Who’s Your Mammy?: Figuring Aunt Jemima

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WHO'S YOUR MAMMY?

FIGURING AUNT JEMIMA

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In existence since the late 1890s, advertising icon Aunt Jemima has been indelibly etched into the American memory. Before her makeover in 1989, Aunt Jemima was the quintessential embodiment of the mammy stereotype—a heavyset black woman, complete with apron and bandana. Her creation was situated at the locus of several racist traditions and discourses affecting African Americans—the mammy stereotype, the minstrel show, The Myth of the Old South, and the Exhibition of the Other. This embodiment of multiple racist practices helps to explain how the mammy in general, and Aunt Jemima in particular, served white businessmen faithfully, who took advantage of the racist ideology inherent in the stereotype to boost sales.

Despite Aunt Jemima's recent transformation, many African Americans remain hostile towards the image. To explain this phenomenon, I establish how Aunt Jemima is firmly rooted in racist traditions of post-Civil War America—describing how Aunt Jemima is the epitome of the mammy stereotype, her roots on the minstrel stage and her debut at the 1893 Columbian World's Exposition. I then move into a discussion of advertisements from the series, The Legend of Aunt Jemima, of the 1920s, to determine how the brand aided in upholding the Mammy stereotype and the Myth of the Old South.

Cultural critic Michele Wallace, in her article, "Defacing History," posits questions one should consider when studying images of blacks in visual art. Her questions are, "Have racial myths been supported by specific visual constructions that have evolved in Western or American art history? What role, if any, does gender play in visual representations of race?" (341). I work to answer these questions by examining how Aunt Jemima is the embodiment of the racialized traditions mentioned earlier and, taking these into consideration, how the advertisements of Aunt Jemima worked to
maintain the status of black women as third class citizens—inhibited by their race, gender and class. The ads I select for analysis focus on different aspects of *The Legend of Aunt Jemima*, paying close attention to the narration, illustrations and its relation to the Myth of the Old South.

The mammy stereotype is one of the most pervasive stereotypes in American culture, propagated by movies including *Gone with the Wind*, *Raisin in the Sun*, numerous novels and histories of the antebellum South, and of course, Aunt Jemima pancake mix (fig. 1). Mammy was the slave who was blessed enough to be in charge of all domestic work in her mistress's home. Her tasks were numerous and never ending—she cooked, cleaning, sewed, gave the mistress sage advice and cared for her children. She was loyal, hard working, and well cared for—the ideal slave.

Visually, she was depicted as dark-skinned, aged and obese. Dressed in rags, apron and bandana, she provides a foil to the femininity and sexuality of her mistress, as well as the sexualized, bestial Jezebel—the hypersexual female black slave. Her clothing was a signifier of her class and slave status—artist and art historian Michael D. Harris

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1 African American feminist Deborah King posits the obstacles faced by black women on account of their race, gender and class as a "triple jeopardy." She expands on ideas put forth by earlier scholars, who tended to focus on black women's race and gender.
2 Although the look of Aunt Jemima has moved out of the image of the mammy, the stereotype can still be seen in contemporary advertisements. Lorraine Fuller sees her "ghost" in the television commercials for Pinesol. Although mammy is often seen as a remnant of the past, with the present Aunt Jemima being stripped of her apron and bandana, (author) shows how the stereotype continues to haunt African American women in contemporary society. See, Lorraine Fuller, "Are We Seeing Things?: The Pinesol Lady and the Ghost of Aunt Jemima," *Journal of Black Studies* 32,1 (2001), JStor, via MetaLib, http://metalibserv.pacific.edu.
points to the bandana, both as a sign of slave status that can be traced to Caribbean plantations, and as a desexualizing agent that covered black women's hair, which he describes as a mark of identity for women in the African diaspora. Mammy's skin color, age and weight made it possible for her to work in the house—made grotesque against American ideals of femininity and beauty, mammy was aligned closer to the work animal than to her mistress—there was no chance that her presence in her master's home would lead to wandering eyes.

