Lolita: Atemporal Class-Play

With tea and cakes

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Introduction

Figure 1
When Tokyopop released the first volume of its English language version of the Japanese collectable magazine *Gothic & Lolita Bible* in 2008, I predicted that it would not be widely accepted by Australian Lolitas. This thesis began as a media reception study in which I intended to explain why the magazine would fail to capture the imaginations of Lolitas. I assumed that the appeal of Lolita lay largely in an Orientalist fantasy of Japan and that Lolita was a subset of the Australian cosplay community. I anticipated the magazine failing to attract a substantial following because its localisation techniques would jar against the prioritisation of ‘authentic’ Japanese exoticism within the community. I was interested by Arjun Appadurai’s (1986: 56) observation that “as commodities travel greater distances (institutional, special, temporal), knowledge about them tends to become partial, contradictory, and differentiated. But such differentiation may itself ... lead to the intensification of demand.” I conducted a number of interviews with Lolitas about their media usage (both production and consumption). Over the course of these interviews it became apparent that the questions I was asking were wrong; they were neither as interesting nor as important as the aspects Lolitas themselves emphasised in answering my more open-ended questions. Japan and Orientalism barely featured in their responses. Some were fans of Japanese animation and cosplayed, but they firmly articulated a separation between Lolita and cosplay. Some Lolitas were musicians who had discovered Lolita through Japanese bands like Malice Mizer. Other Lolitas had no interest in Japan whatsoever. As I talked with Lolitas, read the novels and websites they recommended and looked more closely at what has been written about Lolita communities, I saw an as-yet-unexplored but fascinating aspect of Lolita: playing with an identity of leisure. Roger Silverstone (1999: 60) writes that “to step into a space and a time to play is to move across a threshold, to leave something behind – one kind of order – and to grasp a different reality and a rationality defined by its own rules and terms or trade and action.”

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1 Costumed Role Play: Dressing up and role playing a character, usually (but not exclusively) a character from Japanese animations or video games.
Lolita is the expression of a desire for indulgence untempered by the un-aristocratic concerns of earning income.

**What is Lolita?**

Lolita is a subculture originating in Japan but now worldwide, based around a clothing style that borrows heavily from European dress between the seventeenth and nineteenth centuries, particularly from French Rococo and British Victorian elements. According to Yuniya Kawamura (2010: 216) "the predominant image is that of a Victorian doll; it presents an exaggerated form of femininity, with pale skin, neat hair, knee- or mid-thigh-length Victorian dresses, pinafores, bloomers, stockings, and shoes or boots." Lolitas in Australia gather for sewing bees, tea parties, picnics and other social occasions. Although it is spread around the world and quietly growing, it remains unknown by a substantial majority of those who share their societies with Lolitas. It is a curious mix of the spectacular and the hidden, the performative and the private. Above all, Lolita is a feminised community (in the sense of 'by women, for women') in which male participants are also expected to be feminine (I discuss femininity in greater detail from page 32 onward). For these and perhaps other reasons, Lolita has not attracted a great deal of media coverage and relatively little academic attention when it is found outside of Japan. While English-language writings come from different angles and make a range of assumptions and conclusions about Lolita practitioners, there are some over-arching trends. The most prominent is the framing of Lolitas as immature and/or insecure. They are depicted as clinging to childhood in fear or selfish refusal of adult social responsibilities.

I will argue that this way of framing girls who practice Lolita is not unusual but is part of a wider social understanding of contemporary girlhood. I use 'girls' here explicitly rather than as a generalisation, because male Lolitas are very rarely considered in popular representations. In this research I have also focused on
female Lolitas with only infrequent mentions of male Lolitas (Brolitas\(^2\)/Boylitas). This is not intended to imply that Brolitas are unimportant; rather that their motivations for and experience of participation in Lolita communities are necessarily different from those of Lolitas and it is not within the scope of this research to unpack those complexities. Particularly important for this research is the distinction that “[b]oys’ identities may also be more likely to be taken at face value because of the notion- common across race and gender groups- that girls are more likely to be insecure” (Wilkins, 2008: 194). I also use ‘girls’ in favour of ‘women’ or ‘young women’ as a way of constant contextualisation. Catherine Driscoll (2002: 111) writes that for some Marxist (and often feminist) theorists “girls are systematically disenfranchised so that they will accept and desire a place as Woman.” Despite the quite wide age-range of Lolitas, they are consistently characterised by both academic and press authors as young, incomplete and as ‘becoming’ not ‘being’. These assumptions are captured in the term ‘girl’, a term that consequently has been subject to a number of reinterpretations (most famously by Riot Grrls).

