

Article

Curating Identities in the “Other” Office: My “Colored Museum”

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Abstract: In 1989, I began collecting and populating my university campus office with items reflecting what I knew—from my research, teaching, and lived experience as a Black American—was racist Americana. These items have supplemented my teaching of African American literature and culture for over thirty years, invigorating discussions and breathing life into the texts we study. My collection challenges one of the most esteemed aspects of our profession—alphabet literacy through reading, writing, and books. Embodying past and present, these artifacts are as powerful as books. As my personal traveling library, they go into human spaces in ways books cannot, allowing and inviting viewers’ sensory experiences. Every piece is a story and elicits a range of personal stories, documenting intersectional perspectives on race, gender, sexuality, class, ability, religion, and body size. An exercise in cultural literacy, this collection disrupts mythologies created to restrict and delegitimize the lives of Black people. Challenging my university campus office visitors to confront the reality of me—a Black male faculty member at a predominantly white institution—my collection invites open conversation about race on my terms. My “colored museum” invites all who experience it to reflect on how we experience community building and new meaning making.

Keywords: American race relations; culture; cultural literacy; white supremacy; racist artifacts; memorabilia; museum; identity; Black radical storytelling; Americana



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From back then until now
You know we made you grow;
We have been a misrepresented people
We have been a misrepresented people
From back then until now
We see our destiny
To never be a misrepresented people

—Stevie Wonder, “Misrepresented People” (Wonder 2000)

1. In the Beginning

As early as age five, I knew that I was Black. I do not recall anyone sitting down to tell me, but I knew. I knew my family was Black and that my grandparents worked for white people, sometimes in their homes as housekeepers and sometimes as production workers at the local textile plants. I do recall thinking it strange that when I went to the only family doctor’s office in my small rural northeast Georgia town, we had to walk through the front waiting room, with its separate men’s and women’s restrooms, back to a much smaller waiting room with only one bathroom. I saw no signage labeling the two rooms “Whites Only” and “Colored,” but the racial placement was clear to me. Although my family and I never discussed this race spacing, I suspected even then that the two-room design and racial groupings had little to do with the number of patients of each race but, rather, with a larger social design in support of segregation in the Deep South, another sign of the hypocrisy of “separate but equal.”

My Black elementary school and my African Methodist Episcopal (AME) Church supported and nourished me intellectually, spiritually and psychologically; both encouraged me to step out and lead, and continually celebrated my good grades and leadership skills. In high school, I taught Sunday School, was a lead soloist in our children's choir, and did summer arts classes in my church basement. In some instances, I had been fortunate to have my Sunday School instructors also as my elementary school teachers. Somehow, our communities knew that we were cared for and safe.

When in 1969, our racially segregated neighborhood's Black elementary school was closed and we youngsters were suddenly bussed—without explanation from the adults in our lives—to the white school farther from our homes, I noticed my Blackness in a very different way, this time negatively. As I began my new school as a fifth grader, I was immediately put into a speech class twice a week for an hour, allegedly because I could not pronounce the past tense of the word “ask.” I was in the class with white students who had what were to me even then more pronounced speech impediments, like lisps, and other speech-related concerns. I did lots of worksheets during that hour but have absolutely no recollection of ever saying “axe” or “axed” for “asked,” though my worksheets seemed to focus solely on that detail. I now know that linguists who study Black vernacular explain the logical and appropriate use of “axe/axed” within the rules of a language system that is neither Western nor colonialist. No one in my Black family has ever said “axed,” yet I still to this day avoid altogether using the past tense of “ask.” I use another word altogether.

While I mostly thrived in my new white elementary school, I was aware of race at almost every turn. I was tracked into the college prep lane, which meant that some of my teachers saw me as “college material.” My Black friends—my neighborhood and church friends—were in the non-college track. Being in the college track meant that, throughout elementary and high school, I was always in courses and clubs with white peers. It also meant that most of my teachers were white, except Mrs. Doris P. Brown in the fifth grade, and Mr. George Aker in eleventh-grade chemistry. I did have a couple of white teacher-mentors who were encouraging and nurturing, among them my government and civics teacher Miss Sybil Elder, and Mr. Joseph D. Brewer, the hardest English teacher on the planet, who was my “gifted English” teacher all through high school. He was a hard grader, and I have become that aspect of Mr. Brewer, according to my students over the last thirty years. Mr. Brewer challenged me on so many levels, advised my all-white-but-me Thespian Troupe, and recommended me for the Governor's Honors state competition, for which he coached me through a monologue from Ossie Davis' (Davis 1961) play *Purlie Victorious*. I did not place in that competition, but I have always been grateful that he nurtured an appreciation for performance, drama, and theater that lives on in me today. Mr. Brewer also coached me to serve as narrator for school pageants and for our Homecoming halftime. He saw in me what I never saw: a young Black person not solely and negatively marked and mocked by race.

Going off to my small predominantly white northwest Georgia college, race was not for me a thing as it had been in elementary and high school—or at least I did not think that it was. I did my work as one of the only Black English majors, and was valedictorian of my graduating class. It never occurred to me that in my four years of college, I had no Black teachers. I had not even questioned the fact that I had studied only two Black writers during my entire English degree—poets Langston Hughes and Nikki Giovanni.

Graduate school at Vanderbilt University was an eye opener, and the issue of race permeated every aspect of my experience there for six long and tedious years. All my teachers were white, most of my peers were white, and there were but two other Black graduate students pursuing degrees in English in my cohort. Fortunately, I had funding to complete the degree; I was part of a concerted effort by the Ford Foundation to recruit Black graduate students to these elite universities. My most disturbing moments involving race at Vanderbilt are these: being asked by my white teacher to recite the lyrics to Daniel Emmett's popular and upbeat song of the South “Dixie” (Emmett 1860)—a minstrel song—as the only Black student in a large-lecture Southern literature course, and having this

white Southern literature teacher assign my final paper a grade of B+ with no marginal notes or feedback whatsoever. When I asked for feedback, he said he had lost my essay. When I provided him with another copy, he critiqued my essay in four legal-size pages of handwritten notes telling me what was wrong with it. I still have that paper and his extensive notes. This same white professor consistently refused to allow me to help him in my role as a graduate student worker when I was on duty in Vanderbilt Library's Fugitive and Agrarian Collection. For those who know well the Southern literary canon, the Fugitives and Agrarians were not just white mostly male authors but were white authors who longed for the romanticized past when "darkeys" knew their subordinate positions beneath white folks. This irony is not lost on me now that I was a Black graduate student at Vanderbilt University—one of three in my particular cohort at this wealthy white institution, and on a special fellowship to recruit Black graduate students—now working in a Special Collections where my own white Southern literature professor was refusing my assistance. Indeed, education has never been the great liberator as too many contend.

