SLAVE in a BOX

The Strange Career of Aunt Jemima

M. M. Manring
Cracking Jokes in the Confederate Supermarket

Before . . . our joy at the demise of Aunt Jemima and Uncle Tom approaches the indecent, we had better ask whence they sprang, how they lived? Into what limbo have they vanished?

—James Baldwin, Notes of a Native Son

In 1955 in his Notes of a Native Son, James Baldwin asked “whence” Aunt Jemima “sprang,” and “into what limbo” she and her male counterpart, Uncle Tom or Uncle Mose, had “vanished.” How are we supposed to answer Baldwin’s question? Who could have created Aunt Jemima, and for what reason? She began as a white man, in drag, wearing blackface, singing on the minstrel stage. She became a face on a bag of pancake flour, then a real-life ex-slave who worked in a Chicago kitchen but cobbled together enough reality and fancy of life under slavery to entertain the crowds of the 1893 World’s Fair. Next, advertising copywriters and one of America’s most distinctive illustrators brought her to life in the pages of ladies’ magazines, although the print version was still shadowed by a succession of real-life Aunt Jemimas who greeted the curious public at county fairs and club Bake-Offs. Then, in the era of the Civil Rights movement and Black Power, she grew into a liability, someone to be altered to meet the times and explained away with no small amount of embarrassment. Finally, instead of vanishing into the limbo
Baldwin described in 1935, she rebounded forty years later as a television advertising icon, a black spokeswoman redeemed by having another, more up-to-date, black spokeswoman speak for her. How did she spring back? Why does she persist? Aunt Jemima’s strange career defies easy explanation, despite the increasing attention she has received from historians of marketing, journalism, advertising, and literature during the past decade. She has a confusing history.

One way to answer Baldwin’s question is to ask, in turn. Who cares? At a single glance—the way most people see Aunt Jemima, after all—she seems an insignificant relic. How much meaning can we derive from a cartoon face on a pancake box? It is possible to view the mammy’s picture as at best benign and at worst a silly, outdated joke that no longer carries any of whatever meaning it previously held. The slave population represented by Aunt Jemima, we are reminded, freed itself in the wake of the Emancipation Proclamation. The woman’s face and dress have changed significantly since she began her career, supposedly no longer bearing any meaningful resemblance to an earlier image that traded heavily on her slave origins and ways. And further, Quaker Oats, the company that owns the line of Aunt Jemima products, no longer trades on that image, preferring to cast Aunt Jemima as a modern woman, to the extent that it characterizes Aunt Jemima as anything at all. She does not speak or move in the television or print advertisements; nowadays she is simply a label, not meaning anything other than to identify a particular brand, and kept because customers recognize the name and symbol the same way they recognize Coca-Cola’s “Dynamic Ribbon” typeface or Budweiser’s ornate label. It is an admittedly stupid joke that has lost its offensiveness and thus lost its meaning beyond what marketers call “trade dress,” the way a package is designed, and “brand equity,” the extent to which the name and design attract and hold consumer loyalty. In the average American supermarket, the argument goes, approximately thirty thousand products vie for our attention during the half hour we spend shopping for goods.1 Why concern ourselves with a faded joke on a box of ready-mix pancake batter?

I call Aunt Jemima a joke because Aunt Jemima was the butt of jokes in minstrel shows and print ads but also because the term clarifies a basic argument about how her image should be interpreted. The meaning of jokes, or the dispute over whether jokes have meaning in the first place, parallels the question of whether a figure such as Aunt Jemima has any meaning. One way to look at a joke is commonly termed “incongruity theory,” an idea put forth at least as early as the eighteenth century by James Beattie, who wrote that “laughter arises from the view of two or more inconsistent, unsuitable, or incongruous parts or circumstances, considered as united in one complex object.” The essayist Elliott Oring explained what Beattie was talking about by reminding us of an old joke about the kangaroo buying an expensive drink in a bar. The bartender tells his marsupial customer that he does not see many kangaroos ordering drinks in his bar. The kangaroo replies, “At four seventy-five a drink, I can see why.” As Oring explains in exhaustive detail, a successful incongruity, the basis of most riddles, requires a great deal of cultural knowledge on the part of both the joke teller and his audience: Kangaroos do not speak and do not order cocktails, and $4.75 is a lot to pay for a drink.2 But more important, while a joke depends upon the teller and listener’s ability to access pieces of implicit information, jokes themselves do not mean very much. A kangaroo in a bar, a smiling black woman on a pancake box, both are meant to be passingly pleasing; kangaroos are not defamed by such an innocent association, an incongruity meant to make us smile. A joke is just a joke except in the respect that it reveals common cultural knowledge, and jokes are not meant to be examined in such a way, just enjoyed. A good joke, by its very nature, collapses if it requires any such explanation to the humorless. If a sales clerk has to explain why a smiling black woman is on a pancake box, you probably are not going to buy the product anyway.

In his 1905 book Jokes and Their Relation to the Unconscious, Sigmund Freud argued that jokes are aggressive, articulating the unconscious motives that underlay them. Thus the father of psychoanalysis typically emphasized the teller of the joke rather than the techniques of joke telling, unlike Beattie and incongruity theory. As Oring observed, Freud’s psychoanalytic approach and its emphasis on aggressiveness were in line with earlier observations concerning the meaning of humor, such as Thomas Hobbes’s belief that laughter was the result of a sudden realization that one is superior to another (who is the object of the joke). Thus a joke could be more than the simple pleasure of a cultural incongruity and, in Oring’s words, “actually spawns such eminency [of the joke teller] through the regular and deliberate diminution of others.” Jokes are masked assaults against real individuals and groups in society, socially sanctioned because they serve aggressive emotions in a safe way, one that does not embarrass or offend the particular audience that is the joke’s recipient.3

When a joke crosses a line of safety—such as the actor Ted Danson’s decision to wear blackface and tell watermelon jokes at a 1993 roast of the actress Whoopi Goldberg—it is perceived as something more meaningful and, in this case, repulsive than a mere joke and is not funny.4 Another relatively recent and
more wide-ranging example of the hostile humor identified by Freud is the elephant joke cycle of the 1960s, which Roger Abrahams and Alan Dundes examined in their 1969 article "On Elephantasy and Elephanticide." Elephant jokes were a series of especially absurd incongruities in the form of questions and answers, like these:

Q: What's big and gray and comes in quarts?
A. An elephant.

Q: How do you know if an elephant is in the bathtub with you?
A. By the faint smell of peanuts on his breath.

Q. How do you keep an elephant from stampeding?
A. By cutting his 'tam' peter off.

The authors sought to explain the elephant joke as something that helped whites express their fears and fantasies in a time when traditional racial barriers were under attack, during the Civil Rights and Black Power movements, and when greater attempts were made to integrate schools, workplaces, and other public spaces. The elephant was a safe harbor to say things about blacks that were formerly expressed in increasingly forbidden, explicit humor:

Q. What do you call a Negro with a Ph.D.?
A. Nigger.

Abrahams and Dundes interpreted these jokes as disguising racism rather than merely celebrating incongruity. The "big and gray and comes in quarts" line is a reference to the supposed mammoth nature of black sexuality. The joke about bathtubs and breath hints at black intrusion into the most intimate areas of white life. The stampeder joke hides the aggressive desire of whites to control and emasculate black men. This was too much for Oiring, who wrote that "there is no reason to view [the Civil Rights movement] as the single force conditioning the joke cycle"; he concluded that "much more than the relations between the races was being turned on its ear" in these riddles. Oiring believed the elephant joke arose in the wider countercultural movement, with its sit-ins, strikes, and demonstrations on university campuses, which the jokes reflect through their blatant challenge to conventional reason and their intrusive sexuality. The point is, however, not whether the racial explanation or countercultural analysis is correct (both seem plausible), but that even a view of jokes as incongruous does not assume that jokes are meaningless. Even if the elephant jokes, for example, do not mask a hostile impulse toward blacks, they might still be a sign of some other aggressive challenge toward societal mores, surfacing in an innocuous and even silly way.

So the argument is not about whether jokes mean anything, but what jokes mean, bringing us back to Baldwin's question: What is the meaning of Aunt Jemima? The question is really whether Aunt Jemima is merely incongruous—a relic that persists on pancake boxes, a now-harmless joke that nobody gets anymore, anyway. This is a historical inquiry. Aunt Jemima might have been one kind of joke on the minstrel stage and another in print campaigns, a message that was altered from the 1890s to the 1980s as the circumstances around her changed. Just the same, there must be something at the core to explain her staying power over a century of dramatic and sometimes subtle changes. However incongruous the picture of a slave woman on a box of modern processed food might seem, there must be a way to explain her presence that is causal rather than casual. The reason she is still on the box could be the same reason she was put on the box in the first place; the reason she has changed so much could be the same reason she has stayed the same in so many ways. If her essential persuasive power was exhausted over time, she would have been discarded, not altered. Or more directly, if she did not help sell hundreds of millions of dollars' worth of processed foods every year, somebody or something else would be on the box—unless we accept the idea that there is not an important relationship between what is on the box and what is inside it.

The relationship between what is on the box and what is within it has never been a casual one, at least not since the advent of mass production and consumption. As Thomas Hine has noted in The Total Package: The Evolution and Secret Meanings of Boxes, Bottles, Cans, and Tubes, some products would be impossible if not for packaging, a phenomenon he calls the "Aunt Jemima Effect," because the pancake flour is a combination of separate, familiar products formerly sold unpackaged. Other examples of the "Aunt Jemima Effect" would be those small crackers with peanut butter that languish in vending machines or the McDonald's McDLT, whose dual clamshell package "kept the hot side hot and the cold side cold." The relationship between the product and the package, however, goes beyond mere functionality: to a great extent the package creates the product's personality and in turn enables the consumer to establish a relationship with a stranger: the distant producer of a mass product. Some of the most
powerful and consistent relationships are simple enough to be maintained by designs on small packages, such as the box for Marlboro cigarettes, which few of its regular customers can describe offhand, but all can recognize instantly (which is the reason it is the most valuable brand name in the world). Other relationships are more complex. For instance, test marketing has demonstrated that people recognize the Tide detergent box even when all its typographical elements and colors are hopelessly scrambled.

If we want to see the product-consumer relationship in action, we have only to head for one of the most American of places: the supermarket. One of the unique privileges of being an American is shopping in the veritable cornucopia of food and related stuff known as the supermarket, the place where 30,000 products meet the consumer for 30 minutes, each specially designed to stand out in some special way to a special person. What is interesting about the supermarket, of course, is that so little seems to be transpiring even as so much calculated behavior is going on, endlessly, as some products are selected and others are not, some marketing plans are realized and others crushed. Billions of dollars ride on the sum of millions of apparently innocuous acts; millions are spent by research firms to test typefaces, colors, and images, sometimes videotaping consumer responses in stores, sometimes in controlled tests using a tachistoscope, a slide projector with a rapid shutter speed designed to measure instant recognition. The designers of supermarkets have learned that most of us shop 2.2 times a week. They know that if they slow the store's music down enough, our eyes will blink only 14 times a minute, as opposed to the normal 32 times a minute. They have figured out that the best angle to view products on shelves is 15 degrees below the horizontal, and you probably will stand four feet away, on average, from whatever product you are seeing.

In that environment, if you choose to believe that the "joke" that is Aunt Jemima is not some highly analyzed transaction, you may, but the only remaining question would be, Who is kidding whom?

The Confederate Supermarket

Nothing special seems to be going on in the average American supermarket. Everybody does what everybody else is doing—wandering past rows of cartoon characters on cereal boxes, fixating on a list, hovering over a folding table as a preternaturally friendly woman prepares a free sample of microwavable Vienna sausage. I can devote a considerable amount of mental energy to deciding whether the 48-ounce size of detergent is preferable to the 96-ounce size, or whether picante sauce is a justifiable expense. Shoppers do not come to the supermarket to think about Aunt Jemima's deeper meaning; they have other things—prices, schedules, traffic—on their minds. I do not see those 30,000 products there in the 30 minutes I spend; I see the things that are on my list or catch my eye. (I wonder how James Baldwin would react here.) It is a singular experience rather than an examination of a bunch of individual items, which, conversely, is why packaging experts go to so much trouble to make their items stand out. It is possible to get through the whole trip without concentrating on anything more than keeping the number of products in the cart low enough to secure passage through the express line (I put the picante sauce back). While I wait in line, another hundred sets of eyes are fixed on Wesson oil, a hundred sets of hands fumble through business-size envelopes stuffed with coupons clipped from the Sunday newspaper. It is all very mundane. And perhaps that is the way it should be. We do not need to spend every waking moment thinking about the International Monetary Fund or the latest ballot referendum. In my experience the supermarket is an excellent refuge from thinking about things like the Confederate Memorial movement.

