

**Consuming Mammy:
A Review Essay on the Manifestations of Mammy
in Twentieth-Century America**

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Slave in a Box: The Strange Career of Aunt Jemima. By M. M. Manring. Charlottesville, VA: University Press of Virginia, 1998. 210 pp.

Clinging to Mammy: The Faithful Slave in Twentieth-Century America. By Micki McElya. Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2007. 322 pp.

Ceramic Uncles & Celluloid Mammies: Black Images and their Influence on Culture. By Patricia A. Turner. New York: Anchor Books, 1994. xi, 238 pp.

In the chapter, “‘Look Ma, the Real Aunt Jemima!’: Consuming Identities under Capitalism,” cultural critic Doris Witt repositions conventional readings of the archetypal image of the mammy. She first acknowledges the caricature of Aunt Jemima as representation (or misrepresentation, as her research shows) of the mammy stereotype: the domestic female slave responsible for the preparation of the master’s food. Witt expands on conventional wisdom by redefining this reading and Aunt Jemima as not merely the preparer of but also the food itself. “Aunt Jemima *prepares and is* food; she/it is the ever-smiling source of sustenance for infants and adults.”¹ The myth of mammy, according to Witt, is an image contrived for *and* consumed by White America. With this argument in mind, I find these three works under review equally relevant to the mammy historiography. Articulated from distinct vantage points, these works uncover and challenge the fictionalized manifestations of mammy and reveal the real ramifications of this myth in contemporary consumer culture.

Patricia A. Turner’s *Ceramic Uncles & Celluloid Mammies: Black Images and their Influence on Culture* explores White America’s insatiable appetite for the mammy archetype through the consumption of Black collectibles and stereotypical Black performances on the screen. “For the most part, the raw material of this book is not *black* folklore or *black* popular culture. The material objects, verbal folklore, and media portrayals are the products of white imagination” (xv). Turner’s research, which spans 150 years, critiques the placement and purpose of the mammy image in the world of Black collectibles and the repositioning of alternative, yet similar, misrepresentations of the Black experience in television and film. She suggests White imaginings to be paramount in the creation and continually limited and limiting characterizations of the Black female experience.

Her work begins by looking at the rise of “black Americana” or the demand for Black collectibles around 1981 (5). Attributing this rise to the highly celebrated and televised collection of African-American social worker Janette Faulkner, the first three chapters of this text address the “physical, tangible artifacts that embody a derogatory image of blacks” (6). This closer look into the world of Black collectibles uncovers the wide range of objects or antiques

¹ Doris Witt, “‘Look Ma, the Real Aunt Jemima!’: Consuming Identities under Capitalism,” in *Black Hunger: Food and the Politics of U.S. Identity*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1999, 22.

available and the myths that manifest from the pairing of the African-American body with items like the watermelon or alligator.

Although this work is thought-provoking from the onset, chapter three is particularly relevant as part of a rich historiography on the mammy myth. In “Back to the Kitchen,” Turner notes, “No image exceeds the popularity and diversity of the smiling, overweight, copiously dressed figure referred to alternately as mammy or auntie” (41). Investigating the “birth of mammy” through celluloid depictions like Hattie McDaniel in the cinematic blockbuster *Gone with the Wind*, Turner concludes that the mammy myth is primarily just that because of the fact that most slaves, regardless of gender, were consigned to the fields. “Only the very wealthy could afford the luxury of utilizing the women as house servants rather than as field hands” (44). The mammy, then, was more a figment of White imagination than a factual part of the average master’s home. This reimagining of the past purposefully provided a nostalgic view of slavery that suggested that the slaves were willing participants in the peculiar institution. Popular culture would soon take hold of the South’s rewriting of the slave, especially the female slave, experience. The minstrel shows of the mid- to late nineteenth century and fiction like Harriet Beecher Stowe’s *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) were supposedly the final word on the “real-life” mammy experience. The protagonist of this “real-life” story was a docile figure who was a loyal companion in the master’s home. For 150 years, this myth would limit alternative reconstructions of Black femininity, including future possibilities for the free Black domestic.

Turner’s work is foremost an insightful study of the positioning of the Black experience in the White imagination, as manifested in and through the material and media realms. The voracious appetite of contemporary White America for such archetypal images highlights the pervasiveness of White paternalism and its ramifications in consumer culture. The greatest achievement of this work, then, is the positioning of popular culture and folklore as texts from which Black culture can be understood, challenged, and, most importantly, reappropriated. Although her readings of the mammy, as shown through Black collectibles, are significant, Turner’s exploration of the Black female experience on the screen is less than satisfactory. She briefly includes the work of Hattie McDaniel as an example of the film adaptation of this myth. Further analysis is necessary, however, to explore manifestations of the mammy in television. Turner neglects Nell Carter’s portrayal of the loyal housekeeper in *Gimme a Break!*, which is an example of a fictionalized working relationship that suggests that the loyalty of the housekeeper to the widower’s late wife, Margaret, took precedence over her own economic welfare.