When choosing my dissertation topic, I settled on Black female poet and playwright Ntozake Shange because I did not understand her 1976 choreopoem *for colored girls who have considered suicide/when the rainbow is enough*. As I was speaking with professors about assembling my committee, one esteemed British white professor asked me, "Are you working on Shange because she is Black, and you are Black?" (Shange 1975) I received no such delimiting inquiry when I did my master's thesis on Tennessee Williams' short stories.

As a Black child and young Black male, I was never quite able to articulate what was going on around me in terms of my race and my racial realities even though the raw facts of race as a social construct and of American racism as a violent way of life have been with me since before I could remember. I now collect Black material culture because I know that my race has always mattered on some level in my life. In the same way that I have collected, remembered, and even memorialized these personal stories, I collect "stuff" that reminds me that race has always mattered and continues to matter in this country and in the world. I collect these artifacts because I want to remember that where I have been is also where I am now, at a predominantly white institution, still navigating my racial identity as a personal, political, and professional fact. How I have chosen to navigate these intersecting spaces is the foundation of what, how, and why I have created this "colored museum" that is again my university campus office. My collection of Black things is a perpetual confronting, embracing, and exorcising of demons—demons of racial anxiety. It is also a reclamation of my humanity through the lens of racial integrity, racial possibility, and racial liberation—my own and perhaps Others.'

2. Let There Be Light

I have always collected things, although I have not always known why. I saved all my report cards from first grade through high school, and not because all of them had stellar grades across them. I also saved my entries to elementary school contests—a poem about imagining myself a horse, and a mushroom constructed of multicolored striped fabric for a "Mushroom Contest." I have no recollection of why we had this contest. I saved clippings from elementary and high school newspapers about my achievements—Student Council Officer, Thespian awards, a talent show in which I danced with my aunt and a family friend to rhythm and blues singer Betty Wright's (Wright 1972) tune "Clean Up Woman," and other school activities. In one photo, I am on stage in the dashiki that I made myself in a Home Economics class. These clippings, neatly pasted into a scrapbook, were later transferred into acid-free folders and boxes—a lesson in preservation I had learned about as a graduate student worker in the Vanderbilt University Archives. While my family joked about my saving these artifacts, they all came in handy when I was invited a couple of years ago to become a subject of a children's picture book about me and a white childhood friend during desegregation in my small rural town of Jefferson, Georgia. That book is being circulated among potential publishers.

1989 . . . my first assistant professor tenure-track position at the University of Alabama in Tuscaloosa, and my spouse and I were looking to buy our first home after having lived in an apartment in nearby Birmingham. My new white female department chair gave us the name of the realtor she had used to find her beautiful home, so we trusted the recommendation. This white female realtor took us only to what she proudly and repeatedly deemed “professional neighborhoods,” since she knew I was starting at the university. As we toured many houses that were clearly white people’s homes from the family photos displayed throughout, I began noticing Aunt Jemima salt and pepper shakers and cookie jars on kitchen counters and tables. At one point during our search, I could not even focus on the homes themselves because I was too distracted by these Jim Crow artifacts. They were home décor, as I experienced and witnessed them, and were not items collected as some potentially teachable critical point associated with them.

Collector and Civil Rights leader Julian [Bond \(1996\)](#) makes this distinction between Black and white collectors:

We collectors have many motives for our obsession . . . For some, they embrace a fascination with an American yesterday, a before-civil rights era when it was thought proper to decorate homes with cute and cruel depictions of the “other”—the grinning caricatures and twisted bodies of our fellow Americans of African descent . . . For others, like myself, these artifacts also summon up yesterday’s world, but in our hands and homes they become reminders of a different sort. They speak to triumph and overcoming, and inform us that despite what others thought and believed, we were never what these figurines and objects suggest. We see them as sentinels guarding the past, doorkeepers who prevent our ever returning to it, harsh—if even sometimes beautiful—preservers of the history we have overthrown. (p. 11)

When I asked about her initial responses to my office collection of “cute and cruel depictions” of Blackness, Arizona State University Project Humanities Distinguished Visiting Scholar Dr. Carolivia Herron, a Black Jewish academician whose expertise is in epic poetry, recalls:

I stepped into your office, Neal. How well I remember it.

Shock. Shocked response to negative images of Black folks. My eyes got wider. My vision got wider. “Look what he’s done,” I said to myself. A sense of wide perspective, looking from above at the long history of African Americans in the United States, images of African Americans in US American commerce. Black faces on packages and signposts. Then a slow gentle calming. We need to see this. I need to see this. My eyes moving from item to object to item to object. Looking at you. “Is it okay?” an inner thought. I don’t know what you were talking about. You were talking about something. I noticed that I slowly began breathing regularly again. I didn’t know that I had stopped breathing regularly until the regular breath returned. Finally, I did say something about a Jemima image. “It always amazes me that Jemima is a name from the book of Job, a Hebrew name. An honored Hebrew daughter.” I then asked you to tell me of how you gathered your collection. When we got to that point, I had an immense sense of safety, I knew those images couldn’t hurt me anymore. I wondered how you could talk about anything else but your collection to someone, me, seeing the collection for the first time. (Personal email 13 November 2020) ([Herron 2020](#))

Dr. Herron’s and other office visitors’ surprise and shock is an emotional response similar to yet different from the shock and surprise I witnessed when I saw these items in home after home after home during my house hunting. Why I was so surprised to see these artifacts in the white Tuscaloosa homes, I am still not sure. After all, as we drove with the realtor on multiple long house-hunting excursions, we passed through the University of Alabama campus entry where oversized confederate flags hung in windows and on porches of grandly architected white fraternity and sorority houses. Again, that was 1989.

Chair of the English Department at Alabama State University, Dr. Jacqueline Trimble, who is African American and a former graduate student mentee, captured the gravity of my house-hunting eye opener in terms of geography, place, and private and public space when I shared the experience with her back when we worked together in Alabama. She vividly recalls:

I remember the Black caricature figurines. And I remember your explanation that you only bought stuff that was out there, not newly manufactured. I thought it was fascinating that you were confronting a part of our distorted history that I wanted to dismiss or ignore. And that you were making others confront it, whether they wanted to or not, especially in a space as historically fraught as University of Alabama. And you know some of those students had seen that kind of stuff in their houses or in the houses of their grandparents where it was not considered ironic. Very cool. Like an argument without words, the juxtaposition between who I am, this college professor, and who you have historically pretended I am.

