

Bidding on racism

The online sale of black memorabilia has raised heated questions: Should eBay allow racist language in the item descriptions? And should the auction site allow such sales at all?

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It is arguably the most inflammatory slur in the English language.

A Harvard law professor who wrote a book about it calls it the "signature phrase of racial prejudice."

Even Eminem has said he won't use it.

But search for the n-word on eBay and you'll get as many as 80 hits, for items ranging from black activist Dick Gregory's 1963 autobiography N--- to antique mechanical banks in the form of grotesque caricatures of black people that bear the trademark "Jolly N---."

In February, several groups held a rally in Los Angeles calling on eBay to respond to complaints from users about the word and some of the items.

The online auction giant said it had a policy forbidding language that promotes hatred, violence or racial intolerance. A spokesman said that it pulls items that violate the policy but that not all uses of the n-word are violations; the word is permitted as part of a title or trademark.

On Friday, eBay announced a new policy aimed at further limiting the use of the word. But the word is only part of the problem. Sales of black memorabilia on eBay and other auction sites include items of historical value and new reproductions that perpetuate racist stereotypes.

The controversy, then, is really about two issues: Should eBay allow sellers to use racist language to describe items? And should eBay allow the sale of offensive items at all?

The first question would have seemed to be addressed in eBay's original policy statement, found on its site: "eBay policy prohibits the use of language that is racist, hateful, sexual or obscene in nature in a public area."

Kevin Pursglove, a spokesman for eBay, which has corporate headquarters in San Jose, Calif., said the word n--- "is not a category on eBay. It may be used as a descriptive term by individual

sellers." Though eBay provides a virtual marketplace, sellers write the descriptions of their goods.

Earl Ofari Hutchinson is a Los Angeles radio host, online columnist, author and president of the National Alliance for Positive Action, one of the groups that protested against eBay. "I did a search on eBay of other ethnic terms that are used in pejorative ways," he said, rattling off a list of ugly words. "I didn't find any collectible that used that term. Somewhere in this wide world there's an item that used one of these words. Not on this site. Why just this word?"

Many of the items that turn up on a search on the n-word are books, movies or records that use it in their titles: Richard Pryor's classic comedy album *That N---'s Crazy*, Joseph Conrad's 1897 nautical novel *The N--- of the Narcissus*, John Lennon's song *Woman Is the N--- of the World*.

Hutchinson said, "I have no problem with that. That's legitimate."

"If you look at the listings, you'll generally see the term is included as part of a title," Pursglove said. One day last week, that was true of 26 of 67 items found with that search term. Many of the others used the word as part of a trademark, such as cans of an old brand of tobacco called N---head.

What Hutchinson and others objected to most was uses of the term when it's not a title or trademark but part of a description. "I've looked at some of these things, and it's used for racially offensive items. And some of them are described as 'cute' and 'cuddly.' I mean, come on."

One recent example was an old-fashioned print depicting a black child peeking out of a stack of wood. The seller described it as a "n--- in the woodpile print, an adorable picaninny!"

Pursglove said, "We've had this issue raised a number of times over the years. In the last four to five weeks we've gotten 100 to 125 e-mails and phone calls."

In some cases, he said, "People who object don't realize we have removed some of these items."

"This has been handled extensively by our trust and safety team," he says. "They have the primary responsibility for activity on the site. They monitor it, whether it's offensive items, fraud, illegal items.

"We check these listings almost daily, probably twice a day."

Pursglove says that monitors do more than check for certain words. "We remove any item that is being sold or described in a way that promotes hatred. You might have two people selling the same item -- for example, one of the coin banks. One person could be selling it as a legitimate collectible from the '20s. Another person could be selling the exact same item and describing it as a way to raise interest in or as a talking point for a racist organization.

"If an individual is using eBay to promote violence or racial intolerance, we remove that item."

Pursglove said, "We don't remove as many items as we used to because people have learned we have a strict policy. That's scared away some of those people."

Hutchinson said that eBay had responded to his organization: "We've gotten two concessions from them. They say they'll monitor the site much more closely and that any language they feel is offensive in these descriptions they'll take out."

"And they say they'll send what they call an educational message, although I don't know what that is, to all potential listers and sellers of these items."

On Friday, eBay announced a new policy. Starting next month, when a seller uses the n-word in an item description, a box will automatically pop up on the computer screen, telling the seller that the listing contains a word which may be "highly offensive to many in the eBay community" and could violate the company's policy against racially offensive items. Hutchinson said the language in descriptions isn't his only concern. "When someone calls up one of these items, we want something on this page that says, 'Many people find these items to be racially offensive.' If they are going to allow these items to be sold, we want some disclaimer, something much more bold."

And that brings up the second question: whether items that perpetuate racist stereotypes should be sold on online auction sites. Black memorabilia, also called black Americana, is a phrase that covers a wide range of items, from Aunt Jemima cookie jars to slave shackles, from Negro League baseball jerseys to postcards bearing photographs of lynchings.

To many people, some of these objects are offensive reminders of a racist past. But others argue that the objects are part of history and worthy of preservation, that they serve as important reminders of that racist past.

Many collectors of black memorabilia are black (estimates range from 50 to 80 percent); well-known collectors include Oprah Winfrey, Bill Cosby and Spike Lee. Lee made extensive use of black memorabilia in his 2000 movie *Bamboozled*, about a 21st century minstrel show that becomes a hit TV series.

