

AUNT JEMIMA:
THE IMPACT OF AN AMERICAN ICON ON AFRICAN-AMERICAN WOMEN

A Senior Thesis

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**Aunt Jemima: The Impact Of An American Icon On
African-American Women**

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Abstract

Always the Aunt Jemima. Always the submissive servant and comforting mammy. At least these are the portrayals of African-American women that the media often glorify. As society's primary informant, the media, especially the advertising industry, are able to influence perceptions about social images of African-Americans. Thus, the media have a responsibility to create positive representations of the African-American culture. However, Dr. Marilyn Kern-Foxworth, associate professor of journalism at Texas A&M University and author of Aunt Jemima, Uncle Ben, and Rastus - Blacks in Advertising, Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow, believes that historically the media have wronged the black woman by promoting cultural stereotypes instead of realistic portrayals (87). Her true identity has been devalued and overshadowed by an image of a character created straight of the ante-bellum southern plantation - Aunt Jemima (Kern-Foxworth, Aunt Jemima, 88).

This paper concentrates on the impact of historical stereotyping on contemporary women of African ancestry via the Aunt Jemima trademark. The primary purpose is to identify how this image affects the self-image of African-American women. Moreover, the paper will discuss how the media initiated and continues to help perpetuate these stereotypes.

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You may write me down in history
with your bitter, twisted lies,
You may trod me in the very dirt
But still, like dust, I'll rise.
-Maya Angelou, 1978

The History of Aunt Jemima

No one knew that after her 1889 debut as the trademark of the first self-rising pancake mix, Aunt Jemima would become society's most famous marketing icon (Economist 60). The ingenious promotional strategies of the R.T. Davis Milling Company and the Quaker Oats Company has set the Aunt Jemima trademark and products in first-place status for a century (Marquette 144). According to Brent Staples, author of "Aunt Jemima Gets a Makeover," Quaker Oats considers her century-long success one of its biggest triumphs (A22). "The public has warm and positive feelings for Jemima. She has also brought in more than \$200 million this year. With numbers like that she will be with us for a long time" (Staples 22). However, the well-known Aunt Jemima trademark and pancake mix did not always enjoy such a stable existence. For years, both endured several ownership transitions due to financial strains that prevented manufacturing companies from effectively promoting and manufacturing the Aunt Jemima name.

It was not until 1890 that the Aunt Jemima trademark begin to flourish under the ownership of the R.T. Davis Milling Company (Marquette 144). R.T. Davis not only simplified the ready-mix so that cooks would have only to add water, he also took steps to personify the trademark by introducing the first living Aunt Jemima at the 1893 World's Fair (Marquette 144). Kern-Foxworth explains that it was this

ingenious promotional strategy that has set the Aunt Jemima trademark and products in first-place status for a century (Aunt Jemima 73).

However, R.T. Davis was not the only mastermind behind the success of the Aunt Jemima name. In 1926 the Quaker Oats Company bought the Aunt Jemima-Mills Company and continued the intense campaign to promote the product by offering premiums such as salt and pepper shakers, a cream and sugar set, a cookie jar, a syrup pitcher, and the Aunt Jemima rag doll to customers during the 1950s and 60s (Kern-Foxworth, Aunt Jemima, 74-75). Although these items were discontinued, they can now be purchased at antique stores, souvenir shops, general stores and flea markets across the country along with other collectible items such as miniature black minstrels (Monin 39:B14). But Margaret Bass, a Vanderbilt University English professor who teaches a course in African-American literature, insists that these images are insults to the African-American culture and should not be sold because they preserve and reinforce stereotypical attitudes towards the African-American community:

That image has nothing to do with my history. That's an image that was created by someone else. It's the happy go lucky Southern slave who's smiling and eating watermelon and suffering. That's an image that never was true. It was an image that was needed to perpetuate a prejudice (Monin 39:B14).

Like Bass, for decades African-Americans have carried a grave disgust for the exploitation of these stereotypical depictions. Consequently, Aunt Jemima's reign as society's favorite "mammy" has not been favored by the African-American community. Kern-Foxworth believes that the cool reception comes from the horror of seeing the "most negative, pejorative, derogatory features of Aunt Jemima" become the prototype of black women:

The physical attributes of the original versions of Aunt Jemima were totally the opposite of how white America traditionally defined beauty. She was very dark-skinned, had extremely broad features, and was extremely overweight -- a far cry from the thin blond, blue-eyed, Barbie type heralded as the standard of beauty for decades (Kern-Foxworth, Aunt Jemima, 87; Ono B5).

