



Decolonizing Racialized Toys from the Late 19th Century Through Digital Illustration and Artifact Biography

When I first encountered the Jolly N-word Mechanical Bank in the Facing Blackness Collection at the Black Archives, I felt an unsettling mix of emotions—anger, sadness, and a deep curiosity. This 19th-century artifact, designed as a mere children’s toy, carried the weight of racist caricatures that had long outlived its original context. Rather than being discarded into history, it still holds power, a lingering echo of colonial narratives that shaped perceptions of Black identity.

Mechanical banks were once playful household items, but many carried insidious messages. The Jolly N-word Mechanical Bank was part of a larger pattern of racialized toys that reduced Black identity to grotesque exaggerations, reinforcing harmful stereotypes for generations. These objects weren’t just passive—they actively shaped societal views of Blackness, commodifying and ridiculing it for white audiences.

As an artifact biographer, I see my role as more than just uncovering histories. It’s about reshaping how we engage with these objects. Instead of viewing them solely as relics of oppression, I seek to turn them into tools for education and resistance. Digital illustration allows me to dismantle their colonial inscriptions, to break apart their imposed narratives and reconstruct them within a framework that centers Black resilience.

My collage *Fragments and Pieces of a Popular Tale* emerged from this process. Inspired by my research in Amsterdam, I explored how fragmented histories can be pieced together to tell more holistic narratives. The collage juxtaposes elements of the mechanical bank with African artistic motifs, Yoruba textile patterns, and archival photographs, challenging the viewer to see beyond the caricature and engage with the complexities of Black identity.

My time in Amsterdam has been transformative, providing me with access to institutions like the Black Archives, where the Facing Blackness Collection is housed. Engaging with scholars, artists, and activists in the city has deepened my understanding of how colonial legacies persist in European and African contexts alike. The global conversation around restitution and decolonization has informed my artistic process, encouraging me to approach historical artifacts with both criticality and care.

Through my work, I aim to bridge the gap between history and contemporary artistic practice. The mechanical bank, once an instrument of subjugation, becomes a site of reclamation. My digital illustrations and collages act as counter-narratives, challenging viewers to confront historical injustices while celebrating the resilience of Black identity.

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