Buy It Now
White, Michele

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Buy It Now: Lessons from eBay.

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Sellers deploy the terms “gay,” “gay interest,” “lesbian,” and “lesbian interest” to make an array of desires visible on eBay and establish oppositional positions. Many of these sellers resist eBay’s structures and regulations. However, sellers support eBay’s “Black Americana” category and assist in rendering stereotyped black identities and disempowered African Americans. In this category, sellers have not collaboratively developed forms of critical resistance. Instead, sellers attach such insulting terms as “mammy,” “sambo,” and “nigger” to reprehensible depictions of African Americans performing dimwitted actions, dancing, and serving. For example, writer_art renders African Americans as cheerful, servile, and unable to separate eating from evacuating by offering an “adorable” bank with a “little fella” that “is happily eating a huge slice of juicy, ripe watermelon as he sits on a pottie” and “happily” holds “coins for you.”

smitherama also conflates caricatures and people, connects disability to African American identities, and dismisses black agency and adulthood with the term “little” by offering “a delightful little guy” that “can sit up by himself, but not stand by himself.”

Black Americana items are listed under “Collectibles > Cultures & Ethnicities” and “Collectibles > Postcards > Cultures & Ethnicities.” These categories also appear on eBay’s Canadian site. eBay’s terms and sellers’ listings promise to deliver black cultures, collectibles, and history while listing racist representations that empower whites, providing apocryphal narratives.
that excuse slavery, and constructing an eBay community that appears to be good while reproducing intolerance. The “Cultures & Ethnicities” that are listed under the collectibles category are “African,” “Asian,” “Australian,” “Black Americana,” “British,” “Canada: First Nations,” “Canada: Inuit,” “Celtic,” “Egyptian,” “European,” “Ethnic Americana,” “European,” “Hawaiian,” “Latin American,” “Middle Eastern,” “Native American: US,” “Pacific Islands,” “Russian,” “Western Americana,” and “Other.” All of the specific identities listed under the postcards’ cultures and ethnicities category, which are “Asian,” “Black Americana,” and “Native Americana,” describe people of color. In these instances, eBay uses “Other” to stand for anything not grouped in the specified category but still ideologically connoting difference. eBay makes it seem as if the cultures, products, and even ideas of people of color are collectible and can be owned. This commodification of cultures and identities, which is also produced by museums, the antiques market, and other businesses, needs further critical address because people often conflate cultural objects with individuals. This may be heightened in Internet settings where software programs, technologies, and viruses are identified as animate and avatars and profiles are often understood as people.

eBay’s correlation of identity and market is particularly damaging because many of the identities referenced in the cultures and ethnicities categories, including black Americans, have been colonized and inequitably portrayed as less than human. For example, bigbobbie uses the problematic and outmoded term “negro” when listing a “BLACK AMERICANA MINIATURE ORNAMENT” of a “NEGRO GIRL WITH A GREEN SKIRT ON” (figure 18). However, the manufacturer of the figurine also conveys stereotypes by rendering a monkey-like female with a smile stretching from ear to ear, a black knob of hair, oversized eyes, jutting ears, and large feet that look like they can grasp things. The depicted stance, with hips tilted coquettishly to one side and arms placed in a glamour girl pose, emphasizes her uncovered breasts, suggests she is sexually available, and connects her to purportedly primitive and abnormal desires. In such cases, the sexuality of African American women is commodified. Through these listings and category structures, eBay and sellers work together to make it seem as if African Americans can still be bought and sold.

eBay encourages sellers to list different items in the black Americana category. It has subcategories for “Banks,” “Books,” “Cards,” “Dolls & Bears,” “Figures & Sculpture,” “Housewares & Kitchenwares,” “Magazines,” “Paper,” “Photos,” “Prints, Posters, & Paintings,” “Signs,” “Reproductions,” and “Other.” eBay does not indicate the features that make a bank or poster black Americana...
Nevertheless, eBay promotes the expansion of this category and the things that sellers include. eBay has added more subcategories since my research began in 2006. Thousands of items are listed under the black Americana category, but sellers rarely define the term “black Americana” or describe the relationship between listed materials and African Americans’ histories and cultures. For the seller elegantharlot, black Americana dates “from early American slave-history to the present” and “encompasses the cultural attitudes of Black Americans and America’s response to its Black culture.” eBay and sellers often claim that black Americana represents African American history, even though many of the depicted objects and descriptions render stereotyped portrayals. For instance, a postcard is supposed to portray “a time gone

18. bigbobbie, “BLACK AMERICANA FIGURE FREEMAN MCFARLIN MINIATURE,” eBay, 3 February 2007
by” and a factual history, while the back of the postcard provides the unlikely indication that the “happiest person on earth is the negro picking cotton.”

Most of the materials listed in this category were produced by whites and represent their beliefs about African Americans. These representations justify white culture, which is barely mentioned under the “Cultures & Ethnicities” category, because the eBay site, like America and a great deal of Europe, renders white culture as the norm and presumes that it does not need qualifiers or specific identification.

eBay sellers use the general black Americana category when presenting materials that excuse and romanticize slavery, rendering insulting narratives about blacks, and selling objects that celebrate African American culture. Sellers offer such things as music performed by African Americans, mid-twentieth-century magazines directed at black readers, vernacular photographs of African Americans, images of black historical figures, pottery and other materials depicting black families and relationships, and artwork produced by African Americans. The seller elegantharlot also considers “Black Americana” ceramics that “could be seen in the American homes, kitchens, bathrooms, famous Restaurants and international store chains, ranging from the absolutely derogatory in characterizations to the most beautiful and respectful Black expressions and cultural icons.” However, elegantharlot does not interrogate the reasons for combining such materials under the term “Black Americana,” what results from this production of black Americana and Americans, and the function of the objects being sold. When sellers use the term “black Americana,” they make varied items, including such “derogatory” representations as the green-skirted and animal-like figurine, represent black history and African Americans.

In this chapter, I employ the phrase “black Americana category” to describe eBay’s structuring of these materials. This allows me to write about the ways the category functions and how narratives about African Americans, organized through the eBay site, are produced for distinct political functions and support racial oppression. David Pilgrim, a sociologist and curator, describes how the control of black people through social mores and Jim Crow laws was supported by negative portrayals of blacks as ridiculous, subordinate, animal-like, and depraved. These state and local U.S. laws enacted a separate but equal system that provided inferior accommodations for African Americans. Sellers’ black Americana narratives tend to continue these earlier negative portrayals and beliefs into the present day. Through the black Americana category, eBay’s category system, brand community, and orga-
izational logic support racist conceptions of African Americans. I use the phrase “black Americana produced by whites” when considering materials that were designed by whites in the nineteenth century, twentieth century, and twenty-first century and that represent the values of some Caucasian Americans. I intend it to indicate the ways whiteness, blackness, power, and disenfranchisement are rendered by the objects and listings that are described as “black Americana.” It should also convey how the eBay site and members produce black Americana and conceptions of African Americans.

Sellers’ listing practices perpetuate the denigrating ideas about African Americans that were originally conveyed by black Americana items produced by whites. Buyers re-collect black Americana items, which have been previously purchased and displayed, and purchase the recollections that come with these items. These highly constructed memories include sellers’ nostalgic narratives about slavery. Through such unfortunate eBay practices, the listing and selling of black Americana items works to disenfranchise African Americans and further commodify them. I interrogate the eBay site’s and sellers’ practices by employing the historical and critical literature on nineteenth-century and twentieth-century representations of African Americans by such authors as Stacey Menzel Baker, Carol M. Motley, and Geraldine R. Henderson; Carolyn Dean; Kenneth W. Goings; Marilyn Kern-Foxworth; and Patricia A. Turner. Combining this literature with texts on identity and the commodification of people of color, including writings by George Pierre Castille, Patricia Hill Collins, Mary Jane Suero Elliott, Herman Gray, Grace Elizabeth Hale, and Kevin Ruggeri, helps me demonstrate how black Americana sellers perpetuate the idea that black peoples and cultures can be owned, marketed, and controlled. I also employ critical literature on cuteness by Anne Allison, Sharon Kinsella, and Sianne Ngai. Their research assists me in considering how sellers displace the racist aspects of black Americana items by using such terms as “cute” and by indicating that objects are appealing rather than offensive. These critical practices are also useful in interrogating how racism and the commodification of blackness circulate in other Internet settings and spheres.