Or, more accurately, it seems to be. We pass by a weird sort of Confederate memorial, in a sense, every time we push our carts down that aisle with the breakfast items—ersatz maple syrup, Pop Tarts, powdered stuff in boxes. Looking out at us, at about eye level, is one of those seemingly unexplainable relics, something that has been around so long, put to such ordinary use, that it seems not to require much explanation anyway. The black woman on the box of Aunt Jemima pancake mix still smiles at us in much the same way she did in 1920. She has changed her hair, added some jewelry, and lost some weight, but she has not gone anywhere since the turn of the century. Maybe she keeps sticking around because she is more successful than ever, with her face on about forty products, accounting for an overwhelming lead in market share in the ready-to-prepare breakfast category, with sales of more than $300 million annually. But that is not much of an explanation for why she is there. It tells us she still works for Quaker Oats, her owner, in some way, but it does not explain how she works and why people originally decided to put her there. The presence of a statue of a Confederate general in a park probably does not explain the decision to take a walk in the park; we can pass by with scarcely a thought as to what a weather-beaten,
green-copper man is doing on a horse, surrounded by Frisbee throwers and picnickers. The people who put him on that horse had big ideas about what he was doing there, no matter how ordinary he seems today. And even those who might object to everything the man depicted in the statue stood for, if it happens to occur to them, stop far short of suggesting that the green-copper equestrian should come down after all these years. He has become part of the scenery.

Those old statues were not solely commemorating the Confederacy, as Gaines Foster has shown, but were a way of interpreting the “Old South” as a whole, forming a public memory of a time, social order, and place—for white men, white women, black men, and black women. The purpose of constructing social memory through Confederate memorials was not simply a nostalgic look back but a way to come to terms with the realities of the postbellum South—dealing with defeat and building social unity during a time of transition. The Virginians who squabbled over the proper way to memorialize Robert E. Lee in the 1880s, for example, had held a variety of opinions on the possibility of a Confederate victory or on the abilities of commanders like James Longstreet, but in commemorating Lee they employed the Confederate tradition to celebrate the prewar culture. A great many assumptions could be bound up in the forging of a statue, ideas about deference, religion, duty, and white supremacy.9

Not everybody gets a statue, of course. Other icons of the Old South explain as much about their creators’ worldview—their ideas about race and class and gender and order—as statues of Confederate commanders, but they were not cast in bronze or iron. One of them is the mammy, a female slave who in postwar literature and diaries took on special importance. She was depicted as genuinely loving her masters and mistresses, thus providing a justification for slavery. She was sometimes remembered as a maid-of-all-work, someone not only cooked in hot, detached southern kitchens, keeping a fire burning steadily all day, but also served as a nursemaid, physician, and counselor. The extent to which any slave did all these things is the subject of some dispute among historians of slavery. Some of them cling to the maid-of-all-work, emphasizing her loyalty and authority in plantation households; others point to the evidence that shows no single slave did all those things, nor did her master and mistress want her to do them. None of them takes the female slave out of the kitchen, however, and her place in the kitchen is the key to understanding her place in white southern ideology, both male and female, antebellum and postbellum. Black women in the kitchen kept white women out of it, defining not only the

proper place of black women but of white women as well. Gender roles were defined by what different women did, and what they did not do; feminine virtues were defined by task. Robert E. Lee, as a Confederate memorial, was an idea of exemplary southern white manhood. The mammy was an idea about exemplary southern black womanhood, and an important one even after the decline of the Confederate Memorial movement. As late as 1923 the United Daughters of the Confederacy tried, but failed, to build the mammy her own national memorial in Washington, D.C.10 She might not have gotten her statue, but her legendary role in the kitchen retained its resonance; it was a place for black women, a place where Robert E. Lee arguably would have been at a loss. The mammy would be remembered in different ways. Appropriately, she remained in the twentieth century what she had been in the nineteenth century—a black woman bought and sold.

So if we cannot find mammy by looking at statues, we need to look elsewhere—toward that black woman who is looking back at us from the supermarket shelf. And in doing so, we bring together themes in the history of the South, women, business, media, and African Americans in a way that explains the origins and persistent appeal of one of America’s advertising icons, all the cultural information that underlies the seeming incongruity of a black woman on a box of pancake mix, or the unexplained motives behind the joke. Just as others have done, I am putting Aunt Jemima back to work, this time in an effort to historicize the popular image of mammy.

In chapter 2, I study the development of the popular image that formed the basis for Aunt Jemima. The slave woman called “mammy” has become the focus of growing interest among historians in the past three decades. Much of what was assumed to be common knowledge about her is now in dispute—how she worked, why she worked, and even whether she actually existed. Not only historians but novelists and diarists were responsible for fleshing out the image of mammy, and thus any account of her career also requires a study of fictional works as well. The southern mammy exemplified by Aunt Jemima, I argue, was a well-established and well-understood idea long before her image was pasted on a box of pancake flour. From her beginnings in southern plantation reality and literature, the mammy 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). I explain the way historians have treated the mammy
both as a real person and as a largely imaginary symbol of white male ideology in the Old South and demonstrate the ways that writers of fiction, North and South, used her to explain differing ideas about race, class, and gender, starting with the years after the Civil War and ending about 1970. This review of the literature considers both the historiography of slavery and the importance of popular fiction in creating the mammy image to which Aunt Jemima is an heir. There is an inherent difficulty in balancing the two, because many historians consider her largely a fictional person, and many novelists who included mammys in their works, such as Thomas Nelson Page and Thomas Dixon, considered themselves to be faithful reporters of southern history.

Some of these books are about the Old South, some about the New South, and most of them focus on the nature of slavery, from numerous angles. All touch upon mammy in some way, explaining the world black women lived in, both in slavery and freedom. They tell us how the world either stayed the same or changed, and what ideas white people held about mammy, as well. Some, like Deborah Gray White and Catherine Clinton, question mammy’s existence and go so far as to regard her as a myth even among those who lived in the Old South. Others, like Eugene Genovese and Donald Blasingame, see her as a real person. All of them, one way or another, describe what she might have meant to white people—as living justification of the correctness of slavery, as a carrier of black political sensibility after slavery, as an “uplifter” of white southern womanhood, or as a combination of those and other things. One of the conclusions I have reached is that mammy, whatever she was, has been as useful a servant to historians and novelists as she was to her southern masters; that is, she helps Eugene Genovese’s class analysis as much as she happily works in Thomas Nelson Page’s racial paradise. The variety of views on mammy demonstrates historiographical changes over the century, but it also shows the utility a black image has had in white minds, black minds, male minds, female minds. She was above all, and continues to be, a useful person.

In chapter 3 I show how one of the popular images of Aunt Jemima, the white man dressed as a black woman on the minstrel stage, inspired the adoption of the mammy as a trademark. To understand the “discovery” of Aunt Jemima by an aspiring food manufacturer, one must understand not only the racial, gender, and class ideology wrapped up in minstrel shows but the growth of an American industry that promised to prepare, package, and deliver ready-mixed foodstuffs in the late nineteenth century. Aunt Jemima pancake mix did not arise simply because of the mammy’s inherent utility as a trademark but because the logistics and economics of food production created an opportunity for nationally marketed products. Thus what is often described as a coincidental meeting between the mammy and an entrepreneur in a St. Joseph, Missouri, minstrel hall was actually the confluence of major trends in American popular culture and economics, not much of a coincidence at all.

The fourth chapter addresses the rise of the American advertising industry in the first two decades of the twentieth century, and how its attempts to persuade American families to use new products increasingly targeted consumers’ self-image, their doubts and their aspirations. This topic has been addressed by numerous historians and sociologists, but I am convinced that one of the trends in American advertising which has largely escaped their notice was the power of the South—in particular, the plantation South—as a symbol of white leisure, abundance, and sexual order. The utility of such an image is that it directly addressed the dilemma that white households faced as the overall servant population decreased and, simultaneously, the percentage of black domestics increased. America’s long-standing “servant problem” was becoming a “black problem.” In several advertising campaigns, especially the one for Maxwell House coffee, the South was connected with a product and portrayed as a place in which elite white men and women were above laboring for their sustenance. They were instead depicted as feasting, dancing, and celebrating their (white) culture as black servants handled the service that made all the revelry possible. At this juncture we encounter James Webb Young, a mercurial advertising man for the J. Walter Thompson firm, who skillfully employed images of black labor and white leisure not only to persuade white consumers—both men and women—to try new products but to make national brands synonymous with national reconciliation after the Civil War. White southerners knew how to eat and celebrate; Yankees knew how to manufacture and distribute. Both could live in harmony as long as African Americans waited tables and fed the kitchen stoves. A “southern” ideal of racial order and leisure was married to a “northern” approach to enterprise.

Chapter 5 details the Aunt Jemima advertising campaign after World War I, when Young’s agency revamped and expanded the reach of the product’s national effort. This is how the campaign was designed to work: It first established a time and place—a large plantation in Louisiana, either just before or after the Civil War. The manner in which the ads told a story that straddled the war established the continuity of the product, from its Old South origins to its devel-
In chapter 5 for the interpretation of the ads I have given, I also note other possible interpretations of the images that might have appealed to women.

The sixth and final chapter follows Aunt Jemima's image into contemporary times, as the seemingly benign character increasingly became the focus of anger from African Americans. As the limited market research regarding African-American consumers in the 1930s established, blacks were always repelled by Aunt Jemima. In the 1940s and 1950s, the term Aunt Jemima was converted by them—especially among boys "playing the dozens"—into a form of insult, a simultaneous attack on masculinity and racial solidarity that would surface in debates during the Civil Rights and Black Power movements. Local chapters of the NAACP would concentrate on blocking appearances by actresses depicting Aunt Jemima in an effort to ensure that whites understood that the woman in the bandanna was an insult. Finally, I review the ways in which Aunt Jemima's owners attempted to respond to protests by altering her image, instead of dropping it, and speculate on the prospect that she can continue to be useful as an advertising trademark in the twenty-first century.

There are two reasons why Aunt Jemima is a worthwhile subject and not just an old joke. The first is that there is no other source that explains racial imagery this way, bringing together the Old South myth, the New South creed, the history of slavery, women's history, African-American history, and the history of advertising in a way that coherently explains how they all intersect. Aunt Jemima's history uniquely demonstrates the ancestry of one of our time's everyday objects, a box on a grocery shelf that can only be understood by looking at how American manufacturing and marketing developed around World War I, and how its advertising was linked to events even earlier on the minstrel stage and the southern plantation. Aunt Jemima might seem an unlikely guide through American history, but often the best way to investigate a household is to knock on the servants' entrance instead of the front door.

Recent works have attempted, with different measures of success, to explain what Aunt Jemima means to America, but they seem generally to take a viewpoint lacking historical context. The book Celluloid Mammies and Ceramic Uncles, while providing an excellent survey of racial imagery in American popular culture, from minstrel shows to the movie Little Shop of Horrors, does not discuss where Aunt Jemima came from, or why she works in the imagination of racists (they're just racists; that is all). The Myth of Aunt Jemima, a recent collec-

opment in the industrial North. At the plantation we meet Colonel Higbee, the aging, dignified, and bearded owner of a collection of slaves, most notably Aunt Jemima, who tend to his huge white-pillared mansion. We also meet an unending stream of white relatives and guests who arrive for Christmas and Thanksgiving dinners and dances and friends who just "happen in" from hundreds of miles away. They gather for huge banquets and share long stories, and they sometimes stay for weeks. The central character in all the revelry—the person who makes it all possible—is Aunt Jemima, the deliverer not only of unending stacks of pancakes but fish and fowl and all the other wonderful things they eat. (Presumably, she and the rest of the slaves are slaughtering the animals, cleaning up the dishes, and emptying the chamber pots as well.) The missing character is the southern mistress, for Colonel Higbee is not complemented by a lady of the house, and the tableaux presented in James Webb Young's advertisements for the pancake mix invited real, living white housewives to join in the fantasy of Colonel Higbee's plantation, figuratively to buy into the woman known as Aunt Jemima—the slave in a box. In the ad campaign's strategy, white housewives were not supposed to aspire to be the black Aunt Jemima as they might have aspired to be the white Betty Crocker. They were offered the opportunity to have Aunt Jemima, securing a type of femininity, whiteness, and class uplift through the display of a popular image of black womanhood.