You saw those images while house hunting! It's so representative of a desire to control. A malevolent nostalgia for the mostly imagined. I mean most of these folks flying confederate flags were poor and fighting to protect someone else's money. (Facebook message 13 November 2020) ([Trimble 2020](#))

Inspired or provoked by my house-hunting experience, I began collecting items that reflected what I knew, from my research, teaching, and lived experience as a Black American male, was racist Americana.

For the past thirty years, these items have supplemented—increasingly rigorously and deliberately—my teaching of and public presentations on African American literature and culture. They have invigorated ideas and discussions, breathing life into the texts I teach. Among my assorted and-in-no-particular-order-of-collecting-or-importance collection are minstrel dolls; a Mattel 1950s toy clock and toy television with only white people pictured; Barbie dolls in various skin shades, and a couple of Barbies—one Black and another white—in wheelchairs; a brown-skinned American Girl doll my spouse and I bought based on the marketing promise that the doll would look like our biracial daughter—it did not and seemed but another white doll mold, with dark hair added, and brown “skin”; a bowling game (pictured above) in which the object is to roll a ball into Black children to knock them down to score points (Figure 1); another game that involves competing players throwing bean bags into Black minstrel mouth holes; postcards of alligators chasing Black adults and children; minstrelsy posters; a Black lawn jockey with a monkey-like face, painted white; a bushel-basket-size Mammy figure; a miniature Mammy lamp and cookie jar; multiple “ethnic” Nativity scenes; a Parisian Chef clock that offers an interesting contrast to one that looks like “Uncle Ben”; “Darkie” and “Black Girl” toothpaste from Sichuan, China; a music box with a Black ballerina; a box of “Obama Waffles” mix sold at the 2008 Family Research Council’s Values Voter Summit in Washington, DC; Jim Crow signage; Spain’s “Conguitos” chocolate candy pieces, and wrappers featuring a minstrel-like cartoon figure. The occasion of this essay exercise has prompted me to take on the task of inventorying more formally my collection in terms of what each item is, where it was manufactured, its general popularity, and any other notes that one might find in other museums and libraries. For now, though, they are catalogued in my memory and rely solely on my own personal curation.

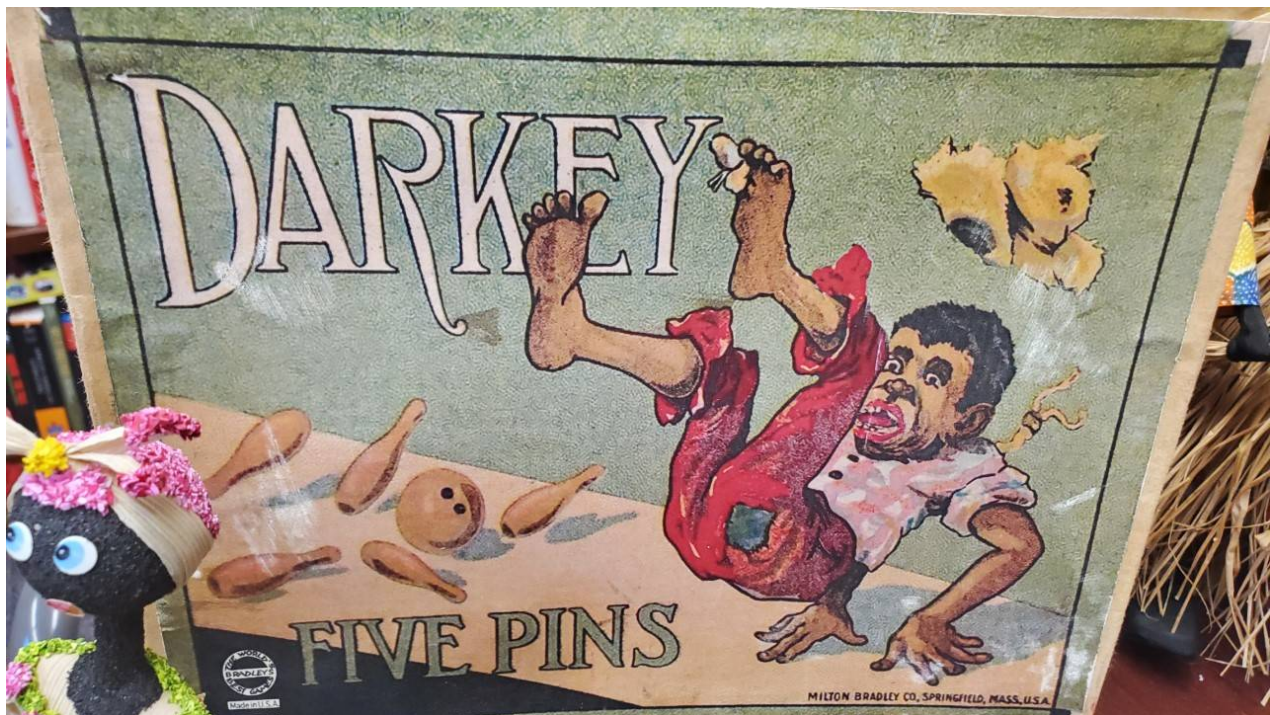


Figure 1. Early twentieth-century *Darkey Five Pins* is a Milton Bradley bowling game that comes with five pins that are wood-based cardboard men, each holding a watermelon. Milton Bradley also made *Darkey Ten Pins* [c. 1910]. Parker Brothers manufactured the similar *Sambo Five Pins* [c. 1920s] and a card game similar to Old Maid called *The Game of Ten Little Ni-ers*. Denis Mercier [n.d.] notes that various manufacturers produced numerous other such games.

More than office décor, these artifacts are, for me, teaching tools just as powerful as books. Across races, generations, and professions, including students and colleagues, those who visit my campus office are often surprised by my collection. Expecting to see the typical college professor's office of books, other books, and more books, visitors visibly pause to take in all that surrounds them as nearly every inch of office space is populated. Some take photos, others make videos. While I do have a few books, the books never become the focus of an office visit. After experiencing the office for the first time recently, Valencia Clement, a Haitian American graduate student in Education Policy and Leadership at Arizona State University, shares:

I felt really welcomed when I came to your space. I was reminded that there were spaces that valued the aesthetic qualities of Blackness. Arizona State University is a place where diversity and Blackness can feel obscured, so to be in a space that centered Black aesthetics so intentionally was refreshing.

I remember being very shocked when I first saw your office but not in a bad way. I had never seen any of the items/figures in your office in person, so it was interesting to see. Just shocked at all the history I was exposed to upon entering your office for the first time! There's a lot to learn and a lot of stories to be told regarding the setup of your office.