The renderings of black Americana and Americans that are conveyed through the black Americana parts of the eBay site, like lesbian interest listings, incorporate diverse materials and ideologies. As I have already argued, selling mainstream erotic representations of women and vernacular images of women under the lesbian interest search term can destabilize the viewing and desiring position of straight male and lesbian viewers. However, this
undermining of standard viewing positions and forms of address does not occur on all aspects of the eBay site. Sellers’ black Americana listings tend to emphasize objects and collecting rather than represent an empowered African American viewer or facilitate black empowerment. The race of collectors remains unaddressed in these eBay listings, even though it has been a major concern in other black Americana collecting cultures. Some gay and lesbian interest sellers highlight alternative buyers and resistant collecting practices, but black Americana sellers do not describe African American buyers rereading and reworking the racist past that many of the materials portray. Instead, their listings emphasize nostalgic reenactments of collecting and recollecting. In these instances, racist ideas and objects are kept within the eBay community instead of the child’s toy boat or the couple’s engagement ring, which eBay depicts as things that the community keeps and cherishes.

My call for critical analysis and tolerance in the marketing of black Americana may seem extreme, since despite their claims the eBay site, sellers, and buyers are focused on profitmaking. Nevertheless, equitable and reflective sales strategies could generate higher prices. Black Americana items have become more valuable since vendors at collectibles shows and other individuals have addressed the politics of black Americana. Thus, the strategies of eBay sellers are founded on racism and, perhaps, a lack of familiarity with the intricacies of the black Americana market, rather than revenue. Sellers could acknowledge the community of African Americans who critically read and collect these materials and thereby engage a broader collector market and facilitate a community that considers histories of racial oppression and does some good.

The Conflicted Position of Black Americana on eBay

Collectors, the authors of books on collectibles, promoters and sellers at collectibles shows, owners of antique shops, and auctioneers have helped to articulate black Americana and make it into a collectible. eBay has increased the presence of black Americana and the reprehensible conceptions of African Americans that items and sellers convey by providing categories for these materials and making black Americana listings a visible part of its site. eBay has encouraged the development of this area by adding subcategories for items in the general black Americana section. This causes some conceptual problems in how eBay renders its corporate and community identity. eBay’s production and maintenance of the black Americana category, and buyers
and sellers who advance the racist narratives of items, undermine claims that the setting is a caring community, a discourse that I considered in chapters 1 and 2. Such failures of the site’s ethos could cause further problems for eBay’s brand community. Nevertheless, eBay has not explained the relationship between “bad” objects, including the materials the company removes from the site, and its vision of “good” members who sometimes buy, sell, and are fans of these things.

eBay has an “Offensive Material Policy” and moral stance that should dissuade the company from promoting black Americana materials and prevent individuals from selling these items. As with its policy on nude images, eBay changes the precise wording but retains its regulations. eBay specifies that sellers “may not list items that promote or glorify hatred, violence, racial or religious intolerance, or items that promote organizations with such views.” eBay “will generally remove items that bear the marks of such organizations, such as relics from the KKK or certain Nazi memorabilia.” eBay emphasizes its values and that “listings that are racially or ethnically offensive are not permitted on eBay. eBay and its community of users will not tolerate such material.” Nevertheless, it goes on to note:

Occasionally, there may be listings of antiques or historical pieces (often referred to as “Black Americana”) that, while unacceptable in today’s society, are relics of an era where racially inappropriate and insensitive products were widely available. While these items are offensive to eBay and its community, eBay recognizes that such historical items find their way into museums and private collections, and serve as important tools for education about the past.

eBay’s decision to remove many items with Nazi and Ku Klux Klan (KKK) markings but actively support the sale of black Americana items is conflicted. While eBay identifies this policy as part of its community values, it seems likely that the policy is based on the anti-hate-group statutes that are enforced in such countries as France and Germany and the lawsuits against Yahoo! for facilitating listings of Nazi items on its now defunct auction site. eBay and Yahoo! prohibited many Nazi items in 2001, after the appearance of legal challenges. Despite its resistance to Nazi and KKK items, eBay justifies black Americana listings because these materials are historically important and can facilitate educational experiences. Of course, Nazi and KKK objects might also be used to critique racism and interrogate the ways hate is deployed. eBay claims that black Americana is part of an educational experi-
ence, but its “More Info About Black Americana” section, which is offered at the bottom of the list of category items, does not provide information about these materials or a definition of the term. eBay thereby fails to support its own reasons for including black Americana. Sellers also refer to the historical productivity of black Americana materials without providing examples of how these items might be educationally deployed, offering informational texts about their histories, or indicating the period in which they were produced.

eBay’s policy statement distinguishes between “historical pieces” and “reproductions.” It bans, “at the request of community members,” listings “of racial or ethnically inappropriate reproductions” and sellers’ use of “offensive words and phrases.” Through these declarations, as in other situations, eBay constitutes good community members to have them conceptually do the work of policing and regulating. eBay provides provisos, but racist terms and reproductions appear in black Americana listings and the related items are bought by community members. eBay actually encourages the production of racism and the breaching of its own policy by including a “Reproduction” subcategory under the general black Americana category. At the same time, sellers of gay and gay interest items, as I suggested in chapter 4, regularly have their listings and accounts canceled by eBay, even though many of their items meet the company’s guidelines. Black Americana sellers do not post to the site about the guidelines or indicate that their listings and accounts were canceled. They may not even be aware of the black Americana policy, because it is not mentioned in the category. eBay’s policies and better-publicized narratives render a community of care. Nevertheless, its black Americana category supports the reprehensible communities that produce and trade in these items and the existent cohort of sellers who commodify the bodies of African Americans.

eBay sellers produce a more powerful and cohesive rendering of black Americana and Americans than what appears in collectibles shows and other physical venues, because a vast number of listings are always available, items are categorized and can be viewed together, and sellers’ written narratives tend to convey similar racist ideas. For instance, sellers’ stories about happily working African American women imply the women’s willingness to serve; representations of nearly nude black women indicate that they are sexually available; and performances of dialect such as “Chill’en HeresUrMammy!” suggest that African Americans cannot speak properly.18 Through these devices, eBay’s black Americana category and sellers’ listings support social and
corporate interests in disempowering African Americans and profiting from their devalued labor and bodies. This strategy of disenfranchisement is related to eBay’s promise to fulfill all desires, deliver any object, acknowledge a multitude of consumer identities, and empower all people while promoting stereotyped gender positions and white heteronormative relationships.

