



## **Reimagining Aunt Jemima: Subverting The Mammy Stereotype Through Black Feminist Art**

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In contemporary society, historical racial stereotypes are increasingly under scrutiny as movements like Black Lives Matter highlight systemic injustices and push for a reexamination of cultural symbols. This modern civil rights movement has intensified calls for societal change, challenging long-standing stereotypes and historical inequalities that persist today. By focusing on the need to address racial disparities and reshape cultural narratives, Black Lives Matter has driven a critical reassessment of symbols that perpetuate racial stereotypes. A prominent example of this shift is the retirement of the Aunt Jemima brand. The brand, long criticized for its depiction of the Mammy stereotype—a derogatory image rooted in minstrel traditions—embodied a broader legacy of racial caricatures. In response to the growing demand for racial justice in 2020, Quaker Oats rebranded Aunt Jemima as the Pearl Milling Company, taking a significant step towards confronting and dismantling offensive imagery. This change underscores the impact of civil rights advocacy in driving meaningful progress towards a more equitable and respectful society. In line with Stuart Hall's theory<sup>1</sup>, contemporary artists engage with existing stereotypes by using them as a starting point for their work, not merely to challenge or reject them but to expose and alter the inherent ambiguities within these reductive portrayals. By examining both the connotations and denotations of these stereotypes—the layers of cultural meaning beyond their literal definitions—they reveal the constructed nature of these representations. This process allows them to shift the meaning of stereotypes, transforming them into sites of empowerment and critical reflection. As a result, they reticulate the identities once constrained by these stereotypes, enabling more complex and multifaceted representations to emerge.

The Mammy stereotype's connection to minstrel traditions reveals a profound ambiguity in both its portrayal and its impact. Emerging in the 19th century, minstrel shows often depicted Black characters through exaggerated and demeaning caricatures, including the Mammy figure. On the surface, the Mammy was portrayed as a loving and devoted caregiver, an image that seemed positive and even affectionate. This portrayal created a facade of warmth and contentment, suggesting that Black women were happily fulfilled in their servitude. However, this seemingly benign image masked deeper, more insidious implications. The Mammy stereotype was strategically designed to obscure the harsh realities of slavery and reinforce racial hierarchies by presenting Black women as inherently suited to subservience. This paradoxical portrayal both normalized and entrenched harmful stereotypes, embedding them into popular culture and supporting the socio-economic structures of oppression. By perpetuating these damaging narratives, minstrel shows contributed to a cultural climate where such stereotypes became deeply ingrained, complicating efforts to address and dismantle them. This legacy of ambiguity underscores the complexity of cultural

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<sup>1</sup> The Spectacle of 'Other' by Stuart Hall

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symbols and highlights the ongoing challenge of confronting and reinterpreting historical racial stereotypes in contemporary society.

Furthermore, the mammy caricature emerged within the visual culture of the antebellum South, where stereotypical portrayals of Black people reinforced and perpetuated the racist myths used to justify slavery. The mammy was a version of the preexisting "happy slave" stereotype, a pervasive and deeply misleading portrayal of Black slaves who were content or even grateful to their masters, suggesting that they were better off under the care of their white masters than they would have been in freedom. This characterization was designed to obscure the brutal realities of slavery by presenting a façade of benevolence and contentment. It was reinforced through cultural and media portrayals that depicted enslaved people as loyal and happy in their servitude, thus masking the profound exploitation and dehumanization they endured. The myth of the happy slave served to rationalize and legitimize the institution of slavery by suggesting that it was a benevolent system rather than one of extreme oppression. The mammy represented one-half of an idealized master-slave relationship. She was portrayed as a loyal and maternal caretaker, deeply devoted to the white family that owned her, often more than to her own. She was the desexualized foil to the widespread stereotype of the hypersexual Black woman, exemplified by the Jezebel figure or caricatures of Saartjie Baartman as the "Hottentot Venus." The Jezebel stereotype was a pervasive caricature of Black women that depicted them as hypersexual, promiscuous, and morally corrupt. This image was rooted in colonial and antebellum justifications for the sexual exploitation of enslaved women. White slaveholders often portrayed Black women as having an insatiable sexual appetite, a narrative used to rationalize the widespread sexual abuse and assault they perpetrated. This stereotype served multiple purposes: it dehumanized Black women, portraying them as more animalistic than human; it excused the sexual violence committed by white men by suggesting that Black women were always willing participants; and it reinforced the broader racist ideology that depicted Black people as inherently inferior and morally depraved. Saartjie Baartman, known as the "Hottentot Venus," became one of the most notorious symbols of the Jezebel stereotype. Baartman was a Khoikhoi woman from South Africa who was exhibited in freak shows in 19th-century Europe due to her physical features, which were exoticized and sexualized by European audiences. Her body was subjected to public scrutiny and objectification. The treatment of Baartman was both a literal and symbolic representation of how Black women's bodies were commodified and dehumanized. Her exploitation underscored the pervasive belief in the supposed sexual deviance of Black women, which justified their mistreatment and solidified their place at the bottom of the social hierarchy.