Turner’s work briefly articulates the creation of the mammy myth as a nostalgic reimagining of the slave experience. M. M. Manring’s fascinating look at the rise and resilience of the Aunt Jemima marketing campaign, *Slave in a Box: The Strange Career of Aunt Jemima*, suggests that one mammy in particular, Aunt Jemima, redefined how White Americans viewed and consumed Black femininity. She also reestablished the role of and place for White women in the greater society. “The southern mammy exemplified by Aunt Jemima, I argue, was . . . a sexual and racial symbol that was used by men and women, North and South, white and black, to explain proper gender relationships, justify or condemn racial oppression, and establish class identities (for both whites and blacks)” (9). Unlike Turner, who recognized the mammy collectible as the sole commodification of Black femininity, Manring argues that the marketing of Aunt Jemima serves as the intersection of “the Old South myth, the New South creed, the history of slavery, women’s history, African-American history, and the history of advertising” (13). In this way, Aunt Jemima, the trademark of the R. T. Davis Milling Company (and later the Quaker Oats Company), serves as a guide through history. She provides a look into how the

White imagination created and commodified the Old South myth (and the mammy) *and* how Black Americans reappropriated this image to wage war on the mammy and other misrepresentations found in modern American advertising.

Manring's work begins by reframing the question first posed by James Baldwin: "What is the meaning of Aunt Jemima" (5)? This poignant question refers to Aunt Jemima's rise and resilience in American advertising. What does it mean, for example, that the image remains in a contemporary consumer culture supposedly more politically correct? "Understanding the way mammy was merchandised, and the way she is still bought and sold today, might teach us a great deal about our past and our present, not only how times have changed but how they have remained the same" (16). In a provocative look at one of America's most successful marketing campaigns, Manring uses the fictionalized existence of Aunt Jemima as a way to frame his critique of modern consumerism. If we are what we eat, what does it say that we, as a society, still readily "consume" the mammy image without thought or consequence?

Manring first explores the myth of mammy, therefore, through a study of fact and fiction. Like Turner, he draws from the popular fiction of the early twentieth century, including the film adaptations of works like Fannie Hurst's *Imitation of Life*. He suggests that the creation of mammy, on the one hand, provided a safe alternative to the Jezebel archetype. She was a Black woman whom White society could control. The emergence of this image, on the other hand, not only appeased White fears but also took White women out of the kitchen, changing how White men would and should view White femininity in contrast to the Black female slave. Consequently, Manring presents Aunt Jemima as a commentary on race and class, an image meant to exalt White femininity as specific to the White elite.

Going from the master's kitchen to the world stage, Manring further uncovers how Aunt Jemima is a direct result of the mammy stereotype, a product of caricatures found on the minstrel stage. Discovered by Chris Rutt and commodified through the efforts of adman James Webb Young and illustrator N. C. Wyeth, the archetype of Aunt Jemima was soon taken off the stage to flip pancakes at the 1893 World's Fair. Manring's most important intervention, with respect to the transportation of the Aunt Jemima image from the stage to the box, is in acknowledging that the selection was not mere coincidence: "[Chris Rutt] was merely awash in the popular culture of the time, when mammies were remembered fondly in novels and personal reminiscences and portrayed onstage. He did not invent this popular icon's appeal; he only adopted as a trade name and image something that was readily evident in the popular domain" (71). This observation acutely articulates why Aunt Jemima gained popular acclaim; the mammy archetype and the Old South myth were already prevalent in the White imagination. Her continued presence, changed to that of a slender body without the trademark bandana, suggests that society is not ready to let go of the image or the myth.

Although Manring's work is critical in the mammy historiography, this work falls short in its ability to articulate fully how Black Americans also employed Aunt Jemima as a way to wage war on American advertising. Manring provides thoughtful analysis of the use of terms like "Aunt Jemima" and "Uncle Tom" in "playing the dozens" (159). He also briefly discusses the work of the NAACP and Cyril V. Briggs in an attempt to silence Aunt Jemima. Although Manring admits that evidence (in the form of surveys) on how Aunt Jemima affected and continues to affect the Black consumer is sparse—a possible distortion by the Quaker Oats Company—this work would be better served with more evidence of how the contemporary consumer culture, in general, responds to Aunt Jemima (and her counterparts, such as Uncle Ben). Such evidence would include how the product sold at different points in history. Manring

mentions that the peak of her fame was in the 1920s; further evidence is necessary to show where Aunt Jemima and the Quaker Oats marketing campaign rank today, including a look at how her revamped image affected sales. Regardless of the numbers, Manring's writing thoughtfully shows how mammy, through Aunt Jemima, remains a slave in a box and a slave to contemporary White imaginings that compels consumers to pick the product off the shelf and place it in everyday lives.