Commodifying Black Americana and African Americans

The identities of most eBay buyers and sellers remain at least partially obscured, but there is a great deal of evidence that black Americana sellers are white. Sellers note that the people represented in black Americana items are different from them. They also provide visual and textual confirmation of their whiteness. For instance, sellers display numerous items by holding them and thereby display the whiteness of their hands. Sellers also present digital self-portraits that verify they are light-skinned. While race is culturally constructed and a slippery concept, and there are problems with identifying people’s race, these sellers produce themselves as Caucasians. Some sellers state that they are white. For instance cajunokie sells “mammy magnets” and “black folk art paintings” and self-identifies as a “57 year old white lady.” She differentiates herself from the stereotyped depictions of black people and advises, “Nope This Isn’t Me!” near one of her “mammy” figures. For her, “Mammy has become like a real person . . . with a distinct personality.” Nevertheless, the producers, designers, and purchasers of black Americana produced by whites use these items to assert their empowered position and the purported differences between African Americans and Caucasian Americans. eBay sellers hold small figural representations of African Americans in their large light-skinned hands. However, I have not found any sellers of reprehensible black Americana who self-identify as African Americans or as people of color.

Some of the literature on consumerism and identity demonstrates how individuals produce their identities in collaboration with groups, consumer processes, and products. Marketers, according to the sociologist Joseph E. Davis, recognize that “an inwardly generated self is a fiction,” and we “are selves in dialogue, both internalized and in direct conversation, with others.” This “shaping and conditioning of our self-understanding by consumption is one form of the commodification of self.” Individuals are valuable commodities. They are produced and addressed by marketers and manufacturers and
often willingly align their shopping patterns and identities with brands. This commodification of the self provides such rewards as being recognized and supported by groups, including brand communities. The largest number of representations of African Americans on eBay appears in the black Americana parts of the site. However, the forms of commodification that occur through the black Americana category do not provide any empowering or politically viable identifications for African Americans.

Some people are commodified without their permission, rendered consumable and impotent, and left with little control over how their identities are culturally understood and deployed for profit. Castille considers the commodification of indigenous people: Their “image and identity have simply been extracted from Indian reality as a ‘raw material,’ to be smelted and forged into new shapes. The processing is managed by wholly owned subsidiaries of the dominant society, entirely free of Indian influence or control.”23 In a similar manner, Caucasian Americans produced black Americana to justify the history of slavery in the United States. They continue to market and control the meanings of black bodies through advertisements and products. By “promoting racist, dehumanizing stereotypes,” writes Ruggeri, “black inferiority could essentially be ‘sold’ to the entire nation.”24 In the black Americana category, African Americans have not visibly engaged in this commodification. Yet the animation of black Americana items and claims that these objects speak make it seem as if African Americans are producing these images and selling themselves.

eBay’s black Americana category is worth studying and critically resisting because it promises a community of good people while turning black bodies and identities into marketable products and rendering racism. Collins and Gray consider the problematic marketing of African Americans as dimwitted and dangerous and the ways some black individuals have redeployed these stereotypes and profited from their own commodification. Gray describes how “rappers have used cinema and music video to” appropriate the form “for different ends: namely, to construct or reconstruct the image of black masculinity into one of hyperblackness based on fear and dread” and to gain some power and profit from this process.25 African Americans recognize that black culture is marketable and marketed and, according to Collins, “put it up for sale, selling an essentialized black culture that white youth could emulate yet never own. Their message was clear—‘the world may be against us, but we are here and we intend to get paid.’”26 These processes continue.
However, eBay produces limiting types of gender, race, and sexuality though an interface that the company claims is new and that nevertheless produces nostalgic representations of racist and slave cultures.

Sellers use racist terms and stereotypes in their listings even though eBay’s policy prohibits such behavior. enghousea lists an “Old Milk Bottle. Molded glass w/ baby, negro, mammy face” but the words on the bottle are “liquid... one quart” and “brookfield baby top.”

Jayhawkks offers the Antique Trader Black Americana Price Guide under the title “Black Americana book $2005 Mammy Lawn Jockey Negro more.” However, the terms do not appear on the cover of the book. Other sellers present a “Delightful Cast Iron Black Americana Pickaninny Mammy” and a “Negro Mammy cast iron Dime Bank.” These sellers employ racist narratives about dimwitted and servile African Americans that may appear to be justified by period artifacts. However, their language is rarely supported by the texts that are printed on or otherwise incorporated into objects. Instead, sellers’ descriptions further commodify African Americans and produce them as terms and objects.

eBay sellers of black Americana cookie jars, salt and pepper shakers, and other collectibles do not acknowledge contemporary critiques of American slavery. The historian Ira Berlin describes an intense contemporary “engagement over the issue of slavery,” including critical considerations of race relations and the relationship between racism and slavery. Sellers sometimes mention slavery in their black Americana listings, but they also use such terms as “mammy”—a black woman who is imagined to be maternal and to happily support a white family that is not biologically her own—to soften or elide how African Americans have been treated as property. They offer listings with descriptions such as “The sweetest little scene of a mammy cookin’ up dinner,” “black mammy nursing a baby, possibly she is a wet nurse,” and “Service with a smile, and faithful too, that’s this Black Mammy Cookie Jar!” These sellers justify servitude by describing black women embracing these positions and smiling at oppressors.

Turner uses the phrase “contemptible collectibles” to describe stereotyped representations of African Americans. For her, there are problems with using the terms “black Americana” and “black collectibles” because they consist of “images of blacks and images by blacks” and do not distinguish “art blacks can be proud of from the mass-produced schlock that distorts and degrades” African Americans. Black Americana sellers use terms like “Negrobilia” and continue to support slurs and perpetuate limited beliefs about people. The use of the term “black” when considering these items makes it seem as if
blacks were integrally involved in their production and distribution. However, these images fail to represent the diversity of skin colors, interests, and desires of black people.

The Politics of Black Americana

Caucasians have been evaluating blacks and conveying their beliefs about people from the African diaspora for centuries. The objects offered on eBay tend to repeat the limited and stereotyped conceptions of African Americans that were generated after the U.S. Civil War and abolition of slavery. While slavery existed in the United States, there were economic reasons for individuals, who were offering slaves for sale or trying to recover individuals who had escaped, to provide detailed portrayals that included, as Kern-Foxworth has indicated, African Americans’ “virtues as well as their shortcomings.”35 The historian Robert E. Desrochers Jr. studied slave-for-sale listings in a Massachusetts newspaper and discovered that advertisements “included a short description of slaves’ physical characteristics” that were often accompanied by an “enthusiastic character assessment. The terminology used to describe slave bodies included ‘able,’ ‘strong,’ and ‘active.’”36 Caucasian Americans’ reasons for producing these more positive representations of African Americans were far from noble. Their depictions were designed to encourage a better sale price or enable bounty hunters to identify escapees. However, these portrayals still articulated some positive attributes.

With the repeal of slavery, Caucasian Americans were no longer commercially motivated to portray African Americans as skilled. Many whites wanted to explain away the injustices of slavery and their complicity in the institution by indicating they had benevolently taken care of African Americans during the antebellum period. After the Civil War, negative portrayals were popular among Caucasian Americans because they re-established the purported differences between whites and blacks, displaced whites’ fears of blacks by making African Americans comic, excused slavery by representing African Americans as embracing servitude, and indicated that blacks were incapable of living as adults without white guidance. These controlling images informed African Americans about the violent punishments for not following prescribed roles and functioned in a similar manner to postcards and other documents of spectacle lynchings.37 For instance, “funny” items depict black men’s legs—and, metaphorically, their genitals—being consumed by alligators. These objects are designed to erase black men’s sexuality and remind
them of the punishments for having sex with white women. As many African Americans were gaining rights, these derogatory representations worked to control their social position.

Negative portrayals of African Americans that represent them as childish, grotesque, and stupid were produced during Reconstruction and continued along with Jim Crow laws and the expansion of racial segregation. Historians indicate that these items were designed by whites in the North and sold in the South. However, these representations have no regional borders. Blackface minstrelsy shows were popular in the North, and products such as Aunt Jemima pancake mix, which was accompanied by a stereotyped depiction of a mammy, were marketed nationally. Negative representations of African Americans were also produced in Japan and Germany during the first half of the twentieth century. In such cases, Caucasian Americans’ narratives about African Americans were transferred to other countries, conflated with larger conceptions of people from the African diaspora, and produced understandings of black people and Americans. Through these processes, African Americans were produced, sold, and commodified worldwide.