The traditional Jemima, made famous in the person of Nancy Green, Anna Robinson, and countless others, wore domestic clothing and a red-bandanna headdress (Staples A2). She exhibited the demeanor of a plantation slave and was probably best known for coining the phrase 'I'se in town, Honey' (Marquette 146). Even her name symbolized the subordination of black people, with the term "aunt" replacing the formal address of "Mrs." and the name Jemima becoming synonymous with obesity and slavery (Jewell 41).

Despite the national status of the traditional image, Quaker Oats administered changes to the trademark in response to the 60s civil rights movement. Aunt Jemima became 100 pounds slimmer and traded the red-bandanna for a more fashionable headband. Then in 1989, Aunt Jemima underwent another metamorphosis exchanging the headband for a perm and pearl earrings. More recently, Quaker hired the popular R&B singer, Gladys Knight, to pitch the products in an attempt to erase the brands controversial image (Ono B5). But even with these changes many still perceive her presence as offensive. Doris Y. Wilkinson captures the essence of the African-American community's attitude toward the Aunt Jemima phenomenon in her article "The Doll Exhibit: A Psycho-Cultural Analysis of Black Female Role Stereotypes." She argues that "the myth of the big, fat black woman as a great cook made the food boxes and kitchens on which Aunt Jemima was caricatured very salable, and in the process fostered one of the most visible and enduring prejudices" (23). These prejudices dissect the African-American woman's true character while reaffirming the white society's distorted image of black womanhood. Even an updated Aunt Jemima doesn't have the power to emancipate African-American women from the mammy stigmatization. Ultimately, her origins will always circle back to the Old South.

Aunt Jemima's Effect on The Self-Image of the African-American Woman

For decades African-American women have struggled to restore an image damaged by distinctive symbols that disfigure the black woman. It is not surprising that Aunt Jemima's popularity plays a significant role in hindering complete restoration. Her mere existence motivates the depreciation of the African-American woman's physical features and character by crucially reinforcing the mammy

stereotype: fat, dark-complected, ugly, strong, superreligious, subservient, and dedicated to "her" white family (Kern-Foxworth, Plantation, 57). Patricia Morton, author of "Disfigured Images: The Historical Assault on Afro-American Women," theorizes that internalization of this mythical imagery not only tainted society's views about African-American women, but also negatively influences African-American women's images of themselves. "The persuasiveness of derogatory images was said to erode her self-confidence, to promote her negative self-identify as a loser, and at best to inspire anxiety and confusion over her own identity" (6).

While it is true that Aunt Jemima is a historical caricature, her deplorable past image has caused African-American women to become self-conscious about their own afrocentric features (Britt, "Getting Over," D1). For example, many members of the African-American community denigrate those blacks who do not have "good hair," a "straighter, wavier, or more loosely curled" version of the mane that naturally grows out of most people of African ancestry (Britt, "Untangling," D1). It is also not uncommon to see the African-American community differentiate between dark-skinned and light-skinned women. In "Beyond the Pale: Why My 'Too-Black' Friends Want Light-Skinned Babies," Portia Williams reminisces about her childhood as a dark-skinned African-American:

Growing up, I was called tar-baby, nappy-head and black baby so many times that for a period, I automatically looked up when a derogatory name was called...The guys at school joked about wanting only the light-bright-damn-near-white girls. If you're caught with somebody dark...they'd trash you (Britt, "Why," C1).

Generally, the hair, complexion, and overall body-image preoccupation stems from society's rejection of Jemima's "desexualized" image and the admiration of the Caucasian woman's "ultrafeminine" image (Morton 8). In an effort to avoid incurring the same stigmatization that was attached to black women in the past, many contemporary African-American women have collectively denied the essential beauty of their physical identify (Britt, "Getting Over," D1). Instead, they find comfort in over-the-counter bleaching creams and hair straighteners that alter their appearance to fit the European standard of beauty (Williams C1).

According to a study that explored the impact of body-image dissatisfaction among African-American women, the black woman's dissatisfaction with particular physical features is not significantly damaging to her overall feelings about herself (Thomas 1211). In fact, the study indicated that although "dissatisfaction with any particular domain of one's self will result in overall lower self-esteem," most black women do not relate their self-worth with various aspects of their physical appearance, thus they do not consider society's recent standards of beauty and fashion instrumental to their complete identity (Thomas 111). Contrastingly, the African-American woman's self-confidence in her self-worth is challenged when burdened with distinguishing between the truths and falsities of myths about her own character-image (Morton 6). Author Barbara Mathias describes the diverse myths for the African-American woman in her article "The Sisterhood - Black Women Learning to Value Their Self-Esteem:"

Either she is silent and strong "black mama" facing adversity without a man, or she is lazy, complaining, irresponsible and living on welfare. And when it comes to how she treats men, the black woman is seen either as tough and unsupportive or sexy and always available (D5).