Yes, there's a sea of different Black figurines that you can tell represent a diverse set of creators. You can see how people perceive Black features as they turn them into "art," especially with lips, skin tone, clothes, etc. One of the things that impacted me a lot was the number of darker dolls with curlier textured hair because often dolls are white, and if they're brown, their hair is straight, so it's actually a bold statement to represent Blackness in this way. (Personal email 13 November 2020) (Clement 2020)

Feeling disconnected from this predominantly white institution, Valencia admits visiting my office at a time when she needed a “real” a cultural connection. She had no idea what she would encounter beyond meeting me.

As a professor of African American literature and culture, I experience these artifacts as living, breathing texts—like the collection Spike Lee (2000) brings to life in his movie *Bamboozled*. At one point in Lee’s film, Pierre de la Croix’s artifacts come alive to torture him, reminding him that he cannot escape his authentic Black identity even in the bubble of his uppity assimilated and mostly white “professional world.” I call my office collection my “colored museum,” borrowed from George C. Wolfe’s (Wolfe 1986) play of the same title. Wolfe’s commentary on the complexities of being Black in America since our forced arrival in 1619 is the story of reconciling the best and the worst of Blacks’ lived experiences at the same time. Both the best and the worst that is racist American history, my collection bears out one of the compelling messages of Wolfe’s play: the “colored contradictions” that are Black folks’ lives in this country (p. 53): Barbie dolls that celebrate the range of brown skin hues, a Michelle Obama doll, a Misty Copeland doll, a Nia music box with a Black spinning ballerina, my *for colored girls* theater poster, and event posters of my campus hosting of both Angela Y. Davis and Ruth Pointer. Using this prevailing sentiment for his African American play anthology, Harry J. Elam, Jr. (Elam 1996) clarifies, “For African Americans, the contemporary social and cultural condition is one of paradox, complexity, despair, and contradiction” (p. 1). Those who study and teach African American literature and culture know that the racist stereotypes and caricatures are not just about being Othered by white people but are also internalized by Black folks ourselves—Du Bois’ notion of “double consciousness.”

My collection, while mostly about race in America, is not restricted to American materials. In fact, some of the distinctly anti-Black pieces are from my international travels to Panama (Figure 2), China, Korea, Spain, Pakistan, Ghana, and Cuba. Each of these trips revealed items that teach persistent and global lessons about white supremacy and anti-Blackness, and about disparaged Black bodies. Other items in the collection have come mostly from thrift stores, eBay, estate sales, and, especially early on, occasional yard sales. Students and colleagues who know my collection have also contributed from their travels to Mexico, Japan, Guyana, London, and Mumbai. As most of my pieces are second-hand, I am not supporting or sustaining their production; rather, I am re-purposing them as educational tools. They travel with me to class and to public lectures I routinely give on the Nword, cultural appropriation, privilege and bias, and the animalization of Black bodies in literature and popular culture. When I asked Martine Garcia, Jr., a Mexican American staff member at Arizona State University, about his memories of experiencing my artifacts in public presentations, he remembers:

In retrospect, there are a handful of emotions that I have personally experienced when seeing many of the items you display. I can say that there is initially a moment of shock. This usually stems from not believing what is being displayed, as many of the items are objectively offensive, such as the Golliwog dolls.¹ That initial shock turns into a mixture of emotions, such as anger, disgust, sadness, or even confusion. However, there are other items in the display that require further examination and critical thinking to understand how deep rooted many biases are.

At the 2020 Peace Dinner at Arizona State University Polytechnic, we had a discussion on children’s books. I was speechless in realizing that many Black children are the least likely to be featured in a children’s book and that child-like animals were far more likely to be featured. When seeing a display such as your collection, I can’t help but want to further examine each item and explore

¹ Inspired by a minstrel doll, Florence Kate Upton created the Golliwog character for her immensely popular children’s books (1895–1909). Untrade-marked, the figure then became a rag doll popular in Britain, Europe, and Australia—sold in Britain until at least 2009 (Sturcke 2009). The character and doll influenced other toys, women’s perfume bottles and jewelry, music, food products, and culture generally.

the intent of its creation and the impact that it has on different communities. These are important discussions, that while uncomfortable, cause us to be more intentional about identifying our biases. (Personal email 16 November 2020) ([Garcia 2020](#))



Figure 2. A minstrelsy Nativity scene from my trip to Panama in 2016.

As my personal traveling library, these items elicit responses—intellectual, emotional and visceral—as they take viewers into human spaces, the nooks and crannies where books cannot go in such a startlingly sensory way. Cyndee Landrum, an African American library administrator at the Institute of Museum and Library Services and doctoral student in Library and Information Science at Simmons University, speaks to how the condensed physicality of the objects in the collection reminded her of how Blackness is denied in our society:

I am a minimalist and visual learner . . . The first time that I visited your office, my senses were overwhelmed. I don't think that I had ever seen Blackness represented at such a scale in a single space. I felt like the little girl who was in awe of Michelle Obama's portrait . . . I was awe-struck. I was saddened to realize that I live in a deficit when it comes to seeing Blackness represented in the images that I encounter in my day-to-day life. (Facebook message 13 November 2020) ([Landrum 2020](#))

More than flat paper images can provide, these cultural materials give those who witness them the literal sensory experiences of sight, smell, touch, sound, and even taste—the Chinese “Darkie” toothpaste, the Golliwog perfume bottle purchased on eBay, a Pakistani skin whitener specifically for brides on their wedding day, a multiple-Mammies windchime gifted to me from a friend's visit to Louisiana, “jolly nword cast iron banks” (Figure 3) a couple of 1920s vintage jig-dancing wind-up tin toys, and the Conguitos and “Obama Waffles” mix, an artifact that has drawn the attention of numerous visitors. Don Guillory, an African American doctoral student in American history at the University of Mississippi, shares his initial impression of my office:

The first time I visited your office, I was in shock . . . not at the display of items, but at the mere volume. I thought about all of the history behind what I saw

and the minds of the people who created them. I looked and thought about how so many of the artifacts on display connected with each other to dehumanize and devalue the lives of people of color. I thought about the world that people must have lived in when this was open and acceptable in the public rather than something that has been removed to odd antique and curio shops. The items there made me feel as though they needed to be on better display for more people to see in order to gain the reality of what these images meant for the people who bought them and bought into them . . . as well as the people who it was targeted toward in order to strike some blow toward their cultural identity. The dolls, images, advertisements did not shock me, but I considered how tremendously necessary some people need to see, hold, touch those items to get a better understanding of the weight that race, racism, discrimination, etc. have on this nation's soul.