Insulting portrayals of black people are still thrown to cheering audiences during Mardi Gras parades in Louisiana; are available in the gift shops attached to former plantations in different parts of Louisiana; are sold in other venues in the U.S. South; and are marketed through numerous ecommerce sites. According to Tara McPherson and her interrogation of racial oppression, tourist sites along Louisiana’s River Road and in other parts of the South have displaced the antebellum and postbellum conditions of African Americans by constructing nostalgic descriptions of plantation living, including apocryphal accounts of African Americans who were eager to serve. In such locations, new developments and roads tend to be given names that include the word “plantation” as phantasmatic references to one version of the area’s past. For instance, the Internet site for University Club Plantation—a planned community in the Baton Rouge area—invites potential residents to “Come Home to a Louisiana Plantation.” University Club Plantation claims that its properties have “all the charm of the old South and all the amenities today’s discriminating homeowner wishes for.” It is “a lifestyle you can retreat to from the fast-paced life outside.” This use of the term “discriminating,” in conjunction with descriptions of old Southern living, is disturbing. The word also describes instances in which people are treated differently because of their race, sex, or other perceived characteristics. Disparities between inside and outside are perpetuated as University Club Plantation assures prospective
owners, “Behind the monitored entrance a sense of community abounds.” Such sites render local communities where people can celebrate the “past” without addressing all of the facets of contemporary society or thinking about racism. eBay presents black Americana as a way for members to address race, presents a community that is opposed to intolerance, and uses these structures to forward the ideas and values incorporated into black Americana.

Old narratives about happy plantation communities and new forms of screening and segregating are facilitated in the United States, but many reproductions of black Americana items are made in China and other parts of Asia. For instance, some of Zeus’s Mardi Gras throws, which are freely given to people along the parade route in Metairie, Louisiana, represent a black woman with an “O”-shaped mouth, beady eyes, and a slice of watermelon and are marked “Made in China.” Such stereotyped images, including those that depict African American women as not understanding things and speaking in incomprehensible dialect, make it seem as if black women are happy to labor and unable to perform more intellectually demanding work. These stereotypical images, as Collins argues, have “been essential to the political economy of domination fostering women’s oppressions.” At the same time, the women of color laboring to produce black Americana items are dominated by these images and oppressive manufacturing conditions.

David Redmon provocatively argues in his documentary film Mardi Gras that this festival is made in China—or, at least, that many of the throws and beads that mark membership in localized American rituals are made in China. The women producing these materials in Chinese factories are poorly paid, work long shifts, face health problems from breathing toxic fumes, and occasionally lose limbs or die because the machines have no safety features. Nevertheless, for many people in New Orleans, the celebratory rituals of Mardi Gras and accompanying swag are believed to unite people into a community along the parade route. This imaginary unification displaces the commodification of African Americans, Chinese people, and other women of color, which is facilitated by racist throws. It also elides the parades that no longer occur because some Caucasian American Mardi Gras krewes refuse to integrate. Such collectibles make Mardi Gras into a brand community with racist underpinnings. Black Americana items sold on eBay, which are incorporated into the site’s category system, also undergird the eBay brand community. The exportation of American racism to other countries, where ostracized groups labor to render images from the racist imaginary of Caucasian Americans, suggests the wide reach of black Americana narratives and
encourages studies of the complicated ways these materials shape cultures, economies, and brands. On eBay, black Americana items are portrayed as records of the history of slavery in the United States and as educational tools, but many of them are contemporary and made in China and other parts of Asia.

Black Americana has anti-fans as well as links to brand communities. Organized African American boycotts of such reprehensible representations as Aunt Jemima—probably the most recognizable mammy figure—began in the early twentieth century. In the 1960s and 1970s, organizations such as the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) increasingly pressured companies to stop producing stereotyped representations of African Americans. Between the 1950s and the 1970s, a great deal of the promotional material that used stereotyped images of African Americans was removed from sight or destroyed because of pressure from organizations such as the NAACP. Individual African Americans also purchased and then destroyed items to remove them from the consumer chain and popular imagination. The “motivation for these efforts,” according to Baker, Motley, and Henderson, “seemed to have been to eradicate items with stereotypical images from the collective memories of Americans.” People’s re-collecting of objects and employment of them as a way to reminisce were prevented through such practices. For instance, Sharon Jones, who went on to collect black Americana items produced by whites, bought her first Aunt Jemima cookie jar in 1968 “to take it out of circulation” and “make sure it would not get back in the hands of whites.” In the 1960s and 1970s, images of the political figures who challenged stereotyped conceptions of race, such as Angela Davis and Malcolm X, began to replace representations of docile black servants. However, in white communities, images of the “threatening street-fighter,” as Goings indicates, became the new stereotype and were also used to define African Americans as different and as outsiders.

Representations of African Americans have been incorporated into Caucasian Americans’ homes and decorating schemes, particularly in the kitchen, for more than a century. Nevertheless, there was no overt vintage and antique collecting culture for black Americana items produced by whites until the late twentieth century. In the 1980s, the appearance of a number of black Americana shows and coverage of people’s collections in the antique-trade and popular press made individuals aware of black Americana items produced by whites; their value increased, and collecting became more common. These items were originally marketed to white consumers, and early
collectors were often Caucasian Americans. However, as the collecting trend continued, a growing number of African Americans, including high-profile individuals, began to buy the materials to reconceptualize their historical and cultural position and to recollect differently. Turner traces the interest in black Americana collectibles produced by whites to publicity, including a spot on NBC’s *Today Show* that featured Janette Faulkner’s vast collection.\(^{49}\) Faulkner, who was a social worker, believed that teachers could use such items to demonstrate the enormous impact of racism on American culture. Sellers such as 8800anita occasionally argue that an item “is a marvelous educational artwork in the telling of a crucial part and period of Black American History, which has been greatly ignored in the art community.”\(^{50}\) However, there is never any explanation in the eBay market of how these materials will educate people.

Without critical analysis, black Americana items produced by whites displace African Americans’ histories and identities. For Elliott, to be “commodified by a colonialist culture” includes an “appropriation of discourse and an oppression of black identity.”\(^{51}\) Hale chronicles the ways black stereotypes, and in some cases body parts that were harvested from lynched African Americans, were used to articulate the identities of Southern whites. There has been a counter-trend in African American communities to collect black Americana produced by whites to document and remember how Caucasian Americans have depicted African Americans. Thus, some African Americans read black Americana as a kind of depiction of Caucasian Americans. In such cases, collecting black Americana includes commodifying the otherwise invisible white identities that are incorporated into these narratives. This enables African Americans to take at least partial control over the marketing of black bodies and cultures.

The reporters Jerry Adler and Frank S. Washington, in a similar manner to Collins and Gray, encourage individuals to read black Americana items as depictions of African American resistance. They advise viewers to look “carefully,” because the “‘jolly mammy’ to whom the white boy and girl turned for cookies is frozen in humiliation; the Coon Jigger is vibrating, not with jazz, but anger. The souls of black people were trapped in these heaps of mass-produced junk. Now at last they are being set free” by critical processes.\(^{52}\) For Kern-Foxworth, “the negative images promulgated yesterday can be transformed into positive ones today” through cultural recontextualization.\(^{53}\) The political possibilities of reading black Americana as both representations of Caucasian Americans and whites’ attempts to control the meaning of black
culture are emphasized in some black Americana collectibles shows and in the ways African Americans collect these materials. For instance, Julian Bond, who was national chairman of the board of the NAACP, offers a critical commentary about these objects in the *Antique Trader Black Americana: Price Guide*. Resistant black Americana collecting practices continue, and some of these collectors use eBay to obtain items, but the eBay market still operates by articulating insulting and derogatory representations of African Americans. If sellers produced political and resistant readings, then they would provide ways to address the functions of these objects, make them into educational tools, raise their market value, and offer a more tolerant and profitable model than eBay’s and sellers’ current practices. In a similar manner, studies of individuals’ resistance to being marketed stereotyped Internet identities in the form of avatars, technology advertisements, and profile configurations can point designers and corporations toward the economic advantages of diversifying avatars and interfaces.

