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Objects of Past Racism are Utensils to Educate

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During my visit to Gatlinburg, Tenn., about two years ago, two items quickly made their presence known -- grits as a potato substitute and black memorabilia.

South of the Mason-Dixon Line, the term "black memorabilia" doesn't describe framed Malcolm X prints or a diploma from Howard University. It's more like mammy salt and pepper shakers and wooden picaninnies eating huge slices of watermelon.

I was alternately intrigued, amused and offended: The items are powerful reminders of a less-enlightened time.

The sight of Uncle Remus utensil holders wasn't enough to cause rage or to spur a boycott of the offending businesses. That I was able to visit a place like Gatlinburg with a multi-racial crew of friends was proof enough that the real racial battles in the South largely have been won.

That opinion, however, apparently isn't shared by a group of black academics and civil-rights organizations. Late last month, they began petitioning Internet retailer eBay to stop selling such black memorabilia.

Ofari Hutchinson, president of the Inglewood, Calif.-based Alliance for Positive Action, sees the items as proof of "utter contempt" for African-Americans by many in society. Others note the casual use of the "n-word" on the souvenirs.

eBay spokesman Kevin Pursglove says the retailer routinely "removes listings using abusive or degrading words," but online buyers have their choice of hundreds of such items, including a bar of N- --- --- Head tar soap and a Jolly N- --- --- cast-iron bank.

So here we are, decades after the last "whites only" restrooms were integrated in this country, yet we still can't come to terms with lawn jockeys. Or maybe we are.

Despite their hypersensitivity, black activists make a good point that shouldn't be overlooked: These items are more than harmless collectibles. They come from a time -- not that distant -- when cross burnings and lynchings were a sport in parts of the United States.

The fact that Jewish groups successfully petitioned eBay to ban the sale of Nazi junk in 2001 -- or face a boycott -- proves the public should have voice in merchandising decisions.

On the other hand, eBay is no different from antiques shops and flea markets, where the odd Aunt Jemima figurine still pops up for sale. Often, the sellers and buyers are black. Many black people collect black memorabilia to remind us just how far we've come in this country - and how far we have to go.

One of the nation's premier collectors of black memorabilia, David Pilgrim, is black. He has bought about 1,000 items from eBay and has 7,000 more at the Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia at Ferris State University in Michigan.

Pilgrim realizes the hatred inherent in these items, but he wants them to be seen, analyzed and even ridiculed -- rather than erased from our collective memory.

Though concerned more with profit than education, eBay ends up doing much the same.

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