The analysis of ads in chapter 5, however, requires this disclaimer: No historian can say with absolute certainty why the Aunt Jemima campaign worked, because the voices extant are largely those of the creators of the campaign, not the targets. We can easily establish what James Webb Young intended to do in designing the ads, and we can judge that the campaign in both its creative concept and its increased exposure for the product significantly improved sales of Aunt Jemima's mix. The type of market research that might have told us whether and to what degree white housewives bought into Young's fable is not extant—and there is no evidence that Young or his colleagues attempted to collect such data. Even today, with more advanced techniques for interrogating consumers and tracking their behavior, advertisers are sometimes unable to determine precisely why a campaign failed, or even why it succeeded. As the authors of one of the most recent advertising school textbooks wrote, "If we are to begin to understand advertising in contemporary society, then, it is essential that we constantly keep in mind the frequent uncertainty of the process." So while I argue
tion of useful essays on southern women, only mentions Aunt Jemima in its title, which at least demonstrates that the name still has some sort of instant recognition that does not have to be explained, especially if one is discussing southern black women. Likewise, Kenneth W. Goings's Mummy and Uncle Mose: Black Collectibles and American Stereotyping is a valuable guide to the large number of black collectible items that are being traded in increasing numbers, but its focus is mostly on the history and trade of the items themselves, for he does not aim to explore the Aunt Jemima story in depth. The most recent and best work on Aunt Jemima is Marilyn Kern-Foxworth's Aunt Jemima, Rastus, and Uncle Ben, a general history of racist images in advertising. Kern-Foxworth, a journalism professor, provides a wide-ranging and at times deeply personal survey of how images dating from slave advertisements persist in contemporary society. In doing so, she also offers the most complete history of Aunt Jemima to date. What Kern-Foxworth does not attempt to do, however, is explain in detail the mechanics of the Aunt Jemima campaign—why, at a certain place and time, it worked and how it was sustained over time. To do so, one must historicize the image and look at what was going on in the world outside the box.

Some historians have done just that, although not with Aunt Jemima advertisements. In White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Popular Culture, Jan Nederveen Pieterse surveyed the development of Western stereotypes of black people over two centuries. In his analysis of European and American advertising, he noted similarities in advertisements for familiar products such as tobacco and coffee on both sides of the Atlantic, many of which featured smiling darkies (like the eponymous emblem of Darkie toothpaste) and cartoonish pickaninnies. Many advertisements made direct references to color, none more so than advertisements for soaps, which in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth century repeatedly implied that blacks could "wash themselves white" with the product. One 1910 ad for a brand of soap produced in the Netherlands depicted a grinning white child telling his black counterpart, "If only you too had washed with Dobelmann's Buttermilk Soap." The intent of the advertisements was not to indicate that blacks truly could wash away their color, Pieterse pointed out, but to amuse whites by confirming in a cartoonish way that "educating and civilizing blacks [was] a vain labor, just like trying to wash them white." Pieterse demonstrated how one could crack—in this sense, meaning decode—the jokes advertisers cracked with their target audiences.

Pieterse's objective was to demonstrate how the growth of advertising and mass production was interwoven with color, class, and gender hierarchies under European colonialism; how the world outside products shaped the ways that products were pitched to consumers. More recently, Anne McClintock, in Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Context, broadened and sharpened aspects of Pieterse's analysis by demonstrating the intersection of commodity racism and commodity sexism that "racialized domesticity," again largely through an analysis of turn-of-the-century British soap ads. During the 1880s and 1890s Monkey soap was advertised with an illustration of a monkey holding a frying pan, with a large bar of the soap before him. The soap's motto promised to do away with women's labor: "No dust, no dirt, no labor." As McClintock described, the seemingly incongruous combination of soap, monkey, and frying pan was an attempt to represent domesticity without depicting women actually at work:

The Victorian middle-class house was structured round the fundamental contradictions between women's paid and unpaid domestic work. As women were driven from paid work in mines, factories, shops and trades to private, unpaid work in the home, domestic work became economically undervalued and the middle-class definition of femininity figured the "proper" woman as one who did not work for profit. At the same time, a cordon sanitaire of racial degeneration was thrown around those women who did work publicly and visibly for money. What could not be formulated into the industrial formation (women's domestic economic value) was displaced onto the invented domain of the primitive, and thereby disciplined and contained.14

McClintock, like Pieterse, also offered examples of advertisements in which blacks were depicted as using soap products in an attempt to wash away their skin color. It is important to note that McClintock described a situation considerably different from the circumstances that surrounded Aunt Jemima's development; the soap ads were developed in a time in which British women were exiting paid employment, while Aunt Jemima advertisements came as more women entered paid employment other than domestic work. However, in both cases the aim of the advertisements in question was to remove every trace of white female labor by employing blacks to represent the product. Pieterse
and McClintock seem to point the way toward understanding Aunt Jemima: Look at the ads but look at the world around them also. That is the way to crack the code underlying the innocuous joke.

The second reason to pursue this subject is not what it says about the past but about the present. In an age of supposedly rampant political correctness, in which our sensibilities allegedly have been strained to an incredulous degree, there remains a picture of an antebellum slave, a minstrel show figure, a (formerly) bandanna-wearing “aunt,” on a very popular line of processed foods. This strikes me as very interesting. Either Aunt Jemima has escaped our attention, or perhaps her existence is evidence that the times are not as politically correct as they are assumed to be. It is possible to argue that a face on a pancake box is a rather trivial source of information on our time, but I disagree. The things we see and use every day—and even more to the point, ignore—tell us much about ourselves. They are, to use one of Baldwin’s phrases, “the evidence of things not seen.” The figures that are made ordinary, those subtle stereotypes, in some ways are the best indicators of what our values are. We might pass by Aunt Jemima without thinking, just the way we might walk by a Confederate memorial without thinking about who put it there, and why. But I believe there is a usefulness in asking this convoluted question: When we are not thinking, what are we not thinking about? Understanding the way the 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.

That is an appropriate enough answer to Baldwin’s question, for now. The author and essayist himself struggled to come up with a solid explanation for why Aunt Jemima sprang into the white mind. His own description of her personality, and that of Uncle Tom, was complex and yet typically still searching for some elusive conclusiveness: “They knew us better than we knew them. This was the piquant flavoring to our national joke, it lay beneath our uneasiness as it lay behind our benevolence: Aunt Jemima and Uncle Tom, our creations, at the last evaded us; they had a life— their own perhaps, a better life than ours—and they would never tell us what it was.” That is because Aunt Jemima and Uncle Tom lived their lives in the fantasy world of whiteness, the only place where they were possible, even though they invaded the world of Baldwin and every other black American. Can you explain Aunt Jemima to a black person in a way that makes her seem benign, comforting, or any of the other things she has been to a white person?

Baldwin’s final observation about Aunt Jemima came on his deathbed in Paris in 1988, as his biographer and friend David Leeming described. Baldwin asked Leeming to travel from the United States to visit him with a few artifacts from America: boxes of Aunt Jemima pancake mix and syrup. Leeming wrote that after he unwrapped the package, Baldwin laughed and said, “We can’t escape our culture.” It is important to remember that Baldwin, throughout his work, essentially defined “our culture” as being both black and white: White people cannot escape “our culture” either. Aunt Jemima is as much the problem of white people as she is of blacks. The punchline to Leeming’s story, though, goes like this: Baldwin, consumed with cancer, woke up later that day and asked for pancakes. He ate them and shortly after had to be carried to the commode to vomit them. Leeming wrote, “My suggestion that it was ‘Aunt Jemima’s revenge’ brought miserable laughter.” Certain jokes are funnier for some people than others, of course.
6 The Secret of the Bandanna: The Mammy in Contemporary Society

I positively hate this illustration.
—Black respondent to survey by Paul K. Edwards, 1932

Change the Joke and Slip the Yoke.
—Ralph Ellison, *Shadow and Act*

In 1942 the Office of Strategic Services, a forerunner of the U.S. Central Intelligence Agency, created an elaborate series of devices for sabotage. Its scientists designed a candle that exploded when the wick burned down to a certain point, a barometric fuse that blew up enemy planes when they reached a certain altitude, and a device for destroying ships that detonated when it was eroded by saltwater. That year, an agent headed for the China-Burma theater carried a special OSS explosive known officially as Composition C, a powdered form of TNT resembling ordinary wheat flour and designed to escape enemy detection. The explosive could be kneaded into dough and baked into biscuits or bread and was even considered edible. Agents, however, were advised not to smoke a cigarette until the substance had passed through the body. The agency, instead of referring to the explosive by its suspicious-sounding official designation, used a code name that was easily understood by everyone who saw it mentioned in official documents. They called the ready-mix bomb “Aunt Jemima.”

Certainly, the name had fallen into popular usage; an eponymous product
had become synonymous with a type of industrial design—the ready-mix. The
greatest measure of the extent to which the southern mammy had become a part
of popular culture, thanks in large part to the Aunt Jemima ad campaign, is per-
haps not her depiction in movies, from Gone with the Wind, to Mr. Blandings
Builds His Dream House, to both versions of Imitation of Life, or even the suc-
cess of the ad campaign itself. What made Aunt Jemima special was how ordi-
nary and uncontroversial she was, because the ultimate success of a brand name
is dependent on the extent to which it can at the same time be instantly recog-
nizable and not undesirable. At that point it has moved beyond the discrete
sphere of advertising and into the vocabulary. For example, much to the Xerox
Corporation’s despair, the company has become so associated with copying ma-
chines that “Xerox”—not legally but practically—has become not only a noun
but a verb; people commonly speak of “Xeroxing” a piece of paper. But there are
dangers to creating a trademark so compelling that it falls into popular usage.
The advertiser gains widespread product recognition but in the transaction loses
control over what the name actually means. Xerox routinely places advertise-
ments in journalism reviews to remind writers that not all photocopying ma-
chines are Xerox machines; as many newspaper reporters know, the best way to
get a free Frisbee—accompanied by a stern reminder of the importance of laws
against trademark infringement—is to write a story in which an off-brand
flying disk is referred to as a “Frisbee.”

Aunt Jemima pancake flour was in many ways a unique product. It was the
first ready-mix, perhaps the first product promoted in person by a living trade-
mark, and could be seen as paving the way for products that would have been
impossible if not for advances in packaging—the “Aunt Jemima Effect,” as
Thomas Hine called it. It also was the subject of a uniquely long-running cam-
paign that drew heavily on racial images and painted a cheerful picture of slave
life throughout that long run. Thus the product also faced unique problems as
its name became a part of the language. Aunt Jemima was designed by Young
and Wyeth, and maintained by later advertisers, to evoke images of white leisure
based on the perpetual servitude of blacks, a specific kind of nostalgia, all moon-
light and magnolias, about race relations in America. Throughout the 1950s and
part of the 1960s, Quaker Oats kept the nostalgia coming, not only in print ads
but in the hundreds of personal appearances, the traditional approach to pro-
moting Aunt Jemima and her recipe. The manufacturer even established a per-
manent presence at one of the shrines of American popular culture, Disneyland.
But finally Aunt Jemima’s reach had exceeded the grasp of Quaker Oats. Per-
sonal appearances by Aunt Jemima became opportunities for African Americans
to voice long-standing grievances. As the “democracy of goods” slowly evolved
to include more African Americans, the legend of the Old South and the image of
a slave on the box had to be altered and then dropped. And Aunt Jemima,
who talked so much in those legendary print campaigns, had to be silenced.

Today, Quaker Oats finds itself in a delicate position. In Aunt Jemima it still
possesses one of the most recognizable and thus valuable trademarks in history.
But it also markets a product whose name has become notorious. Far from ac-
cepting the smiling mammy on the box as insignificant, African-American ob-
servers criticized the advertising campaign at least from the moment that N. C.
Wyeth and James Webb Young fashioned the romantic legend for the pages of
women’s magazines. They recognized her as a symbol of submissiveness, de-
manded that the trademark’s owners quit using her, and called on black con-
sumers to boycott the product. The trademark remained in use, however, and
personal appearances by Aunt Jemimas continued into the 1960s, its owners un-
moved by any real or potential black hostility toward the product. And in the
1970s through the 1980s, the archetypal mammy—sometimes slightly different
from Aunt Jemima, sometimes a deliberate copy of her—became a film and
radio archetype as well. The persistence of Aunt Jemima and the entry of the
mammy into new media, however, created a climate in which African Americans
not only succeeded in putting the Quaker Oats Company on the defensive, ex-
plaining and adjusting its famous black image over the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s,
but in creating a sort of language in which the words Aunt Jemima took on a po-
litical significance. Her trademark eagerness to please whites remained but in a
totally different, disapproving context. Aunt Jemima means essentially the same
thing she meant in 1919, but that instantly understood meaning encompasses a
collection of traits no longer acceptable in the 1990s. In this sense Aunt Jemima
is a guide to how the image of African Americans changed in popular culture
over this century, and her own image remains politically charged today,
makeovers and all. The OSS agents were more correct than they ever knew in
borrowing her name for a time bomb.