As for the many other times I would visit, I would try to make my way back to your office to see more of what was there. (Personal email 13 November 2020) (Guillory 2020)



Figure 3. Uncle and Aunt Dinah cast iron “Jolly Nword Banks,” with an arm as lever, circa 1930s.

As is each viewer's individual reaction, every collected piece is itself a story, a narrative. One thing I especially appreciate about this still-growing collection is that others have gifted me some of the artifacts and the stories that go with them. Upon conversing with a local Bayou restaurant owner here in Tempe, Arizona about his Voodoo Daddy's décor of food-packaging products with minstrelsy images, he quite unexpectedly passed along the two square wall hangings for my collection. A white female undergraduate student gave me the heavy cement lawn jockey that her white grandparents had had in their front yard in Louisiana; even after painting the Black-faced figure white, they had been still harassed by white neighbors for displaying this racist cliché object. A colleague gifted me a revolving music box from Japan with a little monkey-esque Black child providing valet service to a dapper white businessman. Another colleague brought back a Golliwog stuffed toy from London, and still another colleague brought back a decorative plate from Uruguay featuring a brown face with exaggerated minstrel lips.

These artifacts document not just race but also intersectional perspectives on race, gender, sexuality, class, ability, religion, and body size. While my continually growing collection is tied to the content that I teach, it is also about me as a university professor challenging some of the most esteemed aspects of our profession—alphabet literacy through reading, writing, and books. Even though I write, edit, and contribute to books, my collection fundamentally challenges the prevailing notion among academics that books, essays and chapters are the most valuable sources of knowledge and vehicles of Truth. Indeed, my “colored museum” challenges the perception that these products of reading and writing were ever and are the only effective way to know and to document and seek Truth. I know and teach about the historical trauma Black people in this country experienced in learning to read and write. When I taught my first totally online course pre-COVID-19 in Fall 2019, student workers in my office who had taken many online courses insisted that I create short introductory videos for each weekly module to engage students more fully. This video of me in my office with my teaching tools was created by Caprial Grow for Module 1 of my African American Literature course—Part 1: Beginning through the Harlem Renaissance—which always commences with a focus on “Orality, Stories and Storytelling”: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7ccAmfeR-cE#action=share>. More recently, Don Gerron, an African American community member, shared with me how my collection made an impression on him when he walked in a couple of years ago to do a video that had nothing to do with my office or its decor. I remember him as he stood silently, looking around the small room, taking in the objects that filled every available surface and space. He recounts his response to that moment:

Fascination and shock. What was most shocking was the stuff that was modern. That wasn’t dated. Very surprising and eye-opening.

The . . . box is the one that stuck in my head. Yes. The [Obama] waffles [mix]. It was shocking to see because it was unexpected.

I’ve seen some things before, but that office was a wakeup moment. There was an instant message. When it sunk in it was even more surprising that there were things that were new . . . People actually thought this stuff up. Then and now.

“Nothing has changed” was my thought at one point.

I also wondered what someone would think if they never have really thought about the subject or paid attention to it because it doesn’t affect them. What would they be thinking when this slapped them in the face?

. . . I thought it was an effective way of blatantly showing what is out there. Especially to others that don’t see it or are affected ever. I wondered if they thought about it when they left. (Text message 12 November 2020) (Gerron 2020)

Moved by the experience of this office as a teaching tool, Don—a media arts entrepreneur—created this video of me in the office discussing my collection expressly to accompany this essay: <https://tinyurl.com/LestersOffice>. Still another community member, TJ Vanklompberg, who is Vietnamese American and white, like Don, also remembers noticing the pop culture presence of the artifacts, placing their acceptability in the past:

I loved it. My eyes were drawn in every direction to soak it all in . . . Your collection seems to be a shared experience from your past that continues to live on through you and how you teach new people of its significance to you. Some items seem to be more personal to your experience and others have a broader meaning to the general human experience. Some of the blackface dolls/memorabilia from that era can have both a profound personal and general meaning. Some items seem to be kept to never forget the negative meaning behind the item while others are kept for happier reasons (friends, family, travel, etc.). Your office is 100% unique. Never before seen anything like it. I’ve only seen some similar items through “pop culture”—TV (older comedy skits, movies, etc.), magazines, newspapers, radio. It seems that it was more acceptable in an era where minimal

gatekeeping took place with the media. (Personal email 13 November 2020) ([Vanklompenberg 2020](#))

As history concentrated up close and personal, my collection is an exercise in cultural literacy, specifically to teach and to disrupt the myriad mythologies created by others meant to restrict, disenfranchise, and dehumanize Black people. In Marlon Riggs' ([Riggs 1987](#)) seminal documentary *Ethnic Notions: Black People in White Minds*, narrator Esther Rolle historicizes these racist representations:

The mammy . . . the pickaninny . . . the coon . . . the sambo . . . the uncle. Well into the middle of the twentieth century, these were some of the most popular depictions of Black Americans . . . [Caricatures and stereotypes] like these permeated American culture. These were the images that decorated our homes, they served and amused, and made us laugh. Taken for granted, they worked their way into the mainstream of American life. Of ethnic caricatures in America, these have been the most enduring. Today, there's little doubt that they shaped the most gut-level feelings about race.

A white male administrative colleague, Dr. Duane Roen, has seen my public presentations in which these artifacts are integral parts of my efforts to tell the story of Black people in this country and around the world. He admits:

I love your use of artifacts in your presentations. They clearly illustrate the concepts that you discuss, causing me to think, "Ah, yes. I know exactly what he means." Also, because some of the artifacts come from a different time and place, I get a better sense of what the culture was like. In general, I love artifacts. In [our] home, we have lots of artifacts/heirlooms from ancestors. I gently touch some of them every day to bring back memories of my parents or grandparents, or to connect with the great-grandparents who died before I was born. I like to think that some of their DNA may still be there in the artifact, just as it is in me. I hope that you continue to use artifacts. They constitute a traveling museum that effectively complements your words.

