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## Mammy and Aunt Jemima: Keeping the Old South Alive in Popular Visual Culture

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## Mammy and Aunt Jemima: Keeping the Old South Alive in Popular Visual Culture

### **Introduction:**

According to Stuart Hall, “stereotypes get hold of the few ‘simple, vivid, memorable, easily grasped and widely recognized’ characteristics about a person, reduce everything about the person to those traits, exaggerate and simplify them, and fix them without change or development to eternity.”<sup>1</sup> This is exactly how the mammy stereotype was constructed and preserved in American culture. Late nineteenth and early twentieth century literature, exaggerated caricatures, and minstrel performances have promoted a false image of Black women within popular visual culture: an asexual, simple-minded, and loyal servant to the White family. This stereotype has distorted the identities of Black women to a point where audiences accept these false narratives without hesitation. According to Larry Levine of the University of California, Berkeley, if people look at images like the mammy enough, they begin to believe that Black people do resemble exaggerated caricatures.<sup>2</sup> Moreover, African American stereotypes romanticize life in the antebellum South, along with the racial and gender norms of this time.

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<sup>1</sup> Christopher J.P. Sewell, “Mammies and Matriarchs: Tracing Images of the Black Female in Popular Culture 1950s to Present,” *Journal of African American Studies* 17, no.3 (September 2013): 309.

<sup>2</sup> (Riggs 1987, 0:03:32 to 0:04:02).

By 1889, these racist images became a marketing strategy when a fictional mammy by the name of Aunt Jemima became the spokeswoman for pancake mix.<sup>3</sup> This trademark transcends simply selling a breakfast product. Rather, Aunt Jemima represents the promotion of life in the Old South. When White postbellum Southerners open a box of Aunt Jemima pancake mix, they reminisce on the antebellum South through the convenience of their “‘slave in a box.’”<sup>4</sup> The mammy and Aunt Jemima stereotype advertise a life of ease for White families thanks to the subservience of Black women. Aunt Jemima has preserved the mammy within American culture even after emancipation. In response, twentieth and twenty first century Black artists have challenged the stereotype through their work.

### **The origins of the mammy and Aunt Jemima stereotype:**

The mammy as a cultural image emerged during slavery, and advocates of the Old South utilized it to argue against the verity that slavery was “a harsh, cruel, and brutal system.”<sup>5</sup> Popular culture strove to erase the horrific reality of slavery, notably through the Aunt Jemima trademark. The prevailing message within American media was the myth that Black Americans were happy to be slaves and became brutish and uncivilized when they were free.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> Maurice M, Manring, “Aunt Jemima Explained: The Old South, the Absent Mistress, and the Slave in a Box,” *Southern Cultures* 2, no.1 (Fall 1995): 21.

<sup>4</sup> Micki McElya, “The Life of ‘Aunt Jemima,’” in *Clinging to Mammy: The Faithful Slave in Twentieth Century America*, (Harvard University Press, 2007), 20.

<sup>5</sup> K. Sue Jewell, “Mammy,” in *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture: Volume 13: Gender*, ed. Nancy Bercaw and Ted Ownby (University of North Carolina Press, 2009), 171.

<sup>6</sup> (Riggs 1987, 0:09:43 to 0:09:59).

The terms “Aunt” and “mammy” both refer to Southern house slaves.<sup>7</sup> Despite being “fiercely independent,”<sup>8</sup> mammy is a self-sacrificing servant who is content with her subservience to her White master. She cooks, cleans, and tends to White children. Her commitment to serving the White family leads her to not only reject her own needs, but those of her own family.<sup>9</sup> Mammy’s behavior with her White master differs greatly from when she is with her own husband and children. She “is docile in her relationship with Whites but exhibits aggressiveness towards African Americans, a quality not defined as feminine.”<sup>10</sup> Additionally, as mentioned in the documentary *Ethnic Notions*, the mammy was the matriarch in her own family. This conveyed the idea that Black men were weak, as traditional White households in the antebellum South were governed by patriarchs.<sup>11</sup>

In terms of physical attributes, mammy is described as “an obese, dark, and middle-aged domestic servant, with shining white teeth visibly displayed in a grin.”<sup>12</sup> Her uniform consists of “a drab calico dress with a handkerchief tied on her head.”<sup>13</sup> She is required to wear a bandanna because her hair “is another signifier of her difference from Whites.”<sup>14</sup> Although mammy is typically described as a large, dark-skinned, middle-aged woman, real-life mammies

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<sup>7</sup> Jo-Ann Morgan, “Mammy the Huckster: Selling the Old South for the New Century,” *American Art* 9, no. 1, (Spring 1995): 89.

<sup>8</sup> Jewell, “Mammy,” 171.

<sup>9</sup> Jewell, “Mammy,” 171.

<sup>10</sup> Jewell, “Mammy,” 171.

<sup>11</sup> (Riggs 1987, 0:15:35 to 0:16:36).

<sup>12</sup> Jewell, “Mammy,” 170.

<sup>13</sup> Jewell, “Mammy,” 170.

<sup>14</sup> Phoebe Wolfskill, *Archibald Motley Jr. and Racial Reinvention: The Old Negro in New Negro Art*, (University of Illinois Press, 2017), 150.

“represented all shapes, sizes, and hues,” and were typically young women.<sup>15</sup> However, the mammy stereotype could not be presented as a young woman in popular visual culture because they were often fetishized and would therefore pose a threat to White mistresses.<sup>16</sup> The physical appearance of young Black women was also often associated with the Jezebel stereotype, who is “known for her overly flirtatious and sexually explicit nature.”<sup>17</sup> Due to the concern of the White mistress that her husband would lust for a young slave, mammy had to be comedic, asexual, and “the antithesis of American standards of beauty and femininity.”<sup>18</sup> She was stripped of her stereotypical Blackness, which entailed “unrestrained sexuality and violence,”<sup>19</sup> and molded into the ideal domestic servant.

