FROM DESPICABLE TO COLLECTIBLE

The Evolution of Collective Memories for and the Value of Black Advertising Memorabilia

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ABSTRACT: We explore the dynamic nature of society's memories for and value ascribed to advertising materials from the past. Specifically, we examine the *active* negotiation of the meanings of promotional materials containing stereotypical personifications of African Americans created and disseminated between 1860 and 1960. To describe and interpret how the cultural meanings and economic, symbolic, and aesthetic values associated with these marketing materials evolved, we use group level theories, the sociological framework of collective memory, and rubbish theory from social anthropology. These promotional materials were transformed from acceptable mass-produced commercial advertisements, to despicable representations of a group of people that were "hidden" or destroyed, to highly desirable collectibles commanding top dollar on the secondary market. Collective memories as recorded in the print press for three decades are examined to illustrate attitudinal and value shifts among Americans.

Many advertisements from the past, including those created for particular brands (e.g., Coca-Cola, Ford) and by particular artists (e.g., Haddon Sundblom, Palmer Cox), are highly collectible. These advertisements and other promotional materials have been removed from their ordinary uses as advertisements and reframed as items in collections. This reframing process suggests attitudinal shifts have occurred and the objects have moved from serving a functional part of everyday life to serving an aesthetic purpose (see, e.g., Danet and Katriel 1989, 1994; Stewart 1984). Aesthetic items are of two types: objects that have aesthetic value by destination (i.e., paintings, statues, figurines) and objects that attain aesthetic value through transformation or metamorphosis (Malraux [1952] 1967; Maquet 1986). Our focus is on the latter category—objects that were "hand-crafted or industrially-produced [and] originally belonged to 'contexts other than art'" (Maquet 1986, pp. 18–19), and later attain aesthetic value through metamorphosis. For example, the Coca-Cola advertisement is no longer viewed as simply a promotion for soda; instead, it is now an important piece in a collector's anthology or a museum's holdings.

Although there is research in marketing that examines collecting aesthetic-by-transformation promotional materials (Motley, Henderson, and Baker 2003; Slater 2000), we know little about the manner in which objects are transformed from trash to treasure (Belk, Sherry, and Wallendorf 1988). An exception is Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry (1989), who describe how material objects evolve from "profane" to "sacred" through individual processes such as ritual acts, pilgrimages, quintessence, gift giving, inheritance, external sanctions, and collecting. We contribute to the understanding of the metamorphosis of objects from common, everyday commodities to items imbued with economic, symbolic, and aesthetic value by describing and interpreting the transformation of early American promotional materials depicting African Americans from "acceptable" to despicable to collectible. This evolution is particularly intriguing because of the social and cultural meanings attached to the original objects, the meanings associated with the reframed objects, and the increasing numbers of Americans who collect and appear to cherish them. Just as the Coca-Cola advertisement is reframed by a Coca-Cola collector, these materials have been transformed by both collectors and observers of the

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collections: Neither the slave-wanted poster nor the vintage Aunt Jemima advertisement are useful as promotional tools, but they can be appreciated for their historical and educational values.

Our understandings of changes in meanings and values of advertising and promotional items are enhanced by our use of group- rather than individual-level theories, which are characteristic of most advertising research (for exception, see Ritson and Elliot 1999). We also recognize the temporality of promotional materials and how their meanings and values can be negotiated over time by groups of people. The sociological framework—collective memory (Beamish, Molotch, and Flacks 1995; Halbwachs [1950] 1992; Schwartz 1991, 1996, 1997)—helps us describe the progression of thoughts about these promotional materials depicting stereotypic images of African Americans. We use historical documents, primarily from the popular press (e.g., *The New York Times, The Wall Street Journal,* collectors' price guides), to survey the transformation of attitudes toward and meanings of these items. Our approach differs from previous research on this context (Motley, Henderson, and Baker 2003): Based on the historical documents, we offer an interpretation of how collective memories for and the ascribed values of these items have changed over time.

In contrast, Motley and her colleagues (2003) interviewed and reported the perceptions of contemporary collectors of black Americana at one point in time. In addition, we draw on rubbish theory (Thompson 1979) from social anthropology to trace the changing value of the promotional items as they progressed from transient objects, to rubbish, to aesthetically and economically valued durables collected by Americans from a variety of ethnic backgrounds.

We first explain the collective memory framework and theoretical perspectives on the social value of objects. After a brief description of black advertising memorabilia, we describe our research approach and present the collective memories of black advertising memorabilia as recorded in written documents from 1970 to 1999. We conclude with a discussion on how the fluidity of collective memories and the social value of objects can help explain changes in market demand for these and other advertising collectibles.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Collective Memory

Collective memory, a sociological rubric, is generally understood as "collectively shared representations of the past." It has also has been termed "social memory," "collective remembrance," "cultural memory," and even "myth" (Kansteiner 2002, pp. 181–182). Collective memory is a theoretical framework that explains how members of particular social groups retain, alter, or reappropriate public knowledge of history (Beamish, Molotch, and Flacks 1995; Halbwachs 1992 [1950]; Schwartz 1991, 1996, 1997). While collective memories reside in the material aspects of individuals' lives, it is not the objects that carry meaning; individuals "read [and] *actively attribute meanings* to . . . [these] objects" (Straub 1993, p. 116). The past and objects from that past are "deconstructed" and "innovatively recreated" by groups of individuals (Straub 1993, p. 120). In other words, collective memories are socially constructed by group members and represent *present* interpretations of events, individuals, and objects from the past. Therefore, interpretations of the past may differ by group (e.g., families, ethnic groups, professions) (Kansteiner 2002), and these multiple interpretations are not always consistent with one another. In addition, collective memories can and do evolve, albeit slowly, over time (Schwartz 1991, 1997).