In contrast to these bestial and lascivious traits, the mammy was characterized by domestication and maternalism. She managed the master's household with competence and affection, making her a "house slave." Patricia Hill Collins remarks, "the Mammy was, created to justify the economic exploitation of the house slaves and

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sustained to explain Black women's long-standing restriction to domestic service; the mammy image represents the normative yardstick used to evaluate all black women's behavior"<sup>2</sup> (Sewell, 2012). This portrayal aimed to obscure the harsh realities of slavery by promoting a comforting fiction: the notion that enslaved people were content and well-treated in their subservient roles. Hill Collins' analysis also underscores how these stereotypes were not just cultural representations but also tools of social and economic control. By establishing the mammy as the ideal, it created an impossible standard that confined Black women to roles of servitude and domesticity. Any deviation from this ideal, such as exhibiting sexual autonomy or independence, was met with harsh societal judgment, often through the lens of the Jezebel stereotype. By presenting Black women as either hypersexual beings or nurturing caretakers, these stereotypes worked together to dehumanize and control Black women. The dichotomy between the Jezebel and the mammy caricatures mirrors the Madonna/ whore archetypes, where women are categorized into rigid and opposing roles.

During the Reconstruction era, the "contented slave" myth grew evermore comforting for White Southerners who resisted the social and economic upheavals promised by abolition. This reimagining served to gloss over the brutal realities of slavery and to portray the relationship between enslavers and the enslaved as harmonious and mutually respectful. At this point, the mammy figure evolved into a nostalgic symbol of the "Old South," embodying a romanticized vision of antebellum life. She was reimagined as a benevolent and loyal servant who chose to stay with her former enslavers out of genuine affection and duty. This way, they could deny the inherent violence and oppression of slavery, instead framing it as a system of familial bonds and loyalty. The mammy's portrayal as a loving, selfless figure who preferred servitude to freedom was a deliberate attempt to justify the continuation of racial inequality and to resist the social changes being demanded by Reconstruction and the broader movement toward civil rights for Black Americans. The post-war adaptation of the mammy caricature served several purposes. It provided white Southerners with a sense of continuity and stability, suggesting that white supremacy would persist in a modernized form despite the upheaval of Reconstruction. Additionally, it reinforced the belief that African Americans were naturally suited for domestic labor, thereby legitimizing the new forms of racial subjugation that arose in the Jim Crow South. By promoting the mammy figure, Southern whites could maintain an appearance of benevolence while enforcing segregation and disenfranchisement. This image was a calculated effort to romanticize slavery and downplay its brutality, portraying Black women as inherently suited for domestic labor and loyal to their white employers.

Soon thereafter, depictions of the mammy would enter the realm of commercial advertising, where they would be used to market a wide range of domestic products. The most iconic example is the Aunt Jemima brand, introduced in the late 19th century.

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<sup>2</sup> Love and Theft by Eric Lott