Not only was the appearance of the mammy stereotype inaccurate, but her job description was glamorized. Slaveholders created an informal hierarchy of tasks for enslaved people, “placing house servants in the highest class, artisans or tradespeople in the middle class, and field workers in the lowest class.”<sup>20</sup> This ranking was established to push the distorted narrative that “mammy and other enslaved house workers had an easier workload and a more satisfying life than those who worked outside the slaveholder’s house.”<sup>21</sup> In reality, a mammy’s job was far from easy. She was “required to work extremely long hours-cooking, cleaning, rearing children,

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<sup>15</sup> Jewell, “Mammy,” 173.

<sup>16</sup> Sewell, “Mammies and Matriarchs,” 310.

<sup>17</sup> Sewell, “Mammies and Matriarchs,” 311.

<sup>18</sup> Jewell, “Mammy,” 171.

<sup>19</sup> Sewell, “Mammies and Matriarchs,” 309.

<sup>20</sup> Jewell, “Mammy,” 172.

<sup>21</sup> Jewell, “Mammy,” 172.

and assuming the responsibility of being a personal servant to the mistress, which meant being at her beck and call.”<sup>22</sup> There was no time to rest or tend to her own needs.

Mammy made appearances in minstrel performances as early as 1844, when “George Christy of Christy’s Minstrels was renowned for his impersonations of African American women.”<sup>23</sup> Minstrelsy was also where Aunt Jemima was discovered. While she is essentially a mammy, Aunt Jemima possesses her own unique characteristics. The title “Aunt” served as “a term of endearment, usually given to slave women who had been with the family for a long period of time.”<sup>24</sup> Although Aunt Jemima was a domestic servant like mammy, primarily a cook, she was jollier and more agreeable than her.<sup>25</sup> Additionally, Aunt Jemima’s role was slightly different, as the term “mammy” referred to slaves who nursed children.<sup>26</sup> She continued to be a regular in minstrel shows throughout the late nineteenth century, joining fellow stereotypes like Jim Crow and Zip Coon.<sup>27</sup> During a show in St. Joseph, Missouri, for example, Aunt Jemima was portrayed by Baker and Farrell: two blackface performers. Both entertainers dressed in “aprons and red bandannas, imitating the Southern mammy in the kitchen.”<sup>28</sup> On top of her undying loyalty to her master, Baker and Farrell presented Aunt Jemima as a simple-minded and superstitious woman in their performance. For instance, “she was especially alarmed and confused by any advance in technology such as the telephone (and later the automobile), and her

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<sup>22</sup> Jewell, “Mammy,” 172-173.

<sup>23</sup> Morgan, “Mammy the Huckster,” 90.

<sup>24</sup> Morgan, “Mammy the Huckster,” 89.

<sup>25</sup> Jewell, “Mammy,” 172.

<sup>26</sup> Morgan, “Mammy the Huckster,” 89.

<sup>27</sup> Manring, “Aunt Jemima Explained,” 21.

<sup>28</sup> Manring, “Aunt Jemima Explained,” 21.

inability to cope made her the butt of the joke for White audiences.”<sup>29</sup> Aunt Jemima was an undisputed expert in the kitchen however, despite her confusion towards the world outside of domestic life. She was a key ingredient in whipping up “an idealized version of the Old South, a land of good food, beautiful but fragile White women, warm weather, gentility, and leisure.”<sup>30</sup> Aunt Jemima needed to be as real as possible so that White families would feel like life in the antebellum South never came to an end.

### **Evolution of the Image of the mammy and Aunt Jemima in popular visual culture:**

To bring this Southern vision to fruition, mammy and Aunt Jemima’s image has evolved over the centuries through “the print media and later the electronic media, including film, radio, and television.”<sup>31</sup> These outlets “were responsible for the mammy image becoming inextricably woven into American culture.”<sup>32</sup> Euro-American male artists and writers dictated how African American women were presented and perceived in popular visual culture. Throughout the late nineteenth century and into the twentieth century, “mammies became fixtures on trade cards, product labels, and song sheet covers.”<sup>33</sup> The variety of media ensured that mammy and Aunt Jemima were everywhere.

Starting with the late nineteenth century, mammy and Aunt Jemima’s appearance was akin to coon imagery. This style, which was intended to be a satirical interpretation of Black

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<sup>29</sup> Manring, “Aunt Jemima Explained,” 21.

<sup>30</sup> Manring, “Aunt Jemima Explained,” 21.

<sup>31</sup> Jewell, “Mammy,” 171.

<sup>32</sup> Jewell, “Mammy,” 171.

<sup>33</sup> Morgan, “Mammy the Huckster,” 87.

features, illustrated dark-skinned Black people with “protruding red lips and bulging eyeballs.”<sup>34</sup> These features are evident in Purd Wright’s 1895 illustration for the pamphlet *The Life of Aunt Jemima, the Most Famous Colored Woman in the World*: Aunt Jemima’s dark skin highlights the whites of her eyes and teeth, along with her flashy red lips.<sup>35</sup> Her inflated grin suggests that she is a jolly woman who enjoys her work.

Many women portrayed mammies and Aunt Jemima moving into the twentieth century, and some actresses and spokeswomen triggered changes in the stereotype’s appearance. Despite being problematic, this role was a rare opportunity for African American actresses to pursue “individual artistic expression, and, occasionally, resulted in their successfully challenging various stereotypical aspects of the characters that they portrayed.”<sup>36</sup> One notable actress who played a mammy was Louise Beavers. Like a traditional mammy, Beavers is detailed as being “a big-boned, robust woman with skin that was described as smooth as chocolate velvet, and eyes bright, large, and wondrously naïve.”<sup>37</sup> Consistently acting as a housemaid in Hollywood films, Beavers “had been carefully groomed by herself and the studios to fit into the mammy-Aunt Jemima category.”<sup>38</sup> Her role as Delilah Johnson in the 1934 film *Imitation of Life* demonstrates how Beavers effectively embodied a character that contained parallels with both the mammy and Aunt Jemima stereotype.

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<sup>34</sup> Richard J. Powell, *Black Art: A Cultural History* (Black Art, 1997 and 2002 Thames & Hudson Ltd, London), 24-25.

<sup>35</sup> Morgan, “Mammy the Huckster,” 23.

<sup>36</sup> Jewell, “Mammy,” 172.

<sup>37</sup> Donald Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks: An Interpretive History of Blacks in American Films*, (Bloomsbury Academic, 2016), 54.