Collective memories are understood by examining social discourse (Halbwachs 1992 [1950]; Kansteiner 2002; Schwartz 1991, 1997). Researchers have examined dialogues in the popular press and academic literature with the collective memory framework to analyze the evolution of meanings associated with individuals, groups, and icons. For example, Schwartz (1991) examined the pre– and post–Civil War images of George Washington. Prior to the Civil War, Washington was characterized as a noble gentleman in the English tradition. After 1865, this aristocratic ideal was no longer acceptable, and Washington was recast as a hardworking farmer and family man. Schwartz (1991) suggests this transformation of meanings was due in part to the democratization of the United States, the enlargement of the nation, and the moral development of its citizenry. Similarly, researchers have explored the shaping of a collective memory of anti–Vietnam War protesters as being "antitroop" during the Persian Gulf War of 1991 (Beamish, Molotch, and Flacks 1995). (That is, Vietnam War protestors were reframed as being not only critical of the United States' participation in that conflict, but also as being insulting and disrespectful to the troops that served there.) Although there were limited articles from 1965 to 1971 suggesting the protesters were antitroop, this collective memory emerged in the press during the 1991 Persian Gulf War.

In an advertising context, Okleshen, Baker, and Mittelstaedt (2001) investigated the shaping of the collective memory of Santa Claus. The authors examine printed material that describes the formation of the American Santa's physical characteristics. Contrary to the Coca-Cola Company's assertions that Coca-Cola created Santa's collective image, Okleshen and colleagues (2001) found that Coca-Cola was just one of many contributors to his image. More important, their analysis suggests that advertising can contribute to the development of collective memory.

Rubbish Theory

While collective memory is useful for describing the evolution of memories about the past, rubbish theory (Lucas 2002; Thompson 1979) helps explain the evolution of the economic, symbolic, and aesthetic values associated with material objects from that past. Individuals can, and do, control the manner in which objects are viewed, and the value of objects as well as the memories of those objects are socially constructed (Appadurai 1986; Belk 1995; Kopytoff 1986; Pearce 1998; Seriff 1996; Thompson 1979). Thompson (1979) provides an example of this valuation when he suggests an old vase described as an antique in pristine condition is worth quantitatively and qualitatively more than an identical old vase described as used and in good condition. The former would be revered, displayed, and insured, whereas the latter would not. Rubbish theory (Thompson 1979) suggests a framework by which objects—this vase, advertisements with stereotypic images of blacks, and so forth—can attain aesthetic-by-metamorphosis status. The central premise is that the value and meaning of objects can and do change over time (cf. Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989; McCracken 1986, 1988).

Thompson (1979) defines three categories of objects: transients, which have finite life spans and decreasing value; durables, which have infinite life spans and increase in value over time; and rubbish, which has no value and separates the other two. Created to perform a specific task, transient objects are overt but are not meant to last forever (e.g., most household goods, advertisements, product packaging). Durable items are also visible, but are produced to last for an extended time (e.g., paintings, sculptures). Rubbish is invisible, and exists in "a timeless, valueless limbo where at some later date (if it has not by that time turned, or been made, into dust) it has the chance of being discovered" (Thompson 1979, p. 10). Pearce (1998, p. 93) notes: "Rubbish is the zone of transformation where the unregarded detritus of commodity is turned into personal culture, and can rise again through the system into public culture and high market value." Mass-produced material objects of limited economic and aesthetic value may be transformed from transient objects, to rubbish, to durable objects. That is, they can reach aesthetic status through metamorphosis.

An example of this evolution of value in the marketing domain is a limited edition gift-with-purchase promotion item (Seriff 1996). At some point, the promotion ends, the "gift" is consumed, and its marketing promotional value diminishes. The item should become rubbish; but, perhaps, it is "rescued" and prized by another. The qualities conferred on this mass-produced object by contemporary members of society have changed over time (Pearce 1998; Seriff 1996; Thompson 1979). This transformation is not automatic, and does not occur for all transient objects. The conversion happens when some creative members of society "discover" the object on a rubbish heap, reframe the item, and save it from obscurity. In the movie *Ghost World* (*Ghost World* 2001; Clowes and Zwigoff 1997), Enid, an art student, provides a striking enactment of this discovery process to her teacher, Roberta:

> ENID: Well, I got the idea [to use this object] when I was doing some research and I discovered that Cook's Chicken used to be called Coon's Chicken. . . .
>
> ROBERTA: Did you actually do this painting? [referring to the old-fashioned cartoony stereotype of a black man's head, with big lips and a huge toothy smile]
>
> ENID: Well, no—it's more like a "found art object."

Enid has transformed something hidden away in a closet (rubbish) into a valued piece of "art." Similarly, Kopytoff (1986, p. 80) suggests: "Old beer cans, matchbooks, and comic books suddenly become worthy of being collected, moved from the sphere of the singularly worthless to that of the expensive singular." These beer cans are caught in a paradox: "as one makes them more singular and worthy of being collected, one makes them valuable; and if they are valuable, they acquire a price and become a commodity [valued by members of society] and their singularity is to that extent undermined" (Kopytoff 1986, p. 81). These beer cans, Enid's painting, and black advertising memorabilia have social histories that can help explain the evolution of aesthetic, historical, and political judgments of value (Appadurai 1986; Kopytoff 1986; McCracken 1986, 1988; Thompson 1979).

Black Advertising Memorabilia

As with all aesthetic objects, black memorabilia can be placed into two categories. Items that have aesthetic value by destination include paintings from the "black masters" and contemporary artists, sculptures, and figurines. Aesthetic-by-metamorphosis objects include coins depicting blacks, slave chains, and documents and promotional materials with African-American images (our focus). The transient period of these objects followed the Civil War, when many manufacturers and advertisers used images of blacks as trademarks and product symbols in advertisements, posters, and product labels. Well-known brands such as Uncle Ben's Rice, Cream of Wheat, Fisk Tires, Armour Star Ham, Pillsbury's Best Flour, and Aunt Jemima pancake mix used stylized and generally stereotypic depictions of African Americans in advertisements and other promotional materials.

There is almost universal agreement that the majority of the early depictions of blacks in U.S. advertisements was visually unattractive, and perhaps revealed advertisers' and consumers' perceptions of and prejudices against African Americans (Goings 1994; Lemons 1977). Black characters

were portrayed as comedic, in subservient positions (such as docile servants and cooks), which served to reinforce the "popular misconception that they were suitable only for menial jobs" (Sivulka 1998, p. 66). In addition, the characters generally wore tattered clothing. Speech patterns were also stereotypic: "de," "dem," and "dat" ("the," "them," and "that," respectively) were regularly included in advertising copy.