Some of the items traded are clearly, cruelly racist, such as a postcard with a picture of a black baby being eaten by an alligator with the caption "Gator bait in Florida!" Some evoke painful chapters of American history but contain important information, such as the records of slave sales. Others, such as memorabilia from Negro League baseball, signify the achievements of black people despite racism.

David Pilgrim, a professor of sociology at Ferris State University in Big Rapids, Mich., has been grappling with the significance of black memorabilia most of his life. As a young black man, he began buying objects such as Aunt Jemima figurines in order to destroy them.

In 1994 Pilgrim founded the Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia at Ferris State as a way of preserving the more than 4,000 artifacts he had collected (many of them purchased on eBay).

He wanted to put them into a context that would ensure they would be used to teach about and prevent racism, not perpetuate it.

Pilgrim's work has made him a veteran of online auctions and knowledgeable about collectors of black memorabilia and their motivations.

"There are 50,000 to 100,000 people who buy" black memorabilia, he says. "They're black and white. I'd say there are five categories. There are people who speculate, who hope to make money from the items. There are those who are nostalgic for the good old days, whatever those were.

"There are liberation buyers, who want to take the stuff out of circulation. There are people like myself who want to use it to educate. And there are those who say, 'It's my First Amendment right to buy the weirdest, dumbest thing I can buy.' " Pilgrim says that the use of the n-word in titles in online auction descriptions isn't a problem. Other items contain the word as part of their design or brand name, such as cans of N---head brand oysters from an old Baltimore company or early 20th century prints of a group of black children about to go swimming, with a caption reading "Last one in's a n---."

Pilgrim has bought thousands of such items for the museum and knows a great deal about their authenticity. "Some people say these things are part of history," he says, and he agrees that they can teach us about the past.

The genuine artifacts are one thing, he says, but there is a profound difference between them and objects that use the old racist imagery on new goods. The real thing may be history; the fakes feed racism.

"The overwhelming majority of what they're selling as black memorabilia are reproductions," he says. "That's one thing many people don't realize: the scam element. Some dealers have become very smart in how they describe things: 'I don't really know how old this is, it was told to me it was this old,' that kind of thing."

But, Pilgrim says, some buyers are not being scammed. "The really disturbing thing is that there's a whole new market for new racist images.

"There are mouse pads, clocks, watches. Anything on paper: new postcards, new posters. I saw one the other day where someone had taken the old N---head tobacco label and put it on a lunch pail. That's a brand new item."

Such objects aren't about historical value, Pilgrim says. They're about perpetuating racist stereotypes and racism, and the market for them is brisk.

"A big thing now is soap. People take the racist images from the old soap labels and put them on new ones. If the word n--- is on the label, it will sell for \$40 to \$50. If it doesn't use the word, it sells for about \$6."

eBay's Pursglove says, "We have gone so far as to remove reproductions." The announcement on Friday also included new language for eBay's offensive items policy. It will now say that eBay will not allow "listings of racial or ethnically inappropriate reproductions." Pilgrim counters, "The staff (at eBay) weren't ready for this. They don't understand about this area." He doubts whether eBay staffers have the expertise to monitor the authenticity of such items. Pilgrim doesn't argue that eBay and other online auctions should ban the sale of black memorabilia. "I detest the material. But I don't want to live in a society where you can't sell Aunt Jemima cookie jars."

But given that eBay has banned some classes of objects, he believes that some of the worst racist items should be off limits. "Things like lynching memorabilia, raping memorabilia, I wouldn't mind seeing those banned."

There are items that eBay does not permit sellers to offer. In 2001, eBay changed its policy to forbid the sale of items related to racist organizations such as the Ku Klux Klan, Nazis, neo-Nazis and Aryan Nations.

According to the "Policies" statement on the site, "eBay will judiciously disallow listings or items that promote or glorify hatred, violence, or racial intolerance, or items that promote organizations (such as the KKK, Nazis, neo-Nazis, and Aryan Nation) with such views."

Why allow black stereotypes but forbid Klan T-shirts? Because, Pursglove says, many of eBay's international markets, including France and Germany, have strict laws against such sales.

But, Hutchinson says, eBay was also responding to pressure from groups that objected to Nazi and KKK material, including a widely publicized letter from Rabbi Abraham Cooper of the Simon Wiesenthal Center, a Jewish human rights organization.

Pilgrim says, "I think that emboldened some African-Americans, because there has always been more antiblack material than Nazi material at these sites. That became the jumping off point. And the more people looked at these sites, a lot of the pieces showed up that people found objectionable."

The sellers have the ultimate responsibility for that objectionable material. But online auctions make it easier for such material to be bought and sold than the bricks-and-mortar paradigm did. A dealer who opened a shop at the mall and filled its display windows with racist memorabilia would create an uproar. But that dealer flies under the public radar online, usually visible only to those searching for such items.

That's why Hutchinson says he wants not bans or boycotts but warning labels that let people make their own decisions. "Take cigarettes," he says. "It doesn't matter what brand you smoke. There's a warning on there about the dangers. It doesn't stop you from smoking. You read it and . . . then you go about your business.

"You mean to tell me they can't do something similar about racially offensive material?"

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