

I SPY WITH MY LITTLE EYE: A MAMMY: THE PRESENCE OF NINETEENTH-CENTURY BLACK STEREOTYPES IN CONTEMPORARY VISUAL MEDIA

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ABSTRACT

This paper examines the presence of nineteenth-century black stereotypes in contemporary visual media through a focus on the Mammy figure. As the most frequently occurring of the stereotypes, the Mammy models the subtlety with which these figures pervade visual platforms and gain permanence in their circulation. Marketers make especial use of these caricatures by modifying their obscene portraits to more appropriately cater to consumer demographics, in one instance transforming the “Mammy” into the American beloved “Aunt Jemima.” But these tidying modifications do not negate the figure’s presence. Rather, they show one way in which this perversely racial dimension of art is perpetuated over time. As these figures are reproduced, so is America’s darker past.

INTRODUCTION

In late Spring of 2014, Kara Walker revealed her 35-foot tall sculpture, “A Subtlety” (Appendix A). Thousands of spectators gazed at the adaptation of a sphinx before them, only to realize that the conventional Ancient Egyptian “sphinx” was actually a representation of a nineteenth-century Mammy. Walker innovated upon the static character of the sphinx, using this dissonance rhetorically in order to make an impactful social commentary on the history of black caricature (more specifically of the Mammy figure). Walker presents viewers with far more complexity than may at first be attributed to the sculpture. She recognized the characteristics of the Mammy and simultaneously condoned it. It is in the light of Walker’s simplistic methodology (in presenting the bare traits of the Mammy to make her commentary) that this paper will discuss the presence of nineteenth-century Mammy in twentieth-century visual depiction. Overall, this paper will show that artists occasionally integrate a stereotype of nineteenth-century black caricature into his or her work, eliciting the viewer’s acknowledgement of the stereotypical figure’s historical context. It will illuminate a neglected tendency in marketing and visual arts in which African-American suffering is commodified for the sake of visual rhetoric. The reproduction of these figures in contemporary images contributes to their perpetuated circulation and renders these stereotypes politically uncharged templates without significance or past.

REPRESENTATIVE FIGURES AND STEREOTYPES

At the outset, it is important to remember that this paper focuses on the Mammy's *representative figures*. Reproduced figures will not always be represented as exact replicas of one depiction of a stereotype: They can be diversely represented. One will therefore find that depictions of the Mammy discussed in this essay contain the *characteristics* associated with the stereotype. There are trait-templates of the figure that can aid one in identifying the figure, but a Sambo figure, for example, does not need to be replicated according to only one representation for it to be present and detectable in a visual medium.

Therefore, Walker's sphinx Mammy engages with its viewers by eliciting a curious response: "Oh my God! What?" The answer is in the bandana, the lips, the breasts, the buttocks. These characteristics come together to form the Mammy. Most famously known for its originating role in Harriet Beecher Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, the Mammy stereotype is depicted as the character Aunt Chloe. She possessed a "round, black, shining face [...] so glossy as to suggest the idea that she might have been washed over with white of eggs [...] Her whole plump countenance beams with satisfaction and contentment from under her well-starched checked turban" (Stowe 25). The Mammy lives according to her domestic duties at the master's home. Her glossy complexion described above marks her constant physical exertion, but her smile exhudes genuine satisfaction and pride in the work that she does. Over time, she would become mythologized in blackface and minstrel shows as the asexual, nearly pitch-black in skin, bloated slave that she became known as:

She was always presented as docile, loyal, protective of the white house, the big house, an indication that she understood of the value of the society. She is presented almost as the antithesis of the white lady the person who does not have the qualities of fragility and beauty which would make her valued in the society (Christian).

As the female counterpart of the Uncle Tom, the Mammy would have to be de-sexualized in order to assuage tensions in the master's home. Placing tattered clothing on her did not make her invulnerable to her master's sexual exploits, but if she embodied qualities that were deemed unattractive (unattractive according to nineteenth-century ideals of female beauty), her master would want nothing to do with her sexually. The Mammy therefore justified the presence of female domestics in the master's home because she was not presented as a threat to her mistress's marriage. Instead, she was relegated as a productive slave who enjoyed her duties and who cared deeply for her owner's family. Walker knew these traits well, and she revived them to remind audiences, or provoke them to learn, of an unsettling time in American history. As an effective platform, the sphinx seamlessly integrates the Mammy's most noticeable characteristics. The breast and bottom on a typical Mammy caricature are accentuated through their size. It is only expected, then, that these features appear exaggerated and scandalous when presented on a 35-foot tall sphinx. In general depictions of the Mammy, these features are typically hidden under clothes. If audiences are put off by