Over time, many of these promotional materials entered the rubbish stage. Rubbish is either destroyed or removed from sight (Thompson 1979), and this destruction and removal from the cultural landscape occurred for these promotional materials. For example, between the 1950s and 1970s, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and other groups and individuals mounted a campaign to remove these images and items from the public domain (Morrison 1974; Peñaloza 1994). Shopkeepers physically moved stereotypic objects to back rooms, and the items were made available for sale only by request. In addition, many affluent African Americans purchased and destroyed some of the artifacts. The motivation for these efforts seemed to have been to eradicate items with stereotypical images from the collective memories of Americans. Morrison (1974) characterized these actions as an "early hysteria" representing a denial of the African-American experience in the United States. Today, many African Americans, as well as members of other ethnic groups, have amassed significant collections of these historical artifacts, which include both beautiful and beastly depictions of blacks. These items have become durables; they have acquired aesthetic-by-metamorphosis status, and their economic and aesthetic values have continued to increase.

Interviews with collectors reveal that they view the objects as valuable symbols and preservers of the past (Motley, Henderson, and Baker 2003). Many black collectors tend to view the objects as representative of the collective struggle and perseverance of African Americans in the United States (e.g., in spite of being enslaved, Aunt Jemima was a strong black woman who successfully managed two households). In contrast, many white collectors use autobiographical references to interpret these objects from the past (e.g., Grandma had an Aunt Jemima cookie jar). These viewpoints are neither mutually exclusive nor generalizable to all blacks or all whites. However, whether the perspective is communal or personal, the collectors view the objects as connections to the past (see, e.g., Belk 1991). The emotion evoked by the artifacts is bittersweet: It represents not only a loss in the past, but also reconciliation or reunion with that past.

Objects not only symbolize the past, but are also used to interpret the past given present concerns (Belk 1991; Motley, Henderson, and Baker 2003; Stewart 1984). Collectors transform material possessions from rubbish to durables by actively and constructively creating new meanings for them (Danet and Katriel 1989, 1994; Pearce 1998; Stewart 1984; Thompson 1979). The meaning of an item changes when it is added to a collection, as it is transformed from neutral to sacred (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989), or from rubbish to durable (Thompson 1979). Stewart explains the reframing process:

> The collection is a form of art as play, a form involving the reframing of objects within a world of attention and manipulation of context. Like other forms of art, its function is not the restoration of context of origin, but rather the creation of a new context, a context standing in a metaphorical, rather than a contiguous, relation to the world of everyday life. (1984, pp. 151–152)

For example, Grandma's Aunt Jemima cookie jar is no longer used to promote the brand, or even to hold cookies; it has become part of a collection.

Reframing is also evident when collectors believe the uglier and more grotesque an item, the more valuable it is (Danet and Katriel 1989). As previously noted, many black advertising memorabilia objects are visually unattractive and stereotypic, and often the more unattractive items command higher prices (Hernandez 1992). Perhaps some black advertising memorabilia are collected to transform and reframe the collective memories of the history of blacks in the United States. Exploring the evolution of collective memories about these items can help us bear witness to this attitudinal shift and the changing economic, symbolic, and aesthetic values placed on black memorabilia.

METHOD

As previously mentioned, the principal research question is how the collective memories and value of black advertising memorabilia have changed over time. Consistent with other studies of collective memory (Beamish, Molotch, and Flacks 1995; Okleshen, Baker, and Mittelstaedt 2001; Schwartz 1991, 1996, 1997), we examine articles and books from both the popular press and academic literature to trace the social history of these collectibles. Journalists, charged with scanning the cultural landscape and documenting and cataloging collective memories as they evolve, penned the majority of our raw data.

We conducted electronic searches (e.g., ArticlesFirst, EBSCOhost, OCLC FirstSearch, ProQuest) for documents in the popular and academic press referring to black/African-American memorabilia, black/African-American collectibles, and/or black/African-American Americana. In addition, we consulted the references of publications on these topics to assemble as complete a listing of available material as possible. We found 170 full-text articles and 27 books that specifically

TABLE I
Black Memorabilia References, 1970–1999

Period	Articles authored by journalists	Articles authored by academics	Books authored by journalists	Books authored by academics	Total publications
1970–1979	4		2		6
1980–1984	3	1	1		5
1985–1989	22		5		27
1990–1994	69	4	5	2	80
1995–1999	65	2	11	1	79
Total	163	7	24	3	197

examine collecting these images and artifacts, published between 1970 and 1999 (see Table 1). Within these publications, we extracted verbiage expressly related to collecting advertisements and other promotional materials depicting African Americans. While items pertaining to African Americans have been collected in the United States since the early 1800s, collecting these objects did not appear to become particularly newsworthy until the 1970s. Prior to this time, they were considered to be cultural rubbish and were relatively invisible (Thompson 1979). We found no publications referencing our topic in the 1960s, and few were located from the 1970s. (Due to space constraints, we have not included all the articles and books reviewed in the reference section. A complete list is available from the second author.)

Evidence of the evolution of collective memories is drawn from the social discourse reflected in these documents, and represents the varied perspectives of journalists, collectors, noncollectors, sellers, curators, and academicians. These raw materials demonstrate the changing attitudes about and debates concerning the meanings of these advertising objects. In addition, the transformation of the materials from rubbish into durables with increasing value is witnessed. Undoubtedly, these texts helped contemporary society members form meanings regarding these advertising artifacts. Our approach echoes historical methods employed in the marketing literature to explain trends (Belk and Pollay 1985; Pollay 1985) and causes of change (Mittelstaedt 1990).

We divided the raw materials into five-year intervals to observe the evolution of knowledge and value of promotional materials that depicted African Americans. Reading and rereading the texts, the authors discovered themes illustrating the popular beliefs for each time frame (Smith and Lux 1993). Because "collective memory can only be imagined and accessed through its manifestation in individuals" (Kansteiner 2002, p. 185), these popular text themes are surrogate measures of the evolution of collective memories about these objects and the economic and aesthetic value associated with them.