The Crusader: Some Early Criticism

Almost certainly one of the earliest and still the most pointed of Aunt
Jemima’s critics among black journalists was Cyril V. Briggs, the editor and pub-
lisher of the New York–based Crusader magazine. Briggs was perhaps the most
radical of the “New Negro” editors who appeared in the years immediately following World War I, combining black nationalism with calls for a socialist revolution, and his Crusader is most notable for its strident opposition to Marcus Garvey’s Universal Negro Improvement Association. From August 1918 to its final issue in 1922, the monthly Crusader reported on lynch riots, preached self-determination for Africa, and discussed black cultural and sporting events. But on occasion Briggs turned his attention and a pen, apparently warmed in hell, to the advertising images he saw in both the white and the black press. He called on the black press to refuse ads for products that promised lighter complexions or straight hair:

Many Negro publications have as just cause to complain of the paucity of race support as has the race in regards to their lack of loyalty and integrity during political campaigns and “carrying” of insulting Kink-no-More and Bleach-Your-Complexion advertisements as often and as steadily as they can induce the white manufacturers of these “aids” to a doubtful “beauty” to let them carry their race-insulting advertisements.

During the past few months, The Crusader has been the recipient of several hundred letters congratulatory upon the absence of our columns of insulting advertisements and body condemnatory of the publications that carry them. This is a good sign of awakening pride. But does not the blame lie halfway between the grasping, race-selling editors and the Negro reader and business man whose scant support both in the circulation and advertisement departments drive the editors to the white man for support? It is simply a matter of “who pays the fiddler calls the tune.”

Briggs argued that regardless of how poorly black readers supported their press, editors could not accept such ads without bolstering “the Caucasian’s assumption of superiority” and thus undermining the editorial columns on racial pride. “By what inverted reasoning do certain Negro papers preach race pride on one page while carrying on another page race advertisements that insult by their brazen assumption that present-day members of the race that gave civilization to the world would like to change their color and racial characteristics merely because white men, whose ancestors in centuries past wandered over Europe as greasy, hairy savages, are now enjoying a little temporary power?”

Briggs saw something even more sinister in Aunt Jemima ads. He first editorialized about them in September 1918, roughly the same time the Young and Wyeth version of the mammy began appearing on the pages of national magazines, billboards, and pancake boxes. Briggs never mentioned Jemima by name, but the references to her are unmistakable: “You have noticed them? Advertisements that caricature and insult the Race. Aunt Somebody or other with her midnight black, wrinkled face, thick red lips, and totally ugly and repulsive expression? And other advertisements that use the Race to represent ugliness, depravity and subservience. You have seen them in the subway and ‘L’ and have burned red hot with impotent rage, no doubt. They are part of the white man’s propaganda to demean, ridicule and insult the Race. They are malicious targets aimed at what he considers a powerless people.” Briggs had never seen, he said, a figure like Aunt Jemima in real life, and he called on his readers to take action against her owners. One of his calls for a boycott is worth repeating in its entirety:

One of the most widely advertised staple foods is given publicity through means that are decidedly insulting to the Negro.

On its advertisements and on its containers it carries a most repulsive female face with thick red lips, coal black complexion, flat, face straddling nose, deep ugly lines and other tricks of the “artist” intended to make the picture as hideous as possible. This picture stares at you from every subway car and elevated station. It is supposed to represent a Negro “aunt,” yet neither in America nor in any part of the so-called “Dark Continent” is to be found any human being of such repulsive features as this caucasian-created “aunt.” No, not even the average red-nosed and choleric-looking white man can quite compare in absolute hideousness with this horrible nightmare of a demented artist’s creation.

This “aunt” is an insult to the Negro Race. An insult that should neither go unheeded nor unpunished. Thousands of our women are engaged as cooks in the homes of others and make the food purchases for these homes; millions more buy for their own homes. Both as housewife and domestic they can resent this insult to their race. They can make the money they spend TALK to remove this insult to their race!

It is difficult to assess the effectiveness of Briggs’s call for a boycott of the pancake flour. If there are any records that might indicate a boycott by black consumers, or anybody else, during this period, they might be locked in the
archives that Quaker Oats is reluctant to share. I have found no evidence of a boycott in the J. Walter Thompson Company's records. One also should be cautious in assessing the size of Briggs's audience. The editor claimed a circulation of 32,700 in October 1919, which would have possibly left the Crusader second only to the Crisis among the nation's black periodicals. It is likely that the magazine's readers, regardless of their number, were spread across the country; the editor said two thousand agents distributed the Crusader nationally, and a list of delinquent news agents printed in November 1919 included points as far away from New York City as Carthage, Missouri; Sterling, Kentucky; and Point Blank, Texas. A New York State senate committee, however, reported in 1920 that while the Crisis had a circulation of 104,000 and the Messenger and Negro World each more than 30,000, the Crusader had only 4,000. Briggs disputed this figure as late as 1958, when he claimed a "peak circulation of 36,000."7

Putting aside the possibly unanswerable question of whether any black consumers responded to the call for a boycott—and noting that the Aunt Jemima campaign persisted and its producers prospered long after the Crusader closed shop—it remains clear that Briggs's editorials foreshadowed two important developments in the pancake mammy's career. The first was assigning political importance to a seemingly mundane object and calling for action against its makers. It is important to remember that Briggs was writing at a time of peak racial violence across the nation, from the East St. Louis riot of 1917 to the "Red summer" of 1919. He also was at the center of intense disputes among "New Negro" leaders, eventually becoming identified as "one of the fellows that sent Marcus Garvey to prison." And his business had its own problems with postal regulators who looked askance at his affiliation with socialist organizations.8 But Briggs's larger political battles did not blind him to the importance of everyday objects; he saw his political agenda reflected within them and demanded a boycott. The second tactic employed by the Crusader was offering positive images of the black woman, not merely denying "Aunt Somebody" but replacing her with real people. A continuing feature throughout the Crusader's run was titled "Successful Business Women," and it congratulated women such as Dr. Julia P. H. Coleman, a "pioneer in the business world" who established the Hair Vim Manufacturing Company, "now famous throughout the world."8 The magazine also included perhaps more traditional arguments promoting the importance of the black woman as mother. In "Negro Womanhood—An Appeal," Theodore Burrell asked, "Where is the wife who will shoulder the burden of motherhood and bring us sons on whose shoulders we may rest our 'crusade'?"9 Whether the figure was a businesswoman or mother (or both), later generations would demonstrate the importance of fighting Aunt Jemima with alternative, positive images—eventually, even her owners would try to make her a businesswoman and mother. But because the Crusader was short-lived and limited in its distribution, it is not necessarily a guide to how larger numbers of African-American consumers reacted to Aunt Jemima ads. Arguably, they might not have cared and might have had bigger problems than a pancake campaign. So how did black consumers react to the slave in a box?

A Survey: "I Positively Hate This Illustration"

Significant evidence indicates that black consumers who saw Aunt Jemima ads during the 1920s and 1930s strongly disliked them for the very reasons that Young created them and for the very themes the ads emphasized. Neither JWT nor Quaker Oats, apparently, ever bothered to ask black consumers what they thought of Aunt Jemima or the plantation campaigns, but Paul K. Edwards, an economics professor at Fisk University, inquired into the attitudes of black consumers in southern cities regarding a number of different advertising approaches. Edwards published his results in a 1932 book titled The Southern Urban Negro as a Consumer, with a great deal of census and other data about what products African Americans bought, and why they bought them. He was particularly interested in brand loyalty among African Americans. His polling of consumers in major southern cities indicated they held strong national brand loyalties that in many ways seemed unrelated to specific approaches in advertising campaigns. For example, high percentages of African Americans preferred Maxwell House coffee, despite the fact that the brand's campaign in no way was designed to appeal to them; in Nashville, more than 70 percent of African Americans in the survey preferred the hometown brand. Edwards concluded that distribution, more than advertising or even price, was the major factor in understanding why African Americans purchased a particular brand; most urban southern blacks bought their goods at white-owned outlets, and their selections reflected the choices of the people who stocked the shelves.10

But Edwards also asked African-American consumers what they thought of different advertising approaches, particularly those that included black images. In each case he showed his subjects two different ads for the same product, one
that in his judgment was relatively “race-neutral” (which usually meant, in reality, that it only included images of whites), and another that highlighted a black figure. He then gauged the subjects’ responses in two categories: first, the extent to which the subjects simply recognized or remembered the ad, and second, their explicit reactions to the ad, either approval or disapproval, recorded in their own words. For example, Edwards showed his subjects two Rinso laundry soap ads. The first (advertisement A) showed two white women discussing the virtues of Rinso, and the second (advertisement B) showed a white woman and black laundress talking about the product. When the two ads were flashed simultaneously before their eyes, the second ad, including a black woman, gained the immediate attention of 183 of the 240 individuals surveyed, or 76 percent. Edwards reported that the ad attracted attention for three reasons: “(a) simply the presence in it of a Negro character; (b) the rather unusual association of a Negro woman with a white woman in the same illustration; and (c) the utilization in the copy of a neatly dressed Negro woman of intelligent appearance.” When Edwards asked his subjects which ad, upon reflection, they preferred, a substantial majority—80 percent of men and women polled in Nashville, and 57 percent of those in Richmond—chose the ad with the African-American laundress. “One practical reason was given by a majority of these people for their choice,” Edwards wrote. “They stated that if the experienced Negro laundress pictured in [the second ad] used Rinso and found it to be good as indicated by her testimony, it must have merit. . . . Others selected advertisement B, not through logical reasoning of this nature, but merely because of a favorable reaction toward the illustration which to them pictured a pleasant-appearing, attractively dressed Negro laundress who was permitted to use good English in conversation with her white employer.”

Edwards found that African Americans did not object to members of their race being depicted in ads, but just the opposite; they even voiced approval of a laundresswoman, as long as she was depicted in a respectable fashion.

When Edwards turned to the Aunt Jemima campaign, he selected first an ad titled “Do You Know This Secret of Making Lighter, Fluffier Pancakes?” which used a very small image of Aunt Jemima and a very large picture of a plate of pancakes, although the copy played up the plantation legend. The second ad used a larger image of Aunt Jemima, with an inset illustration of her cabin, and the headline “She Mixed Four Different Flours in a Special Way.” Edwards found that Aunt Jemima ads fared much more poorly in the “instant recognition” test than other ads with prominent images of African Americans; just more than half of the people he tested said the larger image of Aunt Jemima caught their eye before the big picture of pancakes. “It is quite clear, therefore, that the Aunt Jemima advertisement containing elements relating to the Negro race gained much less than a complete victory in the attention-value test” than the other ads sampled, Edwards wrote. The Aunt Jemima ads fared even worse in the specific evaluations by African Americans, with disapproval crossing all lines of class, sex, and geographic location. Edwards summarized the views of his subjects by saying that they objected either because of “their disapproval of the use of the ‘mammy’ type of Negro as pictured in [the] advertisement; because of the use in combination of this Negro mammy and the log cabin; or because of the use of the Negro mammy and the log cabin plus the reference to Aunt Jemima’s master—all of which savored too much of slavery days.” In other words, they objected to the very heart of James Webb Young’s campaign—the plantation legend, the slave South, the loyal mammy. Men and women, unskilled and skilled laborers, and business and professional workers brought up the same issues. “Plays upon idea of Negro in slavery too much,” said one of the male common laborers, and a female skilled laborer added, “I made my opinion about slave advertisements a long time ago, and the picture of Aunt Jemima would make me pass it by.” A male professional said, “I positively hate this illustration.”

There was no way to misinterpret the results. They reflected deep resentment of the references to slavery and Aunt Jemima’s master. Subjects disliked the log cabin and the idea that the magical mammy cook ever existed. They took specific exception to the handkerchief she wore on her head, seizing upon it as the symbol of servitude and ignorance. Edwards’s work, in the absence of market research by JWT, is the best evidence of how black consumers responded, viscerally and unambiguously. An organized protest against Aunt Jemima was still years ahead, but something was simmering beneath the surface—something to which JWT and other ad agencies were apparently oblivious. African Americans wanted a different representation of their race in advertising, a better-spoken person, a free person, not an imaginary, rag-wearing, subservient piece of property happily flipping pancakes for the Carters, the Southwoods, and the Marshalls.