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The creation of Aunt Jemima can be traced back to 1889 when Chris Rutt and Charles Underwood, the founders of the Pearl Milling Company, were looking for a catchy name and image for their new ready-mix pancake flour. They chose "Aunt Jemima" after hearing a song of the same name performed by a minstrel show comedian in blackface. Minstrel shows were popular entertainment at the time, known for their demeaning and stereotypical portrayals of African Americans, including the mammy figure. The commercialization of Aunt Jemima began in earnest when the Pearl Milling Company was acquired by the R.T. Davis Milling Company in 1890. Recognizing the marketing potential of Aunt Jemima, Davis hired Nancy Green, a former slave from Kentucky, to portray Aunt Jemima at the 1893 World's Columbian Exposition in Chicago. Green's performances, which included cooking demonstrations and storytelling, were a resounding success, drawing large crowds and solidifying Aunt Jemima's place in American consumer culture. Green's portrayal established the character as a friendly and welcoming figure, embodying the mammy stereotype. As the brand grew, Aunt Jemima's image became more widely circulated through advertising. Early print advertisements and packaging featured illustrations of Aunt Jemima that emphasized her servile and nurturing qualities, reinforcing the mammy caricature. The character was depicted as a devoted cook who happily served white families, perpetuating the myth of the contented Black servant. With her kerchiefed head and broad smile, Aunt Jemima became a familiar and comforting image for white consumers, symbolizing the supposed gentility and benevolence of the Old South. The character's popularity was bolstered by an aggressive marketing campaign that included appearances at fairs and expos, print advertisements, and eventually radio and television commercials. In 1926, the Quaker Oats Company purchased the Aunt Jemima brand and continued to expand its reach. Quaker Oats introduced a series of radio commercials featuring Aunt Jemima, further embedding the character in American culture. The radio ads, like the earlier print ads, emphasized Aunt Jemima's association with wholesome, home-cooked meals and Southern hospitality. The brand's success was also driven by its adaptability. In the mid-20th century, as television became a dominant medium, Aunt Jemima transitioned to the screen, appearing in commercials that reached millions of households. Television commercials showcased Aunt Jemima's warmth and culinary expertise, reinforcing her image as the ultimate domestic caretaker. Actresses such as Edith Wilson, Ethel Ernestine Harper, and later Aylene Lewis took on the role of Aunt Jemima in these commercials, each contributing to the character's enduring appeal. During this period, Quaker Oats also updated Aunt Jemima's image to keep pace with changing social norms. While the core elements of the mammy stereotype remained, her appearance was slightly modernized. However, these changes were primarily superficial, as the character continued to represent the same comforting, subservient figure that had been popularized in earlier decades. The widespread recognition and appeal of Aunt Jemima made it one of the most enduring and recognizable brands in American history. This commercialization not only solidified the mammy caricature in the public imagination but also commodified Black womanhood, reducing it to a marketing tool. The widespread

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use of this stereotype in advertising reinforced its legitimacy and acceptance, further entrenching racist perceptions of Black women.

Contemporary artists have increasingly turned to reclaiming and reinterpreting historical stereotypes to challenge and subvert their reductive portrayals. By engaging with these stereotypes, they create nuanced works that reveal the complexity and depth of the individuals once confined to simplistic representations. This process of reclamation often involves addressing and deconstructing the very ambiguities embedded in these stereotypes, transforming them into platforms for empowerment and critical commentary. Betye Saar's *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* and Faith Ringgold's *Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima?* are seminal examples of this artistic reclamation. Saar's work recontextualizes the Mammy figure from a symbol of oppression into one of resistance and strength, using mixed media to challenge the stereotype's derogatory origins. Her piece features Aunt Jemima holding a broom in one hand and a rifle in the other, a powerful statement of agency and self-defense. Similarly, Ringgold's artwork confronts the Mammy stereotype through a narrative approach, presenting Aunt Jemima as a dynamic character rather than a static caricature. By infusing the stereotype with personal stories and emotions, Ringgold exposes the complexity of Black women's experiences. Both artists use ambiguity in their work to disrupt traditional narratives and reveal deeper truths. Saar's assemblage combines familiar elements of the Mammy figure with unexpected symbols of power and resistance, creating a multifaceted critique that challenges viewers to rethink their assumptions. Ringgold's use of narrative and vibrant visuals similarly complicates the stereotype, offering a more nuanced portrayal that acknowledges the real lives and struggles behind the caricature. Through their innovative approaches, Saar and Ringgold not only reclaim the Mammy figure but also use ambiguity as a tool to uncover and express the rich, multifaceted realities of Black identities.

*The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* is a mixed-media assemblage created by Betye Saar in 1972. The artwork is housed in a shallow wooden box measuring approximately 11.75 x 8 x 2.75 inches. Inside the box, Saar combines various objects to create a provocative piece. Assemblage gained popularity due to its potential for political and social commentary. Artists used found objects to make statements about society, culture, and politics. This was particularly relevant during the social upheavals of the 1960s and 1970s when artists sought to address issues such as civil rights, gender equality, and anti-war sentiments through their art. In this context, Betye Saar's use of assemblage in *Liberation of Aunt Jemima* was both timely and moving. By the early 1970s, Saar had been collecting racist imagery for some time, driven by a desire to confront and critique these pervasive stereotypes. Her discovery of the particular "mammy" figurine she used for *Liberation of Aunt Jemima* was significant. The figurine, originally sold as a notepad and pencil holder targeted at housewives for jotting notes or grocery lists, was a stark example of how such racist caricatures were commercialized and integrated into everyday life. The plastic "mammy" figurine wears a red and white