<sup>38</sup> Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, 54.



Even though she arrives at the house coincidentally, Delilah convinces Bea Pullman (Claudette Colbert), a White widow and single mother, to hire her as a live-in housemaid.<sup>39</sup> Delilah persuades Bea to let her serve her and Bea's daughter Jessie (Baby Jane) by making breakfast for Jessie, explaining that she is a natural at tending to housework and children, is willing to work for little pay and will not eat a lot despite her size.<sup>40</sup> Delilah's comments regarding her weight and her inclination for cooking, cleaning, and caring for children check off the stereotypical characteristics of a mammy. Her willingness to work for little to no pay implies that she is very passionate about domestic service, regardless of the circumstances. This in turn aids the argument that mammy is satisfied with her subservience, shining a deceptively attractive light on life in the Old South.

Bea, who runs her husband's syrup business at the beginning of the film, is thoroughly impressed by the pancakes Delilah makes for her one morning, and she decides to open a pancake restaurant with the recipe.<sup>41</sup> She names the establishment "Aunt Delilah's Homemade Pancakes," after her new servant. The logo, designed by Bea, is a picture of Delilah with wide eyes, raised eyebrows, and a big smile as she flips a pancake in the air.<sup>42</sup> "Aunt Delilah" in the name of the restaurant sounds very similar to "Aunt Jemima," who is familiar to most audiences. Bea's vision for the restaurant name and logo is heavily influenced by the exaggerated caricatures of mammies that were popular since the late nineteenth century. Larry Levine's statement from *Ethnic Notions* regarding how racist caricatures shape the way people view Black

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<sup>39</sup> (Stahl 1934, 0:04:59 to 0:09:21).

<sup>40</sup> (Stahl 1934, 0:06:39 to 0:09:21).

<sup>41</sup> (Stahl 1934, 0:12:33 to 0:15:40).

<sup>42</sup> (Stahl 1934, 0:19:00 to 0:19:41).

people in real life is put into effect in this scene. Bea is projecting the racist lens she views Black women through by encouraging Delilah to pose as an exaggerated caricature for the restaurant's logo.

After five years of paying off debts for the restaurant, Bea meets Elmer Smith (Ned Sparks), who encourages her to package the pancake mix to reach more consumers.<sup>43</sup> Bea manages to sell 32 million boxes with Elmer's guidance.<sup>44</sup> Now a wealthy businesswoman, Bea offers Delilah "an active role in the pancake company," so she can afford her own house, but Delilah refuses.<sup>45</sup> Turning down the opportunity to advance presents Delilah as "'the old slave refusing freedom.'"<sup>46</sup> Moreover, it invalidates the horrors of slavery in the antebellum South by perpetuating the myth that slavery benefitted Black slaves and White masters alike. The process of taking Delilah's pancakes from the Pullman household to kitchen tables everywhere mirrors the functions of the mammy and Aunt Jemima stereotypes within American society. While mammy worked in the home in the antebellum South, Aunt Jemima brought her beloved cooking, and in turn the Old South, to every home for generations.

Another prominent African American actress who would play mammy in film was Hattie McDaniel. She epitomized the original late nineteenth century mammy in the twentieth century by portraying "the fussy, boisterous, big-bosomed maid time and time again, using the

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<sup>43</sup> (Stahl 1934, 0:34:54 to 0:36:36).

<sup>44</sup> (Stahl 1934, 0:38:51 to 0:39:11).

<sup>45</sup> Matthew H. Bernstein and Dana F. White, "'Imitation of Life' in a Segregated Atlanta: Its Promotion, Distribution and Reception," *Film History* 19 no.2 (2007):170.

<sup>46</sup> Bernstein and White, "'Imitation of Life,'"170.

stereotyped figure to display her remarkable talent and affinity for pure broad comedy.”<sup>47</sup> Her most notable role was as Mammy in the 1939 film *Gone with the Wind*, earning her an Academy Award for Best Supporting Actress, and making her the first African American to achieve this.<sup>48</sup> In the film, Mammy is a faithful servant to the O’Hara family, “boasting that she diapered three generations of O’Hara women.”<sup>49</sup> Her pride in her service is another example of American popular culture promoting the idea that mammy’s subservience was beneficial to both the White family and mammy herself.

As previously stated, due to the racist perception of Black Americans within popular culture, the mammy was one of the few roles an African American actress could play to make her mark in Hollywood.<sup>50</sup> There were no opportunities for African American actresses to portray characters outside of the romanticized world of the Old South. Therefore, the fact that McDaniel received an award for being a mammy speaks to how American audiences wanted Black actresses to be displayed on the silver screen. McDaniel won an award for playing into the fantasy of the antebellum South.

In addition to numerous movie roles, in the 1950s McDaniel played a loyal mammy to the Henderson family on the second season of the television show *Beulah*.<sup>51</sup> The program showcased Beulah as a housemaid who would do just about anything for her White master,

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<sup>47</sup> Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, 72.

<sup>48</sup> Rebecca Wanzo, “Beyond a ‘Just’ Syntax: Black Actresses, Hollywood and Complex Personhood,” *Women & Performance: A Journal of Feminist Theory* 16, no.1 (2006): 135, <https://doi.org/10.1080/07407700500515985>.

<sup>49</sup> Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, 76.

<sup>50</sup> Sewell, “Mammies and Matriarchs,” 315.

