

Mammy As Myth: The Truth Behind the Mammy Stereotype in American History

- The mammy stereotype has been researched and written about heavily but, only as it relates to the past. The mammy image is very removed from images we consume today. This presentation works to analyze the mammy stereotype as it appears in the 21st century.
- The mammy stereotype begins in slavery discourse and for enslavement purposes. From mammy's body to her dressings and stories, mammy is used to remove black women from their own families and communities and turn them into one dimensional servants for whites.

Mammy in Slavery



- The earliest use of the word mammy occurs in 1810 in a travel narrative about the American South. It is the hybrid of the words ma'am and mamma. Overweight, docile and asexual, the mammy maintains the role of good mother to white children as well as the perfect slave.
- The high infant mortality rate, attributed to being born in bondage, was blamed on the enslaved woman's lack of instinctual ability to care for her young.

Mammy in Slavery

The role of mammy allowed enslaved women to be mentored by their white mistresses because without it they were primitive, ignorant and reckless. It is important to understand the necessity of having a brutal black mother narrative pitted against the selfless dotting white mother in order to play up white motherhood in the Victorian era.

But the mammy is a fictitious representation designed with a pro-slavery agenda with little connection to real Black women.

While enslaved black women were expected to perform mammy "duties" as it were it is not until the creation of Aunt Jemima that mammy is solidified as a myth.



Aunt Jemima

Nancy Green's Aunt Jemima served to soothe, recover and reconcile North-South relations following the Civil War. A pro-capitalist mammy full of industry and trade secrets from the Old South sought to revive the pulse of the weakened heart of white families which is now missing the devoted black servants that slavery provided.

As the narrative goes, Aunt Jemima had a secret pancake recipe that she used to save her Colonel's life against Union soldiers and rather than keep the recipe to herself she passed it along to her white mistress who was welcomed to sell it for profit to restore the plantation with Aunt Jemima wanting no profits for herself. Already, Green's Aunt Jemima served as a signifier of not just the Old South but the wealth and class status that belied the South during slavery.



Mammy's Cupboard (Natchez, MS)

My research included a visit to Natchez, MS where stands a 28ft statue of Mammy. This monument of sorts is named as Mammy's Cupboard doubles as a small café purported to serve authentic southern cuisine. The statue is constructed in a way where customers enter the café through the front of Mammy's skirt which is built from the ground while Mammy's face (complete with gold earrings) stands 28ft above head. It is to be understood that the statue has undergone some transformations over the years.

In 1940 (the first year of business), the statue appeared to be much darker in brown color that made up the Mammy face. Over time and during several renovations the Mammy (of Mammy's Cupboard) has seemingly "lightened up" due to public pressure—much the same as the Aunt Jemima character laid to rest her handkerchief and plaid shawl. It is worth noting that Mammy's Cupboard is white owned and has been since it opened its doors in 1940. Rather than serving as memorabilia or freezing a segment in time that highlights a dark past, Mammy's Cupboard continues to stay relevant and a part of the race talk that sinks into American society by remaining open for business for the past 75 years.





"Annie the Chicken Queen"



"Pine Sol Lady"



"Madea"

But to date we see the commodified mammy signifying slavery again and again in advertising with minimal variations applied. For example the mammy stereotype can be found today to sell *Popeye's Chicken*, *Pine Sol* and performed in movies such the *Madea* series performed by Tyler Perry.

In all of these advertisements black women perform mammy through revealing their "trade secrets" to the public with a know-it-all persona that has all the answers (limited to house work and kitchen duties of course). These 'human trademarks' are usually performed against a clueless white woman who just doesn't know what to do in her own household. Performing mammy in this way and selling household products allows for slavery signifiers to be commodities without ever having to mention any details of slavery at all.

Mammy's Legacy



Mammy is a cultural text situated in American history. That is not to say that black women have not cared for white children around the world and that is certainly not to say that black women have not been denied the right of motherhood to their black children within the Pan African world.

But what that looks like in representation, as a stereotype and a mode of oppression is very different in separate discourses. The main point of this presentation is to show that mammy embodies the fetish that the American society has with enslavement. Mammy does very little to represent the life of real women in the Pan African World. In fact, mammy fails black women time and time again.