checked headscarf, complete with a floral dress and a polka-dotted scarf. The colors are jarring, with bright reds, yellows, and blues throughout the clothing. The use of red is particularly striking; psychologically and in nature, red often signals danger, evoking a sense of alarm and unease. Its bright and garish colors bear a striking resemblance to a clown, creating a jarring juxtaposition between supposed joy and underlying terror. This overall contributes to its unsettling and uncanny presence. The deep black of the figure's skin stands in stark contrast to the vibrant colors of her attire, reminiscent of blackface in minstrel shows, where exaggerated depictions of Black people were disgustingly used to entertain white audiences. Her lips are bright red and overlined, and the overpowering colors and patterns give her a monstrous appearance. The repetition of red, resembling blood, further adds to the horror, making the figure appear not just unsettling but almost nightmarish. This monstrous depiction is not accidental, but a deliberate design choice meant to dehumanize and ridicule. The garish colors and exaggerated features evoke the imagery of clowns, who are often associated with both comedy and fear due to their unnatural appearance and behavior. Her teeth look almost spiked, adding to the caricature's exaggerated and dehumanizing features. The figure's round, hungry eyes, and grotesque smiling face portray black women as animalistic, a tool to inspire fear and reinforce racist stereotypes. But Saar saw the potential to transform this object from a symbol of servitude into one of resistance and empowerment. By repurposing the figurine, Saar not only reclaimed the image of Aunt Jemima but also subverted its original intent.

A significant aspect of this artistic exploration is the concept of the uncanny, as introduced by Sigmund Freud. Freud described the uncanny as something that is simultaneously familiar and strange, evoking a sense of discomfort and cognitive dissonance. This feeling arises when something familiar is rendered unfamiliar, challenging our perceptions and assumptions. Betye Saar employs the uncanny in her work *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* by taking a well-known stereotype and infusing it with elements that disturb its traditional context. In *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*, Saar uses the uncanny to transform the comforting and servile image of Aunt Jemima into a figure that is unsettling and powerful. The familiar image of Aunt Jemima, often associated with the mammy stereotype, is presented with elements that disrupt its conventional narrative. By placing a rifle and a raised fist in her hands, Saar adds an unexpected layer of complexity and defiance to the figure, evoking the uncanny by merging the known with the unfamiliar. This juxtaposition creates a tension between the stereotype's historical roots and its new, empowered representation. The uncanny effect in Saar's work forces viewers to confront the contradictions inherent in the Aunt Jemima stereotype. The transformation from a passive, smiling figure to one that exudes strength, and resistance compels viewers to question their preconceived notions about the character and the cultural history it represents. Saar's use of the uncanny not only challenges the stereotype's historical narrative but also invites viewers to consider the latent power and agency within the caricature. By creating this sense of unease and unfamiliarity, Saar effectively uses the uncanny to disrupt the viewer's expectations and

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prompt a reevaluation of cultural symbols. The integration of the uncanny into Saar's work enhances its ambiguity by blurring the lines between the original stereotype and its reimagined form. This ambiguity is crucial, as it opens multiple interpretations and discussions about the role of stereotypes in society. The unsettling combination of traditional and revolutionary elements in Saar's assemblage creates a space for dialogue and reflection, compelling viewers to grapple with the complexities of racial representation and the historical narratives that underpin them. By employing the uncanny, Saar encourages a deeper examination of how stereotypes have been used to both oppress and empower, highlighting the multifaceted nature of cultural symbols.

The first adjustment that she made to the original object was to fill the woman's left hand, which was originally fashioned to hold a pencil, with a gun. The rifle is black with silver detailing, standing as tall as the broom she carries in her right hand. The broom has a brown handle, with a green-colored hay bottom, complete with vertical lines, adding detail. The clip of a hand grenade appears in the gap between her body and right arm. In the context of the 1970s, a period marked by the Civil Rights Movement and the rise of Black Power, the rifle symbolizes militant resistance and the fight for justice. This transformation is particularly poignant considering the Black Panther Party's influence during this period. The Black Panther Party, founded in 1966 by Huey Newton and Bobby Seale, was a revolutionary organization that sought to address systemic racism, police brutality, and economic injustice faced by Black communities. They were known for their militant stance and willingness to bear arms for self-defense, embodying a powerful symbol of resistance and empowerment. The juxtaposition of the rifle and broom in the reimagined Aunt Jemima transforms her from a passive, subservient caricature into an empowered, active participant in the struggle for equality. The juxtaposition of the rifle and broom highlights the difference between the stereotypically submissive "mammy" figure, and the reimagined Aunt Jemima.