The dolls and the children's books stand out because they made me think about how stereotypes were reinforced for the children who experienced them—sometimes on a daily basis. The artifacts with images of Aunt Jemima stand out because we used those products in our house when I was a child. (Personal email 14 November 2020) ([Roen 2020](#))

My artifacts also underscore the ways in which white people's and white children's lives have been touched by delimiting images of Black people; Black children, on the other hand, have been fundamentally affected by the trauma of Black adult experiences with racism, domestic terrorism, and cultural misrepresentation or total erasure. Dean of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the University of Central Oklahoma, Dr. Catherine Webster, who is white, witnessed some my collected artifacts in a presentation on privilege and bias that I did for her faculty a few years ago. Reflecting on the workshop experience, she shares, "The material for children—toys, games, dolls, and books—engendered a different reaction for me. They reinforced negative stereotypes and myths about people of color—how they act, what roles they play in society, and how they should be treated. The volume and variety of these artifacts was troubling."²

Since these stereotypes have also been reinforced by literary and filmic representations of Black folks, my collected artifacts complement my teaching of nineteenth-century slave/bondage narratives like Frederick Douglass's *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave* ([Douglass \[1845\] 1996](#)) and Harriet Wilson's novel *Our Nig* ([Wilson 1859](#));

² Dean Webster recently discussed the children's materials with Dr. Heather Ahtone, a citizen of the Chickasaw Nation and Choctaw descendant. Dr. Ahtone is senior curator at the First Americans Museum in Oklahoma City, which will open in 2021. The museum will feature a "tunnel of kitsch" that will exhibit depictions of Native Americans on everyday objects, from placemats and saltshakers to dolls, toys, and games. Personal email 14 November 2020 ([Webster 2020](#)).

of twentieth-century novels and plays, including Zora Neale Hurston's *Their Eyes Were Watching God* (Hurston 1937), James Baldwin's *Blues for Mister Charlie* (Baldwin 1964), and Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (Morrison 1970); and of film into the twenty-first century, such as Spike Lee's *Bamboozled* (Lee 2000). Sterling A. Brown (1933), in his essay "Negro Character as Seen by White Authors," identifies categories of stereotypes that manifest in textual and material creations: the contented slave, the wretched freeman, the comic Negro, the brute Negro, the tragic mulatto, the local color Negro, and the exotic primitive (p. 180). Pieces in my collection both embody the perpetuation of these reductive stereotypes and, as they serve as teaching tools, challenge these misrepresentations. Dr. Michelle Pinkard, a Black former graduate student mentee who is now an Associate Professor of English and interim chair of the Department of Languages, Literature, and Philosophy at Tennessee State University, recalls the immediate intellectual and cultural connections she made between her previous experiences at the historically Black colleges and universities (HBCUs) she attended and her seeing my office at Arizona State University for the first time:

I mainly remember the perception shift that I experienced after visiting your office. You may recall that by the time we met, I had already earned a couple of degrees from different institutions . . . I had been in many academic offices, and I had an implicit understanding of their function as a respite for the instructors. Generally, when entering a professor's office, I saw them as an extension of the instructor, reflecting their interests and lives, but ultimately designed to fuel their own productivity.

By contrast, your office felt like it was designed to extend the education process for students, or anyone who entered the space, for that matter. The sensation was similar to that of walking into a museum. Moreover, coming from two HBCUs before entering Arizona State University, I was accustomed to seeing gestures of Afrocentric art in offices. But where those previous experiences were celebratory, your office decor seemed to illuminate the fissures and fractures in America's racial history. In a word, your office was overwhelming, and much of your collection was unabashedly controversial. I remember you saying that most of the collection "sparks conversation." And in that moment, I came to appreciate how space can support advocacy. I can't speak to a specific item, but the word "Sambo" comes to mind when I think of the space. The lesson, however, stuck with me. (Personal email 16 November 2020) (Pinkard 2020)

As Dr. Pinkard's reaction attests, my "colored museum" is equally about the power of Black people telling Black stories as affirmation of Black life, and about Black radical storytelling in the face of systemic racism, global anti-Blackness, and the illusion of white supremacy to confront and dismantle these interlocking systems.

In the first chapter of his *Understanding Jim Crow: Using Racist Memorabilia to Teach Tolerance and Promote Social Justice*, "The Garbage Man: Why I Collect Racist Objects," David Pilgrim (2015), founder and curator of the Ferris State University's Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia, explains the impetus for his own collecting practices and purposes:

All racial groups have been caricatured in this country, but none have been caricatured as often or in as many ways as have lack Americans. Blacks have been portrayed in popular culture as pitiable exotics, cannibalistic savages, hypersexual deviants, childlike buffoons, obedient servants, self-loathing victims, and menaces to society. These antiblack depictions were routinely manifested in or on material objects: ashtrays, drinking glasses, banks, games, fishing lures, detergent boxes, and other everyday items. These objects both reflected and shaped attitudes toward African Americans. (p. 5)

Our [museum's] goal is not to shock visitors. A thick naiveté about the racial past permeates this country. Many Americans understand historical racism mainly as a general abstraction: Racism existed; it was bad, though probably not as bad as blacks and other minorities claim. A confrontation with the visual evidence of

racism—especially thousands of items in a small space—is frequently shocking, even agonizing. (p. 17)

For Pilgrim and for me, as for some of my office visitors and those who attend my talks, our collected racist Americana lives and breathes the past and present.

Phillip Merrill, founder of Nanny Jack & Company, a consulting agency specializing in Black Americana, sees these grotesque racist items as part of Black collectors' "emotional need to claim ownership of the past" (Zeller 2001, p. 6). The blurb for Chico Colvard's 2018 documentary *Black Memorabilia* (Colvard 2018)—a cultural companion to Riggs' *Ethnic Notions: Black People in White Minds*—reminds audiences that collectors collect for a host of personal and political reasons:

What does it mean when Americans rebuke racism yet hold on to nostalgia objects that embrace it? *Black Memorabilia* explores the world of racist material, both antique and newly produced, that propagate demeaning representations of African Americans. From industrial China to the rural South to Brooklyn, the film shines light on those who reproduce, consume and reclaim racially charged items, from banks to mammy kitchenware, Confederate flags, Nazi insignia and other ephemera. *Black Memorabilia* asks the provocative questions: When are objects immoral, and when is it right or wrong to possess them? Does historical value supersede offensiveness? At times uncomfortable and often unexpected, *Black Memorabilia* is a thought-provoking, stimulating addition to our [US] nation's ongoing conversations about how we think and talk about race.

"Uncomfortable" and "unexpected" describe how many visitors report having felt upon entering my office museum. In the same way that my stumbling into the private-made-public spaces during my first house-hunting experience so many years ago, I see this collection and my collecting as a way to prompt what are for many across the racial spectrum those proverbial uncomfortable conversations about race. I trust that those who do experience my private-made-public space also have a curiosity and desire to know more and to understand more about racial and social justice, past and present. Perhaps their experience will provoke, prompt, coerce, or even compel visitors to see white supremacy and anti-Blackness not as abstractions of the past but in real tangible ways that were commodified and codified in these concrete artifacts and creations. I trust that the details of each artifact will underscore that white supremacy and anti-Blackness were and are not coincidental or incidental but rather calculated and systemic, woven into the very fabric of our USA national identity and beyond.

