

Romancing Collective Memories by Recontextualizing Stereotypical African-American Images In Marketing Materials

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Many marketing materials produced from the 1860s until the 1960s contained stereotypical and derogatory depictions of African Americans. Today, many of these items, referred to as black memorabilia, black collectibles, or black Americana, have been removed from commercial use and recontextualized as acceptable to modern-day social realities: collections. This decontextualization - recontextualization process suggests two things: (1) an attitudinal shift has occurred and these images no longer serve a functional part of everyday life (c.f., Danet and Katriel 1989, 1994; Stewart 1984) and (2) collecting black memorabilia celebrates the irrational function of these images from the past, i.e., it romanticizes them.

We provide insights into the evolution of the collective memories associated with these stereotypical African-American advertising images. We use as a theoretical framework, collective memory, a rubric for exploring how group members retain, alter, or reappropriate public knowledge of history (Halbwachs 1950/1992, Schwartz 1991, 1997). Collective memory theory acknowledges the significance of context in shaping cultural meanings of consumer goods/images and provides a framework for describing the romantic evolution of these representations of blacks in marketing materials from despicable characterizations into prized possessions.

Evidence is drawn from an analysis of the collective memories recorded in print for three decades (from the 1970s until 1999). This raw material documents the changing attitudes, debates, and meanings of these images. Prior to discussing this study, we provide an overview of black memorabilia, and describe both the collective memory framework and the romantic philosophy.

BLACK MEMORABILIA

After the Civil War manufacturers and advertisers used images of blacks to sell a plethora of goods, the most famous of these include Uncle Ben's Rice, Cream of Wheat

breakfast cereal, and Aunt Jemima pancake mix. There is almost universal agreement that early depictions of blacks in U.S. advertisements were visually unattractive and revealed something about advertisers' and consumers' perceptions of and prejudices against African Americans (Goings 1994, Lemons 1977). While there was a movement from the 1950s to the 1970s to remove these stereotypical images from the public domain (Morrison 1974), today, many African Americans, and others, have amassed significant collections that include both beautiful and beastly depictions of blacks.

COLLECTIVE MEMORY AND THE ROMANTIC ETHIC

Collective memories represent what members of social groups know about the past, and reside in material aspects of individuals' lives (e.g., Halbwachs 1950/1992, Swartz 1991, 1997). As such, collective memory is a remembering of the past informed by shared experiences and public narratives and it evolves over time (Schwartz 1991, 1997).

Danet and Katriel (1994) note that collecting is a means of powerfully expressing the romantic ethic which suggests personal revelations and introspective insights can be gleaned through experiential consumption (Holbrook 1997). Therefore, consumers may collect to imaginatively create new experiences or modify old ones (cf., Campbell 1987; Holbrook 1997). Collectors actively and constructively create new meanings for items by reframing the objects to complement present concerns (Danet and Katriel 1989, 1994; Stewart 1984). Many early representations of blacks in marketing materials are grossly stereotypic, visually unattractive and comedic. Perhaps these items are collected to reframe the past, this is, to update and transform the collective memories about the African-American experience. Our research questions are: (1) what are the collective memories of black memorabilia at different periods? and (2) how have these memories changed over time?

METHODOLOGY

We examine articles and books from the popular press to trace the changing collective memory about these marketing materials (Schwartz 1991, 1997). We found 159 full-text articles and 27 books published between 1970 and 1999 specifically examining collecting these images and artifacts. We then developed a list of how authors represented black memorabilia in these publications (Smith and Lux 1993). From there we synthesized these historical facts into sets of primary associations. Finally, we developed a theory for how black memorabilia came to be valued so highly in the marketplace.

THE EVOLUTION OF COLLECTIVE MEMORIES

Our historical analysis of the public discourse about black memorabilia suggests the collective memories associated with these objects have evolved over time. The first discussions of black memorabilia in the popular press discussed how black memorabilia could be used to document the history of blacks in America. These interests eventually gave way to collecting, spurred on by the rich set of memories associated with the objects. By collecting these objects, collectors socially reconstructed the shared memories for the objects into something more pleasing, i.e., they "romanced" them. By the mid to late 1990's the "romance" of collecting black memorabilia was replaced by the "business" of collecting. However, this progression should not be oversimplified such that the competing collective memories evident in our analyses are lost (see also Motley, Henderson and Baker 2003). There are different interpretations of the "reality" represented by the objects. These competing memories and meanings continue to cause tension among collectors and non-collectors about why these artifacts should and should not be preserved/collected.

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