The Beginnings

The articles from the 1970s provide the context for the development of the black Americana movement. Merrill (1972) details author Alex Haley's quest for knowledge about his family background, the increased attention afforded to black history, and the difficulties encountered when conducting African-American genealogical research. The first information Haley obtained was from personal memorabilia preserved by his mother and grandmother. Many credit Haley's novel, *Roots* (1976), and the television miniseries with the same name (1977) with providing the spark that ignited an interest in black history.

The Black Book (Middleton, Levitt, and Furman 1974) documents the lives of blacks in the United States with original raw material from the editors' collections, such as posters, letters, newspapers, and advertising cards. This book is an attempt to tell a story about African-American lives as experienced—not devoid of unpleasant characterizations—by the people who lived them. It contains early advertisements featuring stereotypical images of blacks that helped shape the collective memories of American history. Referring to the advertising items included in the book, the editor, Morrison writes:

> Nothing mollified the constant assault of seeing oneself in ugly caricature. The "coon" cards, trading cards, advertisements and music sheet covers that depicted us if not close to [beastly], then just a chromosome away, still mortify and enrage. (1974, p. 16)

These collectors and Morrison felt these items should be preserved, even though the images continually "assaulted" the individuals who encountered them and "mortify and enrage" current viewers and collectors. "The most threatening and 'ugly' products of industrialized recycling . . . have been reappropriated and transformed as exotic icons to ornament the urban American culturescape. They have been divorced from their original points of referentiality" (Seriff 1996, pp. 53, 55).

This period marked the beginning of the reframing process (Danet and Katriel 1994; Stewart 1984), or the movement from rubbish to durable status (Thompson 1979). This first set of articles suggests that during this period, collecting black advertising memorabilia had little to do with consumerism, but rather involved a rich set of meanings for the objects. These materials were removed from their original uses as promotional materials, rescued from trash piles, and incorporated into new contexts as parts of collections and historical symbols of the American experience. The items were reframed, and meanings were updated to meet contemporary needs. This genre of black Americana served as a metaphor for the past, and also provided a catalyst for some African Americans to discover and embrace their heritage (see, e.g., Belk 1991). This "historical value" motivation validates the symbolic valuation of rubbish as an important link to personal or cultural memories (Pearce 1998; Thompson 1979).

1980–1984

In the 1980s, the market for collectibles in general escalated as the affluence of Americans increased (Belk 1995), and black advertising memorabilia was included in this boom. Articles in the early 1980s tell of a number of "firsts" in the black collectibles market. In 1981, the first magazine with the mission of enhancing knowledge of black memorabilia was launched and the first auction devoted entirely to black collectibles was held (Rooks 1981). In addition, black memorabilia exhibits, including those sponsored by the DuSable Museum in Chicago (1980) and Dartmouth University (1981), were the subjects of several pieces. Authors indicated that advertising items were popular, and delineated the names of products depicting black images, such as Nigger Head golf tees, Old Hickory Brand typewriter ribbon, the Gold Dust Twins, and Aunt Jemima. Inclusion of these transient items in exhibits is indicative of the process of attaining aesthetic value through transformation. This popularity was in spite of, or perhaps due to, the portrayals of blacks on advertising and other promotional items made between the Civil War and World War II as "slow, lazy, ignorant, stupid, amoral, criminal, unclean, bestial and generally subhuman," according to a sign at the entrance to the Dartmouth exhibit (Reif 1981, p. A11). This sign also stated, "Images of blacks in popular culture have been an important vehicle for the transmission of the myth of black inferiority" (Reif 1981, p. A11). According to the exhibit organizer:

> It may be unpleasant to view these items and bring out into the open what may be considered shocking examples of black stereotyping. I think it is important that our intention is clear. . . . we want to show how comprehensive a set of stereotypes we have in American society, among blacks and whites and

we want to generate discussion about how we create and maintain stereotypes. (Ibid.)

Collectors and exhibitors asserted that the old advertisements had helped ascribe meanings to brands *and* a group of people at the same time. It appears that some advertisers were being charged with having shaped and reinforced negative stereotypes of African Americans.

African-American collectors' perceptions of these stereotypic promotional items began to change. The collective memory and valuation of these items were updated to protect the self (Kates and Belk 2001). However, the visually unappealing and stereotypic nature of the renditions could be neither hidden nor denied.

> [The collector] said she began collecting black mementos 17 years ago, when she purchased a box of Gold Dust Twins in an antiques shop. At first, she recalled, she did not show her collection to others because she felt too emotional about what she viewed as highly offensive images. Soon, she said, she realized that the collection accurately documented the views that whites held of blacks in that period, and that there was much that could be learned about racism by studying these examples. . . . "When one comes to terms with this material, one sees that the image is not me but an oppressor's idea of me." (Ibid.)

As illustrated by this passage, black collectors appeared to continue to identify with the historical images, but they separated themselves from the images and suggested these items were not "of me," but "about me."

The articles and activities from this period suggest the beginnings of the commercialization of collecting black Americana, a continuation of the historical interest in the items, and the recognition of the educational value of the stereotypical representations of blacks in advertisements. As individuals singularized the items, they gave the items social value, and others began to covet them (Kopytoff 1986). Museums and auctions became important vehicles for fueling the changes in collective memories and the social valuation of the objects. Collectors used these sacralization venues to gain understanding of how their collections could be used as a "mode of knowledge" for telling an important story and educating others (Stewart 1984, p. 161). Furthermore, museums facilitated the sacralization process, as their representatives are recognized authorities (Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry 1989).

1985–1989

In this five-year period there were almost three times as many publications ($n = 27$) referencing black memorabilia as in the previous 15 years ($n = 10$). The data indicated an increased interest in black advertising memorabilia among collectors.