**Collecting Black Americana Reproductions**

People’s interest in collecting black Americana produced by whites has increased the value of these objects and supported a growing reproduction industry. Reproductions highlight the value of these items by indicating they are desirable and a limited resource. At the same time, they contribute to the devaluation of black Americana by making it difficult to determine what is being purchased. Some reproductions are sold as period items. Theorists are excited about the collecting of reproductions because replicas undermine the value of collectibles and the past that the items are supposed to be situated within and to convey. Walter Benjamin and other cultural theorists indicate that copies challenge the authority and history of originals by providing an array of narratives and versions. For Adler and Washington and Kern-Foxworth, collecting black Americana can be the first step in rereading and repurposing items. However, making reproductions, particularly new items that rework reprehensible conventions and narratives, can also validate the stereotypes that earlier works convey. Reproductions perpetuate the nostalgic narratives about plantation pasts and stereotyped portrayals of lazy African Americans into the present.

Some reproductions are dense consolidations of period stereotypes rather than exacting copies. For example, creeksideprimitives makes new game boards with stereotyped images of happy and servile African American men.
valuable by informing buyers that they are “hand-crafted” and thus one-of-a-kind.57 However, reproducing “aging” and rendering the “vintage look” is a form of massification. Such reworkings represent a comforting past that continues into the contemporary period in which men “sitting around a pot-bellied stove” facilitate rural community. creeksideprimitives advertises its operation as a “woodworking and crafting business,” location “on the family homestead for about 16 years,” and ancestry from “pioneer stock” that “settled” in the mountains of Virginia “over 230 years ago!”58 With such stories, sellers displace the technological aspects of selling on eBay, the processes of manufacturing reproductions, and the locations and conditions under which many of these items are made with proclaimed connections to the American land and preindustrial place. Sellers’ descriptions of authentic forms of crafting and lifestyles also elide the deeply constructed aspects of black Americana items produced by whites and make them appear to be more real. Black Americana thereby depicts a cohesive community that continues eBay’s narratives about members being family and doing good work, even though items support racist stereotypes. Members are tied into these positive community narratives when they buy.

Reproductions repeat the past. They also make it difficult to determine the details of the period because they reference multiple times. On eBay, reproductions of cast-iron banks and other items are often sold as nineteenth-century artifacts or as records of the antebellum period. This has created problems for individuals who sell and collect period artifacts. The provenance of items and their material details are difficult to determine on eBay because buyers cannot look at all aspects of an object and cannot observe markings, paint quality, and materials firsthand. These issues are referenced in sellers’ indications that “photographs don’t do it justice,” but in these cases, items may be less desirable than their representations. It is likely that duplicitous marketing motivates eBay’s banning of reprehensible reproductions. eBay cannot claim to be doing good work by enabling the sale of items with historical and educational value if it unreservedly allows reproductions. Nevertheless, these sales offer some critical possibilities. Individuals’ difficulties identifying the period in which items were produced can remind them that most listed objects were manufactured after the antebellum period.

Buyers of black Americana items produced by whites are often concerned about condition as well as attribution. Items are usually less valuable when they have damage such as cracks, creases, fade marks, mildew, lost parts, scrapes, stains, and worn paint. However, flaws also indicate that an object
is old. The yellowing of paper or wear to the handle of a wooden tool conveys its long history of use. According to nowarkedd, it “is wise to remember that most used and antique collectibles will have nicks, cracks, scratches and dings consistent with age” and that such wear is a form of “‘patina’—proof of their pedigree.” Nevertheless, nowarkedd’s item is “brand new! It looks 1890s, but no, it’s a reproduction!” Through patina-suffused reproductions, sellers contradictorily assure buyers about the objects’ pedigree and worth. Reproductions are more reasonable than period items; they have a poor resale value; and their history can be physically cleaned up and conceptually rewritten. By actively ignoring eBay’s rules about reprehensible reproductions, sellers also problematize eBay’s model of trust. These contradictions may offer productive methods from which to launch critical resistance, since eBay’s general policy changes have already caused disenfranchisement among members.

Wear is sometimes faked, but eBay sellers still demonstrate that items are old and original by listing flaws such as worn glazes from repeated handling. For instance, wham2001 lists “A GREAT OLD SET OF BLACK MEMORABILIA SALT AND PEPPER SHAKERS” that are obviously old because of “THE RUBBED OFF PAINT.” This history of wear, which is visibly documented in many of the listings, is a disturbing aspect of black Americana items produced by whites. Weathering may be produced at the back of a disreputable antique shop, but wear appears to—and often does—convey the long periods of everyday engagement people had with these denigrating representations. According to Goings, individuals “consciously and unconsciously accepted the stereotypes” by using these materials every day and in a “familiar manner.” Worn paint and chipped ceramics indicate that people were comfortable incorporating racist beliefs about African Americans into their homes and lives and that these pieces helped generate cultural beliefs for decades or even more than a century.

Sellers’ descriptions of wear, which imagine the pleasant homes within which black Americana items produced by whites were situated and the delights in using them, help further the racist intents of these objects. For instance, newsquarepa offers a children’s book with a stereotyped depiction of a large African American woman doing laundry that “appears to have been enjoyed, because it does show wear.” Of course, the literature on doll play shows how wear can be a mark of cultural resistance and a record of burning, burying, or otherwise destroying toys that assert undesired norms. African Americans have been taking these objects out of the consumer stream
for decades to supplant the racist beliefs conveyed by these representations. However, eBay ordinarily displaces these forms of cultural resistance and instead renders a never-ending cycle of consuming, collecting, relinquishing, and encouraging new owners to experience racist narratives through objects. eBay facilitates a vast virtual array of black Americana items, which includes individual depictions, iterations, and objects within each type. eBay’s representation of this large and insistent text and sellers’ nostalgic chronicles of wear continue nineteenth-century and twentieth-century racist narratives into the present day. Buyers and sellers of gay interest underwear and swimwear describe eBay’s censorship and make it clear that individuals cannot get everything on eBay. However, eBay’s own policy indicates that there are black Americana listings that should be canceled or sold differently.

The Problem of Reading Black Americana as Black Americans

Representations of African American women, including portrayals of smiling “mammies,” are the most common form of black Americana sold on eBay. Mammies, according to Hale, are key components of Southern cultural production in both literary and visual forms. In his study of Aunt Jemima, M. M. Manring identifies depictions of mammies as some of the most persistent media representations of black people. Representations of happy mammies are similar to the claims of proslavery propagandists such as George Fitzhugh and beliefs that slaves were as “happy as a human can be.” On eBay, mammies smile while acting as note holders that are always there to remind; are eviscerated so twine can be dispensed through their bodies; are formed into banks that store and save; and serve as hard laborers who have places for utensils grafted onto their backs. They are represented cooking, scrubbing, sweeping, performing child care, and doing other kinds of labor. The mammy is thereby a controlling image and, according to Collins, justifies “the economic exploitation of house slaves” in the antebellum period, explains black “women’s long-standing restriction to domestic service,” and directs African American women to labor. In the last few chapters, I have demonstrated how eBay’s representations and narratives about work, engagements, and weddings configure users. In a related and destructive manner, the large number of black Americana items on eBay configures conceptions of African Americans and the kinds of work they can perform.