<sup>51</sup> Sewell, “Mammies and Matriarchs,” 316.

including tasks outside of her stereotypical job description. For example, in the episode “Beulah Goes Gardening,” Beulah’s employer, Harry Henderson (David Bruce), decides to fire the gardener, Tony.<sup>52</sup> Mr. Henderson initially assigns himself, his wife Alice (Jane Frazee) and his son Donnie (Stuffy Singer) different gardening chores to complete every Saturday.<sup>53</sup> Although the family agreed to do their part in the garden, each member has an excuse for why they cannot help, “asking Beulah to do the work for them.”<sup>54</sup> It does not seem fair for the Henderson’s to leave all the gardening to Beulah, considering the rigorous workload she already has as a domestic servant. Nonetheless, she agrees to tend to everything in the garden in true faithful mammy fashion, “even though she does not know how to really work the lawnmower and jeep the hedges at equal length.”<sup>55</sup> Beulah is still expected to cook a delicious dinner for the Henderson’s, on top of this new project. It is evident that she has taken on too many responsibilities, and, to her dismay, Beulah burns the family’s meal while working in the garden.<sup>56</sup> When the Henderson’s see that their dinner is not as good as usual, Beulah remarks that the food was prepared by a field hand instead of a cook: referring to her new role as the gardener.<sup>57</sup> This comment asserts that Beulah as a housemaid is superior to Beulah as the gardener. Moreover, the origins of her statement can perhaps be traced back to the Old South,

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<sup>52</sup> (The Riverbends Channel “Beulah (1952/08/12): Beulah Goes Gardening.” March 29, 2012, YouTube video, 0:00:39 to 0:02:04, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=E8vqCNP--HI>).

<sup>53</sup> (The Riverbends Channel 2012, 0:01:53 to 0:02:04).

<sup>54</sup> Sewell, “Mammies and Matriarchs,” 316.

<sup>55</sup> Sewell, “Mammies and Matriarchs,” 316.

<sup>56</sup> Sewell, “Mammies and Matriarchs,” 316.

<sup>57</sup> Sewell, “Mammies and Matriarchs,” 316.

when slaveholders created a hierarchy with domestic service at the top and field work at the bottom.<sup>58</sup>

Mr. Henderson proposes that Beulah should make cold cuts on Saturdays, so that she can continue being the gardener without burning dinner again. Beulah refuses, as cold cuts are not up to par with what she wishes to serve. While she has too much on her plate, Beulah, like other mammies, commits to doing whatever it takes to ensure that her White master receives the best service.<sup>59</sup>

Despite critics' disapproval of her stereotypical characters, McDaniel argued that it was better to make seven thousand dollars playing a maid than to make seven dollars as a real servant.<sup>60</sup> Critics proclaimed that McDaniel had conformed not only in her acting but in real life. However, her comment highlights the lack of opportunities for African Americans: both in Hollywood and within the broader society. While working as a real-life mammy and playing one in film and television fuel the racist antebellum South fantasy, Black Americans had to choose between the actual job, the acting gig, or unemployment.

Aside from mammy in film and television, there were several notable women who posed as Aunt Jemima in advertisements. The most significant of these Black spokeswomen include Anna Robinson, Edith Wilson and Aylene Lewis.<sup>61</sup> From 1933 to 1951, Robinson "created the darker and heavier Aunt Jemima depicted on boxes."<sup>62</sup> Her image is perhaps the most like the

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<sup>58</sup> Jewell, "Mammy," 172.

<sup>59</sup> Sewell, "Mammies and Matriarchs," 316.

<sup>60</sup> Bogle, *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, 72.

<sup>61</sup> Manring, "Aunt Jemima Explained," 26.

<sup>62</sup> Manring, "Aunt Jemima Explained," 26.

exaggerated caricatures of the late nineteenth century. Wilson started out playing Aunt Jemima in radio advertisements in 1948, then replaced Robinson following her death in 1951. She is known as the Aunt Jemima who “lost the bandanna and gained a handkerchief in 1968 and then was further modified in 1989 in an attempt to ‘update’ her image.”<sup>63</sup> From 1957 to 1964, Lewis was the resident Aunt Jemima at the Aunt Jemima Pancake House in Disneyland’s Frontierland.<sup>64</sup> Throughout the twentieth century, there was consistently a new Aunt Jemima to replace the old one. This is a testament to White business owners’ refusal to allow her or the fantasy of the antebellum South to ever die.

### **Origins of Aunt Jemima as a business:**

Aunt Jemima went from a minstrel regular to the face of a business. In the late 1800s, editorial writer Chris L. Rutt and mill worker Charles G. Underwood joined forces to purchase a mill and start their own business in St. Joseph, Missouri: The Pearl Milling Company.<sup>65</sup> Given that many mills inhabited St. Joseph, Rutt and Underwood needed to stand out against the competition. The duo realized that merely producing flour like every other mill in town was not going cut it, so they created a self-rising pancake mix.<sup>66</sup> However, an unprecedented product required an unprecedented marketing strategy to match. Unaware of what he might discover, Rutt attended a local minstrel show in 1889.<sup>67</sup> He was introduced to the jolly Aunt Jemima at this performance. Upon observing her popularity among the White audience, “Rutt realized he had

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<sup>63</sup> Manring, “Aunt Jemima Explained,” 26.

<sup>64</sup> Manring, “Aunt Jemima Explained,” 26.

<sup>65</sup> Manring, “Aunt Jemima Explained,” 20.

<sup>66</sup> Manring, “Aunt Jemima Explained,” 20.

<sup>67</sup> Manring, “Aunt Jemima Explained,” 21.

found his trademark.”<sup>68</sup> He and Underwood proceeded to name their innovative product “Aunt Jemima Pancake Mix”.

The first bags of the pancake mix were adorned “with a grinning, wide-eyed caricature of a Black woman wearing a bandanna.”<sup>69</sup> By selecting Aunt Jemima as the face of their product, Rutt was choosing “a figure that already resonated with Northerners and Southerners, whether they knew mammy from personal experience or literature.”<sup>70</sup> Aunt Jemima’s face on the pancake mix evoked feelings of nostalgia among postbellum Southern Whites, as they would have reminisced “fondly on the mammy in the kitchen.”<sup>71</sup> In other words, this product was a way in which the mammy could return to serving the White home.

Rutt and Underwood went bankrupt in the winter of 1889 due to a lack of business experience.<sup>72</sup> Nevertheless, Aunt Jemima pancake mix lived on when they “sold the company and recipe to Charles Underwood’s new boss, R.T. Davis,” in January 1890.<sup>73</sup> Naming the milling company after himself,<sup>74</sup> Davis took the reins at a time when advertising grew increasingly important to the success of a product.<sup>75</sup> He improved the recipe and the promotional strategy. To add to the convenience, Davis added powdered milk to the pancake mix, so

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<sup>68</sup> Manring, “Aunt Jemima Explained,” 21.