Research Questions, Methodology and Process

Why do Australians participate in Lolita culture and what do they gain by their participation? In the English-speaking world Lolita is a small subculture. An article in The Times mentions a 2006 Lolita gathering in the UK of 1,500, but in Australia meet-ups rarely top twenty (Vine, 2006). Lolita is not taking Australia by storm nor is it likely to change the world in a dramatic way, so what can we learn from such a small group? How does Lolita contribute to our understanding of the interactions between gender, socio-economic status, media and identity?

It was logistically impossible to restart the interview processes to reflect the new focus of the project. Instead, where additional data was necessary I have

\(^2\) Brolitas wear dresses and ‘pass’ as female, often using wigs and make-up to complete their appearance. Ideally a Brolita should be indistinguishable from any other Lolita.
looked to two online Lolita communities, LiveJournal.com and Lolita.org. These sources are Anglophone but not used exclusively by Australian Lolitas. Data sourced from interviews is clearly distinguished from data taken from these websites. Key word searches using the internal search features of the two websites were the primary method of data collection from online sources. The secondary method was following hyperlinks posted in one thread pointing to similar or related discussion topics. All of the material used is publicly available to registered users of the sites, and registration is free and unrestricted. I did not monitor every new contribution to the sites nor read every post within a specific timeframe. Instead the sites were used as supplementary sources of information and context for specific topics raised during face-to-face interviews.

I conducted tape-recorded interviews with eleven Australian Lolitas in either Hobart or Melbourne. The interview data is presented with pseudonyms to retain anonymity and none of the Lolitas whose pictures are reproduced in this thesis participated in the interviews. Although this is a small sample size, as Andy Ruddock (2001: 133) points out, smaller samples “do not necessarily lead to weaker or less useful work.” These interviews typically lasted for forty-five minutes. In several cases Lolitas spent considerably more time with me, taking me to see their favourite shops and gathering places and sharing meals with me. At times I felt more like a novice being initiated into Lolita than a researcher. I learned that the treatment I received is commonplace for girls who express an interest in Lolita but are not sure if they are ready to be Lolitas: more experienced Lolitas meet with them to discuss their concerns and interests and introduce them to the community (one respondent had spent an entire year preparing herself to become a Lolita). One additional interview was a written response to a series of questions I sent by email. The primary interview questions are listed in Appendix 1. Where the answers to questions were open-ended, supplementary questions for clarification or to follow up on a new point of interest were asked as part of an ongoing conversation. The
final question in every interview was an invitation for Lolitas to discuss anything they felt was important but that I had not asked them about. Eleven of respondents were female, living in Tasmania or Victoria and aged in their mid to late twenties. Two respondents were teenagers and one was a Brolita. Interview participants were recruited in three ways: I placed an ‘advertisement’ in the LiveJournal ‘EGL: The Elegant Gothic Lolita Community’, I recruited in person at two alternative fashion events in Tasmania, and some respondents later referred their friends to me, representing a small element of snowball sampling. Thus I had three discrete lines of data and was able to cross check details between them. This data was subjected to content analysis within a qualitative, ethnographic, research framework.

The first chapter deals with access to representation and the power of media in anchoring social practices. The infantilisation of Lolitas by the media demonstrates the limitations of media frames in the case of girls and young women. However, the active engagement of Lolitas in 'misframing', that is, in perpetuating misunderstanding of their culture in order to maintain insider-outsider-boundaries, shows an awareness of young women’s position in relation to commercial media and an active engagement in the spaces to which girls do have access. In the second chapter, the case of academic pathologising of Lolitas’ presumed asexuality is highlighted through comparative textual analysis and examples of diverse Lolita lifestyles. In the final chapter the aspect of socio-economic disadvantage is highlighted by examining the atemporal class-play that is so central to Lolita. This aspect of Australia’s Lolita community has been largely invisible in previous research. It will be argued that the attraction of Lolita is strongly connected to a rejection of the contemporary social system, which offers some girls little hope for class mobility while concurrently assigning personal blame for their failure to be upwardly mobile. These girls use Lolita to displace themselves temporally and also to link themselves to a global cosmopolitanism in which their refined, specific taste

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3 I mean “infantile” not literally in the sense of infant development but in the pejorative sense, as in immature or puerile.
is a source of subcultural capital and their community prioritises a gift and praise economy. I argue that the current focus on the gendered semiotics of Lolita clothing prevents a deeper understanding of how gender influences other power dynamics, including social-economic status.