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M.M. Manring. *Slave in a Box: The Strange Career of Aunt Jemima.* Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1998. ix + 210 pp. $19.50 (paper), ISBN 978-0-8139-1811-2; $47.50 (cloth), ISBN 978-0-8139-1782-5.

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Is Aunt Jemima Still in Her Box?

Quaker Oats's Aunt Jemima has been a national figure for nearly a century, her image emblazoned on packages of pancake mix and related products, offering consumers (women) a shortcut to cooking success in a kitchen devoid of servants. This happy, loving, resourceful mammy, who never really existed, has been so successful selling ready-made pancake mix that she has persisted as part of our national popular culture for over one hundred years. Through print, radio and television advertisements and personal appearances by actresses portraying her, Aunt Jemima has cooked up a comforting batch of pancakes, easing the burden for white women and securing the hearth for white men (or so the ads implied). In *Slave In A Box: The Strange Career of Aunt Jemima*, M.M. Manring argues that this icon of the devoted slave mammy, an indefatigable image of a manufactured ante-bellum plantation fantasy, appealed to the national white consciousness during post-bellum waves of reconciliation. Eager to transform the conflicts of the Civil War and the world of ante-bellum slavery into a fictional memory of a benevolent, leisurely Old South, the white creators of Aunt Jemima reinterpreted plantation life for blacks and whites, often centering on stereotypical images of black women and men and their roles in white plantation life. Manring asserts that the image of Aunt Jemima is an interesting manifestation of the ante- and post-bellum minstrel show: a ready made mammy that met the racial, gendered and class expectations of a white middle class learning to cope with fewer servants and modernized kitchens. The mammy image, however, has been and still is a particularly painful one for African-Americans. As a symbol of subordination of black women under slavery and as domestic laborers after emancipation, the scarf-capped, overweight, jolly mammy has been a constant reminder of white oppression. Manring also argues that this racialized mammy stereotype should seem out of place in the 1990s, but Aunt Jemima persists because notions about race and gender are still deeply rooted in our national culture.

Covering a broad range of issues in a tight, highly readable book, Manring roots the analysis in historical scholarship in the categories of race, class and gender. By using a cross disciplinary approach, combining historical research, cultural and gender studies, advertising theory, and business case analysis, Manring documents Aunt Jemima's "birth" in 1889 as the brand name and image for a new self-rising flour product. By examining a century's worth of advertising copy created by various advertising agencies and the corporate records of companies that have owned the product and its advertising images, particularly the Quaker Oats Company, Manring reveals the deliberate manipulation of the public in turn-of-the-century mass marketing campaigns that created huge consumer demand for ready made products. By conflating notions about race, class and gender these advertising strategies appealed to a national white consciousness devoted to reconciliation after the Civil War and Reconstruction.

Manring first traces the creation of the legend of Aunt Jemima, her "life" on the plantation, her emancipation and the sale of her famous, secret pancake recipe to technologically advanced northern millers. Aunt Jemima was first conceived by Chris Rutt in 1889 in St. Joseph, Missouri. With his partner Charles Underwood, Rutt began marketing a self-rising flour but lacked a brand name. According to Quaker Oats Company legend, Rutt strolled into a minstrel show one day and witnessed a white man in blackface, dressed in drag singing "Old Aunt Jemima." Though many would believe that Rutt's chance encounter with "Aunt Jemima" is a "happy coincidence," Manring argues that Rutt actually "tapped into major trends in the nation's popular culture and industry" (pp. 61-62). Aunt Jemima was a ready-made image, well suited to the marketing of a labor-saving pre-mixed pancake flour that re-created down home southern hospitality. The author also draws a provocative parallel between the white "in-

terlocutor" of the early minstrel show who interpreted black life and speech for the white audience and the advertising script that used a white voice to interpret the fractured speech of Aunt Jemima.