<sup>69</sup> Manring, “Aunt Jemima Explained,” 21.

<sup>70</sup> Manring, “Aunt Jemima Explained,” 21.

<sup>71</sup> Manring, “Aunt Jemima Explained,” 21.

<sup>72</sup> Manring, “Aunt Jemima Explained,” 22.

<sup>73</sup> Manring, “Aunt Jemima Explained,” 23.

<sup>74</sup> McElya, “The Life of ‘Aunt Jemima,’” 15.

<sup>75</sup> Manring, “Aunt Jemima Explained,” 23.

“housewives needed only Aunt Jemima and water to make pancakes.”<sup>76</sup> He also enhanced the flavor by adding rice and corn sugar.<sup>77</sup> Davis had created a product for White families that was nearly as satisfying as a real mammy cooking pancakes in the kitchen back in the antebellum South.

Aside from improving the recipe, the most innovative change Davis made to the product was the marketing strategy. He wanted the trademark to come to life, so he set out to find a woman who would encapsulate “Aunt Jemima in person.”<sup>78</sup> With the help of his network of food brokers, Davis searched “for the personification of Aunt Jemima: a Black woman with an outgoing personality, cooking skills, and the poise to demonstrate the pancake mix at fairs and festivals.”<sup>79</sup> The first Aunt Jemima, Nancy Green, was discovered by food wholesaler Charles Jackson, and eventually signed an exclusive contract with Davis.<sup>80</sup> Green, who was a servant for a Chicago judge, made her first appearance as Aunt Jemima at age 59 “at the 1893 Columbian Exposition in Chicago, in a booth designed to look like a giant flour barrel.”<sup>81</sup> Her performance as Aunt Jemima at the fair referenced “minstrel show performances inspired by Harriet Beecher Stowe’s Aunt Chloe.”<sup>82</sup> Additionally, Green’s portrayal draws from “contemporary White

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<sup>76</sup> Manring, “Aunt Jemima Explained,” 24.

<sup>77</sup> Manring, “Aunt Jemima Explained,” 24.

<sup>78</sup> Manring, “Aunt Jemima Explained,” 24.

<sup>79</sup> Manring, “Aunt Jemima Explained,” 24.

<sup>80</sup> Manring, “Aunt Jemima Explained,” 24.

<sup>81</sup> Manring, “Aunt Jemima Explained,” 24.

<sup>82</sup> Grace Elizabeth Hale, “Advertising (Early), African American Stereotypes in,” in *The New Encyclopedia of Southern Culture Volume 24: Race*, ed. Thomas C. Holt, Laurie B. Green and Charles Reagan Wilson (University of North Carolina Press), 11.



Southerners' sentimental images of Black antebellum 'mammies.'"<sup>83</sup> While promoting the product, Green "greeted guests and cooked pancakes, all the while singing and telling stories of life on the plantation, some real, some apocryphal."<sup>84</sup> It was as though Aunt Jemima jumped out of the pancake mix and into the real world, fulfilling the Old Southern vision.

Green's debut as Aunt Jemima was a hit, with Davis himself claiming "that merchants who had attended the fair placed more than 50,000 orders for his pancake mix."<sup>85</sup> Although Green was playing a character, spectators were encouraged to believe that Aunt Jemima was in fact "an actual former faithful slave."<sup>86</sup> The trademark had blurred the lines between Green's identity and Aunt Jemima. This was evident when Green was killed in a car crash in 1923, and the *Chicago Tribune* released an obituary titled "'Aunt Jemima of Pancake Fame Is Killed by Auto."<sup>87</sup> Moreover, the harsh reality of slavery, which Green was born into on a Montgomery County, Kentucky, plantation, was erased in exchange for a romanticized version of the antebellum South.<sup>88</sup> Green's face replaced the mammy caricature on the original logo.<sup>89</sup> On one hand, perhaps employing her actual face was a more dignified way of illustrating the spokeswoman. On the other hand, by hiring a real woman to play Aunt Jemima at the fair," the R.T. Davis Milling Company capitalized on a mythic Southern past to sell a thoroughly modern

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<sup>83</sup> Grace Elizabeth Hale, "Advertising," 11.

<sup>84</sup> Manring, "Aunt Jemima Explained," 24-25.

<sup>85</sup> Manring, "Aunt Jemima Explained," 25.

<sup>86</sup> McElya, "The Life of 'Aunt Jemima,'" 16.

<sup>87</sup> McElya, "The Life of 'Aunt Jemima,'" 28.

<sup>88</sup> McElya, "The Life of 'Aunt Jemima,'" 16.

<sup>89</sup> Manring, "Aunt Jemima Explained," 25.

product made possible by the technological advances displayed elsewhere at the fair.”<sup>90</sup> Green brought the character to life in a way that White Southerners could embrace both the high-tech innovations of the modern era and their faithful mammy.

Another way Aunt Jemima’s story became as elaborate as a that of a real person was through Purd Wright’s literature and illustrations. Just as the *Chicago Tribune* did when they wrote about her death, Wright intermingled Nancy Green’s life story with the fictional tale of Aunt Jemima in his pamphlet *The Life of Aunt Jemima, the Most Famous Colored Woman in the World*.<sup>91</sup> Wright tells the tale of Aunt Jemima as a Civil war hero from Louisiana. With the help of her secret recipe, Aunt Jemima served her delicious pancakes to Union soldiers to protect Colonel Higbee, ”a prosperous planter on the Mississippi,” from having his mustache ripped off.<sup>92</sup> The Northerners convinced her to leave the South following Higbee’s death and “share her secret with the world.”<sup>93</sup> R.T. Davis used this myth to promote the pancake mix until his death in 1900, and it was maintained under the reorganization of the company in 1903.<sup>94</sup>

Under the new leadership of Robert Clark, Davis’s former general manager, Aunt Jemima Mills sold merchandise such as “rag dolls, salt and pepper shakers, and cookie jars,” until the company was struck by financial turmoil during World War I.<sup>95</sup> The incorporation of a detailed myth and additional products was yet another way the milling company kept the Old

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<sup>90</sup> McElya, “The Life of ‘Aunt Jemima,’” 15.