This house-hunting experience is indeed not unlike my first administrative visit to Sichuan University in China back in the mid-2000s and going into a campus bookstore for toothpaste. The toothpaste that I noticed first was called "Darlie" toothpaste and had the slightly whitewashed American minstrelsy Black male imaged on the green and white box. The box and the image immediately reminded me of a graduate school roommate from Taiwan who had a tube of "Darkey" toothpaste with the same but unwhitened minstrel male face and the same black and white packaging. When I saw this package in the bookstore, I knew immediately that the two products' names and images were connected. Googling the names and images, I learned the story of the toothpaste brand that originated in Hong Kong and was allegedly based on an Asian person's witnessing a US American minstrelsy performance and concluding that a Black person's teeth did appear whiter against Blackface makeup and ruby red exaggerated lips. When Colgate bought the Hong Kong company in 1985, the name changed from "Darkey" to "Darlie" because of the US race politics of representation and became a very popular brand of toothpaste for Chinese adults and children. The well-documented Asian anti-Blackness sentiment was not lost on me then or now as I vividly recall seeing mostly Chinese young women carrying parasols nearly everywhere during the day in Sichuan providence. While I naively thought this gesture at first a guard against skin damage from sun exposure, I now see it as yet another manifestation of the deep and undeniable interconnectedness of race, gender, class,

colorism, white supremacy and anti-Blackness. Such a lesson about race, for me, had once again come from a seemingly unexpected place.

As “texts” that teach, my collection moves beyond the limitations of a physical book, which typically must be opened or technologically switched on to experience, instead engaging instantly, and not necessarily with a visitor’s permission, anyone who walks into or by my professorial office space. The artifacts tell stories that I cannot personally tell as they capture a viewer’s emotion and imagination without the viewer’s awareness or control, unlike the deliberate act of picking up, opening, and closing a book. If there is something the reader does not like, the book can be snapped shut, the rest of the book unread and ignored. In contrast, visitors to my office cannot close my door or not see what they see. They may certainly choose not to engage with me about the contents of what they see, but they cannot not see it as they are not physiologically blind or visually impaired. This collection also challenges my office visitors to confront the reality of me, an African American male faculty member at yet another predominantly white institution, inviting—even forcing—an interiority or open conversation about US and even global constructions of race on my terms. In this sense, my “colored museum” invites, coaxes, and seduces all who experience it—my students, office staff team, and university colleagues, especially—to reflect on how they see me in this space and how we collectively and individually experience community building and new meaning making. My “colored museum” curates intersectional identities and begs continual reflection on the perennial question W.E.B. Du Bois (1903) poses in *The Souls of Black Folk* forty years after Emancipation: How do we measure progress? More importantly, though, my collection reveals a lot about me as an entrepreneurial humanist using every trick up my proverbial sleeve to teach and learn. My collecting story and teaching-learning purpose echoes that of Pilgrim (2015), who explains: “I am a garbage collector—racist garbage . . . I collect this garbage because I believe, and know to be true, that items of intolerance can be used to teach tolerance and promote social justice” (p. 1). Though in different places geographically, Pilgrim and I are walking side by side in this justice journey.

3. Challenges and Challenging

Harlem Renaissance author Jean Toomer ([1931] 1991) famously posits in *Essentials* that “We are [Western society is] hypnotized by literacy”—by alphabet literacy, that is, reading and writing (n.p. Chapter LXI). As a scholar and teacher of African American literature and culture, I know well the struggles of Black people historically to declare our humanity sometimes through the illusion of getting an education. I also know the dangers that came with learning to read and write as part of that education and the extent to which the academy and the larger society have long idolized reading and writing as the pillars for Black respectability and of Black generational racial uplift and advancement.

I also know the extent to which racial uplift and social advancement have not leveled the political or professional playing field. Frederick Douglass, in his 1845 *Narrative of the Life of Frederick Douglass, an American Slave*, acknowledges the reality of blatant American racism when he, though educated and no longer enslaved, cannot get a job as a caulker because he is Black. It is a myth of great proportion to imagine that learning to read and write and being “educated” is a great social, educational, or economic equalizer. This is not to say that education has no value but, rather, to acknowledge that much of my awakening to white supremacy, racial bias, anti-Blackness, and racism comes from lessons within the very structure of the academy—not just from who is recruited, hired, and making decisions about the institutions, but also in terms of what is deemed legitimate research by the powers that be, and what research matters and is valued and rewarded. Systemic racial bias shows up in the academy’s privileging of books over other kinds of epistemological vehicles (e.g., artifacts) as ways of knowing. Writer and visiting Pakistani faculty member Kanza Javed, of Kinnaird College in Lahore, recalls her response to the office artifacts:

I was never familiar with America’s racist history . . . [W]e were always taught old white men in literature. Growing up in Pakistan, where white skin is desirable, I

had never pondered over racism in the US. I believed it was a free land. I didn't even know the depth of Native American history and pain until I visited Arizona. I realized the TV shows I watched had all white casts . . . So, [your office] was very confronting. It was eye opening to see tangible proof that America is just as problematic with its treatment of minorities as Pakistan is. (Facebook message 13 November 2020) (Javed 2020)

While empathy and emotion alone will not effect justice, to put these artifacts in conversations about morality and human dignity can potentially challenge attitudes, thoughts, and actions in moves toward a more just and humane world for all. My collection elicits emotional responses from me and my office visitors, but I draw “strength from seeing what [we Black people] have endured and how we have survived” (Cain 1994, p. 106). Perhaps my hope also is to elicit empathy from those who have relied consciously or unconsciously on stereotypes and caricatures in their thinking about, interactions with, and understanding of me as a university professor and of other Black people's experiences in this country and globally.

The white saviorism complex of Joel Schumacher's *A Time to Kill* aside, this 1996 film's excursion into the minds of white people and their attitudes about Black people is an exercise in imagining another's denied humanity (Schumacher 1996). Matthew McConaughey's attorney character uses this strategy in his closing argument to an all-white Mississippi jury in defense of a Black father who has admittedly murdered the two male white supremacists who raped, battered, and lynched his ten-year-old daughter. His closing argument goes like this:

What is it in us that seeks Truth? Is it our minds, or is it our hearts? I set out to prove a Black man could receive a fair trial in the South, that we are all equal in the eyes of the law. That's not the Truth because the eyes of the law are human eyes—yours and mine—and until we can see each other as equals, justice is never going to be evenhanded. It will remain nothing more than a reflection of our own prejudices, so until that day we have a duty under God to seek the Truth, not with our eyes and not with our minds where fear and hate turn commonality into prejudice, but with our hearts—where we don't know better.