Mammy's heaviness also served another purpose—it was an indication that slavery could not have been that bad. If mammy was overweight, then she must have been well fed and well treated. The myth of mammy was vital to uphold the Myth of the Old South, used to gloss over the hardships enacted on black by slavery. Art historian Jo-Ann Morgan offers several reasons for mammy's popularity in post-Civil War America:

Because she was a survivor from the Old South, her continued service to a white mistress, now her northern employer, was a reunifying gesture toward North-South reconciliation. At the same time Mammy became a defender of class privilege and the status quo. By remaining in the kitchen or the nursery, she offered a ready solution not only to the problem of how to assimilate former slaves into contemporary society, but also to the challenge of how to keep the middle-class Euro-American woman in her "ladylike" role of home administrator. (88)

Along similar lines, advertising historian Marilyn Kern-Foxworth notes, "Blacks were used extensively during the post-slavery era because they reinforced the stereotype of the docile servant who was always ready to serve humbly. Whether consciously or unconsciously conceived, advertising was a structured mechanism that eroded the self-esteem of blacks and kept them powerless" (62).

Aunt Jemima is an exemplary mammy and one advertisement from The Legend of Aunt Jemima includes several hallmarks of the stereotype. The Last Christmas on the
Old Plantation, 1919 (fig. 2) features Aunt Jemima's role as mammy, defined in terms of physical appearance, cooking ability, and childrearing duties. My analysis of this advertisement will be followed by a history of the advertising icon, as well as an analysis of other ads in the series to understand how they work to uphold the mammy stereotype.

The series was developed by advertising agent James Webb Young, who drew on his experiences growing up in Kentucky to pen the Legend (Kern-Foxworth, 72). The Aunt Jemima Mills Company commissioned illustrator N.C. Wyeth to complete the imagery for the series. Wyeth visually molded Aunt Jemima in the form of mammy. Size and skin color create clear racial demarcations between Aunt Jemima and the white women in the advertisement. While the bodies of the white women are curved because of corsets and bustles, the protruding breasts and waist of Jemima are her own. Her skin, meanwhile, is much darker in comparison to the fair women who surround her. Indeed, the copy of the advertisement even emphasizes Jemima's skin color, stating, "the Colonel and his guests praise Aunt Jemima till her black face was all aglow with pride."

Another feature of Aunt Jemima in this advertisement that is characteristic of the mammy is her relationships with her master's children. One caption from the advertisement reads, "The children, stuffed like little geese, delight in teasing Aunt Jemima." Jemima has provided for her white charges well—not only feeding them, but providing them with a source of amusement as well. The caption is also indicative of how low mammy's status was in the Southern household—Jemima didn't simply play with the children. No, they took "delight in teasing Aunt Jemima." The (at least) middle-aged mammy seems to earn little respect from the white children under her care.
Of course, all these stereotypical attributes are compounded on the one feature that makes Aunt Jemima the exemplary mammy—her ability to cook. The advertisement, *How Aunt Jemima Saved the Colonel's Moustache and His Reputation as Host* (fig. 3) presents this cooking ability as a natural, inborn talent. Containing the only reference to Jemima's family in the series, the ad recounts how Jemima's tremendous cooking ability was discovered. Her mother, Aunt Eliza, "got a mis'ry," and was unable to prepare breakfast for his Colonel's guests. All is saved, however, by "Jemima's unusual skill in the kitchen." She immediately begins cooking and, impressing the Colonel so much, she replaced her mother as head of the kitchen. By capturing Jemima's innate skills in a box, *The Last Christmas* promises, "the most inexperienced cook can make cakes with the same flavor that delighted those holiday guests on the old plantation!"

Morgan describes mammies as hucksters, who "became fixtures on trade cards, product labels, and song sheet covers—almost anywhere advertisers could exploit the former slaves' well-honed domestic skills to attract buyers" (87). Of course, the most famous and enduring of these fixtures is Aunt Jemima, an icon that is well into its second century of existence. Her likeness was disseminated to the American public at large. Her presence branched out beyond the supermarket aisles—extending its reach through promotional objects, including rag dolls and salt and peppershakers.