The nostalgic imagery of the Old South, with its abundant plantation culture, teeming with happy, helpful slaves and contented, genteel masters, complemented a racialized middle-class domesticity, where white women were eager to ease their burdens in the kitchen with a "slave in a box." Aunt Jemima in a box allowed white women access to another person's labor and culture, but not their station in life. These advertisements were rooted, Manring says, in the psychological need of middle-class housewives for the "secret recipe" and the black womaṅs labor. Aunt Jemima, as the "slave of a wealthy southern gentleman, [brought] a mythical world to life again." (p. 139) By eliminating the white mistress from the ads, Manring argues that white women could buy this product and, in effect, buy the fantasy as well. Early ads encouraged white housewives to imagine themselves as the mistress, "to have Aunt Jemima, not to be Aunt Jemima" (p. 139). The continued success of the ads throughout the 1920s and 1930s hinged on their appeal to white women's sense of identity as providers for their husbands and families, which, Manring argues, is deeply imbedded in the social construction of whiteness and white womanhood. The mammy figure, in myth and as shown in early Aunt Jemima advertisements, is only represented within the white household, not as a nurturing, loving mother in her own home.

Rather than just a detailed history of an advertising campaign, Manring expands the analysis with historical, cultural and gender analysis. Examining the complex interplay and conflation of race, class and gender by the advertising industry, Manring interprets the cultural, social and historical construction of Aunt Jemima. Manring argues that these Aunt Jemima plantation narratives, and the fabricated history of her life, persisted far longer than would have been expected. Well into the 1920s and 1930s, Quaker Oats continued to market this secret "plantation" recipe. It is here that Manring has developed a convincing argument. This racialized mammy image provided more than a nostalgic look back to the ante-bellum plantation and its legendary Southern hospitality. The construction of Aunt Jemima's image is one example of the historical repression of the memory of slavery. The Aunt Jemima of the early advertisements is a representation of plantation life that demonstrates in a very concrete manner the remarkable ways that white control over memory can distort history. Not only in depictions of benevolent plantation life, but also in the perpetuation of stereotypical black images, which deny African-Americans their right to an historical identity of their own. Marketing research reports from the 1930s indicate Quaker Oats cared little about the negative connotations the mammy image held for African-Americans. The fact that her image persisted through the Civil Rights movement, through boycotts and calls for "her" retirement, reveals the tenacity of the institutional and cultural devaluation of black women this image perpetuates.

Manring draws on many historical and literary sources to trace the evolution of the mammy image. Recent scholarship on slavery and slave women has shown this stereotypical image to be false and does not reflect the reality of slave women's lives. The fictional life of Aunt Jemima, a generous mammy who endured slavery and the Civil War and who served slaveowners and northern emancipators alike, blurred with reality as the ongoing serial nature of the advertisements became more detailed and historical in their content. The historical fiction appealed to the consumer, who understood and could decode the social construct of a racialized image. As Patricia Hill Collins has noted, the mammy image was "[c]reated to justify the economic exploitation of house slaves and sustained to explain Black women's long-standing restriction to domestic service…[and] the mammy symbolizes the dominant group's perceptions of the ideal black female relationship to elite white male power." Collins also notes that the fictional mammy, though an authority figure, "still knows her 'place' as obedient servant."[1] Manring shows how advertisers counted on white women's ability to decode the racial, gendered and class relations encoded in the image of the mammy. The advertising campaign constructed and then reinforced white women's perception that they needed, wanted, and deserved good help in the kitchen, particularly in the service of men. In the act of purchasing Aunt Jemima in the box, white women were in effect buying the labor of a black servant, reinforcing their sense of white superiority.

There are a few problems with this book. Scholars looking for a very detailed analysis of national reconciliation, the advertising industry as a whole, consumerism at the turn-of-the-century, or a post-modern look at representation will not find it here. There are too few illustrations; I often found myself wishing I could see the detailed images that Manring so carefully describes, though restrictions on the use of images may have played a role here. Though Manring does spend the last part of the book dealing with the historical response of African-Americans to the image and the product, I also found myself wanting to know more. That said, this is a highly

readable narrative and may be quite appropriate as a secondary reading for a variety of courses. I found Manring's interdisciplinary approach very intriguing.

Manring asks, in conclusion, why, when this racialized image is so offensive to African Americans and the plantation mythology is no longer valid, does Quaker Oats persist in using her image? Though she has recently been updated with a new hairdo, trimmed down and aged to look more like a grandmother, Quaker Oats insists that her image is now racially neutral. M. M. Manring disagrees, and so do I. It is time to let Aunt Jemima out of the box and set her free.

Notes

[1]. Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness, and the Politics of Empowerment.* New York: Routledge, 1991, 71.

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