But throughout most of the twentieth century, the most popular image of
black womanhood remained an Aunt Jemima-style mammy, particularly as portrayed in American films. The two versions of *Imitation of Life* (1934 and 1959) are actually very different movies. The earlier version, with Claudette Colbert, is truer to Fannie Hurst's storyline than the remake with Lana Turner, but both maintain Hurst's simple yet stigmatic mammy. The Aunt Delilah character, who helps the female lead build a pancake empire, is so clearly Aunt Jemima that *Imitation of Life* is really an imitation of an imitation of life. Although Donald Bogle, in his indispensable film history *Toms, Coons, Mulattoes, Mammies, and Bucks*, argues that Hattie McDaniel's portrayal of Mammy in *Gone with the Wind* was “free of the greatest burden that slavery—on screen and off—inflicted on blacks,” meaning an innate sense of inferiority, he bases that judgment on the fact that McDaniel's Mammy “never bites her tongue.” This is a rather unpersuasive argument, given that McDaniel was portraying the outspoken Mammy just as Margaret Mitchell or, more to the point, Thomas Nelson Page and Thomas Dixon did. The archetypal mammy was always outspoken, particularly when it came to offering advice to white women, but that in no way compromised her place in the slave hierarchy or made her any less subservient, ultimately. And if McDaniel's Mammy was not as superstitious or silly as many popular mammy were (including not only the stock characters in Mae West films but *Imitation of Life*'s Delilah and Aunt Jemima herself in some ads), it should be noted that *Gone with the Wind* had Butterfly McQueen in the ridiculous role of the maid Prissy (“I don’t know nothin’ bout birthin’ babies!”) to complete that task. Mammy was a stock character in films as well as advertising because (white) people knew exactly what to expect from her—that’s what stock characters are for. As Bogle has noted, a truly sympathetic portrayal of the mammy came not in *Gone with the Wind* but in the 1952 film version of Carson McCuller's *The Member of the Wedding*, a critically praised commercial failure that was carried by Ethel Waters's performance as the cook Berenice. Waters later portrayed Faulkner's Dilsey in a 1959 film version of *The Sound and the Fury*, which also flopped. One should not look to mid-twentieth-century cinema, however, to find the real challenge to the Aunt Jemima image. Protests against Aunt Jemima were carried out at a local level, where activists, mostly in the Midwest, worked to put an end to personal appearances of Aunt Jemima, specifically. But before that happened, African Americans continued to redefine Aunt Jemima on their own terms, transforming the mammy of advertising and cinema into a base insult by practicing it on one another.

---

**The Secret of the Bandanna**

**Playing the Dozens: "I Ain't No Aunt Jemima"**

The folklorist Roger Abrahams moved into the Camingery neighborhood of South Philadelphia, an area inhabited predominantly by African Americans, in 1958 with the intent of “following his nose” to collect evidence of the area’s cultural life. His findings, documented in *Deep Down in the Jungle* and other books, include two facts important for a discussion of Aunt Jemima. The first was his general observation that “the greatest single distinguishing feature of Negro life in South Philadelphia is the importance of the mother in the family,” because African-American women, often raising families without the help of fathers, assumed all the motherly roles of keeping house and tending children while also serving as breadwinners for their families. Abrahams’s other revelation (among many) was his discussion of the practice of “playing the dozens,” a series of quick-witted insults traded among black youths that focus intensely on defaming the opponent’s mother. Abrahams concluded that the emphasis on insulting mothers was a “complete reversal of values” meant to signal a youth’s transition from boy to man, from “mother-oriented to gang-oriented values.” Whether or not this interpretation is correct, what is important for the purposes of this discussion is the nature of the insults against mothers, what a young man might choose to say when he wished to smear another young man’s mother.

Most of the taunts were sexual in nature, particularly among older adolescents, and alleged that the opponent’s mother was a wanton woman. For example, one of the rhymes Abrahams reported went like this: “I fucked your mother on an electric wire. I made her pussy rise higher and higher.” A response: “I fucked your mother between two cans. Up jumped a baby and hollered, ‘Superman.’” Abrahams believed the harshness of the insults depended on the age of the combatants in the game. Younger boys were less likely to attack openly another boy’s mother and thus open their own maternal authority figures to attack; but eventually they came to express resentment against their own mothers, because they were maternal authority figures who inherently posed limits on virility, by inviting attacks in verbal combat. “He must in some way exorcise her influence. He therefore creates a playground which enables him to attack some other person’s mother, in full knowledge that that person must come back and insult his own.” Thus, the young black men Abrahams observed invited their comrades to “do the work for them” and crafted insults in an aggressive fashion calculated to express their own virility, bonding by degrading women. “He has
prepared a defense for himself against incest, homosexuality, or any other forbidden sexual motive. In this way the youths prepare themselves for the hypermasculine world of the gang.”

Oddly enough—it seems at first, anyway—Aunt Jemima, the asexual old mammy of the plantation in the white mind, figured into these ritual insults. Both Marilyn Kern-Foxworth and Karen Sue Jewell, in their studies of the mammy image and Aunt Jemima in particular, report that other common taunts launched by African-American youths included, “Hey man, ain’t yo momma on a pancake box,” and references to rag heads and handkerchief heads. Jewell argues that the use of Aunt Jemima in playing the dozens demonstrates how “images of African-American women have had a microcultural influence.” But what if we consider Abrahams’s observations about the purpose of the game—to undermine maternal authority? It is not much of a reach to see Aunt Jemima, the obsequious servant, the woman who lived to serve her white master and make pancakes for his guests, the slave, as a deprecation useful in resisting maternal authority within the black male community. It represents a different interpretation of the meaning of Aunt Jemima, exposing gender conflict within the black community while using all of the material that James Webb Young and N. C. Wyeth presented to create an image of black womanhood. It was another way to reinterpret Aunt Jemima as a strong insult rather than an insult of the same kind as, say, “a real southern cook.” Paul Edwards polled southern urban blacks, men and women, upper and lower class, and found that they already considered Aunt Jemima an insult that they simply did not wish to see. Now a generation of young black men growing up in the urban North of the 1950s were dealing with Aunt Jemima in a different way but still pejorative: as an insult aimed by black men at other black men, but striking black women.

This method of insult was not limited to games among boys in the streets, because the African-American men who grew up to run for office in the 1950s and 1960s—some of them the most vocal proponents of civil rights legislation—learned to use the insult for political advantage, again against other African Americans rather than against whites. At this point the term Aunt Jemima began to cross sexual boundaries and became a way for black men to chastise other black men while adding an insult to virility as well as racial solidarity. They did not call their opponents’ mothers Aunt Jemima, they called their opponents Aunt Jemima, as a sort of a substitute for the more traditional insult, “Uncle Tom.” When they did not use the term Aunt Jemima, they substituted related insults such as “handkerchief head.” For example, in 1966 the Harlem congressman Adam Clayton Powell, under assault from members of his own race and party, insinuated that his critics were merely kowtowing to whites and said, “What I cannot abide are the black ‘Aunt Jemimas’ who snuggle up to the white power structure for approbation by denouncing ‘black power’ and telling Mr. Charlie what he wants to hear.”

As in minstrelsy, the lines between male and female, as well as black and white, were blurred in the game of insult. A black male resident of Washington, D.C., criticized black members of the city’s school board in 1967 by saying that the board “is nothing but Aunt Jemimahs and Uncle Toms doing the white man’s bidding.” This method of insult was not limited to the 1960s or the Civil Rights movement but in fact can be found in accounts years earlier, suggesting that the resentment felt by African Americans had transformed itself into a common insult by the 1950s. In 1938 broadcaster and columnist Walter Winchell reported that the entertainer Bill “Bo”-Jangles Robinson used the term to castigate other performers: “Bill Robinson’s form of belittling when he gets angry with a performer at the Cotton Club: He groans ‘You handkerchief head!’” A “colored service man” writing to the Nation in 1944 described a submissive black man who headed a Mississippi family by simply saying, “The father is a handkerchief head. The crook in his back would pain you.” And Dr. William McKinley Thomas, a member of San Francisco’s urban development agency, responded to his firing in April 1950 by noting, “If I had been an Uncle Tom or a handkerchief head, I could have remained in the position, but I am in violent opposition to discrimination.”

Decades after Briggs, the editor of the Crusader, had called for African Americans to recognize the “Negro aunt” as an insult, they were commonly using her as one. But the insult was not only a generalized slut in a game between boys. It implied that the target was subservient to whites; that he was playing along with them and undermining race solidarity; that he was a throwback to grinning, happy darkies laboring on the plantation. In other words, it said that he was behaving like Aunt Jemima, doing the very same things that Young and Wyeth depicted her doing, and doing them in the same way, with the same attitude, that she did. When black men called other men “Aunt Jemima,” they meant that the person in question was a blockade to economic and social progress, to desegregation. When they called each other “handker-
chief heads,” they did so not only to belittle but to imply that someone in their midst was a race traitor as well as a person of suspect masculinity.

The insult was common trade among black separatists, as well, including the most famous one, Malcolm X. In his autobiography Malcolm X told Alex Haley that black professionals were betraying their race and said, mixing references to Aunt Jemima and Uncle Tom, “Today’s Uncle Tom doesn’t wear a handkerchief on his head. This modern, twentieth-century Uncle Thomas now often wears a top hat. He’s often the personification of culture and refinement.” And of lower-class blacks who affected white hairstyles by getting a “conk” (as he once did), Malcolm X was more direct: “It’s generally among these fools that you’ll see a black handkerchief over the man’s head, like Aunt Jemima.”20 Given Malcolm X’s views about the importance of black manhood—and the importance that black women remain in submissive roles—he characteristically chose a street insult pointed directly at his targets’ virility. He, too, was playing the dozens, except, like civil rights activists he opposed, in a more political sphere.

By appropriating Aunt Jemima as an insult, African-American men were “changing the joke” to “slip the yoke,” in Ralph Ellison’s terms.21 But they were not challenging the definition of mammy or the image of Aunt Jemima; neither would have been a powerful insult if they had. In some ways black men were using Aunt Jemima the same way that white men had used her on the minstrel stage—to express masculinity and class status. So while the Aunt Jemima joke changed, particularly during the 1950s and 1960s, the difference was primarily in the joke teller’s intent. The mammy had not changed. Black men might have been slipping the yoke themselves, but they were not removing it from the necks of black women. The rhetoric of racial solidarity, when bolstering the masculinity of black men, in this case offered black women little more than a traditional form of disrespect.

If African Americans considered it a supreme insult to be called an Aunt Jemima or “handkerchief head” by members of their own race—if boys considered it a supreme insult to call another boy’s mother Aunt Jemima—how long could they have been expected to tolerate the use or depiction of Aunt Jemima by whites? An advertising trademark that had become a symbol of humiliation was becoming a problem for its owner. As Robert Weems has shown, major U.S. corporations slowly became aware from the mid-1950s through the 1960s that their marketing strategies were neglecting millions of potential customers. As African Americans continued to migrate northward into large U.S. cities, ad-

vertising trade journals began featuring advice on how to reach the “negro market” and how to persuade African Americans to “identify with your product.” Advertisers began placing their messages on black-oriented radio stations, buying space in Ebony magazine, and hiring African-American consultants to help direct campaigns.22 Marketers began, clumsily, to ask questions that had never seemed important before.

But in 1955 Quaker Oats instead forged ahead with its traditional marketing approach by initiating what was perhaps Aunt Jemima’s most prominent personal appearance. It contracted with Disneyland to operate “Aunt Jemima’s Pancake House” in the California theme park’s Frontierland. Aylene Lewis, who had been Aunt Jemima in personal appearances and radio advertisements, played the role, apparently with great zest, flipping pancakes for luminaries ranging from bandleader Benny Goodman to Indian prime minister Nehru, and in its first eight years, the facility served 1.6 million guests. The placemats and menus at the restaurant replicated scenes from the old ad campaign, with text describing Aunt Jemima’s legend. Lewis reportedly became good friends with Walt Disney and called herself “the happiest person in the world.” Even Lewis’s death in 1964 did not derail the operation, which had expanded in 1962 to serve more customers and was renamed “Aunt Jemima’s Kitchen.”23 With the advent of television advertising, Quaker Oats recruited Edith Wilson, a blues singer and actress from Chicago whose film credits included To Have and Have Not with Humphrey Bogart, to play Aunt Jemima in spot ads. Wilson and Rosie Hall, a former employee of Quaker’s advertising department, shared the role in personal appearances with Ethel Ernestine Harper, an actress and schoolteacher. In the 1950s and early 1960s, there were three national Aunt Jemimas on tour and one in permanent service at Disneyland. Other actresses continued to portray her at smaller events, such as trade shows and pancake breakfasts.24

No matter how many millions of white Americans were pleased with and entertained by Aunt Jemima’s image, a decades-old animosity toward her remained among African Americans. That animosity was magnified in discussions that had nothing to do with Aunt Jemima’s personal appearances or her product. Her name began to appear in political discussions, as a symbol of Uncle Tomism, and became a choice insult hurled by African Americans at each other. James Webb Young, in creating the Aunt Jemima campaign, had made a sort of political statement about the place of African-American labor and the virtues of the Old South order. But clearly no one at Quaker Oats or JWT ever anticipated
the day when a product associated with black labor and white leisure would be a political liability. Instead, while African Americans were demanding to be seated at lunch counters and on buses, marching on Washington, and spending more money than ever before at the supermarket, Quaker Oats was sending actresses out to play the butter-tongued slave Jemima at schools and club meetings. The time-honored promotional approach that made her famous helped in the 1960s to make her infamous, too.

