

**Highly offensive: Karen Juanita Carrillo examines the ongoing currency of racist curios. (Culture).**

Summer, 2003, by Karen Juanita Carrillo

"Ay, yie-yie-yieeee! "I am dee Frito Bandito!" the Frito-Lay Company's infamously caricatured Mexican American advertising mascot used to sing on TV commercials:

"I love Frito's Corn Chips/I love dem I do/I love Ftito's Corn Chips/I take dem from you!"

As a pudgy, greasy, illiterate-sounding, jolly thief, the Frito Bandito was an early 1970s racist offense. It took four years for Frito-Lay to pull the image from its ad campaigns.

During that time, the company's years of aggressively marketing the symbol--as a pencil eraser, a toy ring, and even as the feature on a "Wanted for Theft" poster--made Frito Bandito items a hot commodity. A writer on the toy collector's website ToyNfo.com notes that, "The controversy plus the age of the Frito Bandito, makes anything with his likeness quite collectible today.... A small pencil-eraser image of this gun-toting junk-food bandit, in good condition, can bring up to \$20 today."

The Frito Bandito is part of a growing trend in the world of racist collectibles. Like Aunt Jemima, Fu Manchu, and Redskin Indians, the Frito Bandito is a stereotyped ethnic image that may ignite controversy, but is also quickly becoming an income-generating antique.

Activist groups are reliably boycotting and petitioning to stop the sale of these items. What's strange, though, is to find that some of the newest consumers of these antiques are members of the same ethnic groups its stereotypes are slurring. Scores of recent magazine articles have featured middle-class African Americans finding their niche in the world of antiquing by collecting derogatory black memorabilia. Others, both white and non-white, are debating the merits of bucking political correctness and daring to purchase racially "edgy" items. Under the premise that "we could all use a laugh," or that racist antiques are collectible documentation of "how bad things used to be," ethnic memorabilia sell like hotcakes in online auctions and other markets. These reminders of the ugly faces of racism continue to have new permutations and continued shelf life.

#### To the Highest Bidder

There was a time when you could've typed in the letters "n-i-g-g-e-r" on eBay's search engine and pulled up "Tragic Mulatto" books, "Coon" ashtrays, "Sambo" or "Jigger" masks, "Picaninny" toys, "Uncle Tom" matchbooks, and tons of other so-called black memorabilia items.

In February 2003, the California-based National Alliance for Positive Action and the owners of the website BlackNews.com took the lead in urging eBay to stop selling such racially offensive objects. Although eBay banned the sale of Nazi Germany/Third Reich and Ku Klux Klan items back in May 2001, its new policy regarding the n-word will still permit the sale of "Mack memorabilia" and "extreme ethnic" items. eBay is currently setting up a new pop-up screen that will surface whenever the n-word is used to describe an item for sale on its auction site. The pop-

up screen will advise sellers that the n-word is "highly offensive" and that its use in describing an item will be checked and could be against eBay policies.

But eBay isn't the only auction house to blame. Online sites like Yahoo! Auctions and outfits like TrashTalkers.com have taken to selling ethnographic antiques and toys. Sotheby's, Swann Galleries, Christie's, and other high-end auction houses also sell racist items to the highest bidder. Items in circulation include the "Talking Alligator Cookie Jar" which, when you open the jar by tilting the alligator's head back, features the voice of an alligator saying, "Mmm Mmmm, them sho' is some tasty cookies!" At the website TrashTalkers.com, Perleberg, a company based in Germany, offers equal-opportunity offensive dolls: there's a male Chinese doll who's constantly got sex on his mind, and the site offers dolls depicting flamboyantly stereotypical gay white males. The gold-neck-laced black male doll, "Pimp Daddy," is programmed to utter phrases like "You better make some money, bitch" and "Ooww!!! You got some nice ass titties, birch!"; while a bindi-wearing, turbaned "Mr. Patel" reminds you that in his native country: "We would've already killed you already."

Racist dolls and ethnographic figurines and antiques have become so voluminous that selectively protesting the companies who sell them can seem like trying to stem a growing tidal wave.

### Collecting Garbage

"A lot of people think they know about race and racism," notes David Pilgrim, curator for the Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia. "But they don't."

A virtual tour of the museum is also available via Internet at [www.ferris.edu/news/jimcrow/menu.htm](http://www.ferris.edu/news/jimcrow/menu.htm). Ever since he was a child, the African American sociology professor says he has been both disgusted and fascinated by the proliferation of anti-black, Jim Crow images and racial artifacts. But he's found a way to overcome his disgust and use the artifacts as teaching aids.

Pilgrim points out, "These things are great visual aids in telling the story I am trying to tell. I see it as such a unique opportunity to teach people about race and racism in an educational setting.

"I hate them, I consider myself a garbage collector," Pilgrim says about the items the museum displays, "but it's still important to know about the Jim Crow period. So much of our race relations can be understood based on that period."

Pilgrim has also collected racist ethnographic pieces dealing with other people of color. His museum only displays Jim Crow related items, but Pilgrim says it's easy to see how decades-long racist portrayals of people of color helped to determine their station in life.

"A lot of people don't know what living under Jim Crow was like. But it's relatively easy to go back into history to find out what it meant," Pilgrim said. "You can take an image like 'Mammy,' and just think about why it was so embraced by whites and hated by blacks. What was the political and social climate that produced such an image? And how did it affect how black and white people lived their lives?"

The museum's website explains the history of these racist caricatures and the ways they were used to belittle blacks and deny their humanity. Physical distortions of black bodies and stereotypical exaggerations were used, the website notes, to maintain one-dimensional roles for African Americans. Many of these roles--depicting blacks as thugs, jezebels, and brutes--can also be seen in current portrayals by blacks of other blacks, Pilgrim also points out. The website is also adamant about showing how Jim Crow images are still being produced and utilized today.

"There is so much money in these things that people are even creating fake vintage items, to fool those who collect them," Pilgrim says, commenting on the eBay controversy. Although he has also collected anti-women, anti-Asian, anti-Indian, and anti-Mexican images, Pilgrim contends that anti-black images have been the most brutal and the most virulent throughout the history of the United States.

"It's powerful stuff and it certainly should make people think," he says. "I think you can never understand racism in this country until you understand how deeply whites hated blacks. And unfortunately, these images were the norm, this was the normal way whites treated blacks."

Sometimes when he speaks at schools or before community events, Pilgrim says he hears from people who are uncomfortable with recalling racist images of African Americans. But he's found that those who don't talk about race issues are the people who have the most problems with other races. "So much of our culture is about making people feel good. But people need to grow up. This talk about, 'Well, if we don't talk about it, things will get better....' Those are people who are not out there doing the work. I don't have time for that--race is too important to me."

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