The most common characteristics attributed to the African-American woman are arrogance, hard controlling, and self-centered. Ella Louise Bell, author of "Myths, Stereotypes, and Realities of Black Women: A Personal Reflection," suggests that the origin of these negative and harmful stereotypes stems from the legacy of slavery (370). Race, gender, and class oppression conditions disallow black women to be docile, submissive, or fragile (Bell 371). These characteristics, which are often attributed to white women, conflict directly with the rearing of an African-American woman (Bell 371). Bell states that as young girls, they are taught that restricted opportunities for black men demands that they become self-reliant and prepare for the possibility of being the financial providers for themselves and their families (Bell 371). In fact, in 1990, 56% of black women headed their households while only 17% Caucasian women did the same (Bell 373). Additionally the relationship between African-American men and women is strained by not only the number of black men that are incarcerated, gay, or in interracial relationships, but also black men have a lower educational level and occupational status than black women (Jewell 35). These circumstances force African-American women to have a high self-worth and

inner strength. It is this strength which is misinterpreted as being overbearing. Mathias insists that these conflicting myths and stereotypes that bring about low self-esteem and confusion about the black woman's identity ultimately deny their individuality and put them in a state of unrealistic expectations (D5).

Promoting cultural symbols such as Aunt Jemima helps to emit these mythical expectations. The Aunt Jemima trademark causes society to not only absorb representations of stereotypical imagery, but also associate African-American women with this image. As a result, healing and restoration has yet come to pass. Thus, it is difficult for black women to accept and love a physical identity that is deemed undesirable by society or relinquish an identity utterly degraded by negative cultural configurations.

The Media's Role in Perpetuating the Aunt Jemima Stereotype

It is evident that the media has become the dominant source of communication. Each medium, ranging from television to advertising significantly influences the values, ideas and beliefs of present-day society. It is also plausible to infer that each medium, in some way, influences the collective perceptions of American history. However, some ideas and beliefs adopted by society via the media reflect the media's sensationalized historical interpretations rather than historical fact. Robert Brent Topin, author "From Slavery to Freedom: The View Through Film and TV Drama" writes that "situations, events, and characters are enormously exaggerated for effect, and directors take great license in shaping the evidence, both visual and verbal, to ensure that the audience reaches the desired conclusion" (qtd. Hine 204-205).

This pattern of media exaggeration is especially prominent in presentations of the African-American experience in America. For black women, Aunt Jemima has unfortunately become the most widely used image from which directors, producers and cartoonists, alike, parallel their characters (Morton 7). For example, several popular television shows viewed by audiences during the 70s and 80s centered around characters that exemplified one or more traits characteristic of a Jemima. Characters Florence of "The Jefferson's" and Nell of "Gimmie a Break," portrayed by Marla Gibbs and Nell Carter, respectively, fit into the category of either the lazy but devoted servant or overly protective mother figure.

Moreover, the film industry is also guilty of supporting stereotypes of black women that pervade American society. "Gone with the Wind," one of America's most celebrated movies, enabled Hattie McDaniel to become the first African-American to win an Oscar for her performance as Mammy (Staples A22). In this motion picture the character defends Miss Scarlet, mistress of the house, against angry black soldiers and even chooses to sacrifice her freedom during emancipation so that she might continue to act as guardian and servant to the helpless Miss Scarlet (Staples A22). According to Morton, McDaniel's good fortune proved both a triumph and defeat for African-American women (7). She insists that although McDaniel's win created avenues for other African-American actors and actresses to be acknowledged for their efforts, her success stigmatized and still continues to confine black female artists to mammy-type roles. "Hollywood prone to replicate success...wrapped a bandanna around the head of each working black actress" (qtd. in Morton 7). In fact, despite the many other performances by black actresses since McDaniel's 1939 portrayal as Mammy, no other African-American woman was awarded an Academy Award until Whoopi Goldberg received the Oscar over fifty years later.

Although the illumination of the stereotypical African-American can be attributed to the broadcast industry, the public dissemination of the stereotype is rooted in the advertising industry. Advertisements have exploited blacks since the seventeenth century. The first advertisements featuring African-Americans were not symbols or caricatures, but slave ads that informed the public of the buying and selling of slaves (Kern-Foxworth, Aunt Jemima, 3-4). These advertisements revealed who were slave owners, provided insights on the methods used to sell and purchase slaves, and emphasized the skillfulness of each slave (Kern-Foxworth, Aunt Jemima, 3-4). By the end of the nineteenth century, advertisements evolved from strictly print to incorporating African-Americans as symbols and models representing certain products. Rastus of Cream of Wheat, the Gold Dust Twins of Gold Dust washing powder and Aunt Jemima of Aunt Jemima pancakes were just three of many caricatures published in newspapers, printed on boxes, and drawn on posters for promotional gimmicks (Kern-Foxworth, Aunt Jemima, 3-4).