The "rubbish-to-emerging-durable" history of the items became part of the commentary: Articles referenced the sales decline during the civil rights movement and the removal of black advertising memorabilia coming from the figurative and literal "closet" (Allison 1986; Lee 1988). Authors detailed the proliferation of shows and sales, exhibits, and individual collections. Jeanette Carson, editor and publisher of Black Ethnic Collectibles, observed:

> There's been a definite increase in the value of black collectibles and the awareness of them as historically important. . . . Black memorabilia has always been collectible, always has brought a higher price and always has been harder to find. . . . I think the changing awareness of what is offensive has made this type of material forbidden and sought-after. (Ferrigno 1988, p. k8)

There was not universal receptivity to these collectibles, however. While some viewed the items as historical artifacts that should be preserved, and thus rescued from the rubbish heap (Seriff 1996), various critics suggested collecting and exhibiting stereotypical images reinforced long-held biases against blacks (Lee 1988). That is, competing collective memories were apparent (Schwartz 1991, 1997). Article titles illustrated the mixed reactions to black memorabilia in general, and the stereotypical advertising images in particular—for example, "Black Memorabilia Stirs Memories Good and Bad," "Black Memorabilia Generate Feelings of Disgust and Nostalgia," "Black 'Image' Collectibles Draw Variety of Responses." What was politically and socially appropriate was being discussed and negotiated through public discourse.

Speculation about the motivations for collecting materials with stereotypic depictions of African Americans also surfaced during this time period. There were acceptable reasons for collecting such items, such as for preserving history and helping educate current and future generations about the past.

> "Black people buy these items for the very same reason that Jewish people research the Holocaust," says [the collector]. "The black experience, during and after slavery, was a Holocaust we must never forget. . . . They are important because they document our history. . . . It is particularly important to pass them along to young people, so they know where they came from and where they are going." (Andrews 1989, p. A20)

Referring to these artifacts as documentation of a *Holocaust* elevated the status of both the collector and the items collected. The collective memory of the items was updated to meet the needs of contemporary African Americans attempting to reconcile the images portrayed in period popular culture with their self-images and current social circumstances (see, e.g., Thompson 1979). The elevation of status from transient promotional materials to items with historical signifi-

cance provided the instantiation and justification for these "obsolete" and disregarded promotional items to reemerge as valued collectibles (Seriff 1996; Thompson 1979).

The documents also provide evidence to consider other motivations for collecting black advertising memorabilia, such as use as decorative accessories, which was generally viewed negatively. In addition, many African-American collectors appeared to believe that one had to understand the collector's motives to interpret the ownership of an object:

> A lot of people of course are collecting for the sake of collecting, and I have a problem with that. If you look at the uniqueness without understanding the social context . . . then you're perpetuating the racism that these images were intended to portray. (Lee 1988, p. H1)

The context of possession and display is inextricably linked with the meaning people ascribe to the objects (Kleine and Kernan 1991). Amassing a collection, just for the sake of doing so, becomes akin to viewing these items as having aesthetic value by destination (Maquet 1986), perhaps devoid of a purpose (e.g., to educate, to preserve history). The reasons or motivation for collecting, however, allow the object to attain aesthetic value through metamorphosis (ibid.).

The themes of this time period reflected an increasing awareness of black advertising memorabilia as emotionally laden objects capable of preserving evidence of America's past. Collectors were increasingly interested in the history of the objects and their link to racial attitudes of the past. Competing collective memories brought tension between collectors and noncollectors about why these artifacts should be preserved and/or collected. In addition, some collectors' motivations for acquiring these items were questioned; that is, the object was viewed as an extension of the self (Belk 1988), and that "self" served as a contextual frame.

1990–1994

Information about black advertising collectibles proliferated during this five-year period: More than 73 popular press articles and 7 price guidebooks were published. Titles such as "Interest Grows in the Field of Black Memorabilia" and "Black History in Bric-a-Brac: Collectibles Enjoy a Wave of Popularity" attest to the mounting interest. In addition, the number of collectors was steadily increasing. Indeed, it was estimated that in 1972 there were 10,000 collectors (Hernandez 1992), compared with more than 50,000 in 1992 (Gufloff 1993). An increased proportion of the collectors were black: 30% of the collectors were African American in 1972, compared with 70% in 1992.

> But what is most interesting about the hot market in so-called "black collectibles" is that the buyers are for the most part

not snickering rednecks or dotty white dowagers. They are upscale blacks—including such celebrities as Bill Cosby, Oprah Winfrey, Whoopi Goldberg, and Michael Jackson. For these people, the racist memorabilia offers a vivid reminder of all they've overcome to get where they are. (Tilove and Cox 1994, p. O38)

The growing interest of African Americans was often attributed to the growth in the number of middle-class blacks and a renewal of black pride (Hernandez 1992).

Collecting black advertising memorabilia had become more socially acceptable than in previous years. Controversy erupted over collecting and preserving grossly stereotypical or "negative" images of blacks, however. "Negative" objects were labeled "offensive," "ugly reminders," "derogatory," "contemptible collectibles," and "anti-black" (Turner 1994; Wright 1990), which included advertising items depicting blacks with exaggerated features. Some appeared to maintain "rubbish blindness" and conspired not to see the negative objects (Thompson 1979); that is, they believed the negative items were rubbish that was lacking in value and should not be sold (Thorpe 1992). Others contended that these objects were artifacts of history, and should be bought and sold in the same manner as other artifacts (Gibbs 1990).

The centennial of Aunt Jemima, the ubiquitous advertising icon, occurred during this period (Kern-Foxworth 1994). As with this genre of collectibles, her symbol evoked different meanings from various contemporary publics. For example, Aunt Jemima was referred to as "one of the heroines of the black collectibles movement" ("Collecting Mammy" 1993, p. 86), representing a cheerfully servile and overweight domestic worker. Others, like this dealer/ collector, interpreted her with mixed emotions:

> I think the problem a lot of people have is what this woman looks like. And I just saw beyond the heavy buxom woman with the red head rag . . . and I started thinking about what this woman did for us. And I just saw her in a whole different way. And I think we need to get back to what that woman did. She was a nurturer, a provider. (George 1994, p. 1)

Again, competing collective memories are evident (Schwartz 1991, 1997), and meanings are being actively negotiated (Peñaloza and Price 1993).