<sup>91</sup> Manring, “Aunt Jemima Explained,” 25.

<sup>92</sup> Manring, “Aunt Jemima Explained,” 25.

<sup>93</sup> Manring, “Aunt Jemima Explained,” 25.

<sup>94</sup> Manring, “Aunt Jemima Explained,” 25.

<sup>95</sup> Manring, “Aunt Jemima Explained,” 25.

South alive. In 1917, Chicago ad writer James Webb Young and illustrator N.C. Wyeth developed a new advertisement.<sup>96</sup> The duo “took the legend of Aunt Jemima and fleshed it out in more vivid color,” making it feel even more real.<sup>97</sup> Trademarks for other products, like the Gold Dust Twins of Gold Dust Cleanser and Chef Rastus from the Cream of Wheat ads did not have their own biographies. Consequently, there was an understanding among consumers that these were purely fictional characters. Aunt Jemima, on the contrary, had a backstory that was so intricate that the public could not help but believe she was a real, cheerful mammy who would cook and clean for them.<sup>98</sup>

Despite Nancy Green’s death in 1923, Aunt Jemima would live on when the Quaker Oats Company took over in 1925.<sup>99</sup> Young and Wyeth, who continued advertising under Quaker Oats, maintained their vivid characterization of Aunt Jemima through writing and illustration, respectively. Their tactics were especially effective during the end of the nineteenth century through the 1920s: a period when both Black and White female servants grew increasingly scarce.<sup>100</sup> Modern household appliances that debuted at the turn of the twentieth century also decreased the demand for domestic servants.<sup>101</sup> During an era of modernity, Young and Wyeth managed to promote a product that reverted to the antebellum South. They were successful in doing so because they addressed “the present-day problem of putting food on the table in an age

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<sup>96</sup> Manring, “Aunt Jemima Explained,” 27.

<sup>97</sup> Manring, “Aunt Jemima Explained,” 27.

<sup>98</sup> Manring, “Aunt Jemima Explained,” 30.

<sup>99</sup> Manring, “Aunt Jemima Explained,” 26.

<sup>100</sup> Manring, “Aunt Jemima Explained,” 27.

<sup>101</sup> Manring, “Aunt Jemima Explained,” 28.

when live-in household servants were in short supply.”<sup>102</sup> They showed that the convenience of Aunt Jemima pancake mix would ease some of the White mother’s stress in the home.

Young and Wyeth’s 1920s advertisements were reprinted for decades. For example, Wyeth’s drawings were displayed “on the menus and place settings in Aunt Jemima’s Pancake House in Disneyland until it closed in 1970.”<sup>103</sup> The duo’s efforts were so potent that in 1989, a Gannett News service report was still extracting elements of Nancy Green’s life and passing them off as Aunt Jemima’s story.<sup>104</sup>

### **How Black artists have addressed the stereotype:**

The harmful images and messages within the mammy and Aunt Jemima stereotype led many Black artists to challenge these notions through their art during the twentieth and twenty first century: “Because racial stereotype had such a prominent and distributed pictorial presence, the visual arts would be one of several battlegrounds on which to fight.”<sup>105</sup> One of the Black artists who stepped foot on the battlefield in the 1920s was Archibald Motley. As a “Negro Renaissance painter,” Archibald Motley sought to “create fresh and dignified images of African Americans.”<sup>106</sup> He challenges the idea that mammy is a grotesque, exaggerated caricature with his painting *Woman Peeling Apples (Mammy) (Nancy)* (1924) (see figure 1).<sup>107</sup> Motley composed this portrait during the New Negro Movement. Also known as the Harlem

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<sup>102</sup> Manring, “Aunt Jemima Explained,” 29.

<sup>103</sup> Manring, “Aunt Jemima Explained,” 30.

<sup>104</sup> Manring, “Aunt Jemima Explained,” 27.

<sup>105</sup> Wolfskill, *Archibald Motley Jr.*, 1.

<sup>106</sup> Wolfskill, *Archibald Motley Jr.*, 2.

<sup>107</sup> Wolfskill, *Archibald Motley Jr.*, 10.

Renaissance, this movement was popular throughout the 1920s and 1930s.<sup>108</sup> While it possessed slightly different meanings among Black artists and scholars, it essentially asserted that “Black culture and its practitioners were seen as a valuable part of the larger cultural scene.”<sup>109</sup> Through this portrait, Motley sought to represent Black Americans within the canon of good Western art.

“Nancy” in the title of the work likely refers to Nancy Green, the first real-life Aunt Jemima. Motley utilizes the Western tradition of portraiture in this work, which “dignifies the mammy.”<sup>110</sup> Unlike the exaggerated caricatures of mammy and Aunt Jemima in popular visual culture, portraiture strives to create accurate representations of individuals. Like Leonardo da Vinci’s famous portrait *Mona Lisa*, the woman in Motley’s painting stares confidently at her viewers, a departure from the mammy stereotype who is subservient to her White master. Her eyebrows knit together in a stern expression. This may communicate the reality of her duties. While popular visual culture in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century pushed the idea that a mammy’s job was easy and enjoyable, the woman’s expression reveals years of strenuous work. Motley’s use of shading emphasizes the wrinkles on her forehead as her eyebrows furrow, along with the bags under her eyes. Aside from the woman’s face, her fully frontal position challenges the pseudo-science of phrenology, which claimed that the shape of the skull can mark a lack of intelligence. African Americans were often photographed in a three-quarter pose to show the shape of the head as evidence for phrenology.<sup>111</sup> By sitting in a fully frontal position,

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<sup>108</sup> Powell, *Black Art*, 41.

<sup>109</sup> Powell, *Black Art*, 42.

<sup>110</sup> Wolfskill, *Archibald Motley Jr.*, 149.

<sup>111</sup> Samantha A. Noel, “Krista Thompson, ‘Preoccupied with Haiti’ 74-97,” PowerPoint, Detroit, MI, February 17<sup>th</sup>, 2020.

viewers cannot apply phrenology to critique the woman's skull shape and draw inaccurate conclusions about her intellect.