"Poor Aunt Jemima": The NAACP Works Locally

In 1956, two years after the Supreme Court's ruling against segregation in *Brown v. Board of Education*, and a year before Arkansas governor Orval Faubus's defiance of that decision led to the deployment of troops in Little Rock, the Aunt Jemima print campaigns and personal appearances were essentially unchanged from the 1920s. Ads still depicted the jolly plantation slave refusing to reveal her recipe to elite white women; Aunt Jemima still appeared personally at Lions Clubs and supermarket trade shows. Almost from its beginnings in 1909, the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People had sought to highlight black dissent against images in media, but it had concentrated its efforts largely on film, radio, and later television dramas and comedies and less on advertising. Probably one of its most successful campaigns was its earliest, against *Birth of a Nation*, the film version of Thomas Dixon's *The Clansman*, which W. E. B. Du Bois said did not kill the film but "succeeded in wounding it."25

The organization's official stance toward film mammys, however, reflected mixed feelings. For example, while many African Americans objected to the film version of Fannie Hurst's *Imitation of Life*, including Louise Beavers's role as Aunt Delilah, the *Crisis* reviewer praised the film, saying that Beavers's performance "was one of the most unprecedented triumphs for an obscure player in the annals of a crazy business."26 The film version of *Gone with the Wind* and its servile blacks also earned a mixed reaction. The *Crisis* reviewer wrote, "God help us what 'Gone with the Wind' will bring us," and Walter White, NAACP executive secretary, felt the film hurt efforts to pass a federal antilynching law. Many members called on Hattie McDaniel to refuse the Academy Award she won for her portrayal of Mammy. But Roy Wilkins believed concerns expressed by the NAACP before the movie's release had moderated its images of slaves. And the

*Crisis*, sending further mixed signals, put McDaniel on its cover.27 Even though she was barred from the film's premiere in Atlanta, McDaniel disagreed with her critics and continued to play the mammy not only in such movies as *Song of the South* and the TV and radio series *Beulah* but also in her own personal appearances to promote *Gone with the Wind* after its release. She and Walter White sparred frequently throughout the 1930s and 1940s over the consequences of "mammyism" in film. McDaniels defended herself by arguing that she was merely playing one of the few roles offered to black women, and that she was making good money doing it. She once responded to White's complaints about *Gone with the Wind* by asking him, "What do you want me to do? Play a glamour girl and sit on Clark Gable's knee? When you ask me not to play the parts, what do you offer me in return?" At least McDaniel was paid handsomely to perform a role that many black women played for little reward. She continued to play the role to the hilt, even dancing the cakewalk during some of her personal appearances, and she performed her own rendition of Al Jolson's "Swanee."28

The NAACP continued to organize protests against characterizations of blacks such as Jack Benny's assistant Rochester, Amos 'n' Andy, and *Beulah* and against blackface minstrel shows, which were springing up again in the 1950s, most notably in California and in community theaters across the rural South.29 But the primary emphasis throughout most of the NAACP's campaigns was national, and its resolutions against media stereotypes focused on characterizations in national entertainment offerings, not advertisements.30 The NAACP's efforts to persuade the entertainment industry sometimes led to even worse outcomes. For example, when CBS canceled the TV version of *Amos 'n' Andy* (because of ratings rather than the protests, Melvin Patrick Ely has shown), the program wound up being shown on more stations independently through syndication than it had on network television, and the logistical problems of mounting multiple protests rather than focusing on a single network hindered the NAACP.31

The NAACP had officially called for a boycott of Aunt Jemima in the early 1960s. However, protests against Aunt Jemima in the nascent civil rights era focused not on eliminating the national print campaign but on community-based efforts to cancel local appearances. Amos 'n' Andy, after all, traveled elusively over the airwaves to American homes, while Aunt Jemima visited communities in person, inviting more direct protest. According to the NAACP's files, these protests were especially successful in Massachusetts and in the Chicago and out-
state Illinois areas, near the home base of Aunt Jemima's owner, Quaker Oats. In April 1956 the Florence Gas Range Company announced that Aunt Jemima would appear at a home and sport show in Springfield, Massachusetts. The company employed six women to play the role of an "expert cook" around the nation and claimed that the woman who would play Aunt Jemima at the show, to demonstrate the modern wonder of the gas range, was a member of the NAACP herself. According to Ruth Loving, the president of the Springfield NAACP, the organization did not object to the woman's presence at the trade show but was "firm in not having the young women to appear in the costume, but in other proper dress." Loving noted that a local newspaper had claimed that only the Springfield NAACP chapter, and not the national office, had lodged a protest against Aunt Jemima's personal appearances. She asked the national organization whether this claim could be disproved. The national office's records do not contain a reply to Loving, however.32

The local chapter was successful in pressuring Florence Gas Range to cancel Aunt Jemima's appearance at the show, where an estimated eight thousand people crowded to see displays sponsored by the Greater Springfield Home Builders Association. A local newspaper, the Springfield Daily News, noted the trade show's success despite what it sarcastically called the NAACP's "great triumph" against "Poor Aunt Jemima." It also warned that the organization was wasting its time making an "assault on a windmill," and that no one would take such an organization seriously in the future:

By making this senseless objection, the Springfield NAACP has reduced the power of any future protest it might ever make, even if a future protest had some validity. The Springfield branch of NAACP will be remembered as the group which saw reason to use its influence to get Aunt Jemima benched. However foolish the Springfield branch's criticism may appear, and however it may weaken its case when it might have a valid reason to complain, still its ridiculous complaint is a great compliment to the people of Springfield. This silly objection tends to prove that the NAACP can find no valid reason to make complaints about racial relations in Greater Springfield. It is good for us to know that NAACP can find nothing more serious to complain about here than the appearance of a smiling (and very competent!) cook.33

The editorial writer made several assumptions that characterize a defense of the Aunt Jemima image even today. The first is that everybody—blacks and whites alike—understands that the image is at worst harmless and probably, by demonstrating competence in the kitchen, a positive picture of African Americans and particularly African-American women. That is, that in America a consensus exists over the meaning of the mammy image and the name Aunt Jemima. The second is that African Americans must have more pressing concerns than trying to blot out the image of "Poor Aunt Jemima," and attempts to do so would only forestall addressing those concerns. Indeed, the very act of protesting Aunt Jemima was taken as evidence that there must not be any more important problems; once again, the presence of a mammy was taken by some as proof of healthy race relations. It is worth mentioning, of course, that these two arguments are by their nature contradictory: a failure to concentrate on "valid reasons" to complain was rooted in a supposed fixation on Aunt Jemima, but the Aunt Jemima protest itself was supposedly evidence that there was in reality no basis for "valid" complaints in the Springfield area.

The distinction between valid and invalid complaints was not the concern of African-American employees of Western Electric in Kearney, New Jersey, who in addition to protesting injustices in pay and promotions at the Kearney plant—and noting that "there is not a single doctor or nurse in the plant"—asked the NAACP to register a complaint regarding a recent company "pancake party" featuring a "lone Negro woman dressed as Aunt Jemima." The pancake party was featured in a 1959 edition of a national company newsletter, Pioneer Progress.34 John Morrell, the assistant to the executive secretary of the NAACP, registered the complaint with Henry Killingsworth, president of the Telephone Pioneers of America, which published the article. Choosing not to deal with pay or promotion, areas that were "not properly a part of this communication," Morrell told Killingsworth that he "may or may not know the extent to which the 'Aunt Jemima' figure has become one of distaste and humiliation to a great many colored people."35

Eventually, local efforts to block appearances by actresses portraying Aunt Jemima gained greater attention from the national NAACP office. Responding to complaints in 1960 against the Super Market Institute of Chicago lodged by the New England Regional Conference of the NAACP, Morrell began a correspondence with the institute. African Americans in Pittsfield, Massachusetts, had already persuaded a local grocery chain to stop personal appearances, and the owners of the chain, Jacob and Melvin Wineberg, suggested the NAACP also contact the supermarket trade organization. Don Parsons, executive director of the Super Market Institute, however, denied any connection between the
organization and Aunt Jemima promotions, an explanation Morrell accepted. Frank Walker, the director of the New England NAACP conference, protested, insisting that the supermarket organization indeed was responsible, but congratulated the national office for making Parsons and his organization aware of the problem, as well as for putting the Super Market Institute on record as not supporting the personal appearances.36

The national NAACP had trouble pinning down the Super Market Institute, but local groups continued to fare better. The Racine, Wisconsin, branch reported in April 1963 that it had voiced strong disapproval of a planned personal appearance for Pancake Day at the local Kiwanis Club, which refused to cancel the appearance but promised to pass along the objections to representatives of Quaker Oats. The leader of the Racine NAACP, Sloan E. Williams, also said the branch had organized “local Negro storekeepers to write Quaker Oats Co. expressing their dissatisfaction with the promotional program of Aunt Jemima.” Williams wrote Quaker Oats directly, saying that “the personal appearance of Aunt Jemima is objectionable to most Negroes in Racine. Such an appearance helps to perpetuate an undesirable and negative image of the Negro. It is a stereotype which depicts the Negro in a state and condition which no longer exists.”37

The appeal apparently fell on deaf ears, as did a similar complaint about a Pancake Day by the Ypsilanti, Michigan, branch of the NAACP.38 But the activists in Fort Madison, Iowa, were more successful. Virginia Harper, the local secretary, wrote to the national office to say that a planned Pancake Day in August 1964 had been canceled. The Jaycees in Fort Madison had planned to feature Aunt Jemima at a rodeo but, according to Harper, “voted not to bring Aunt Jemima to town, even though she wanted to come here and talk to us and explain why we shouldn’t feel as we do.” (There is no reference to which actress portraying Aunt Jemima wanted to do the explaining.) Harper added that “at this time the Jaycees in this community are still bitter.”39 Also in 1964, the Rock Falls, Illinois, NAACP chapter had forced the cancellation of an appearance by Edith Wilson as Aunt Jemima at a local high school. At first Forrest L. Tabot, the school superintendent, had been reluctant to cancel the event, sponsored by the city’s Chamber of Commerce, asking the NAACP, “How do I explain to over 1,000 high school students and over 3,000 elementary students who remember Miss Wilson with deep admiration and affection and were looking forward with great anticipation to her appearance this year?” But eventually the threat of picketing forced the school to cancel the appearance after the NAACP rejected an offer to have Wilson appear in street clothes “instead of her traditional kitchen garb.”40

By the time Edith Wilson’s personal appearance was blocked in Rock Falls, Raymond Harth, an attorney for the Illinois NAACP, was making sure that Quaker Oats was aware of his organization’s activities. He wrote to Robert Stuart, the company president, in October 1964, and his correspondence refers to previous letters (apparently not extant in NAACP files) and telephone conversations with Quaker Oats. “Once again it becomes my duty to urge you to cancel an appearance of the character known as ‘Aunt Jemima.’ . . . So that there will be no misunderstanding, we are opposed to appearance of the ‘Aunt Jemima’ stereotyped character at any time or place, and in any costume.” Harth also referred to organizing in Rock Island, Moline, and East Moline against Aunt Jemima and threatened Quaker Oats with continued embarrassment if the personal appearances persisted. “It further appears,” he said, “that it is the intention of Quaker Oats to continue this practice.”41 Quaker Oats was feeling the heat and would respond to the changes in the “democracy of goods” by altering Aunt Jemima’s appearance and minimizing her presence. But there are many indications that African Americans believe the company has not done enough. The slave in the box would prove difficult even for her owners to emancipate.

Setting Free the Slave in a Box

It is not as easy to document the ways in which pressure from African Americans directly affected the changes in Aunt Jemima’s image in the 1960s—especially since Quaker Oats and its archives are not forthcoming on the subject—but the company appears to have adopted an increasingly defensive stance in the mid-1960s which continues today. Protests and boycotts by black Americans led Quaker Oats to drop the bandanna in 1968 and give Aunt Jemima a headband, in addition to slimming her down and making her look somewhat younger.42

Two years later the company altered its relationship with Disneyland, which changed the pancake house on its grounds from Aunt Jemima’s Kitchen to a more innocuous name, and an actress portraying Aunt Jemima no longer appeared personally after Edith Wilson was fired in 1966 and Rosie Hall died in
1967. Edith Wilson bitterly disagreed with those who said that her performances were “impeding racial progress,” and years later argued, “The Aunt Jemima routine wasn’t done for what a lot of people took it to be. There was a lot of that already going on in minstrel shows. I put my head in the sand to a lot of that. Otherwise you’re always mad at people and situations. Prejudice is a feeling you have to tuck away. I’ve seen too many people spoil their lives by carrying that chip on their shoulder.” In a 1979 interview, she defended her work for Quaker Oats by arguing that she was honoring the life of a real black woman: “I was fired because the NAACP asked why did they have to dress me in the old-fashioned costume like that? The people didn’t like that, but they didn’t realize that the people came to know this was historic. Aunt Jemima was the first person to bring a gold medal back from the Paris Exposition for her pancakes. She was from Mississippi and she came up to St. Joseph, Missouri. In the Civil War some of the soldiers from the North got lost and they wanted to get back to their regiment, but were afraid the South Soldiers might shoot them. They went up and knocked at Aunt Jemima’s door.”