this presentation of bare excess, so they should also have been with the artistic movement dedicated to producing these exaggerations en masse. Kara Walker confronts her audience with a dark American past. Assuming that most people's attention would be directed at the erogenous zones, she takes advantage of their attention and threw on a bandana and over-sized lips in the event that audiences were hoping to identify the figure's ethnicity and occupation. Using a sphinx also reminds viewers that slavery stems as far back as to the times of ancient Egypt, simultaneously depicting how slavery had evolved in the West. Walker makes use of the Mammy stereotype to denounce its origin and to disgust audiences with the notion that the woman upon which this sculpture is based is just as absurd a creation as the enormous statue that asserts itself in their sight.

Other artists' conscious implementations of the Mammy, especially in the early twentieth century, were not as driven by social justice. Instead, they used the figure's most marketable qualities to create consumer-friendly depictions such as "Aunt Jemima," the face of America's most famous brand of pancake mix and syrup. An early advertisement of the pancake mix presents the physical attributes that de-sexualized the Mammy as a charming house cook (See Figure 1). Her face is plump but her jaw is strong, even masculine in appearance. The only feminine quality demonstratively attributed to this figure is her name ("Aunt Jemima"). Her hair would give her a more gendered look, but it is completely hidden by her bandana. This accessory represents hard work and efficiency, just as it did when it was displayed in feminist industrial propaganda of the 1940s, and it also functions to censor her hair, a component of female allure. Furthermore, this Mammy figure's complexion is markedly dark, nearly "pitch-



Fig. 1. "Mammy Stereotype." *JCM: Mammy Stereotype*. (Ferris State University, n.d. Web; 08 Dec. 2015.)

black", if not for the contrasting white in her face, which adds a lighter appearance but also resembles the "oily" look Aunt Chloe was said to have in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*. Most important is Aunt Jemima's smile, the piece that completes what is known to be the Mammy figure. It is not too bright a smile – her eyes are not squinting, and the skin on her face is not tense. Instead, this smile conveys a nurturing quality, harmless intentions, and an overall peppy demeanor. With all of her positive qualities in mind, the fact remains that the approachable character peddling pancake mix represents a domestic slave that was caricatured in the nineteenth century. After all, her prefix "Aunt" invokes her literary counterpart and predecessor, Aunt Chloe.

Figure 1 presents a Mammy figure that more closely resembled her nineteenth-century representation. And although modern-day marketers have changed Aunt Jemima's appearance to a less politically-charged icon, the infrastructure at work that made her a Mammy figure is still present (see Figure 2). The bandana was removed, her skin tone was changed to a soft brown, and her designers gave her pearl earrings; but marketers merely contemporized the Mammy. She may not currently resemble a slave with exact proximity, but the face on the box of Aunt Jemima pancake mix is still a house maid's. The glimpse of her white clothing that can be seen in this new



Fig. 2. "Original ." *Aunt Jemima – Original*. (Aunt Jemima, n.d. Web. 09 Dec. 2015.)

appearance matches her white pearl earrings and suggests that she dons a maid's monochromatic uniform. An effort to politically correct a black stereotype does not eliminate the stereotype; it only modifies the image. The Quaker Oats Company of Chicago simply gave a new name to an old problem. Marketing techniques have made it possible to assuage the tensions associated with even the most repugnant material. These portrayals make it possible for inappropriate content to go unchecked in the public sphere and to continue being used.