A number of factors appeared to fuel demand for black advertising memorabilia. There was repetition of the "memory" that during the civil rights movement the NAACP and other groups attempted to ban the sale and collection of these images (Gibbs 1990; Hawkins 1994; McManus 1991). (Although we were unable to locate a primary source to substantiate this recollection, this notion is very much a part of the collective memory [see, e.g., Morrison 1974].) Consistent with the motivation to maintain behavioral freedom, Hawkins (1994) suggested national efforts to thwart the sale

of stereotypic images of blacks only served to increase demand.

The *degree* of offensiveness of an item also appeared to increase demand. As Thompson asserts, "One man's rubbish can be another man's desirable object; that rubbish, like beauty, is in the eye of the beholder" (1979, p. 97). "The trend is, the more offensive the item is, the higher the price," one collector observed (Hernandez 1992, p. B1). This statement was repeated over the years (George 1994; Heng 1994). The "offensive" items included promotional material such as Aunt Jemima cookie jars, ads for NiggerHair tobacco, Dixie Boy watermelon, and Sambo axle grease (Kruh 1994; Thorpe 1992). A Smithsonian curator attempted to explain the growing acceptance of these items among blacks:

> Many people are trying to reverse the stereotype by saying, "If we collect this material, we are not going to let white Americans denigrate our experience." But secondly . . . It's learning about our history in a positive way through non-positive material. (McGhee 1992, p. 30)

Collectors echoed this sentiment:

> [A collector] says he's drawn to the items for two reasons. "[T]o know who and where you are, you have to know what you came from," he explains. "We have a tendency to see it only in the negative. (But) black people were used to advertise a plethora of items, I'm just enthralled by how entrenched we were in American country—from soap and postcards to pancakes." (George 1994, p. 1)

The "negatives" could be framed as reminders of the triumphant battle fought and won for civil rights (Duckett 1994; Tilove and Cox 1994). It appears there was a belief that the more offensive the item, the more likely viewers were to understand and appreciate the black experience in America. Appropriating and embracing these objects could also be viewed as a means of resistance and empowerment (see, e.g., Kates and Belk 2001; Peñaloza and Price 1993).

These varied reactions demonstrate that meaning and value are socially constructed (Thompson 1979), and can be negotiated and renegotiated (Danet and Katriel 1994; Stewart 1984). Collectors found the sometimes grotesque, offensive, or negative images in promotional materials in closets and on rubbish heaps, and transformed them into something more pleasing (Danet and Katriel 1994; Stewart 1984). Maquet suggests this type of "metamorphosis is unavoidable: a new reality has to be constructed for these objects so that they make sense for people living in the society into which they have been introduced" (1986, p. 33).

These authors were not only accepting these as historical artifacts, but were also ascribing intent for their production and dissemination during their transient period. For example, Goings wrote:

[Promotional material with stereotypic images of blacks] were props in the slave/racial ideology that has engulfed America from the 17th century to the present. They were the physical manifestation of a culture that continually negated and demeaned African Americans and their achievements. Manufacturers produced the props that gave physical reality to the racist ideology that had emerged, and they did so at a profit. Literally, images of black people were being bought, sold, and used much like the slaves of ante-bellum America. (1990, p. B76)

Similarly, upon seeing an exhibit of 150 artifacts stereotyping blacks, a curator of a national African-American museum noted:

For the first time it really struck me how pervasive racism was as reflected in the material culture. It was really overwhelming. It touched every aspect of American life. And while I don't believe these stereotypical images say anything particularly about African Americans, I think they say a whole lot about the larger society. (Tilove and Cox 1994, p. O38)

As black advertising memorabilia items attained durable status, demonstrated by increasing visibility, demand, and value, public narratives were legitimized. The narratives suggested many of these materials were meant to denigrate a group of people (see, e.g., Kates and Belk 2001), and advertisers were instrumental in this social valuation.

The public discourse from 1990 through 1994 suggested that the popularity of black collectibles appeared to be fueled by the alleged efforts to thwart supply; there was an apparent reframing of the most offensive (primarily promotional) materials; there was a dispute of what components of U.S. history should be retained, and how these components should be interpreted; and there were mounting discussions about what some of the black advertising memorabilia symbolized, and why they were created. Debates were intense and emotional, and appeared to stimulate passions for collecting, influence perceptions of value, and impact the market (Pearce 1998).

1995–1999

Black Americana items were becoming increasingly more visible, as evidenced by their presence in historical records. The types of documents penned parallel the transition from transient to durable objects (Thompson 1979). In the former stage, the information context is journalistic, generally ephemeral, and disposable, whereas later, the data are more scholarly and persistent. Of more than 70 publications, 12 were books (mostly price guides). This increase in books suggests a desire to document the historical context of the items, the increasingly commercialized trading of black memorabilia, escalating prices, and a need for frequent price updates.

Numerous reasons for price increases were proffered, from economic arguments suggesting scarcity as the primary driver

(Robinson and Brown 1996), to greater willingness among whites to acknowledge the slave era (Zoll 1996), to an increased interest in collecting and investing in preserving history among African Americans (Page 1996; Singletary 1995a). Regardless of the professed reason, a change in the social valuation of these objects fueled the increased demand. This is the paradox to which Kopytoff (1986) referred in his old beer can example. As individuals deemed black advertising memorabilia worthy of being collected, the objects were more valued in society. The items were no longer viewed as social rubbish, but instead, as items capable of documenting an important part of American culture. Soaring prices indicated black advertising memorabilia were now durables and had attained aesthetic-by-metamorphosis status (Maquet 1986).

While historical and educational values were still offered as motivations for collecting the items, individuals were noting the increasing prices, and financial rewards were also surfacing as potential benefits. For some collectors, there appears to have been a movement from a focus on the aesthetic value to interests in the functional (i.e., economic value) (Maquet 1986), demonstrating the transformation of both collective memories and valuations. Numerous veteran African-American and white collectors referred to their collections-turned-inventory as profitable and "big business." Some blacks suggested: "many white collectors have long appreciated and profited from selling and buying black memorabilia. So, it's about time that black dealers and collectors profit from their own heritage" (Singletary 1995b, p. D1).

