hide a sinister deviance (Street-Porter 2014, p. 17).

While some coverage focused on the fact that the shocking nature of Harris's abuse meant that society needed to think more fully about its values and certainties, in general this was not the case. Only a small minority of articles concluded that the Harris case meant that ordinary, well-loved and respected men could also be child abusers. One journalist wrote that the 'shock truth' of Harris means 'we will trust nobody now' and that 'now we know' the truth of

these allegations against Harris ‘we have to accept they could be true of anyone’ (Street-Porter 2014, p. 17). However, as with others, this article went on to suggest that the solution was to become more vigilant so we would not be ‘fooled again’ (Phillips 2014, p. 9). As also a victim of Harris, the only failing of British culture was apparently to be taken in by a deviant colonial outsider. In general, responses remained within the register of individual pathology rather than asking questions about the cultural beliefs that enable the actions and impunity of men such as Harris. Ultimately, I suggest, there is a greater significance to the conclusion that, ‘for all his many talents, the man Britain took to its heart for decades will be remembered first as a predatory paedophile’ (Myers and Pettifor 2014, p. 8). However, the potentially wider cultural ramifications of this fact were almost entirely absent from media coverage of Harris’s downfall.

### **Conclusion: Unmaking Rolf Harris, salvaging colonial masculinity**

Following Harris’s conviction, his art was removed from galleries, his television shows were removed from digital archives, his honours were revoked, and various public memorials in the UK and Australia were pulled down or covered over. According to one report, the only known public display of Harris’s art to have survived the culling was a manhole cover that he had painted in his hometown of Bassendean (Lawson 2014). Most notably, his portrait of the Queen, given to her by the BBC, disappeared in what one report described as a ‘bizarre game of pass-the-portrait’, while the accompanying television special was also erased from publicly available archives (Griffiths 2013, p. 13). I conclude by considering the significance of this public disappearance or disappearing of Harris.

The uncovering of historic cases of abuse reflects an increasing public awareness of child sexual abuse. It is undeniable that the unveiling of the barely-kept secrets of the actions of

Harris, Savile and others prosecuted by Operation Yewtree signifies some kind of cultural shift. As the extensive coverage of the Harris case indicates, however, this horror operated in the register of 'scandal', where details of the case were avidly but ambivalently produced and consumed, rather than one of cultural and political change (Apostolidis and Williams 2004). The truth of the Harris case, read beyond the realm of individual pathology and, instead, as a cultural indictment, is deeply uncomfortable, and it is this discomfort that necessitates his casting out, a casting out that forecloses the wider questions raised by his downfall. In this way, the questions of celebrity masculinity and the wider tropes of masculinity Harris represented are stabilised as a system even as his individual manifestation of them is removed. What is at stake in a scandal is both an individual reputation and the restating of social norms. In other words, in the register of scandal, the public erasure of Harris reflects both public opprobrium of childhood sexual assault and, ironically, denial of its widespread existence. The public disappearing of Harris it seems is a desire to deny any wider cultural significance of his case. By disappearing Harris from public culture, the systemic nature of the problem of sexual violence and abuse could also be disappeared and it is in this sense that this case, like other public scandals, ended up buttressing the legitimacy of dominant discourses even as they manifest their 'deep corruption' (Apostolidis and Williams 2004, p. 27).

In general, even those media reports that attempted to engage with the Harris case as something with wider cultural significance did so in the register of 'exposure'. For instance, some, such as prominent journalist Janet Street-Porter (2014, p. 17), called for Harris's public legacy to not be removed but instead preserved to 'remind us how wrong we could be about a national treasure'. She argued that she wants their performances 'to be studied for future generations, to try to understand how none of us spotted what these men were up to' (Street-

Porter 2014, p. 17). However, while arguments such as these appear to reckon with societal complicity, they in fact preclude an acknowledgement of it. Street-Porter (2014, p. 17) says that ‘we need to keep their memory alive’ to ‘stop it happening again’. However, scandal, even where it is remembered, operates in the register of repetition rather than social change.

Calls for the maintenance of Harris’s artworks, potentially with educational plaques to accompany them, sidestep a broader reckoning with Harris’s legacy. A celebrity can be ‘unmade’ through erasure and denial or through selective erasure and denial that only retains evidence of wrongdoing. This selective erasure avoids the uncomfortable questions raised by refusing a strict bifurcation between Harris the much-loved celebrity and archetype of colonial masculinity and Harris the serial sexual offender. The reality is that these two figures were, in the end, both part of the same individual and the same cultural constructions of masculinity. This is not to say that they are strictly or necessarily causally related – a celebrity such as Harris could easily have not been a sex offender – but it is to say that they operate within the same cultural register. The same culture and cultural values that saw Harris’s particular masculine persona as admirable are those that allow the existence and denial of widespread sexual violence. As one columnist noted, it is ‘typical’ that ‘turning of a blind eye’ is later supplanted by a ‘punitive reaction’ when ‘the full picture is revealed’ (Blumenthal 2014, p. 31). This punitive reaction is typified both by the disappearance of Harris’s artwork and, potentially, by holding onto it as a record of deviance. The fact that Harris’s portrait of the Queen has not merely been removed from public display but figuratively unmade to the extent that it cannot be located suggests the ongoing public difficulty in responding to and resolving the questions raised by insisting on the continuities between Harris as much-loved celebrity and as a perpetrator of sexual abuse. It is my

contention here that raising and responding to these questions involves reckoning with the gendered, racial and colonial tropes that enabled Harris's celebrity.

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<sup>i</sup> The term '*terra nullius*', meaning a land without owners, was used by the British colonisers to legitimate and establish a constitutional basis for the dispossession of Australia's Aboriginal inhabitants through asserting that they had no proprietary rights to land owing to a perceived lack of social organisation and political institutions. This doctrine was rejected as 'repugnant and inconsistent with historical reality' in 1993 in the High Court Case, *Mabo v. Queensland (No. 2)*. The 'Mabo judgement' overturned *terra nullius* and forced the Australian government to recognise that Indigenous people had a prior, and, in specific circumstances, ongoing right to the land, codified in the *Native Title Act (1993)*. For a discussion of the role played by *terra nullius* in the Australian cultural imaginary, see Elder (2007). For a discussion of the continuing legal and cultural disputes surrounding native title, see Vincent (2017).

<sup>ii</sup> The referendum removed a series of clauses in the Australian Constitution that explicitly excluded Aboriginal people from being counted as part of the Australian population, effectively excluding them from the 'human' population, and resulting in them being governed separately, at times through government Departments devoted to managing native 'wildlife'. See Attwood and Markus (2007).