REALISM AND STEREOTYPES

The Mammy has come a long way from its far more intensely caricatured image in the nineteenth century, and at that time, intentions were to emphasize what artists proposed to be true slave archetypes. This intention is expounded upon in Henry Wonham's *Playing the Races*, which explores the nineteenth-century notion of ethnic caricature as an ultimately accurate portrayal of the subject:

What shall we make of the fact that Winslow Homer required a watermelon patch to represent what many critics considered an image of "the negro...as he really is"? Is it a coincidence that so many of the artists and writers [...] relied heavily on the stock conventions of ethnic caricature [...] The age of realism in American art and letters is simultaneously the great age of ethnic caricature. These two aesthetic programs [...] operate less as antithetical choices than as complementary impulses. (Wonham 8)

Wonham acknowledges the place of nineteenth-century stereotypes in the American realist tradition. He has identified one of the processes at work in the consolidation process of a stereotype, one in which two movements in American history (realism and caricature) coexist and eventually intertwine. But a 'realistic caricature' is as truthful as it is oxymoronic. It deems an intentional exaggeration and falsehood to be just as true a depiction as a photographic representation (one without embellishment). What is at work, suggests Wonham, is not an accurate representation, but a projection of a prevailing racial perspective. Further discussing the potential for caricature to reflect 'real life,' he cites Anibale Carracci, who asserts that "one may strive to visualize the perfect form and to realize it in his work, the other grasp the perfect deformity, and thus reveal the very essence of a personality. A good caricature, like every work of art, is more true to life than reality itself" (10). What Carracci proposes challenges and undermines the reasoning behind efforts to eradicate an artist's use of stereotypes. He claims that the job of the artist is in presenting the truth. Whatever the reason, and whatever the image, Carracci implies that truth can be found in a work of art, even if it is obscured in the piece, and black caricature is no exception. He reasons that to some extent, the Uncle Tom, the Mammy, and the Mulatto stand as the realistically personified characteristics of nineteenth-century slaves. Wonham also cites Ernst

Gombrich, who expresses a similar view as to why ethnic caricatures may not be entirely motivated by malice:

The mimetic artist and the caricaturist pursue “corresponding” aims. Whereas the painter employs traditional portraiture “to reveal the character, the essence of the man,” his counterpart accentuates the subject’s deformity, “thus penetrating through the mere outward appearance to the inner being in all its littleness or ugliness. (Wonham 10)

Gombrich reasons that an artist during the Realist Movement only intended to reflect societal realities in his or her work. This intention seems maliced in regard to black caricature because the *content* of black caricature appropriates the flaws that are “foundlessly” projected onto a second-class population.

CONCLUSION

Although Carracci and Gombrich’s conclusions about caricature are logically founded, they neglect to acknowledge that the Realist intentions of caricature do not validate the production of black caricature as Realist art. Their assertions about the Realist artist, who paints scenes of poverty or landscapes, are not universally applicable across subjects; to include the exaggerated characteristics of slaves in the category of Realism is to baselessly assign a personality and appearance to a defenseless population. Stereotypes are said to form by correlating repeated behaviors to frequently-occurring phenotypes (Sherman 305). Therefore, a stereotype should not form without an occurrence upon which to base itself; yet the Mammy stereotype was created. This figure may have roots in *some* nineteenth-century fiction featuring slaves, but Catherine Clinton suggests that there is no real basis for its creation:

[The Mammy] is not merely a stereotype, but in fact a figment of the combined romantic imaginations of the contemporary southern dialogue and the modern southern historian. Records do not acknowledge the presence of female slaves who served as the “right hand” of plantation mistresses. (Clinton 201-202)

The Mammy’s appearance in Southern literature served as the only necessary qualifier for her circulation. The presentation of the figure as a Realist reflection of southern American culture is based on a fabricated precedent. Carracci and Gombrich’s theories about caricature as reflective of “real life” do not substantiate what they would call an “honest” portrayal of slaves by an artist. African-American integrity was undermined and damaged by the formation of these stereotypes, and the caricatures denigrating this culture have managed to perpetuate without so much as a proper attestation of their depiction’s accuracy. By ignoring their authentication, they are accepted and validated as true, also becoming available for a variety of deprecating enterprises.

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The reproduced Mammy of nineteenth-century black caricatures transcends the nineteenth century. The stereotype may not be reproduced the same way each time, but it does follow a trending template. By assigning the characteristics associated with a black nineteenth-century stereotype to a character in their visual work, what artists and marketers create are representations of racialized images that disrupt the endearing charm (or in the Mulatto figure's case, the alluring drama) they aim for their work to have. Wherever they are located in the work, they "perform an integral function *within* the political and aesthetic program of American realism" by underscoring a disturbing historical context (Wonham 8). In order to end the circulation of black caricature figures in visual media, their implementation in any image must cease. Their presence perpetuates African-American objectification because they are being used as artistic commodities. Artists need to let them go, if they are never to return.

Appendix
Appendix A



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