Escalating prices opened the door to another phenomenon: the development of a market in reproductions, such as "new" advertisements for the Gold Dust twins and Aunt Jemima (Demski 1998; Owens 1998; Padilla 1999; Ziner 1997). Reproductions made it difficult to differentiate the profane from the sacred, and affected the price of authentic items (Demski 1998; Padilla 1999). While many viewed the reproductions with disdain and collected only period pieces (Roberts 1998), a debate surfaced over the meaning of reproductions:

We need to look at what is happening in the market now and why it's happening. We need to question a lot of the reproductions on the market . . . and make sure that time period doesn't repeat itself [says a collector and authority on black memorabilia]. (Ziner 1997, p. A1)

Some viewed the motivations for producing reproductions akin to the motivations for the creation of the originals. They believed that, once again, marketers were reinforcing black stereotypes.

In contrast, a Chicago dealer who collected originals and sold reproductions framed the items she sold as cathartic, historic, and educational: "Some people come here and it brings tears to their eyes. . . . They think about how far they've come and how far their families have come" (Price

1996). Sellers of reproductions had both supporters and detractors. For example, a DePaul University professor stated, "By remembering it and even selling these items, they gain some control over them and their distribution and their meaning" (Price 1996). Reproduction advocates seemed to believe inauthentic items could serve the same function as the authentic ones.

This intense debate revolves around the social valuation of these objects, and how meaning is ascribed to authentic versus inauthentic (reproduction) pieces (Maquet 1986). Reproductions were created as items that had aesthetic value by destination, whereas authentic pieces attained aesthetic value through transformation (Malraux 1967 [1952]; Maquet 1986). Reproductions did not make sense to those who collected black memorabilia for knowledge value, as knowledge value is not typically associated with inauthentic items (Pearce 1998). While authentic objects were accepted and embraced by many, there was resistance to reproductions.

The increased visibility of and interest in black advertising memorabilia also gave rise to questions about who should own these items and the meanings of the objects to collectors and viewers. At issue were the ethnicity of owners and whether owners should be individual consumers or institutions. Many African Americans thought these items should be the exclusive property of blacks (Thomas and Kruh 1995; Woodward 1996), as illustrated by this comment from a collector and journalism professor: "We should be the caretakers and overseers of our own memorabilia" (Thomas and Kruh 1995, p. E2). Some African Americans felt so strongly on this issue that they purchased items to keep them out of the hands of others:

> About two decades ago, [two black women] stood speechless at an estate sale and watched as white customers laughed and bought memorabilia depicting black people in grotesque, negative ways. "We were so embarrassed, we thought we would buy it and just put it away where no one would see it," said [a collector]. (Thomas and Kruh 1995, p. E2)

Some white collectors believed their motives for collecting would be questioned (Padilla 1999; Savage 1995):

> There are paradoxes. Although many blacks say collecting is benign, white buyers are labeled racist. White dealers and experts are being squeezed out of the market too. Collector and expert Dawn Reno of Deltona, Fla., said she was threatened and followed to her hotel room after a memorabilia show. "There were people who don't appreciate that I am white and writing about a black subject," said Reno, who is credited with writing the first catalog of black collectibles in 1984. Reno . . . attributes such encounters to emotions generated by racism. It also highlights blacks' suspicions about the motivations of white buyers. That is, blacks are buying for historical reasons, but whites may collect because they accept the black stereotypes. (Padilla 1999, p. E1)

Many of these historical pieces were in private collections that provided a service to the community: The owners shared their items and knowledge (Stepzinski 1996; Zoll 1996). Others were concerned about the private versus public ownership of objects, however:

> While black collectors . . . are not offended by the auctions, they are upset that citizens, rather than museums or universities, are purchasing items. "I don't have any problem with the sales, but I'd prefer they be collected by institutions and put in the proper context," said [a black collector] who has a 500-piece collection of black memorabilia in his home. (Zoll 1996, p. 52)

Viewers appeared to need a context, or lens, through which to view a collection (see also Kleine and Kernan 1991). Some viewers considered these items as "African-American" and not "American" memorabilia. Thus, ethnicity and perceived motivation for ownership were important frames that helped observers discern meanings. Context can also signal the transformation from commercial use, to rubbish, to collectibles (Seriff 1996).

Writings from this period increasingly focused on the economic as opposed to the historical and educational value of the objects. People perceived value in these items, and were being fulfilled by collecting them; at the same time, they appeared to believe these objects could be framed to represent social injustice (see also Kates and Belk 2001). Although some still viewed black advertising memorabilia as "rubbish," it was being valued in the marketplace as durable.

DISCUSSION

The value of objects is generally taken for granted by group members. The documentation of collective memories and the evolving value of black memorabilia allows us to demonstrate the temporality of promotional materials. Consistent with Appadurai (1986) and Kopytoff (1986), we have focused on the total trajectory of a category of objects, from production to exchange, to consumption to disposal, which is repeated any number of times as social perceptions and valuation changes. These fluctuations in meaning suggest that individuals do not simply use objects and symbols as advertisers may have envisioned; instead, they reframe and alter the items to fit present needs (Ritson, Elliot, and Eccles 1996). Black advertising memorabilia became recognized as objects with lasting aesthetic value that should not be hidden or destroyed, and as their social value surfaced and escalated, they became commercially profitable as well.

The collective memories of black advertising memorabilia reflect the dynamic and interactive process between advertising, politics, cultural values, and consumers. Objects not only symbolize the past, but are also used to interpret the past in

light of present concerns (Belk 1991; Motley, Henderson, and Baker 2003; Stewart 1984). Collectors transform material objects from rubbish to durables by actively and constructively creating new meanings for them (Danet and Katriel 1989, 1994; Pearce 1998; Stewart 1984; Thompson 1979). For example, a NiggerHair Tobacco tin is not viewed as a functional container by a collector of black advertising memorabilia but, rather, as an item that is similar to, yet different from, other items in the collection.