Now I wanna tell you a story. I'm gonna ask y'all to close your eyes while I tell you this story. I want you to listen to me. I want you to listen to yourselves. This is a story about a little girl walking home from the grocery store one sunny afternoon. I want you to picture this little girl.

Suddenly a truck races up. Two men jump out and grab her. They drag her into a nearby field and they tie her up, and they rip her clothes from her body. Now they climb on, first one then the other, raping her, shattering everything innocent and pure—vicious thrusts—in a fog of drunken breath and sweat. And when they're done, after they killed her tiny womb, murdered any chance for her to bear children, to have life beyond her own, they decide to use her for target practice. So, they start throwing full beer cans at her. They throw 'em so hard that it tears the flesh all the way to her bones—and they urinate on her.

Now comes the hanging. They have a rope; they tie a noose. Imagine the noose pulling tight around her neck and a sudden blinding jerk. She's pulled into the air and her feet and legs go kicking and they don't find the ground. The hanging branch isn't strong enough. It snaps and she falls back to the earth. So, they pick her up, throw her in the back of the truck, and drive out to Foggy Creek Bridge and pitch her over the edge. And she drops some 30 feet down to the creek bottom below.

Can you see her? Her raped, beaten, broken body, soaked in their urine, soaked in their semen, soaked in her blood—left to die. Can you see her? I want you to picture that little girl. Now imagine she's white. (<https://www.americanrhetoric.com/MovieSpeeches/specialengagements/moviespeechatimetokill.html>)

This scene and my office demonstrate, coerce, and invite both an emotional and intellectual exercise in bias, empathy, humanity, justice, and imagination—or the lack thereof.

These visual representations and their ability often to elicit visceral responses from viewers also afford a strategy for engaging storytelling as process and product, and of the ways in which the humanities are about this process of creating narrative. As does Jean Toomer, Toni Morrison (1987), in *Beloved*, challenges the primacy of reading and writing by underscoring the more powerful meaning of sound and sense: “In the beginning there were no words. In the beginning was the sound, and they all knew what that sound sounded like” (p. 259). Morrison here signifies on a different Genesis story that does not idolize words when words cannot and do not capture all that is human experience; seeing instead, sounds as the building blocks of words. Especially do we witness this declaration of our humanity among those silenced or destroyed by various systems of oppression. By circumstance, these declarations emerge from a fundamental humanizing of self against the backdrop of horse bits and other metal contraptions forced upon human chattel plagued by racial violence, lynching, and other race-specific terrorist acts, and later by Jim Crow segregation meant further to silence and dehumanize, and later still by the tenacious imagery of brutality and caricature that continued to inform and cement a nation’s thinking and acting.

On its most basic level, my collection invites and challenges viewers to be more empathetic toward those who do not consciously separate the Black person living, standing and breathing in front of them from these misrepresentations, whether it’s me or someone else. On another level, my collection urges viewers disturbed by these misrepresentations to do something to move the needle of justice toward all.³ Collecting authentic racist memorabilia (versus collecting contemporary reproductions/imitations⁴) is, for me, an act of defiance, of reclaiming a history and declaring liberation from it. Destroying these pieces and representations would erase a history that lives in the present and in the minds of many. Indeed, my very physical presence in this historically white academic space is one of both privilege and racial angst.

As visitors engage with the pieces and with me in my office space, we enact new stories and new storytelling, thus constituting acts of potential liberation, discovery, understanding, and connection. Morrison (Bonetti 1983) offers a context for this kind of discovery through storytelling and orality: “The part of the heritage of Black people and uneducated people is oral. And we tend to diminish that knowledge because it’s not in print or it’s not print-oriented—what has something to do also with the distinction made between who reads and who does not. But the ability to remember is the ability to say it, to repeat it.”⁵ These objects are sounds and stories, living testimonials of how “the souls of Black folk” can survive under the direst of circumstances. The artifacts in my collection tell stories about race relations and about those who created the pieces, bought them, sold them, and who still have them. For me, they challenge the very foundation of my identity as a university professor, even as they reveal what that racist challenge is. The artifacts urge visitors to see me in the context of seeing the history of limitation and indifference that is still inscribed upon my physical body, both in this physical space and across this predominantly white campus. I have a privilege in officing in this way that my white colleagues do not have. I embrace that distinction with gusto. It is empowering, and it is liberating. It is also a testament to the power and absolute necessity of seeing orality, story, and narrative as acts of legitimizing our very human existence as Black people amid the myriad manifestations of racism in the academy and in the world beyond the academy.

³ Were there a theme song to play for those entering my office, it would likely be Stevie Wonder’s “Misrepresented People” (Wonder 2000), from Spike Lee’s *Bamboozled*, which I quote in the epigraph for this article. The song comments on the persistent and consistent historical misrepresentations of Black Americans by white people and challenges Black folks to resist becoming these misrepresentations in our own minds.

⁴ See (Zeller 2001).

⁵ “Toni Morrison interview with Kay Bonetti,” American Audio Prose Library (Bonetti 1983).

I have always accepted the fact that the past and the present are inextricably connected in my own thinking and teaching about race, and such is embodied in my “colored museum.” As Douglas Congdon-Martin (1990) contends, “It would be nice to think that the old stereotypes and attitudes have passed away, but they have not. They are deeply ingrained in the American culture. Perhaps though, by facing them directly and seeking to understand them, we can remove them from our field of vision and begin to see one another as we really are” (p. 12). About the images and artifacts Pilgrim collected for the Jim Crow Museum of Racist Memorabilia, Henry Louis Gates, Jr. (Gates 2015) comments:

How could anyone look at a real black person, of any period or station, and not see the shameful discrepancies between her or him and how black people, en masse, were portrayed in Jim Crow’s America under the slanderous archetypes . . . ? (p. vi).

I understand . . . that seeing is believing, and that through confronting the worst that has ever been said or depicted about [Black people], new insights can emerge, along with new resolutions for action. There is, after all, a healing power in participating in communal experiences steeped in sadness that cannot—and must not—be overlooked. (p. viii)

My “colored museum” (Figure 4) likewise engages viewers to teach, learn, and heal. It also speaks to the extent to which the academy and this profession have been and are complicit in perpetuating and sustaining racist ways of knowing and valuing Truth.



Figure 4. Pictured in 2017 in my office with a custom-made Mimi-me doll by artist Rebecca Ragan Akins on the occasion of my service as chair the board of directors of our State Humanities Council. Photo Credit: *Ahwatukee Foothills News*.

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