Black women seem to acquiesce to even the most intolerable conditions when their bodies are re-crafted into a variety of implements and a smile.
accompanies these shapes and roles. Feminist film scholars have critiqued the ways white women are objectified through such cinematic processes as cropping and framing.68 However, designers of collectibles who depict parts of black bodies protruding from ceramics do even more metaphorical violence to women’s bodies. eBay sellers perpetuate these derogatory connections. For instance, mollyester offers a mug whose handle has been sculpted into a “googly-eyed bare-breasted black female” with protruding buttocks (figure 19).69 Black women’s supposedly abnormal buttocks, which the mug’s pose emphasizes, have been associated with an unruly sexuality and primitive characteristics.70 According to the gender and race scholar bell hooks, black women’s sexual colonization under slavery and presumptions about their promiscuity continue to inform cultural conceptions of African American women’s sexuality.71 The transformation of the mug’s handle into a woman’s body that can be erotically grasped and held makes it seem as if

African American women also live to be grasped, touched, and owned. The mug producer’s depiction and mollyester’s description of “googly” eyes and an uncomprehending mind continue cultural conceptions that black woman do not understand gender and sexuality standards.

Black Americana items produced by whites, according to Goings, function as “surrogate African-Americans in people’s minds.” For instance, oddpilott animates a black Americana set of salt and pepper shakers: “Peppy is in mint condition but Salty has had a fall and his head had to be glued back on.” With this description of Salty’s “fall,” the shaker becomes a named person with a history. ruthlesspromotions describes the height and condition of a set of “Mammy dolls from New Orleans” but also articulates them as people with gestures and personalities. One “rings a bell,” and “the other two just stand there and boss you around.” ruthlesspromotions does not “know if you need three more women in your house but” is willing to “part with these to the lucky winner.” brewersgeneralstor offers a “Bakery chef holding freshly baked bread (that you can almost smell).” With such descriptions, black Americana items become part of a living, tactile, and multisensory world. Sellers also animate objects in other categories and thereby support an array of cultural stereotypes.

A ceramic depiction of a young black child on a chamber pot suggests black people debase themselves (figure 20). In the depiction, the child’s head is tipped too far back, and his mouth stretched open in a grimace. The open mouth, which the seller identifies as either a bank or an ash collector, conveys the child’s willingness to be violated. In simultaneously gulping something and evacuating into the chamber pot, the child combines processes that, according to social norms, are supposed to remain separate and ostensibly demonstrates his lack of knowledge about hygiene and humanness. This combination of eating and evacuating is also featured in numerous representations of black children consuming watermelon while sitting on chamber pots. In the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, many Caucasian Americans wanted African Americans not only to be second-class citizens, as Goings states, but also “to actively acknowledge their subordinate position by smiling, by showing deference, and, most importantly, by appearing to be happy even as they were treated horribly.” The representation of the gulping child justifies abuse of African Americans because the individual seems to sit and wait to be debased by ash or dirty coins. This excuse is continued in a variety of black Americana items.
Displacing Racism

Sellers have found ways to incorporate the most reprehensible black Americana narratives into the everyday lives of buyers and sellers. Mr. Haneys truck evokes a racist continuum when listing a chalkware representation of black children with bulging eyes, gigantic mouths, and an enormous slice of watermelon as being “right off grandmas wall.” A cast-iron bell of a mammy figure, which depicts a large and lumpy body, is described by oldwest as “a very nice item for your Front door! It would look great on the door to a farm house In the country!!” Countrygal70 auctions a “Wonderful old souvenir doll from New Orleans” that “would look really cute in a country home.” Sellers use terms such as “nice” and “great” to describe the quality of the material object and thus avoid addressing the racist renderings of African Americans. Sellers envision these items, and the African American workers that many of these objects portray, as complementing certain kinds of interiors, homes, and lifestyles. The race of buyers is not mentioned in

20. ggterps, “Old Black baby on chamber pot bank or ash collector,” eBay, 3 August 2006
these descriptions. However, the places that these representations are imagined to decorate, including farmhouses, suggest that black Americana items produced by whites can persist in agrarian communities that purportedly facilitate more relaxed and traditional ways of life.

In the nineteenth century and early twentieth century, many Caucasian Americans identified representations of African Americans as humorous and lighthearted. Depictions of African American children with “enlarged crania, rounded features and wide eyes charmed the average viewer,” according to Dean, and were identified as “appealing, if not adorable” because “the embedded bias operates subtly.” Writing about the same time period, Goings suggests that many white people found these representations to be “very endearing.” eBay sellers continue to read and describe these representations as cute and charming. For instance, ratsden43 offers a “really cute Mammy doll.” surfbunnyanne presents a vintage pair of “caricature” ashtrays, where the figures’ widespread mouths are the ash collectors. According to the seller, they are “cute cartoon faces with earrings and bones in hair.” Such sellers do not address the ways their objects render African Americans as primitive and ready to be defiled.

By using the term “cute,” sellers describe items without addressing—or, perhaps, even acknowledging—the offensive stereotypes that are operating. Cute objects, as well as the people they portray, appear to pose no physical or conceptual threat because, according to Ngai, they “have no edge.” Objects that are called “cute” are likely to be soft and round. They are associated with the infantile and feminine through age and gender stereotyping. For instance, eBay sellers also employ the term “cute” when they list toys and young girls’ clothing since those items reference children and are soft and frilly. It may be difficult to see how “cute” black Americana objects denigrate African Americans because, on a certain level, they portray charming and endearing beings. They also represent African Americans as childish. In her work on “minstrelized girls,” Kinsella connects Japanese representations of cute, erotic, and idiotic girls who have oversize features and “chubby feet” to nineteenth-century blackface performances of infantile African Americans. Minstrel shows included racist blackface portrayals of African Americans with oversize lips, noses, collars, and shoes. eBay sellers describe these same characteristics, including oversize painted mouths, as cute.

Kinsella’s and Allison’s studies of cuteness, while focusing on contemporary Japan, hint at what these black Americana narratives about cuteness displace. According to Kinsella, a cute cartoon character is “small, soft, in-
fantile, mammalian, round, without bodily appendages (e.g. arms), without bodily orifices (e.g. mouths), non-sexual, mute, insecure, helpless or bewildered.”87 In Japan, as Allison states, cuteness is associated with “sweetness, dependence, and gentleness.”88 eBay sellers of black Americana articulate a similar set of attributes. shopperoasis offers “a cute hinged tin advertising Uncle Leroy’s Licorice Drops” that depicts an African American man with a round, bald, and bulbous head and facial features.89 Whether it is the depiction of the bulbous and not fully formed shape of Uncle Leroy’s head or Hello Kitty’s flat face and not fully detailed features, cute is often associated with visually simplified things. For Ngai, this makes cuteness “a sort of primitivism.”90 In black Americana items produced by whites, this primitivism and simplification of elements is associated with simple individuals. For instance, abstracting the person’s mouth as an “O” associates the individual with incomprehension, the inability to speak clearly, and the inability to determine morals and values.