Betye Saar adopts a different approach to addressing the mammy and Aunt Jemima stereotype. Rather than participate in a Western art tradition to compose a realistic representation of a Black woman, Saar appropriates “the offensive object itself in order to revolutionize its meaning.”<sup>112</sup> Motley and Saar's contrasting approaches in their works can be attributed to different historical influences. Motley painted his work during the New Negro Movement, while Saar composed her piece during the Black Power Movement of the 1960s and 1970s: a period when there was a heightened awareness towards racist stereotypes.<sup>113</sup> During the early twentieth century, Motley and his fellow Black artists strove to insert Black subjects within “Western traditions of portraiture, genre scene, and history painting.”<sup>114</sup> While Motley critiqued Western art's lack of diversity, Saar explicitly “challenged consumer culture's limited and damaging inclusion of Black subjects.”<sup>115</sup> Motley reconstructs the mammy stereotype, while Saar communicates to her viewers that the stereotype cannot be reconstructed without addressing it head-on and understanding why it is harmful.<sup>116</sup>

Saar's multimedia piece *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* (1972) (see figure 2) consists of “an assortment of appropriated mammy and Aunt Jemima depictions, attesting to the various iterations of the figure, their location within disparate media, and their ranging levels of

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<sup>112</sup> Wolfskill, *Archibald Motley Jr.*, 149.

<sup>113</sup> J. Stanley Lemons, “Black Stereotypes as Reflected in Popular Culture, 1880-1920,” *American Quarterly* 29, no. 1, (Spring 1977): 116.

<sup>114</sup> Wolfskill, *Archibald Motley Jr.*, 149.

<sup>115</sup> Wolfskill, *Archibald Motley Jr.*, 150.

<sup>116</sup> Wolfskill, *Archibald Motley Jr.*, 27.

cartoonish exaggeration.”<sup>117</sup> All the items in the box rest on a bed of cotton in reference to the “history of slavery and sharecropping from which these images emerge.”<sup>118</sup> The walls of the box are lined with the face of a 1960s Aunt Jemima advertisement.<sup>119</sup> Moving into the foreground of the work, Saar showcases the exaggerated caricatures of mammy and Aunt Jemima that emerged during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The large, three-dimensional mammy resembles the Aunt Jemima from Purd Wright’s 1895 pamphlet. Channeling the infamous style of coon imagery, this version of the stereotype has exaggerated dark skin, bulging eyes, and thick red lips to highlight her smile. Her dress and bandanna also fit the description of a mammy’s stereotypical attire. However, her apron is replaced by an 1880s trade card of a mammy doing laundry while carrying a crying child.<sup>120</sup> This particular card would have been used as an advertisement for laundry services.<sup>121</sup> Saar proposes that the brown highlights on the child’s face is “evidence of a racially mixed heritage.”<sup>122</sup> Including a trade card with a biracial child “draws attention to the longstanding history of sexual abuse of Black women and the Black domestic worker’s uncomfortable proximity to the White male.”<sup>123</sup> To add, the weeping child refers to how the mammy must reject her own family’s needs in order to serve the White family. Most horrific of all, she is expected to keep smiling and remain loyal despite being sexually abused by her White master.

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<sup>117</sup> Wolfskill, *Archibald Motley Jr.*, 150.

<sup>118</sup> Wolfskill, *Archibald Motley Jr.*, 150.

<sup>119</sup> Wolfskill, *Archibald Motley Jr.*, 150.

<sup>120</sup> Wolfskill, *Archibald Motley Jr.*, 150.

<sup>121</sup> Wolskill, *Archibald Motley Jr.*, 150.

<sup>122</sup> Wolfskill, *Archibald Motley Jr.*, 151.

<sup>123</sup> Wolfskill, *Archibald Motley Jr.*, 151.

While Saar has incorporated centuries-worth of racist representations of African American women, she includes details that liberate mammy and Aunt Jemima. In turn, Saar proposes a new meaning to the original images. The three-dimensional mammy holds a broomstick in one hand as a symbol of her domestic service, but she also clutches a pistol next to it and a rifle in her other hand. These weapons alter what this mammy represents. Rather than a faithful slave with a perpetual grin, she is now marked by an “ability to fight back.”<sup>124</sup> Furthermore, her size and appearance change meaning. The original stereotype describes mammy as a large Black woman who is “masculine, brutish,” and the antithesis of White American femininity.<sup>125</sup> On the contrary, Aunt Jemima’s size in Saar’s work is a vital component in her liberation as it establishes her physical strength to fight against the stereotype that has been imposed on her.<sup>126</sup>

In addition to the three-dimensional mammy’s weapons, Saar adds a piece of fabric with Pan-Africanist colors to the bottom of the trade card and a Black Power fist to cover the lower half of the mammy. The fist, which was a popular symbol in the late 1960s and early 1970s, has a polished thumbnail. This is not a typical aspect of the Black Power fist, but in this context, it represents “adornment associated with femininity and reinforcing female participation in the movement.”<sup>127</sup> These symbols transform what was initially an ad for laundry services into “a

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<sup>124</sup> Wolfskill, *Archibald Motley Jr.*, 151.

<sup>125</sup> Wolfskill, *Archibald Motley Jr.*, 150-151.

<sup>126</sup> Wolfskill, *Archibald Motley Jr.*, 151.

<sup>127</sup> Wolfskill, *Archibald Motley Jr.*, 151.



potent rebuke of oppression.”<sup>128</sup> They allow mammy to announce that she will no longer be complacent and do laundry for the White family, among many other rigorous tasks.

The 1960s Aunt Jemima advertisement lines the wall of the box with her trademark grin. Repetition, a technique often used by Andy Warhol in pop art, conveys how consumers have become numb to the boxes of Aunt Jemima pancake mix lining the aisles of grocery stores.<sup>129</sup> At the same time, viewers also interpret this portion of the work as a powerful army of working-class Black women.<sup>130</sup>

The fact that Saar’s work is inside a box challenges the “slave in a box” narrative. As stated previously, Aunt Jemima pancake mix was intended to provide White consumers with a product that was so easy to use that they felt like they still had a real-life slave cooking for them. While a customer would open the box and expect to see the pancake mix inside, the product has been replaced by variations of mammy and Aunt Jemima who have gathered the strength to fight against racist stereotypes.

