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Micki McElya. *Clinging to Mammy: The Faithful Slave in Twentieth-century America.* Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2007. 322 pp. $27.95 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-674-02433-5.

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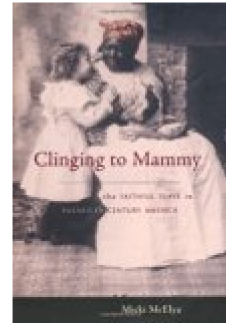

A Thick Description of the Mammy Stereotype

Micki McElya brings to light a wide array of interlocking connections among well-known and forgotten uses of the stereotype Mammy and its iconography. She juxtaposes familiar uses, like Aunt Jemima pancake mix and Hattie McDaniel's role in *Gone with the Wind* (1939), with less well-known appropriations of the Mammy symbol, such as a proposed monument by the United Daughters of the Confederacy (UDC) in Washington DC, or the rhetoric surrounding the "servant problem" in the early-to-mid-twentieth century. Thus, what on first glance might seem to be yet another exploration of the stereotyping of black women in the era of Jane Crow turns out to be a highly sophisticated, multilayered, vigorously written analysis of the uses to which race and gender biases were put in twentieth-century America. The author's genius (and I don't use that noun lightly) in this book is her ability to set familiar events and stories in a broad context of white racial rhetoric, African American journalism, and racialized politics. McElya's scholarship moves quickly outside the box of historical narrative to envelop performance, cartoons, popular "yellow journalism," congressional activity, and editorials in the black press.

Each chapter in *Clinging to Mammy* is a stand-alone essay on some aspect of the slave-caregiver mythology, from manipulation by marketing magnates in the 1920s through popular-culture collectibles of the 1980s. While examples like the marketing of Aunt Jemima have been carefully explored by other scholars, McElya is able to tie the exploitation of the real Aunt Jemima, Nancy Green and the other women who followed her (chapter 1), to the "performance" of blackface entertainers whose programs ranged from the Chautauqua circuit to white women's book clubs (chapter 2).[1] In effect, McElya places Aunt Jemima on the road, as she reveals how "Mammy" functioned both as a distorted memory of happy slavery days and as a domesticated, jolly, no-nonsense household companion whose wit and wisdom the white audiences loved.

In chapter 3, McElya extends her argument about the appropriation of the Mammy motif to the bizarre story of fourteen-year-old Marjorie Delbridge whose dying (white) mother left her in the care of an African American woman, Camille Jackson. In 1916, a Chicago judge removed the child from Jackson's home and placed her in (white) foster care. McElya argues that the white press's continual use of the term "Mammy" to refer to Ms. Jackson set the tone for the soap-opera-like stories that kept the case alive for months. Although initially claiming that Jackson was truly a mother to her, and despite running away and going into hiding from juvenile authorities, Delbridge eventually renounced the black community that had succored her and adopted a completely white identity. This chapter is enhanced by McElya's skillful reading of a posed photograph of Delbridge taken while in foster care. By unknotting the twists and turns of the media frenzy surrounding this case, McElya clearly shows that white society loved "Mammy" as an extra caregiver in a white family, but abolished her when she acted in the role of sole "mother" to a white child.

Chapter 4 elucidates the UDC effort to erect a statue in 1922 to "Mammy" as a testament to all of the supposedly happy slaves who lovingly tended their white families. The UDC's rhetoric for the monument clearly reveals that the statue was not only designed to honor an iconic slave type, but was also designed to instruct future generations in the values of the Old South. The UDC's chosen sculptor had already produced several Confederate Civil War monuments. McElya situates the legislative struggle to approve the statue in the context of Woodrow Wilson's accession to the White House and the increasingly pro-southern attitudes among Washington DC politicians. The timing for such a statue seemed opportune, even as the nation's black press highlighted the irony of memorializing "Mammy" while depriving her sons and daughters of their constitutional rights and privileges. The monument bill passed the House but never made it out of committee in the Senate.

McElya then juxtaposes the rhapsodic southern language about "Mammy" and "days gone by" with the rapidly deteriorating situation for people of color in the United States. Relying heavily on editorials and columns in the national black press, McElya illustrates just how thoroughly African Americans "equated paternalistic affection with violence" (p. 161). As black Americans wrote about the arrival of "the new Negro" in the 1920s, white Americans were identifying a "Negro problem." Both grew out of the extreme violence in East St. Louis and Houston in 1917. After years of trying to get his anti-lynching bill out of committee, Congressman Leonidas C. Dyer of Missouri maneuvered its passage in January of 1922. After being bottled up in the Senate until after mid-term elections, Democratic senators filibustered until the Republicans capitulated and accepted the bill's defeat. "The Senate's southern Democrats were flush with success from their recent victory over the Dyer anti-lynching bill when John Sharp Williams of Mississippi first introduced his mammy memorial legislation" (p. 164).

In raising the question, "who can speak for the enslaved? " McElya draws heavily on the writings by descendants of slaves, most of whom reject the happy slave Mammy motif in favor of a realistic portrayal of the burdens of female black caregivers in white families, both under slavery and after emancipation.

In the final chapter, the author articulates the particular dilemmas that the "faithful slave narrative presented for black women as workers, activists, mothers, and citizens in the twentieth century–the Mammy problem" (p. 209). Working-class black women who expected fair treatment and proper compensation suffered by comparison to a worker ideal that had never existed. Instead they were underpaid, humiliated, patronized, and often simply cheated out of wages while white employers professed a love for "Mammy." Middle-class black clubwomen accomplished as much or more than their white "progressive" counterparts, yet they were ignored or shunned by white clubwomen with similar goals. To conclude the chapter, McElya asserts that Montgomery, Alabama's domestic workers forcefully rejected the Mammy designation when they supported the bus boycott in 1955.

I do have some quibbles with *Clinging to Mammy.* The book suffers from a lack of consistent editing. In trying to tie chapter themes together, the author goes over the same ground in different chapters, particularly when discussing the UDC Mammy monument and the Dyer anti-lynching bill. Key insights are sometimes buried within a long paragraph rather than headlining it. The inconsistencies and dissembling of white employers and politicians that Micki McElya discusses are hardly new findings.

The strength of *Clinging to Mammy: The Faithful Slave in Twentieth-Century America* lies in its thick description of each thematic incident and the interwoven, almost parasitic, relationship McElya finds among a variety of early twentieth-century American phenomena. As carefully as an artist laying on oils, she paints a densely layered picture of the racialized ironies and contradictions inherent when an idealized "Mammy" confronts the disenfranchised, humiliated, real working-class African American. This book deserves to be read and discussed widely.

Note

[1]. M. M. Manring, *Slave in a Box: The Strange Career of Aunt Jemima* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998); Marilyn Kern-Foxworth, *Aunt Jemima, Uncle Ben, and Rastus: Blacks in Advertising, Yesterday, Today, and Tomorrow* (Westport, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1994); Kenneth W. Goings, *Mammy and Uncle Mose: Black Collectibles and American Stereotyping* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994).

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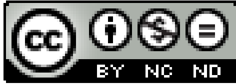

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