The history of Aunt Jemima as an advertising icon began in 1889 when Charles Rutt, owner of the Pearl Milling Company (the precursor to Aunt Jemima Mills), viewed

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4 This ad speaks to the general invisibility of black woman—they are replaceable—Jemima's mother is never mentioned again.

a minstrel performance featuring the character of Aunt Jemima, and found the perfect image to represent his newly developed ready-mixed pancake flour. The white performer in blackface had donned a bandana and apron to play the role of a slave cook. These qualities were subsequently embedded in the mammy stereotype—loyal servitude, an overly genial outlook, and a profound ability to cook—that drew Rutt to the image. (fig. 4)

The minstrel tradition was one grounded in racial difference. Consisting generally of traveling minstrel shows, minstrelsy was linked inextricably to blackface—the practice of putting black makeup on white performers, enabling them to portray black characters. Historian Robert C. Toll describes the act of the first successful minstrel group, The Virginia Minstrels, popular in the early 1840s:

They bust on stage in makeup which gave the impression of huge eyes and gaping mouths. They dressed in ill-fitting, patchwork clothes, and spoke in heave 'nigger' dialects. Once on stage, they could not stay still for an instant. Even while sitting, they contorted their bodies, cocked their heads, rolled their eyes, and twisted their outstretched legs. When the music began, they exploded in a frenzy of grotesque and eccentric movements (36).

Popular in the Northeast, where audience members were least familiar with the institution of slavery, minstrel performers in blackface fulfilled expectations on what blackness should be. Filling a prescriptive role, these actors helped to establish in the northern mind what blackness signified: stupidity, laziness, and buffoonish character. Toll goes on to describe the minstrel performance as a complete falsehood—more than just white actors in heavy makeup, Toll traces the themes and source materials for blackface back to Anglo-American, not African American, themes.

This discussion of how minstrelsy affected images of African American men allows us to see how much the tradition would have affected African American women,
who were demeaned on account of both their race and sex. The performance of Aunt Jemima witnessed by Rutt was artificial on two counts—the performer was in blackface and in drag. As Judith Michelle Williams notes, "A black woman's absence in [the minstrel] milieu existed on several levels, two of the most significant are: black women were not the authors of their representations; they were not the actors who portrayed those characterizations on stage. These representations of black women were also untruthful and contained on the absence of the reality of black women's existence" (1).

The display of foreign bodies in exhibitions has been traced by artist Coco Fusco to the return of Christopher Columbus's first expedition to America, where he brought several Native American to show in Spain. The Exhibition of the Other was the practice of displaying colonial subjects at fairs, zoos and museums, where nude "black" bodies were exhibited for their Otherness, emphasizing differences between colonizer and colonized. Nancy's Green debut as a "real-life" Aunt Jemima places Jemima within the tradition of the Exhibition of the Other. The Davis Milling Company presented her at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition, where they "constructed the world's largest flour barrel, 24 feet high and 16 feet in diameter. Doors were mounted in the side, and the interior was fitted out as a reception parlor to entertain visitors. Outside the barrel, near the front, was Nancy Green in the persona of Aunt Jemima. She cooked pancakes, sang songs, and told stories of the Old South while greeting fair visitors" (Kern-Foxworth, 67). (fig. 5) This exhibit was located on the Midway Plaisance, where it sat alongside villages constructed to represent cultures from across the globe. Included was a village

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6 In her research, Deborah Gray White questions the existence of actual mammies in the antebellum South. Being charged with duties that included nursing, cooking, sewing, advice-giving, and all other household tasks that were assigned would have been too much for any one woman to take—it was humanly impossible to be mammy.
representative of the African colony of Dahomey, where nude Africans were made to pose for onlookers in a display of difference.