Micki McElya's work, *Clinging to Mammy: The Faithful Slave in Twentieth-Century America*, brings both works full-circle by unveiling how White America's unwavering appetite for Aunt Jemima is, in fact, the desire to cling to and consume an image of Black femininity as the jovial, uncomplicated female slave. Like Turner and Manring, McElya recognizes that such desire is the product of the patriarchal and paternalistic Lost Cause mythology. Manring briefly discusses how Aunt Jemima can and did serve as a site for resistance for the Black community, more specifically the NAACP. In contrast to Turner and Manring's work, however, McElya more fully explores such resistance and how Black females, slave and free, challenged such misrepresentations, repositioning themselves politically and socially to take down the mammy myth.

The bookends of this research are, once again, the emergence and manifestations of Aunt Jemima in American capitalism. Similar to Witt, McElya recognizes that Aunt Jemima serves as a vehicle from which to critique White America's construction and willing consumption of the faithful slave. Drawing from fiction, non-fiction, newspapers, advertisements, and pamphlets, McElya researches the real life of Nancy Green, the person behind Aunt Jemima, in order to make manifest the devastating realities for all Black women who sought representation but received misrepresentation through such caricatures of Black femininity. "Accounts of enslaved people's fidelity constituted the ultimate expression of southern paternalism, which held that the relationship of the master to the slave was removed from market forces and economic exigency and functioned more like a familial relationship between father and child based on a set of mutual obligations and responsibilities as well as affection" (5). Although Aunt Jemima was a marketing scheme to sell pancakes, her image furthered the growing myth that the mammy was a position held by many as a result of one's desire, not societal demands.

McElya's work beautifully deconstructs this mythology by comparing White glorification of the faithful slave in tandem with the political and social movements of Black women (and, at times, Black men) whose efforts contradicted these archetypes. Chapter one, for example, looks at the rise of Aunt Jemima, through Nancy Green, at the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition in 1893. McElya explores Green's success in conjunction with the dozens of Black male and female activists who were shut out of the event. Although Nancy Green had little voice, McElya articulates the outcry of activists like Frederick Douglass and Ida B. Wells, who refused to be silenced. Their outrage led to the creation of a widely circulated pamphlet entitled *The Reason Why the Colored American Is Not in the World's Columbian Exposition* (1893) (22).

Similarly, McElya addresses White constructions of the Black mammy in tandem with Black women's reconstruction of Black femininity via Black motherhood. Through the case study of Marjorie Delbridge, McElya demonstrates how motherhood politicized the Black female experience, serving as a direct challenge to the asexual depiction of the mammy stereotype. She further explores the relationships of memory and truth, monuments, and their roles in reconstructing/deconstructing history. The United Daughters of the Confederacy sought to glorify mammy by constructing a monument of her, one, they insisted, that would give voice to historical Black female service. Black females, however, recognized this monument as a

homogenizing effort to exalt mythical Black servitude versus more contemporary Black service, silencing the real progress of Black females, slave and free. These juxtapositions demonstrate how a Black community openly protested against the Black images, like Aunt Jemima, articulated by the White imagination and circulated in and through the national populace.

As a result, McElya's study is a masterful look into how the White imagination has purposefully positioned Black images and archetypes to ensure Black purported inferiority. The goal of these images was to appease White guilt and further an American consumer culture built on White progress. The jovial slave, the archetype of the mammy, was one Black image that allowed White Americans (especially White women) to distance themselves from Black servitude while simultaneously consuming the culture and practices of the other. McElya challenges these historical inaccuracies by arguing, like Turner and Manring, that these images were consumed most readily by White culture because they were contrived in and for the White imagination. The one shortcoming of McElya's work is that it only explores the first half of the twentieth century. Her subtitle misleads the reader, leaving more to be desired.

Despite their limitations, however, these works remain relevant and provide a rich historiography on the mammy. The truths all three writers uncover, amid great historical inaccuracy, is that even as White Americans readily consumed the myth of the mammy, Black Americans, most often, did not. Instead, the Black community, female and male, protested such stereotypical Black imaging. As a result, the myth of mammy created in the twentieth century continues to be deconstructed in the twenty-first, as Black females push it aside on their way to more complex reimaginings of Black femininity in the Black *and* White consciousness.