In retirement, Edith Wilson followed Purd Wright’s basic story faithfully, although she swapped Chicago for Paris and had Aunt Jemima saving Union soldiers instead of Confederates. Other African Americans and white Americans, however, began to use Aunt Jemima as a lightning rod for their grievances after Wilson was fired. The counterculture musical Hair included a number titled “Colored Spade,” whose lyrics were a stream of racial epithets including not only “Uncle Tom, Aunt Jemima, [and] Little Black Sambo” but also “Elevator Operator, Table cleaner at Horn & Hardart, Slave voodoo, Zombie, [and] Usanglilipped.” In the late 1960s the artist Murray N. DePillars, in a commercial poster that sold four thousand copies, depicted an angry Aunt Jemima bursting through a series of boxes of the mix and waving a large spatula. On the ingredients side of all the boxes appears a black-glued, clenched fist in a Black Power salute, and on the text on the first box explains the protest by African-American athletes at the 1968 Olympics in Mexico City. The other boxes contain lists of places where racial conflicts had occurred. In the background are the Stars and Stripes, but the stars are really badges bearing the words “Chicago Police.” Another artist, John Onye Lockard, contributed a 1972 parody of the box depicting a scowling Aunt Jemima whose fist is bursting through the package; the artwork has the simple caption “No More.” In both works the clear message was that Aunt Jemima was no longer a stereotype that African Americans would quietly tolerate. The choice of action by both artists—Aunt Jemima breaking out of the box of pancake flour—is a revealing metaphor. The slave in the box was breaking free. No longer were black men merely “slipping the yoke” themselves by using Aunt Jemima as an insult; black men and women alike were challenging the mammy image and questioning whether it resembled any real black women. By 1983 the poet Sylvia Dunning put the mammy’s escape into past tense in her verse titled “Aunt Jemima”:

She told me she got tired of wearing that rag wrapped around her head.
And she got tired of making pancakes and waffles for other people to eat while she couldn’t sit down at the table.
She told me Lincoln emancipated the slaves.
But she freed her own damn self.

It might have been too early, still, to talk about Aunt Jemima being free. In 1983 the Aunt Jemima on the box was still the slave woman with the headband, the altered image from 1968. Kerri-Foxworth, a journalism professor who has studied the image extensively, believes the 1968 change in appearance was crucial to the continued success of the trademark; she wrote in 1990 that “the physical attributes . . . became more positive and less stereotypical than the caricatures of the past.” Noting changes in soft drink brand names such as Chinese Cherry and Injun Orange in the 1960s, Steven Dubin argued the rise of black consciousness and attention to black images in popular culture made some racial stereotypes in advertising less “grease” and more “grit” in the “smooth functioning of U.S. society,” and that advertising agencies, interested in keeping the wheels turning, adjusted accordingly. In 1977, when Washington Post columnist William Raspberry was asked why he objected to the Sambo’s restaurant chain but not Aunt Jemima, he similarly argued that the changes in Aunt Jemima’s appearance, plus the fact that most people no longer connect titles like aunt and uncle to slavery, had made her an innocuous image. This is a conclusion, however, that many contemporary critics of racial stereotypes in advertising would challenge—after all, that is still Aunt Jemima on the box, “more positive” adjustments to her wardrobe and weight notwithstanding. The novelist Alice Walker in a 1994 essay argued that Aunt Jemima and the mammy she exemplifies, regardless of all attempts to refine her image, are too firmly rooted in the
subconscious of white American culture to erase—even if the picture on the box has changed. Walker sees and hears the old version of Aunt Jemima everywhere, from the Dallas airport gift shops to the rantings of syndicated radio host Howard Stern. Perhaps no matter how her owners dress her, Aunt Jemima is still a slave, something difficult to explain but too valuable to give up, considering the $300 million in sales annually by the 1990s—a dilemma not unlike that faced by antebellum slave owners who struggled to spin apologies for the peculiar institution itself.

Eventually, Quaker Oats tried to free Aunt Jemima, once and for all, and escape the dilemma. The company had several choices. It could have dramatically dropped either the name, the image, or both. Keeping just the name or just the image, however, would have threatened brand recognition without freeing the company from criticism, since both the name Aunt Jemima and the drawing angered African Americans. Or, as the company had in the past, it could have altered the image and kept the brand name intact, which it did. In 1989 the company made its most extensive alterations to Aunt Jemima, removing her headgear, graying her hair, and giving her a pair of earrings. The attempt was, as a company spokeswoman said recently, “to make her look like a working mother,” an image apparently supported by the company’s extensive test-marketing of the new logo among blacks and whites. Making Aunt Jemima visibly older, the spokeswoman did not say, continued an old and historically inaccurate tradition of depicting mammas—removing them from carnal taint—and, we might assume, kept her distinct from young black mothers who presumably were not working to support their children. (Aunt Jemima must remain off welfare.) The change also reflected long-term changes in the workforce, as did General Mills’s constant tinkering with Betty Crocker from the 1930s through the 1980s. The Betty Crocker figure, who also was depicted as a real person who wrote recipes and answered fan mail, has changed constantly to reflect the participation of white women in the workforce. That is, she was supposed to be an acceptable version of a white working mother. Of course, Aunt Jemima the mammy was always a working mother to her family, black and white, in the slave-day nostalgia of her previous advertising campaigns. The specific image of the mammy was outdated by real changes in race relations and the sexual composition of the American workforce, but the things the mammy did—providing nurture to white folks—and the notion that a cheerful, aged black woman performed that service had not changed with the revision of her physical image.

The slave link to the Old South specifically was not removed by the change in image; the spokeswoman also said that, bandanna or not, Aunt Jemima remains on the box because she is a southern character, and the South is known for good food and home cooking.

The early returns were not positive, as a protest by Chicago-area African Americans against Quaker Oats demonstrated. While they demanded that Quaker Oats further integrate its management and invest more of its assets in the community, many of the protesters focused on Aunt Jemima—despite the makeover—in presenting their case. “We buy 70 percent of all the grits sold by Quaker,” Nancy Jefferson, one of the protest leaders, told a newspaper reporter. “We also contribute very heavily to the sales of Aunt Jemima products—and its [the product division’s] vice president is a white woman. If they’re going to insult us, they could at least hire us to insult us.” Apparently, putting Aunt Jemima in a new dress, and even taking off her headband, was not enough to reduce the level of insult perceived by some African Americans, who saw the earlier Aunt Jemima every time they looked at the new version. In a 1989 letter to Advertising Age, Stanley L. Yorker wrote:

Rather than the Quaker Oats Co. giving Aunt Jemima a “makeover,” I and quite a few other African-Americans would prefer that they give her a well-deserved retirement.

The Aunt Jemima brand was born 100 years ago, not exactly the most idyllic of times for race relations in this country. Americans of African descent had been freed and their bonds loosed, their political and, especially, economic manacles were still firmly secured, with the key to opening them as yet undiscovered.

Barbara Allen of Quaker was quoted as saying that this “contemporary” Jemima would preserve “… good taste, heritage and reliability.” I submit that it is actually in severe bad taste to continue perpetuating this stereotypical image of a people who’ve made significant contributions to America and the Quaker Oats Co. and that the “heritage” being preserved is one of callous racism.

Yorker raised one of the more interesting questions concerning the makeover Aunt Jemima: Why not give her up? This and other questions were left unanswered by Quaker Oats: What makes a black woman a particularly
southern character? Might it have something to do with slavery? And how many working mothers, white or black, identify with the name Aunt Jemima? Try to imagine a contemporary product aimed at men—cologne, for instance—using Uncle Mose as an emblem of masculinity or success. Clearly, though, the Quaker Oats Company believes, perhaps based on its own market studies, that yet again transforming Aunt Jemima into a working mother makes her even less “grit” and more “grease” in society. But Aunt Jemima, made over, remains grist for critiques of American racism. In 1990 the rap group Public Enemy blasted the American film industry for its reluctance to offer meaningful roles to black actors and especially black actresses. In the song “Burn Hollywood Burn,” they complained:

For what they play Aunt Jemima is the perfect term
Even if now she got a perm.\(^{53}\)

In 1991 “Aunt Jemima” was a weird sort of insult, even among white folks who claimed they did not realize the term had racial implications. In June of that year, the members of a Washington, D.C., high school rowing team gathered for their annual picnic along the Potomac River. Warren Hall, one of the few African Americans on the team, heard the coach call him forward to accept the “Aunt Jemima Award.” According to a Washington Post reporter,

“I was in shock,” said Hall, 18, recalling the dead silence that greeted the initial announcement of the award, then the nervous laughter and applause of some students and parents. “I just wanted to throw it in the trash.”

Hall’s coach later apologized, saying he gave the award in jest. When the team rowed, he said, its members all wore bandannas on their heads. Hall was the only one who wore his bandanna with the knot tied in front, reminding some rowers of the century-old Quaker Oats Co. pancake mix logo, Aunt Jemima, a stout black woman wearing a kerchief.

But Hall’s mother, Fatima McKamey, was infuriated that in this day and age, a high school coach would give her son an award rife with the ugly stereotype of a docile slave woman in the plantation kitchen.

The team’s coaches apologized, saying that they did not understand that the name of the award was offensive. Fatima McKamey disagreed. “They’re hiding behind their ignorance,” McKamey said. “The cop-out is to say, ‘Oh, I didn’t know it was offensive. I didn’t mean it.’ Racism is so ingrained in some people’s psyche that they don’t know what’s offensive.” Interestingly, many of the white children on the team “didn’t seem to understand what Aunt Jemima means,” according to the article. “I didn’t know who she was until I asked my dad in the car on the way home,” said Justine Wise, seventeen, a senior. “I just thought of her as she lady on the syrup bottle. He told me that she was a black slave woman who worked in the kitchen.” The school asked McKamey to speak to the students and explain why Aunt Jemima was so offensive, but she said she was still too angry to tell them.\(^{54}\)

One might argue that the reaction of white children is evidence that Aunt Jemima indeed has lost her original meaning, perhaps thanks to the fact that advertisements no longer play up her slave days. But the defenders of trade shows who were befuddled by black anger against “Poor Aunt Jemima” in the 1990s did not understand, either, and arguably, neither did James Webb Young, who apparently never gave the matter much thought, nor the J. Walter Thompson Company, which never asked. Somewhere, behind the image of Aunt Jemima, the working grandmother, lies that same old smiling plantation mammy; raw nerves are still waiting to be touched. And anyone—a food conglomerate or a high school rowing coach—who is ignorant enough to dare to play the dozens with African Americans today seems likely to elicit an unexpected reaction.

**Making the White World Safe for Pancakes**

Whether Aunt Jemima the working mother will have any special appeal to white or black consumers remains a question. Marketing experts today are still struggling with problems of ethnicity and language. For example, Gallo has attempted, unsuccessfully, to position Thunderbird wine in the marketing niche occupied by middle-class blacks, while Kentucky Fried Chicken, now renamed KFC, test-marketed the black consumers who make up 25 percent of its market, wanting to know if Colonel Sanders might somehow be offensive. They decided he was not, as long as he kept off the front porch of the plantation. The R. J. Reynolds Tobacco Company spent $10 million to target Uptown cigarettes to blacks, but the target audience instead protested, and the product was dropped. Budweiser was criticized for a series of British ads that showed Native Americans, whose rate of alcoholism is estimated to be five times higher than that of
of African Americans found a socially acceptable outlet in a kind of underground economy.58

So in September 1994 Aunt Jemima’s advertisers trotted out the working grandmother image in their first national television campaign since 1990, but instead of having Aunt Jemima speak for the Aunt Jemima brand, they hired singer Gladys Knight and two of her grandchildren, which meant that a real black woman was speaking for an imaginary black woman. If the image and name of Aunt Jemima were still offensive, perhaps a real black woman could be counted on to ease hard feelings. Knight reminded reporters that she was not playing any role but herself—a working black grandmother (like Aunt Jemima)—and said, “I’m not Aunt Jemima. I’m only a spokesperson.” She said the transformed image, sans bandanna, “helped in my decision” to endorse the brand. Newsweek magazine added, “Perhaps it’s time to call her Ms. Jemima.”59 Perhaps it is, but her name remains Aunt Jemima; Cap’n Crunch does not require a real, apologetic white male sea captain to speak for him or the cereal that bears his name. Maybe her owners could have argued instead that the 100-year-old Aunt Jemima, by the late 1980s, was superannuated, released from servitude and allowed to wear her gray hair any way she pleased and to feed her own grandchildren instead of Colonel Higbee and the Carters, Southwoods, and Marshalls. But they did not make that argument, because that would have meant acknowledging what an Aunt Jemima or a mammy was and always has been—a slave. Maybe that is why she cannot speak for herself today; she might say something embarrassing.