shopperoasis also describes a “Black Americana Hit Me Hard Carnival Toss Target Game” as “cute” (figure 21).91 In the depiction, the man’s large head, small body, and chubbiness fulfill some of the characteristics of cuteness. Nevertheless, whether it is understood as a game or as a larger cultural mandate, it is hard to engage with this item as if it is cute. The game depicts a seated black man who is flanked by the phrase “Hit me hard.” The man seems to be happily requesting abuse because he is grasping his stomach in laughter and widely grinning to welcome tossed balls. The “Hit me hard” request makes it seem as if black people invite physical punishment. The game, like other black Americana items produced by whites, associates African Americans with infantilism, primitivism, and incomprehension. After all, cultural ideas about identity suggest that physically aware and sensible adults do not invite such pain and punishment. Instead, games and challenges to “hit me hard” are associated with child’s play. The game, like other depictions of passive and vulnerable cute beings, excites “a consumer’s sadistic desires for mastery and control.”92 Associating African Americans with cuteness thus connects them to powerlessness.

eBay sellers describe black Americana items that contrast large and small features as cute and adorable, particularly when these objects render mobility limits. These items include depictions of African Americans handling objects that are too large for them and representations of individuals who have a combination of large and small appendages that prevent them from moving easily and render a form of disability. thesecondchef markets an African
American “little boy’s” face that is overwhelmed by gigantic features by describing it as a “cartoon character” with “sweet and innocent features.” This African American may be described as “adorable” because he has no body and no mobility; his head is directly perched on tiny and dysfunctional feet. Cute things also tend to emulate weak members of society and, as Kinsella states, “can’t walk, can’t talk, can’t in fact do anything at all for themselves because they are physically handicapped.” Black Americana items produced by whites associate incapacity and disability with African Americans, who are presumed to need help from Caucasian Americans. Through this process, black Americana items produced by whites associate disabled individuals with disempowerment rather than acknowledge the varied ways people engage and navigate the world.

A buyer of Coon Chicken Inn dishware describes it as “cute” and “fun to have” despite the grotesque representation. This china depicts an excessively wrinkled black man with one eye screwed closed, a widely stretched mouth that still seems too small for his numerous teeth, and a madly perched porter.
hat. In black Americana items produced by whites, such gigantic mouths and fleshy bodies suggest that African Americans are unable to control their appetites. Representations of African Americans swallowing ash and balls make them seem animalistic and unable to judge what is edible. African Americans are also represented as semi-mute despite oversize mouths. They try to communicate with almost incomprehensible dialect. These denigrating depictions of African Americans, like sellers’ narratives about smallness and cuteness, articulate a Caucasian American culture that is big, virile, and powerful. The tendency to use the term “cute” when describing technologies designed for women also controls and configures women’s relationship to knowledge and skill.

Some eBay sellers magnify the racist aspects of black Americana items by employing derogatory phrases. Using offensive terms and highlighting the most negative aspects of depictions is profitable because extremely derogatory objects sell for more money.96 aaahmazing offers “Amazing Banned & Censored Crazy Cartoon Classics” and lists a variety of stereotypes.97 aahmazing references the “historical significance” of these racist animations, but neither a government nor eBay has banned them. Several of dwells00collectibles’ “postcards are racially insensitive, to say the least.”98 millerzt offers “an interesting pair of racist salt and pepper shakers.”99 However, millerzt does not provide an indication of what is interesting, so it seems as if the items are fascinating because they deploy offensive stereotypes. Sellers may indicate that items provide a racist view, which also suggests an item’s greater value, but they do not provide considerations of how the racism operates or the problems in showing and selling this material. Instead, they mime cultural sensitivity and regulation to highlight the value of their items. Without deleting images or texts, these sellers evoke censorship in a manner that is related to gay interest sellers’ performances of the seen and unseen. However, gay interest sellers must deal with eBay’s removals of listings and resistance to their sexual expressions. Black Americana sellers do not self-identify with African American positions and do not deal with the consequences of their breaches of eBay policy or marketing of intolerance.

The Auction and Slavery

The ability to buy and sell black Americana representations supports the continued commodification of African Americans by Caucasian Americans. According to Turner, representations of “thick-lipped faces on cereal boxes”
and “sloppily dressed figures on sheet music” allowed American consumers to buy and sell “the souls of black folk” even after slavery was over.\textsuperscript{100} It also affects African Americans, as Elliott states, because they struggle to develop an “empowered, agentic sense of self” while being articulated as commodified beings.\textsuperscript{101} It is more difficult to articulate empowered forms of self when confronted with eBay listings for black dolls that are twisted into different configurations and described as people. During slave auctions, according to the observer C. R. Weld, bodies were examined carefully, and marks “were criticized with the knowing air assumed by horse-dealers.”\textsuperscript{102} Max Berger’s research on slave auctions describes how women were “examined on the hands, arms, legs, bust, and teeth. If they claimed to have had no children, their bosoms were carefully fondled to check on this.”\textsuperscript{103} In listings for black Americana dolls, images seem to enable viewers to perform similar inspections. Condition is chronicled as if the dolls were people. For example, auctionittodayby recontextualizes damage as a form of surgery when noting that a listed doll “may have had a tummy tuck at one point, as it looks as if her stomach has been repaired.”\textsuperscript{104}

Sellers offer images of dolls in different positions. These representations are supposed to allow buyers to judge the condition of dolls, but sellers often repeat views. The depictions make it seem as if dolls—and, possibly, the evoked black bodies—have been and can be violated. Some listings include portrayals of female dolls’ crotches and buttocks. kentuckybluebird markets a doll by providing images of the head, back, and lower half of the doll. In one image, the skirt is pulled up so the viewer can inspect the doll’s muslin groin and legs.\textsuperscript{105} themeyermansion depicts a doll with her dress covering her face and pantaloons pulled down to reveal her torso.\textsuperscript{106} annie*boomer includes an image of a rag doll in which the back of the skirt is flipped up, the fabric forms a circle around her buttocks, and the image is cropped to center the doll’s ass in the frame (figure 22).\textsuperscript{107}

These images of dolls are related to “up-skirt” photographs, which depict women from below, reveal what women’s clothing would ordinarily hide, and provide a voyeuristic view. The eroticism of this genre is based on the premise that these views, and the accompanying “penetration” into the interior of women’s clothing, are outside of the depicted person’s control. Sellers’ images of dolls’ underwear and the underside of skirts are also invasive. Sellers literally turn dolls inside out. There are numerous images of the ragged seams and awkward stumps that define the end of dolls’ torsos (figure 23).\textsuperscript{108} Depictions of ovoid holes and the fabric gathered around stumps, which are
created by the dolls’ construction, evoke genitalia. These images perpetuate cultural ideas about owning, sexually possessing, and taking pleasure in African American women. For hooks, representations of black women’s bodies are of “the body taken over, stripped of its own agency and made to serve the will, desire, and needs of others.” Yet sellers repress the multiple levels of commodification and racism that they are facilitating by using such terms as “adorable” and “cute” to describe the dolls.

Sellers’ doll listings also conflate objects and people. In these accounts, dolls cannot take care of themselves and need to be adopted and owned. For instance, kentuckybluebird’s doll is “looking for a really good home for the holidays.” poobelle offers a “BLACK AMERICANA RAG DOLL” and asks, “Would you like to adopt her???” A doll beseeches, “PLEASE TAKE

me home and love me.” These narratives envision the site, buyers, and sellers as a concerned community that takes care of dolls and African Americans who purportedly cannot support themselves. Nevertheless, listings for dolls, like the marketing of African American texts that Eric Gardner studies, equate the sale of black Americana to the auctioning of black bodies. dolls from happier times offers “a 5” Black Americana Pony tail Doll. The seller “will be moving from the south to the north in a few months so most of” her “babies will not” be coming with her. “These girls are being sold as is and as stated.” Dolls are commodities, but describing them as black babies and offering to sell them evokes a reprehensible history of selling and

enslaving people. Whether dolls'* from *happier* times’ member ID is referring to the time that the dolls were produced or the history of African Americans, it is not clear what makes these earlier times happier.