The Civil Rights Movement prompted severe changes in the way blacks were represented in advertising. Findings indicate a diminution of the traditional representation of blacks in stereotypical

occupational roles an increase in positive depictions (Humphrey and Schuman 553). However, the ads showed African-Americans as professionals and skilled laborers at approximately 50 percent of their true frequency in these occupations (Humphrey and Schuman 553). The study explains that racist attitudes among advertisers had a causal relationship with this approximation:

Their main concern is selling a product...by depicting their consumers as they want to be, not as they are...Since the overwhelming majority of consumers are white, it is probable that advertisers portray whites as they would like to think of themselves (i.e., upper-middle-class and at leisure), and portray blacks as whites find it easiest to think of blacks (Humphrey and Schuman 553-554).

The belief was that African-American models did not attract consumers to the product unless the consumer was greeted with a "reassuring" face reminiscent of the southern slave. For example, advertisers hoped that Aunt Jemima's nurturing legacy would convince the targeted audience, usually Caucasian-American, that that product was of quality (Economist 60). Since the 80s, this attitude has subtly changed, especially toward the effect African-American women add to the product's popularity. According to Roger A. Kerin, author of "Black Model Appearance and Product Evaluations, " blacks tend to be more favorably disposed toward integrated or all black model advertisements than all white model ads (126). "The results showed that the physical appearances of black models influence the impressions of product quality and suitability for personal use" (Kerin 124). In fact, he found that in cases in which African-Americans are used in advertising both blacks and whites rate the quality of products more favorably when the models have afrocentric features and dark skin tones (Kerin 128).

Because some advertisers have come to the realization that using African-American women in ads can increase the overall purchasing power of a product, there has been an improvement in the number and image of female African-Americans used (Humphrey and Schuman 562). Several huge companies are represented by an African-American woman. Some of these women include Halle Berry who promotes Revlon, Tina Turner who promotes Hanes pantyhose, Whoopi Goldberg who promotes MCI, and Tyra Banks who promotes Cover Girl and Coca Cola. However, when compared to the publicity of

the Caucasian-American female, the increase is slight and should not be taken for as a triumph (Humphrey and Schuman 562). Researchers argue that now blacks seen in advertising are usually surrounded by a large number of whites and merely used to play token roles (Humphrey and Schuman 562). "It seems more likely that advertisers avoid using a group of blacks because a group would more strongly identify blacks with a product than would a single individual" (Humphrey and Schuman).

Method

To conduct the analysis, students at a large southern university were surveyed in four different classes and at the university multicultural service center. The 24-item questionnaire was developed to determine the students views on the Aunt Jemima trademark and the impact the media has made on their perceptions of African-American women. The questionnaire comprised three areas:

Aunt Jemima. Questions number 3-7 and number 16-17 ask students to rate the warmth, attractiveness, intelligence, and authority of the Aunt Jemima trademark as well as choose the physical characteristics they associate with the trademark. One question provided items linked with the Aunt Jemima image. The list included the red-bandanna, pearls, slavery, cook, business woman and happy. Students were asked to choose the items they most associated with the image. Students were also asked to estimate the trademark's income level.

The Media. Questions 1-2 and 11-15 inquired about the frequency and type of media that the students come into contact with. They were also asked to what extent the media influence their opinions about African-American women. Additionally, they were asked to list a name of an African-American woman in advertising to determine if students were aware of other African-Americans used in advertising.

Perception of Attractiveness. Questions 8-10 asked for students to list the physical characteristics of the Aunt Jemima trademark that were most unattractive to them if any. Following that answer, they were then asked to list any physical or personality characteristics that would be perceived as attractive to them.

The racial make-up, gender, academic major, and age were mixed to increase the validity of the answers.