The language used in Rossiter Johnson's comprehensive *A History of the World's Columbian Exposition* captures the reactions invoked by the Dahomey Village in its American audience:

The Dahomey Village consisted of thirty native houses, with a population of sixty-nine people, of whom twenty-one were Amazon warriors. Sight-seers regarded with wonder and intense interest the actions of these chocolate-hued West African barbarians and were fascinated with the savagery of the fetish war dance performed by the Amazons. There was a museum of native arms, and the Dahomeyans worked at their rude arts of goldsmithing, weaving, and blacksmithing (443-444).

The description of the village indicates that the Africans on displayed were viewed as inferior specimens. Adjectives such as "savagery", "fetish", and "rude" serve to place the Africans on a lower plane of civilization than the Eastern and European cultures. This was reinforced by the "natives" level of undress. The description is paired with a photograph of nude Dahomeyan women, promoting the popular notion that Africans were lascivious, barbaric creatures—the village was constructed and filled to satisfy Western conceptions of blackness (fig. 6). In this context, Aunt Jemima must be viewed as linked to the tradition of the Exhibition of the Other—where the Dahomeyans were exploited by fair organizers to maintain an ideology of blackness, Nancy Green was used to promote Aunt Jemima pancake flour and the Myth of the Old South. The performative aspect of the gimmick further links her to the minstrel stage.

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7 The tradition of African American women performing as Aunt Jemima at expositions, county fairs, and supermarkets continued, including a popular restaurant in Disneyland. Kern-Foxworth provides brief biographies of some of the many women who have depicted the character.
Indeed, it was this very practice of having women perform in supermarkets, county fairs and expositions that tied together the many racist traditions that are conflated with Aunt Jemima. Independent scholar M.M. Manring states that the performing Jemimas combine the tradition of traveling salesmen with minstrelsy, convincing audiences that the performer was an authentic slave cook. "A real living black woman, instead of a white man in blackface and drag, would reinforce the product's authenticity and origin as the creation of a real ex-slave" (74-75). Hence, at Aunt Jemima's debut at the Columbian World's Exposition, the icon was already strongly linked to the minstrel stage and the Exhibition of the Other. However, while those links may have faded from the American collective consciousness over time, the advertisements and packaging for Aunt Jemima pancake flour continued to locate her as the stereotype of the mammy.

Aunt Jemima's grounding in the racist traditions of the mammy stereotype, minstrelsy, The Myth of the Old South and the Exhibition of the Other establishes and advertising icon that, in its very nature, works to uphold the racial hierarchy in which whites are valorized and blacks are made second-class citizens. The Legend of Aunt Jemima not only upholds the mammy stereotype, as outlined above, but serves to reinforce the idealized myth of the Old South as well. This is exemplified in the advertisement, When the Robert E. Lee Stopped at Aunt Jemima's Cabin, the only advertisement in the series that takes place after the Civil War (fig. 7). The advertisement was produced in 1919, in the aftermath of the First World War and in the midst of the large migration of African Americans from the rural south to the urban north, where they hoped to find employment and escape racism. The advertisement shows Aunt Jemima living in the same cabin on Colonel Higbee's plantation twenty years after the war as she
did when she was still enslaved. Following the mammy tradition, Aunt Jemima was so loyal to her master that she failed to move off the plantation following her emancipation. Here, the ad indicates, is an ideal black person, one who remains in the South instead of fleeing north when given the chance. This advertisement served as a form of social control. In the midst of the mass migration of African Americans, the advertisement enumerated the "proper" place for black women. In terms of space, she belonged in the South, on the same plantation she worked on under slavery. In terms of occupation and class, she was relegated to domestic service occupations, at or near slave status.

Aunt Jemima's interaction with whites is also indicative of the mammy tradition. The Legend reflects on events that take place during the Civil War, in which Aunt Jemima rescues a band of Confederate soldiers with a generous helping of her famous pancakes. How bad could slavery be, the advertisement seems to ask, if Aunt Jemima is willing to feed and house the very soldiers that are fighting to keep her enslaved? Art historian Jo-Ann Morgan combines the social control and idealizing functions of the mammy stereotype:

Scenes of happy mammies continuing to work in kitchens placated northerners concerned about preserving the southern labor force. And if mammy voluntarily remained with "Missus" and "Massa" even though now freed, perhaps the slave-holding planter had not been so villainous after all (94).