Over time, even some people who initially dismissed promotional materials with stereotypical depictions of African Americans as "racist" and "degrading," acknowledged their potential educational value in providing evidence of the American experience. These collections help document a more complete history (Stewart 1984), capture the totality of the human experience in the United States, and, perhaps, expose some viewers to this set of social inequities for the first time (Kates and Belk 2001). This exposure may help explain the intense emotional, and sometimes physical, reactions some have to viewing (and collecting) these objects.

The intense debates about black advertising memorabilia are political. There is a constant tension over what is authentic, what should be displayed, what should be known, and who should control the items (Appadurai 1986). These debates are similar to those faced by museum administrators: who determines the intellectual content, who controls it, what stories should be told, how does this relate to national narratives (see, e.g., Ruffins 1997). These discussions can be distilled to a central issue: The collective memories social groups use to view the advertising artifacts differ (cf. McCracken 1986). As the distances between those interpretations increase, tension increases (Appadurai 1986). Each group or collectivity "establishes its own special vision of the world, thus rendering the understandings and rules appropriate to one cultural context preposterously inappropriate to another" (McCracken 1986, p. 72). The items are simultaneously framed as unwelcome and cherished reminders of a part of American history. And yet, these very differences may lead to intensification of demand and demonstrate that the "creation of value is a politically mediated process" (Appadurai 1986, p. 6). In fact, both the value of and the knowledge about black advertising memorabilia are political (Appadurai 1986).

Collecting is both an act of consumption and an act of production: "Collectors create, combine, classify, and curate the objects they acquire in such a way that a new product, the collection, emerges. In the process, they also produce meanings. More precisely, they participate in the process of socially reconstructing shared meanings for the objects they collect" (Belk 1995, p. 55). The meaning of the collection of black advertising memorabilia is multidimensional and complex. For example, including "racist" material in a collection can express antiracist sentiments if the context is "right." An

advertisement can attain aesthetic value through metamorphosis, but it cannot be divorced from its original production (Appadurai 1986). Collectors do not necessarily have to embrace ideals from the past when they acquire an item from a bygone era; they may simply want to realistically represent that past (Schwartz 1996).

Marketers have not traditionally viewed advertisements as having aesthetic value by destination or as being durable objects; rather, they view advertisements as a means of attracting attention to the brand, differentiating it from other brands, and creating symbolic associations with it (Lears 1982). However, consumers have removed old promotional materials from the rubbish heap, as with Enid in *Ghost World,* and changed them into "art" by changing the contexts in which they are situated. Similarly, consumers produce "art" from found objects, such as discarded Coke cans and Budweiser beer bottle tops, which are used in artistic creations sold at juried art shows. In addition, promotional materials are found in a plethora of museums, renowned venues for sacralizing material objects (Stewart 1984). These aesthetic-by-metamorphosis objects blur the lines between advertisement and art, and between high and popular culture. Reproductions of old advertisements as instant collectibles do little to clarify these boundaries. Whether or not an item is viewed as art is not for advertisers, artists, or academics to decide. Consumers make these decisions as they interact with the material artifacts of society and its cultural institutions (e.g., advertising).

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

Our textual data is limited to collective memories published after the use of blatantly stereotypical images of African Americans in advertisements had substantially abated. In addition, the data are from information generators (authors) rather than information users (consumers). However, this dependence on journalists, who were in tune with the day-to-day occurrences of the period, is consistent with previous collective memory research.

There is an abundance of similar moments in the history of advertising and consumption worthy of future research. For example, many old advertisements depicted women in subservient positions, portrayed cigarettes as healthy, and encouraged excessive consumption of alcohol. Similarly, advertisers' depictions of other ethnic groups, including Hispanic Americans, Asian Americans and Native Americans, and religious groups, including Jews and Catholics, were not always positive (Dávila 2001; Peñaloza 1994; Taylor and Lee 1994). Many depictions became less stereotypic over time; "Frito-Lay retired the Frito Bandito, Aunt Jemima got a new look, and Sambo's went out of business" (Peñaloza 1994, p. 135). In addition, many of these marketing materials have been

reframed and included in collections. It would be interesting and instructive to see if public dialogues exist about these transformations and the nature of the public discourse.

CONCLUSION

The manner in which African Americans were portrayed in marketing materials for nearly 100 years provides a provocative context to demonstrate how collective memories and social value are constructed, negotiated, and changed, and how members of society determine which artifacts "should" be preserved to mark those memories and the value associated with these memory markers. We use this context—a context marked by intense debate—to make significant contributions to the literature.

Perhaps foremost, our theoretical contribution lies in the recognition that there are situations in which consumer knowledge and valuation of advertising materials can be better understood by examining social rather than individual frameworks. Much advertising research focuses on how individual consumers evaluate messages, and appears to neglect the social valuation of advertising materials (for notable exceptions, see Ritson and Elliott [1999] and a special issue of the *Journal of Advertising* edited by Otnes [2003]). As Ritson and Elliott note, "The dominance of the solitary subject at the epistemological center of advertising research has resulted in only a partial understanding of the effect of advertising texts on their audiences" (1999, p. 262). We combined group-level frameworks from sociology (collective memory) and social anthropology (rubbish theory) to better understand how promotional materials can be transformed from transient objects with limited life spans to durable status, that is, how they can reach aesthetic standing through metamorphosis. Whereas Belk, Wallendorf, and Sherry (1989) describe how material objects are reframed and evolve from profane to sacred through individual activities (e.g., ritual acts, pilgrimages, quintessence, gift giving), we examine this transformation as it is achieved by social groups.

Furthermore, these theoretical frameworks allow us to observe the temporality of promotional materials and how their meanings and values are negotiated and changed by members of groups via social discourse. Advertisers might capture and crystallize contemporary cultural values and norms; however, members of society can and do reframe these transient objects when they remove the items from the trash heaps and place them in collections. The Coca-Cola advertisement, the limited edition gift-with-purchase, and the Aunt Jemima advertisement are no longer useful as promotional tools, but can be and are appreciated for their historical and educational values. Examining the social history of these objects allows us to witness American culture and the collective understandings on which it rests.

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