



TOLERANCE IN THE NEWS

eBay: Auctioning Hate or History?

By Dana Williams | Staff Writer, Tolerance.org

March 7, 2003 -- Chances are, you won't walk up to a shelf at any store today and find a label for an authentic 1890 'Nigger Eats Watermelon' trading card. And you certainly won't see any TV commercial advertising an original 'Jolly Nigger Bank.'

But you can log onto eBay and try your luck at selling or bidding on everything from a bar of 'Little Nigger Soap' to Darkie Toothpaste Brand 'Sho' is Good' glass marbles.

On an average day, a basic search for the term 'nigger' on the auction site produces nearly 100 items of 'black memorabilia.'

Do these controversial listings exploit and glorify an American past fraught with racist stereotypes? Or are they simply a tool to help legitimate collectors describe and find relevant relics of history?

Some are convinced the listings on eBay that include the racial slur are an outright slap in the face to African Americans ' especially when the company prohibits the listing of other offensive items such as anti-Semitic or Nazi-related memorabilia.

'These items are blatantly racially offensive and many, many African Americans are offended and outraged,' said Earl Ofari Hutchinson, president of the National Alliance for Positive Action, an Inglewood, Calif.-based racial and social advocacy group. 'Why is it that when we as African Americans look at this and say it's offensive, there is no response?'

Hutchinson's organization recently launched a national campaign against eBay's 'racially degrading' listings.

'We are very disturbed about how some of the items are being presented and in many cases, described by the sellers as 'cute, cuddly and adorable gems,'" said Hutchinson. 'What's cute and cuddly about a 'nigger bank' or 'ten little nigger boys and girls?''

Hutchinson says eBay is violating its own mission and policy statements by allowing sellers to list items that are racially demeaning.

Under the heading 'Offensive material,' eBay's policy clearly states the company 'will judiciously disallow listings or items that promote or glorify hatred, violence, or racial intolerance, or items that promote organizations' with such views.'

But Kevin Pursglove, spokesperson for eBay, says the company is not violating any policies by allowing listings that include racial slurs.

'In the great majority of cases, the seller who uses the word 'nigger' is accurately describing the particular

item for sale,' said Pursglove. 'In each of those cases, the way the item is being described reflects the actual item. The item generally includes the word in the title of the product itself.'

'Nigger is not a synonym for blacks'

David Pilgrim, founder of the Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia at Ferris State University, says eBay not only needs to better police itself at enforcing its own policy, but should also become better educated about what it's allowing sellers to get away with.

'eBay allows people to use the term nigger as a synonym for blacks, even when that word is not in the title of an item,' said Pilgrim, who estimates he has bought about 1,000 of the racist collectibles in his museum from eBay. 'Nigger is not a synonym for blacks.'

Pilgrim said he has seen and purchased postcards, plates and other items on eBay that were labeled using the term 'nigger' even when the term appeared nowhere on the item in question.

'Sellers use the term as a marketing tool. They know there is an insatiable appetite in this country for racist memorabilia and people will search that word looking for items,' said Pilgrim. 'eBay is allowing this.'

But Pursglove said the company can only interpret a seller's motivation by reviewing an item's description, not its label or title.

'For example, if we find that two people are selling the same exact item and the first person identifies the item as 'American history from the '20s and '30s' and the second person, describing the same item, says, 'This is a great way to promote your beliefs or raise money for your racist cause,' we would pull the second item,' Pursglove said.

The market for black memorabilia, from inspirational items to racist ones, has continued to expand during the last two decades. The ease and anonymity of purchasing such merchandise from online outlets like eBay has contributed to the demand.

'We try to strike a balance with those who want eBay to address the sensitivities of a certain group of people or a community with those who have a legitimate interest or purpose in buying and selling items on eBay,' said Pursglove.

Still, Hutchinson says at the very minimum, the company should put a disclaimer on certain items, warning buyers and sellers that the merchandise and words associated with them are considered by many to be racially offensive.

'To not do so is unreasonable and irresponsible,' said Hutchinson. 'It's an outrage.'

'This is history'

Not all share Hutchinson's outrage over the use of the term 'nigger' on eBay or the racist memorabilia being auctioned there.

Philip J. Merrill, of Baltimore's Nanny Jack & Company, an organization devoted to appreciating and preserving black memorabilia, says both the slur and the articles of memorabilia are simply part of African American history.

'This is history and it's not all roses. Our journey has been one of overcoming,' said Merrill. 'And, as my grandmother used to say, you have to take the bitter with the sweet.'

Merrill, who is black, says he has no problem with the use of the term 'nigger' on eBay as long as it is used within a historical context.

'In terms of this memorabilia, people have to realize that these are historical offensive items that we can all learn from,' Merrill said.

Sellers of these items on eBay and other outlets, he says, are merely providing 'samples of the past in the present, and in a material way.'

At least one eBay seller of racist memorabilia, asking not to be identified by name, agrees.

'My view is that these items are from another era, which is hopefully past. I'm just here trying to sell interesting collectibles,' he wrote in an email to Tolerance.org. 'If you don't like these things, don't bid.'

D. Robinson, an eBay seller of an 1898 print titled, 'Last One In's a Nigger,' wrote in another email to Tolerance.org, 'I am surprised at the number of people who email me asking me if I'm racist for selling the picture. I understand the concerns of some, who think that so-called racist items should not be bought or sold, but [I] also understand the need for freedom of speech, press and choice.'

According to Merrill, eBay is simply an online version of the old-fashioned flea market or traditional marketplace.

'You can walk into any antique store in America and find this same memorabilia,' said Merrill. 'These items have been around for generations; they haven't just miraculously appeared.'

Tools for education, racial healing

Merrill and Pilgrim both agree that there is tremendous educational value in the collection and preservation of racist memorabilia.

But Pilgrim says the folks at eBay would especially benefit from learning more about such items. Only then, he says, would they be better equipped to make certain racist items sold on their site are authentic and presented appropriately.

'I would love to have members of the eBay staff come to my museum and see the items I've purchased from eBay all in one room,' said Pilgrim. 'They'd get a different perspective on how harmful this stuff is.'

Pilgrim admits he often refers to himself as a 'garbage collector.' And though he says he is bothered by the fact that the market for racist collectibles is so vast, he knows it is important for people like himself and other legitimate collectors to provide a framework for understanding historical and contemporary aspects of racism.

'I think all of this stuff should be in the garbage or in a setting where we can cry and yell and talk about it, someplace where racial healing can come about,' said Pilgrim.

Merrill says access to items from the past, no matter how hurtful, is necessary.

'I live and breathe African American history and culture,' said Merrill. 'Some of it is racist, some of it is hurtful. But we need to have access to these items so we can learn about them ' their impact, who made them, how they were used. Only then can we have a dialogue about it.'