Just the same, Quaker Oats cannot give up that name—it cannot call the product, for instance, Gladys Knight pancake mix, even though plenty of products today use a celebrity name and face as their trademark: (Paul) Newman’s Own foods, Chicken by (Phyllis) George, and the grand champion, (Frank) Perdue chicken. Why not go ahead and have a real working black grandmother advertise the product, if that approach seems so persuasive, and use a person who is free of all of Aunt Jemima’s historical baggage, especially the slave title Aunt? The answer is always that Quaker Oats has invested years and a huge amount of money in the product’s brand recognition; consumers recognize the brand name, expect to see it, anticipate its presence at the supermarket, and thus buy it. At this point the argument that the remade Aunt Jemima is significantly different from the old version appears incorrect, because we cannot separate the elements that make Aunt Jemima, regardless of whether she herself is made over.
The (slave) name, the drawing, and the product are all bound together. The purpose of Chris Rutts’s selection of the name Aunt Jemima, as well as James Webb Young’s plantation advertising, was to build that brand recognition, in the latter case through making brand recognition and race and sex recognition the same thing. If Aunt Jemima is recognized as anything more today than Gladys Knight is, then it must owe more to Aunt Jemima’s past than to her present—no one is buying the product because it is somehow connected with modern black working grandmothers, or Gladys Knight could do the job without Aunt Jemima.

Somehow, Aunt Jemima—the image, the name, and the product—is still effective among white people, and Quaker Oats will simply have to continue apologizing and explaining for as long as it wants the type of brand recognition that this particular product possesses. And all the while, Aunt Jemima maintains another source of brand recognition—the mere fact that she is black—which she seems unlikely to lose anytime soon, because Quaker Oats has not chosen to drop the image while keeping the name. “Whiteness is the norm. It’s what advertisers expect and attempt to portray,” noted Carleton University professor Eileen Saunders, who specializes in images in advertising. Saunders’s opinion is seconded by the many black models and commercial actors seeking one of the rare spots for African Americans in national advertising. Why does Aunt Jemima stand out among so many white faces on national products, if not that she remains an exception among modern black images: safe, subservient, still ready to whip up those famous pancakes. This is a type of racial nostalgia, not racial progress. The modern Aunt Jemima is a sanitized slave; she is to the issue of race what the insipid 1980s television comedy Happy Days was to the actual 1950s. Her blackness still reminds white consumers that they are white, and that whiteness is a good thing. Her sex reminds consumers that black women belong in the kitchen. In some respects Aunt Jemima has not changed a bit since 1889.

No matter how often African Americans—who are estimated to spend $500 billion annually—express distaste for Aunt Jemima, Quaker Oats will not stop using her. While African Americans periodically threaten boycotts and lodge protests against the product, white Americans apparently are not embarrassed enough to take such complaints seriously and stop buying the product. Lawn jockeys might no longer stand beside as many driveways as they used to, but Aunt Jemima sits comfortably in kitchen cupboards. Presumably part of the reason for her persistence must be Quaker Oats’s tinkering with the image. Kern-Foxworth was right when she argued that changing Aunt Jemima’s appearance has helped the product survive, but I believe she was wrong in arguing that the changes made the product less offensive to African Americans. Removing the bandanna and graying the hair might not have been enough for the black mass market, but it kept Aunt Jemima safe for the white market. If Aunt Jemima’s image had not been altered, white consumers might have become uncomfortable with a product that so visibly and clearly articulated racism. But because the product articulates racism more subtly, white consumers can purchase it with little fear of appearing to be racists.

The black working grandmother is still working for her white family; the image keeps white consumers comfortable even as it and the name Aunt Jemima remind black consumers of the old slave image. The black working grandmother is as much a figure for feeding white imagination as Aunt Jemima ever was. Gladys Knight might be a real black working grandmother, but in her TV commercials she was playing a role. She depicted the black woman in her own kitchen, feeding her own grandchildren, in a campaign designed not merely to be less offensive to African Americans but to tell white Americans that the product was no longer considered racially offensive. In this sense Gladys Knight was as much of an imaginary figure as Aunt Jemima. In the words of Fatima Mckamey, the black woman whose son won the Aunt Jemima award, “Racism is so ingrained in some people’s psyche that they don’t know what’s offensive.” Quaker Oats sought a black woman to play a role, explaining to white people that Aunt Jemima is not offensive, and Gladys Knight was available. (Hattie McDaniel has been dead for years.)

Years ago, Aunt Jemima helped advertisers and their audience answer all sorts of questions. The ads told whites that the South should be more like the North in accepting advances in production and marketing. The ads also said that the North should be more like the South in its view of antebellum life and black labor. They presented idealized images of white men as outdoor enthusiasts and of white women as managers of household labor. In addition, the campaigns married the past and the present, emphasizing the ways in which modern technology could give new birth to old-fashioned pleasures. The image of the mammy helped advertisers propose solutions for contemporary problems, assuring continuity between old and new, black and white, and men and women, no matter how the rest of the world changed.

White America still seems to need a mammy to answer its questions. The most recent changes to Aunt Jemima’s image and the Gladys Knight ads are an
attempt to answer the question, How do we notice race and gender? Quaker Oats and, presumably, other advertisers have a huge stake in the answer. The food company is betting that consumers will both notice and not notice Aunt Jemima. It hopes African-American consumers will approve of an attractive, well-spoken woman who cares for her children in a nice, bright kitchen. The company also wants whites to notice Gladys Knight’s blackness, as an endorsement of the notion that blacks are no longer angered by the product. The promise of a color-free society exists within a scene of social harmony, just as James Webb Young’s ads showed social harmony within a race-based society. Gladys Knight might have believed that she was not playing a mammy in the ads, but she, like the mammy, was someone whose very presence in the TV spot suggested a world of racial and sexual order.

The ad also constantly displayed the drawing of Aunt Jemima that adorns the box, sometimes filling up the whole TV screen. This was the link between past and present. Quaker Oats added Gladys Knight, but it did not subtract Aunt Jemima. She remained, redrawn in a way calculated to elicit minimal outcry but recognizable as the same woman, with the same name and slave title, who has always been on the box. Just as Gladys Knight reassured white Americans that today black women have enjoyed tremendous social progress—they can inhabit scenes in commercials that were once populated exclusively by whites—Aunt Jemima gave them that old-time brand recognition. There are comfortable things that white people do not have to give up, no matter how much the world changes, and one of them is familiar image of the smiling black female servant. The mammy continues to do for Quaker Oats what she has always done, marrying racial nostalgia with changing lifestyles. She helps white Americans to be comfortable with racial imagery as her employer ostensibly presents its product in a fashionably color-blind manner. Quaker Oats truly wants African-American consumers to buy its product, but it also wants to tell white consumers that they can have their pancakes and eat them, too.

Secrets of the Bandanna

Eldridge Cleaver remains a better source on Aunt Jemima than anybody at Quaker Oats. “The white man turned the white woman into a weak-minded, weak-bodied, delicate freak, a sex pot, and placed her on a pedestal,” he wrote in 1968. “He turned the black woman into a strong self-reliant Amazon and deposited her in his kitchen—that’s the secret of Aunt Jemima’s bandanna.”

While it might be enough to argue that the “secret of the bandanna” was simply taking a symbol of personal pride and making it a mark of servility, that does not explain how the symbol of servility worked. It does not explain the message Aunt Jemima carried from white men, or how it was interpreted by white women. Servility to whom? For what purpose?

The analysis might be overly harsh—especially given the fact that Cleaver again played the dozens by arguing that black women were partly responsible for the situation—but the author of Soul on Ice was on to something. It is true that the white woman who mixed Aunt Jemima pancakes was in no danger of becoming weak-bodied or more delicate, and the rise of processed foods did not bring any enhancement of her sexuality. But the mammy was a tool for white men to use in creating a fantasy in which white women could aspire to live, an alternative household in which they were the ultrafeminine, fragile mistresses who sat alongside Colonel Higbee as guests at his plantation. Race and gender, as Cleaver suggests, both are forces in explaining how the advertising campaign was designed. But class was a factor as well, for whatever vacuum cleaners might have done to enhance household work, they were not from Aunt Jemima’s idealized plantation. They could not have made the white women an employer of labor, instead of the laborer herself. Aunt Jemima was designed to do that. It was an advertising fable tailored to address the realities of the drearier, work-filled days of white housewives, facilitating the transition from household manager to household laborer, just as the Old South myth also served as a balm for defeated white southerners.

But the campaign tells us as much about what was going on in the minds of the white male advertisers. Who really needed the Rosemont plantation to exist? Aunt Jemima could have been sold many different ways. It might have focused explicitly on the themes it mined implicitly: as a reaction against science, or at least a quick solution for women trying to put breakfast on the table. It was never necessary for the women to go to Rosemont. The men wanted to take them there because the trip emphasized subservience and service while de-emphasizing skill and independent thought. It was a reflection not only of what the white pitchmen thought women should be, and how women might be motivated to serve in that role, but what they believed white men should be as well.
The “Colonel’s Lady” required a colonel to please with a fast, hearty breakfast before he rushed off to the campgrounds, or Appomattox, or, more prosaically but more likely, the workplace.

Aunt Jemima’s race remains inseparable from the message white men expected white women to complete as the mammy again transmitted values from master to mistress. She could not have been white. A white Aunt Jemima, provided she did not quit domestic service for other work, ostensibly could have liberated white housewives from the kitchen, as Betty Crocker increasingly was re-designed to do, but she could not have accentuated their whiteness and femininity in the manner of the plantation mammy. Aunt Jemima was designed to be persuasive because she was a female black servant, in an age when perpetual human bondage existed, in a place legendary for its good food and white leisure. As such, she implicitly made white men and women what they should be—at least according to the white men who drew the ads and wrote the copy.

But there is another “secret of the bandanna,” one that Cleaver could not have guessed, because he was part of the process that revealed it. The other secret is that the marriage of commerce, racism, and sexism that made James Webb Young’s Aunt Jemima work—both as a product and as a symbol—for white men and women gave African Americans a tool to express their dissent, to say that the fantasy world of Aunt Jemima in no way represented who they were or what they aspired to be, while simultaneously exposing gender conflicts within the black community. This fact remained a secret for a long time, principally because no one who made or advertised Aunt Jemima felt any need to ask. When African Americans found a chance to share the secret—in Paul Edwards’s marketing survey, at personal appearances, in art, music, and political speeches—they broadcast the secret loud and clear. They did not want it to remain a secret. The image of Aunt Jemima was always an insult to them. When they eventually received their opportunity, thanks to the commodification of racism and sexism, they made sure whites learned the secret, too. And today, anyone who claims he or she does not know the “secret of the bandanna”—who says that the woman on the box used to be offensive but now is race-neutral or even admirable, the “Ms. Jemima” argument in Newsweek—is either lying or ignorant. In this way Aunt Jemima remains a touchstone for social relations in the United States. Aunt Jemima will remain on the shelf only as long as she is an effective trademark; she will remain an effective trademark only as long as it is important for her to be a black woman; it will be important for her to be a black woman only as long as racism and sexism maintain their persuasive appeal among consumers. That is the consequence of her historical baggage. Her historical baggage is exactly what makes her effective.

No single person invented Aunt Jemima or her legend, not Billy Kersands, Chris Rutt, James Webb Young, or N. C. Wyeth—not even Nancy Green, Anna Robinson, Edith Wilson, or any of the other women who portrayed her. No single novelist or diarist invented the mammy, either. The idea of Aunt Jemima worked because of its appeal to existing white female needs in a time of revolutionary changes in the household, because of general white perceptions of self relative to blacks, and mostly because of white male power sufficient to define images of whiteness and femininity. As in Cleaver’s explanation, white men are the manipulators, but white women, not African Americans, were the real target of white male manipulation. African Americans also proved to be adept manipulators of Aunt Jemima’s image, turning her from trademark to epithet and turning the game on its head. That Aunt Jemima survives today, in whatever diluted form, only means the game has a long time to go before it is over. Attempts to adapt old racial stereotypes to meet contemporary reality, instead of simply removing them, are more than reminders of the foolish aspects of our past that we are unwilling to surrender. They demonstrate that some seemingly old-fashioned ideas about race and gender remain powerful in contemporary times.

Aunt Jemima lives on because white Americans like having a mammy. Quaker Oats can move her off the plantation, take off her bandanna, and tint her hair; it makes little difference. If times change, they might even be bold enough to put the bandanna back on her head. Aunt Jemima and mammy are tools used to interpret our legacy of racism, sexism, and slavery, either approvingly or disapprovingly. Keeping her around, spinning superficial explanations for her continued presence on that box, does not help us overcome that legacy. “And so we bear on,” in the words of F. Scott Fitzgerald, “boats against the current, back ceaselessly into the past.”62