Another Black artist who has challenged the mammy stereotype is Kara Walker with her installation *Subtlety or The Marvelous Sugar Baby* (2014) (see figure 3).<sup>131</sup> This piece displays a fully nude woman on all fours constructed from “polystyrene foam and covered in white sugar.”<sup>132</sup> She is surrounded by fifteen semi-nude Black boys carrying fruit baskets to resemble

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<sup>128</sup> Wolfskill, *Archibald Motley Jr.*, 151.

<sup>129</sup> Wolfskill, *Archibald Motley Jr.*, 151.

<sup>130</sup> Wolfskill, *Archibald Motley Jr.*, 151.

<sup>131</sup> Wolfskill, *Archibald Motley Jr.*, 166.

<sup>132</sup> Wolfskill, *Archibald Motley Jr.*, 167.

slaves in the Caribbean.<sup>133</sup> Five of the boys consisted of dark brown sugar, which melted and filled the factory with the scent of molasses.<sup>134</sup> The melted sugar signifies the blood and sweat of real-life Caribbean slaves.<sup>135</sup> Installed in an empty Domino Sugar factory in Brooklyn, New York, Walker “brings forth new conversations about Black female sexuality, stereotype, racial reinvention, and the policing of imagery.”<sup>136</sup> *The Marvelous Sugar Baby* was a public installation, making it more accessible than an exhibition in a museum or gallery. Social media garnered more attention as well.<sup>137</sup>

Like the Great Sphinx of Giza, Walker’s monument is configured in a similar position with massive proportions: “35 feet high, 26 feet wide, and 75 feet long.”<sup>138</sup> The woman holds her head high with a regal confidence, contrary to the subservience of the mammy. Her features seem to intertwine the Jezebel and mammy stereotypes in some respects, but Walker also distinguished the sculpture from stereotypes “in terms of color, scale, and expression.”<sup>139</sup> The woman’s handkerchief references the mammy stereotype, however that appears to be the only element drawn from it. Instead of the mammy’s infamous exaggerated smile, which was part of Walker’s original sketch, the sculpture’s mouth and eyes are closed in a meditative state.<sup>140</sup> The sugar baby’s breasts, butt, and vulva are exposed to refer to the hypersexual Jezebel

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<sup>133</sup> Wolfskill, *Archibald Motley Jr.*, 168.

<sup>134</sup> Wolfskill, *Archibald Motley Jr.*, 168.

<sup>135</sup> Wolfskill, *Archibald Motley Jr.*, 168.

<sup>136</sup> Wolfskill, *Archibald Motley Jr.*, 166.

<sup>137</sup> Wolfskill, *Archibald Motley Jr.*, 167.

<sup>138</sup> Wolfskill, *Archibald Motley Jr.*, 167.

<sup>139</sup> Wolfskill, *Archibald Motley Jr.*, 167-168.

<sup>140</sup> Wolfskill, *Archibald Motley Jr.*, 168.

stereotype.<sup>141</sup> Walker mixes the asexuality of mammy with the hypersexuality of Jezebel. This overt sexuality is what White mistresses in the antebellum South feared. However, the sugar baby's resemblance to an ancient monument prevents it from completely embodying the promiscuous Jezebel. The juxtaposition of the bandanna to represent the asexual mammy and the nudity to signify the sexual Jezebel illustrate that Black women cannot be reduced to a stereotype. To add, by likening the sugar baby to the sphinx, Walker combines "the heroic with the sexualized."<sup>142</sup>

While Walker's installation does not directly discuss Aunt Jemima pancake mix, perhaps there is a parallel between the product and sugar. The title *Subtlety* alludes to the subtleties, or table décor made of sugar, that were "enjoyed by royalty during the Middle Ages."<sup>143</sup> Through slave labor and trade, sugar went from a luxury for the wealthy to an affordable and widely obtainable resource.<sup>144</sup> Just as slavery made sugar more accessible, Aunt Jemima, a fictional former slave, made pancake mix available and easy to use, as told in her origin story. Even bigger than selling pancake mix, Aunt Jemima brought the Old South into consumers' homes.

### **Conclusion:**

The mammy and Aunt Jemima stereotype impose an oppressive racial and gender role onto Black women. During slavery, they were expected to neglect themselves and their families' needs, fully commit to serving the White family, and, especially in Aunt Jemima's case, do it all with a shiny smile and a jolly disposition. Mammy and Aunt Jemima's willingness to submit to

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<sup>141</sup> Wolfskill, *Archibald Motley Jr.*, 168.

<sup>142</sup> Wolfskill, *Archibald Motley Jr.*, 168.

<sup>143</sup> Wolfskill, *Archibald Motley Jr.*, 169.

<sup>144</sup> Wolfskill, *Archibald Motley Jr.*, 169.

domestic service also pushes the false narrative that slavery was beneficial for both Black and White Americans, painting the antebellum South as “the good old days”. Following emancipation, Aunt Jemima was the faithful mammy who continued to prepare pancakes for the White family.

After centuries of utilizing racist stereotypes to market for the Old South, mammy and Aunt Jemima appear to be retiring soon. The Aunt Jemima pancake mix logo was only recently altered in early 2021. The name and logo will go from “Aunt Jemima Pancake Mix” to “Pearl Milling Company,” after the original company founded by Rutt and Underwood.<sup>145</sup> Nevertheless, it is difficult to completely erase a stereotype that was so heavily engrained into American popular visual culture.

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<sup>145</sup> Chauncey Alcorn, “Aunt Jemima finally has a new name,” *CNN Business*, February 9, 2021, <https://www.cnn.com/2021/02/09/business/aunt-jemima-new-name/index.html>.

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Image Appendix



Fig. 1, Archibald Motley, *Woman Peeling Apples (Mammy) (Nancy)*, 1924, portrait, [sai.msu.su](http://sai.msu.su)



Fig. 3, Kara Walker, *Subtlety or The Marvelous Sugar Baby*, 2014, sculpture installation, [creativetime.org](http://creativetime.org)



Fig. 2, Betye Saar, *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*, 1972, multimedia, [revolution.berkeley.edu](http://revolution.berkeley.edu)