Results

The earlier Aunt Jemima image is still the most recognizable image that the surveyed students identified with the trademark. Red-bandanna, slavery and cook were selected as being the items associated with the trademark by 96%, 91%, and 98% of the students, respectively. Only 10% of the students chose the pearls and business-woman options. Over 90% of the students also selected obesity, dark-skin, large posterior, large lips, and large nose as the physical features most associated with the Aunt Jemima image. However, the students' reactions to these physical features were split by ethnicity. The majority of Caucasian students said the features listed are unattractive to them with exception to dark-skin. For African-American and Latin-American (Hispanic) students the response was mixed. When answering that Aunt Jemima was not attractive, the reason given was that she resembled a slave. But the actual physical features mentioned were mostly praised with the exception of obesity. Also divided by ethnicity were the ratings of attractiveness, intelligence, warmth, and authority of the overall image of Aunt Jemima. All agreed that Aunt Jemima's image was warm. However, African-Americans believe that the image is not attractive, somewhat intelligent, and extremely authoritative. Caucasian and Latin-Americans (Hispanic) responded oppositely with somewhat attractive, not very intelligent, and fairly authoritative. When asked about the income level of Aunt Jemima, 84% selected lower class or lower middle class. The remaining 16% chose middle class. Eighty-three percent said that the Aunt Jemima image has not influence their opinion of African-American women.

Of the various mediums, the majority of the students formed opinions from what they see on television. Twenty-three percent of the students chose a combination of radio and newspaper with television. The final 3% was divided with 1% of the students just relying on newspapers, 1% relying on radio, and 1% relying on magazines. The overall response to whether the media has any impact on students' opinions of African-American women was 44%. The majority of students agreed that African-American women are not well represented by the media. In fact, asked to name some African-American

women that are featured in advertisements only four names were repeatedly mentioned: Tyra Banks, Tina Turner, Phylisha Rashad, and Halle Berry. The rest of the answers were either too scarce to mention or just left blank. Once again answers were divided by ethnicity when students were asked to rate how much the media influenced their idea of what is attractive and what is not attractive on a scale from 1 to 7, 1 being very much and 7 very poor. African-Americans responded with 7 while most Caucasian and Latin-Americans' responses fell at or between 2 and 4.

Caucasian-Americans identified their ideal attractive woman as having a good figure, being well groomed, and possessing a good personality. Ninety percent of the African-American and Latin-American (Hispanic) comments made about what makes a woman attractive dealt with a woman's intelligence, strength, and dignity.

This study helps to give insight as to how the Aunt Jemima symbol could implicitly have an impact on African-American women's self-evaluations as well as society's perceptions of African-American women. However, there is room for further investigation into this subject. With further understanding on how the media influences African-American women and society's opinions of self-worth and physical appearance, it could be possible to establish programs and practices, within the media, that foster and improve African-American women's self-evaluations.

Discussion

While it is true that of the students surveyed 83% responded that the Aunt Jemima image has not affected their opinions about African-American women, and 56% said that the media has little or no influence on their opinions about African-American women, it is important to not lose sight of the fact that collectively, 61% of the students are influenced by the image and/or the media to some extent. It is also imperative to recognize the differences on what African-Americans and Caucasian-Americans find attractive about a woman. As noted in the results, the Caucasian-American students emphasize physical features while the African-American students emphasize personality and character traits. However, when comparing opinions on acceptable physical features, the typical afrocentric features are rejected by most of the Caucasian-American students and praised by African-American students. This can cause a problem

when one considers that most advertising and production executives are Caucasian-American. From this it is not implausible to infer that this division on beauty standards has caused the small numbers in African-American woman representation in advertising and other media. It is also safe to infer that this rejection may cause some African-Americans to deplore their afrocentric features.

The originators of the Aunt Jemima trademark did not know that the Jemima concept would become a century-long phenomenon. They were not aware that an image of a traditional dark-skinned, fat and nurturing mammy, whose image was created merely to sell pancake mix, would exceed its original intention and become the most widely used and awarded prototype of African-American women. "Their concerted abilities to create a trademark with a personality that transcended all usual marketing expectations moved Aunt Jemima beyond the plantation kitchen and into the American culture and psyche" (Kern-Foxworth, "Plantation," 65).

However, being deemed the prototype of an Aunt Jemima image has proved to inflict burdensome implications upon black women. Continuous exposure to this image can not only influence the Caucasian-American's opinions about the value, physical beauty and character of African-American women, but also cause the black woman to question her own self-worth and overall afrocentric identity. It is noted that Quaker Oats has changed the features of the image to reflect contemporary modern society. But according to Staples, the modernization of the trademark has not made a significant impression on society's perceptions of the black woman. He says: "The drama points up a lesson: that racially charged imagery never loses its historical taint" (A22). Along with Quaker Oats, the media have made progress in providing accurate depictions of African-American women. However, it is believed that the media is only creeping toward progression. Thus, their efforts are not effective, and devaluation, though subtle, still prevails. Even as America approaches the threshold of the 21st century, African-American women still struggle to rise above deeply rooted stereotypes and myths about black women that are continuously ingrained into society by the legacy of an American icon--Aunt Jemima.

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