**Envisioning New Orleans and American Culture**

People’s understanding of American culture has been shaped by stereotyped renderings of African Americans. eBay unfortunately supports the circulation of these materials and the further incorporation of these notions of African Americans into American society and global settings. Sellers in the black Americana category use IDs such as sellinghistory to emphasize the value of their products and the historical importance of the past. Sellers also make it seem as if their black Americana items are truthful representations. Postcards of a “Mammy and Tap Dancing” feature “life for the black race in early 1900’s Florida.” A fold-out booklet that portrays an unthreatening elderly African American man and an image of watermelon is advertised as “16 views of Black American life in the old south.” Through these descriptions, sellers make it appear as if black Americana items produced by whites convey the details and geographies of particular times and places. eBay sustains these claims by describing black Americana as historically important.

Black Americana items produced by whites frame and produce America, including the city of New Orleans. Many items are stamped with the city’s name. For instance, numerous “mammy” dolls with red-and-white turbans and polka dot dresses have aprons with “New Orleans” imprinted on them. Potholders, salt and pepper shakers, spoons, dish towels, boxes of cotton, match holders, and other items portray stereotyped images of African Americans and are labeled as being from New Orleans. Jayhawkme offers a “Vintage 'Souvenir of New Orleans cotton picker' Black American plastic doll” that is holding a cotton bale with “Souvenir of New Orleans” imprinted on it. Sellers list recently produced versions of these items and make it seem as if visitors and buyers can still access the depicted services and obtain such bodies. Imprinting these objects with the name of the city also associates them with a particular place and depicts a specific cultural past and possible present.

These items seem to provide detailed information about New Orleans because they are marked with the name of the city. However, there is no consideration of the history of New Orleans as the largest and one of the oldest slave-trading centers in the United States. Neither the dolls nor the sellers’
descriptions articulate aspects of New Orleans. Even the printed claim that these items are from the area and presumably produced in New Orleans should be interrogated. These objects may be marked “New Orleans,” but many of them, like other black Americana items, are produced in Asia and encourage the reproduction of America’s racist past and present in other countries. For instance, sarcole offers a “SET OF VINTAGE 1977 AUNT JAMIMA SALT & PEPPER SHAKERS.”122 The woman may be “HOLDING A POT OF GUMBO” that “READS ‘NEW ORLEANS, LA’” but “THE STICKER READS ‘MADE IN TAIWAN.’” ceegeel auctions a set of salt and pepper shakers. The items are stamped “‘New Orleans’ and ‘Louisiana’” on “the front” but they are “marked inside the base with the words ‘Hong Kong.’”123 Sellers can try to prevent people from conflating black Americana items and African Americans by indicating these assorted heritages and attributions. The labels on black Americana items highlight their diverse production histories, which includes people of color laboring in varied parts of the world to reproduce these stereotyped items.

**Conclusion: Resisting Black Americana**

Some eBay engagements provide ways of resisting the overt racism of black Americana items and sellers’ stereotyped narratives. As I have noted, the visible wear that appears on black Americana items produced by whites can indicate pleasurable engagements with stereotyped representations or resistant use. On rare occasions, condition indicates attempts to destroy black Americana items and the accompanying stereotypes. For instance, nail1nh55 lists a defaced racist postcard of an African American man with an oversize head and tiny eyes who is dressed in a tuxedo and top hat, sitting on a chamber pot, and revealing his buttocks (figure 24). The postcard’s text reads, “I’m all set for the big blowout! Expect to have a good time here!”124 The caricatured aspects of the man’s physiognomy and his social transgressions, which combine high-class entertainment with flatulence and evacuating, repeat many stereotyped black Americana narratives and render the man as less than human. Nevertheless, the seller describes the item as “adorable” and advises, “SOMEONE SCRIBBLED ON IT. BUT THE PICTURE AND WORDING ON IT IS STILL LEDGIBLE.” In spite of the seller’s promises, a previous owner appears to have intentionally drawn over the stereotyped face and body, marred the postcard, and intervened in its racist narratives and its value as “humorous” and a collectible. Even the postcard’s plastic sleeve elides the affront-
ing image. Such documented effacements offer an intervention into eBay’s black Americana representations. Unfortunately, such resistant tactics are not prevalent enough to permanently disrupt the narratives that accompany eBay’s black Americana category or the ways sellers render New Orleans.

The artists Mendi + Keith Obadike sabotage the black Americana category through different means. In 2001, they interrogated the commodification of blackness in contemporary society by offering Keith Obadike’s “Blackness” for auction under the black Americana category. They warned possible purchasers that they did not recommend that “this Blackness be used while performing such actions as “seeking employment,” “making or selling ‘serious’ art,” “shopping or writing a personal check,” “making intellectual claims,” or “voting in the United States or Florida.” Through humor, they critique

social perceptions that being black provides a new form of privilege. Mendi + Keith also evoke a past where black bodies were sold without consideration. For the artist and theorist Coco Fusco, the listing is full of “references to the history of objectifying black bodies in the slave trade and the contemporary commodifying of black culture.” When black Americana is viewed as people, it constitutes a black community of commodified bodies, smiling mammies, happy watermelon consumers, and goodwill. The black Americana category and its fantastical people thereby becomes part of eBay’s moral community. Mendi + Keith challenge people’s ideas about owning and controlling black bodies, including the ability to experience a version of identity tourism in which white people can temporarily and safely perform as African Americans. As artists they supplant eBay’s equitable community and critique the troubling sexualities, power structures, and forms of community that underlie eBay’s and sellers’ commodification of blackness.

eBay’s cancellation of Mendi + Keith’s auction four days after its posting demonstrates the static and rigid aspects of the category structure and the risks and promises in incorporating critical commentary into the site. According to Mendi + Keith, “eBay closed the auction due to the ‘inappropriateness’ of the item.” Yet Mendi + Keith were deploying the auction as a critical and educational tool. The company’s cancellation of the auction raises serious questions about eBay’s claims that it retains black Americana on the site because of its educational functions. Mendi + Keith have highlighted the cancellation by posting information about it on their site. In a similar manner to gay interest sellers, they emphasize eBay’s duplicitous promises about providing a setting where all objects can be bought and sold and identities and desires can be facilitated. Mendi + Keith were “a little shocked that a company like eBay that sells ceramic coons and mammies, African exotica and Nazi paraphernalia would shy away from” their project. eBay may have canceled the auction because Mendi + Keith deploy the kinds of critical commodifications of blackness envisioned by Collins and Gray. They reappropriate and profit from their own position as product and temporarily rupture eBay’s categories and community. The artists write into the site instead of allowing black Americana produced by whites to speak for them.

Mendi + Keith perform a consumer critique and challenge ideas about what is being bought and sold on eBay, the ways eBay produces categories and conceptions of things, and its rendering of identity and desiring positions. They point to strategies for resistance by inserting their assessment into the system and maintaining it on another site. Otherwise, eBay erases records
of resistance, difference, and the limits of its organizational logic when it deletes listings. Consumer critics can also use the language and ethos of corporations to question companies’ values and structures; deploy brand logos and communities for personal messages; highlight conflicts within and beyond Internet settings; exemplify the essence of products better than companies; reinvent the services and features that attracted them; assert their role and value as consumer citizens; and use their knowledge and methods to assess other sites, products, and companies. Consumer critics can bring to light the dangerous power of corporations. However, they might also use such methods to examine culture more broadly; assess the relationship between corporations and state structures; and imagine other possibilities for consumers, products, producers, and citizenship. In the afterword, I consider the similar workings of craigslist’s organizational logic and brand community features and demonstrate how eBay’s troubling promises and functions are part of the larger workings of Internet settings.