Wyeth's illustrations also serve to marginalize Aunt Jemima within her own legend. Instead of being about Aunt Jemima, the story is really about the ex-soldiers aboard the Robert E. Lee, who remembered her pancakes and convinced her to sell her secret recipe for all to share. Indeed, the dominant image in the advertisement features
only the soldiers aboard the Robert E. Lee—Aunt Jemima is pictured in smaller images, further down the page.

The advertisement, *The Poor Little Bride of 1860*, illustrates how mammy was used as a foil for white femininity (fig. 8). Always the friendly advice giver, Jemima allows the newlywed bride to observe her cooking the pancakes her husband found so delicious. The ad served a prescriptive function—not only in its placement of the black female body within a specific class and occupation—it used Aunt Jemima as a tool to educate women of the 1920s on how to be proper wives, or even how to be as subservient as a slave. The copy states, "The little bride, filled with a sudden new interest in housekeeping, enjoyed nothing more than going out to the big kitchen. She never tired of watching Aunt Jemima bustling around preparing the delectable meals for which the Higbee's home was famous." A wife, the ad states, must keep her husband satisfied through housekeeping and, especially, food preparation. Where the poor little bride of 1860 failed to appease her husband's craving for delicious pancakes, "the bride of 1920 need never disappoint him." Furthermore, the availability of ready-mixed Aunt Jemima pancake flour ensured that white women would never need to work as hard as a slave to prepare her husband's food—she could spend more of her time outside of the kitchen.

This leads into my discussion of the boxed pancake mix. As the advertisements show, the Aunt Jemima boxes of the 1920s feature a portrait of Aunt Jemima, unlike today's boxes, which feature a photograph of the product, with Jemima relegated to a corner of the box front. The design of the packaging (having the likeness of ex-slave Nancy Green dominate the box front), as well as the concept of the product (selling Aunt Jemima's secret pancake recipe), creates a situation in which a daily reenactment of slave
auctions take place at the local supermarket. Here, a black woman is literally bought and sold for the benefit of white consumers. Furthermore, when the product is spent and Aunt Jemima was no longer needed, the box—Aunt Jemima, herself—is thrown out. Although the institution of slavery as the trade of actual human bodies was made illegal in the 1860s, the symbolic slavery enacted by the purchase and disposal of Aunt Jemima continues in the present.

Indeed, the last idea I want to touch on in this section is the black woman's invisibility. Although narratives of the antebellum South recounted mammy as a beloved figure, in actuality, she too was removed from the plantation household when no longer needed. This is reflected in *How Aunt Jemima Saved the Colonel's Moustache*, as a young Jemima is able to jump into the kitchen to cook pancakes at the instant her mother, the previous mammy, falls ill. And this automatic replacement of the black woman continues in the history of the product, reinforced as mostly anonymous African American women were hired to portray Aunt Jemima in supermarkets, trade shows, restaurants, and exhibitions. This is reflected again in the purchase and disposal of Aunt Jemima's likeness on her pancake boxes.

Despite the popularity of Aunt Jemima as an advertising icon, however, Jemima has never had a voice or identity of her own throughout her career as a huckster. She remains, to this day, a puppet of hegemony and the white business interests who craft her. Her character was determined years before her genesis, through minstrel acts, exhibitions, "scientific" documentation, and narrative that rewrote the history of the antebellum South. Illustrators like N.C. Wyeth, the various mills companies that have owned the trademark, and the admen who developed her story and marketed it to the public further
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shaped her. As photographer James van der Zee photographed black women of the Harlem Renaissance in the 1920s (fig. 9)—women who were obtaining education and entering urban life—Aunt Jemima remained the visual representation of black women disseminated to the American public at large.
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**Magazine Advertisements**
