



## COLLECTING MEMORY

MAY 30, 1996

TRANSCRIPT

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*Clarence Page of the **Chicago Tribune** talks about the growing number of African Americans collecting Jim Crow and Slave era memorabilia.*

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CLARENCE PAGE: Talk about politically incorrect, I bought this sign [COLORED WAITING ROOM] about 20 years ago in a Chicago memorabilia shop. It cost me \$75. I've since been offered several hundred dollars for it. But I have no intention to part with it. In our family, this symbol of our past subjugation has become something of a trophy of triumph in our struggle of memory against forgetting. In recent years, I've found I'm not alone. Blacks like me have fueled a vigorous market in racist memorabilia--mammy dolls, Pickaninny postcards, Sambo art of all times is being trafficked by collectors at premium prices today, whether through antique shops, flea markets, newsletters, or word of mouth. The more vile the stereotyping, the more outrageous the bug eyes and fat lips and big hips, the more the item finds itself cherished by some black collectors today. It's a black thing, particularly among middle class blacks, the only people who in many cases can afford them. In a Southern suburb of Chicago, a store called Martha's Crib has a lively business in black memorabilia, including stereotypical memories of our painful past. At 32, the shop's owner, Marchelle Barber, is too young to remember legal segregation firsthand. The market for memories is so great, says Barber, that she sells replicas of colored waiting room signs and other hallmarks of segregation for \$15 apiece. There simply is not enough supply of the real thing, she says, to meet the demands of African-American consumers eager to capture artifacts. Another collector, Philip Merrill of Baltimore, isn't old enough to remember the days of Jim Crow segregation either, yet, he too became fascinated by its relics and has since become a leading expert of them. Part of his collection was put on display here at Manhattan's Hudson Guild Theater to carry on the theme of the play inside, "We Are Your Sisters," a dramatized oral history of black women who survived slavery.

ACTRESS: My grandmothers were strong. They followed plows and bent to toil. They moved through fields sowing seed. They touched earth and grain grew. They were full of sturdiness and singing--

CLARENCE PAGE: Inspired by his great grandmother, Merrill says, he has collected hundreds of items as haunting as these slave shackles or this letter of manumission that freed a slave woman named Sarah. His items are as degrading as this Sambo cap pistol with a hammer smashing into an open mouth or as disturbing as this antique hood and documents from the Ku Klux Klan. Looking at these demeaning images, one wonders at what they reveal. It was not enough to show blacks as laughable. They had to be reduced to something sub-human, non-threatening, and compliant, like a pet that must never be allowed to turn in any way against its master. "The medium is the message," Marshall McLuhan once said. The messages of this vulgar art seemed to change sharply and abruptly with its new ownership by the people who were its original victims. The Czech author, Milan Kundera, once wrote that the struggle of man against power is the struggle of memory against forgetting. He was writing about Communist repression. Our efforts as African-Americans to own racist memorabilia is another struggle against power and forgetting, a reminder of the images that lie just beneath the nervous surface civility of today's race relations. Designed to enforce white supremacy, these old relics possessed by new owners now expose its folly. I'm Clarence Page.



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