Also, instead of a notepad, Saar placed a vintage postcard into the figurine's skirt. This postcard shows a black woman holding a mixed-race child, a poignant representation of the sexual assault and subjugation of black female slaves by white men. The woman in the postcard, embodying the "mammy" figure, appears more approachable than the altered figurine. She has an inviting smile, though she holds a crying baby, which adds a layer of complexity to her demeanor. This combination creates a sense of ambiguity: while the woman's smile is comforting, it is undercut by the crying child and the context of sexual violence and exploitation. The familiar image of the mammy is thus destabilized, becoming both comforting and unsettling. The figurine itself enhances this sense of the uncanny. With two differently sized eyes, it evokes an almost familiar but disconcerting presence. The uncanny nature of the figurine thus serves to challenge and disrupt the comforting myths of the mammy figure, revealing the underlying violence and exploitation masked by such stereotypes. Her attire includes the stereotypical headscarf and a red and orange striped shirt. In contrast to the bright and jarring colors of the mammy figurine holding the broom and rifle, the colors in the postcard are more peaceful and subdued, contributing to a deceptively



serene atmosphere. She stands in front of a yellow picket fence and a large green bush, elements that evoke a sense of domestic tranquility. However, this serene setting belies the underlying historical trauma and exploitation that black women endured during slavery. The postcard is a stark reminder of the brutal realities faced by enslaved women, who were often subjected to sexual violence and forced to care for the children born from these assaults. Moreover, Saar collaged a raised fist over the postcard, invoking the symbol of Black Power. The raised fist, a symbol of strength, solidarity, and resistance, contrasts sharply with the image of subjugation depicted on the postcard. This juxtaposition transforms the postcard into a statement of resilience and empowerment. By overlaying the fist, Saar reclaims the narrative, emphasizing the strength and defiance of black women in the face of historical oppression. This element of the artwork reinforces the overall theme of transformation and liberation, turning symbols of servitude and victimization into icons of empowerment and resistance.

The altered figurine was then placed in a brown wooden box, standing on cotton and cotton pods. There are mirrors lining the inner borders of the box, and a red outline against the wooden frame. Cotton, a key crop in the American South, is inextricably linked to the history of slavery and the exploitation of black labor. During the antebellum period, enslaved African Americans were forced to work in cotton fields under brutal conditions, making cotton a symbol of their oppression and suffering. By incorporating cotton into the assemblage, Saar evokes this painful history and highlights the economic foundation of slavery in America. The cotton-filled box can also be seen as a form of enclosure, symbolizing the confinement and limited roles imposed on black women through the mammy stereotype. The wooden box, filled with cotton, creates a visual and conceptual frame that encapsulates the figurine, mirroring how societal expectations and stereotypes have constrained black women's identities and opportunities.

Lastly, Saar set up her figurine against a wallpaper of pancake labels featuring Aunt Jemima, with the portrait repeated over and over in the background, each instance of the figure staring directly at the viewer. In the portrait, Aunt Jemima is smiling, wearing the same headscarf as the other figurines, but this time it is just her neck up, not her whole body. She looks youthful, with glowing skin, and smiles as if in laughter. This repetitive wallpaper serves as a stark reminder of how deeply ingrained and pervasive these racist stereotypes are in American culture. The ubiquitous presence of Aunt Jemima on pancake labels is transformed by Saar into a critical commentary on the commodification and normalization of racist imagery. It creates visual and psychological pressure, compelling viewers to acknowledge the omnipresence of these racist symbols. The transformation of Aunt Jemima from a symbol of subservience into one of strength and defiance is a profound act of reclamation.

*Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima?* is a notable work by artist Faith Ringgold, as it marks the beginning of her iconic story quilts. Created in 1983, this piece is made with acrylic paint and dyed-painted fabric. In the 1980s, Ringgold transitioned from oil paintings to story quilts, marking a significant shift in her artistic practice. Ringgold's family history with quilting is deeply intertwined with her artistic journey and cultural

heritage. Central to this lineage is her mother, Willi Posey Jones, who was a skilled couturier in Harlem. Willi's mastery of sewing and design not only provided for the family but also instilled in Ringgold a profound appreciation for textile arts from an early age. This expertise was not just a profession but a cultural inheritance, passed down through generations of resilient women. The tradition of quilting in Ringgold's family can be traced back through her maternal line, reaching back to Susan Shannon, an enslaved 19th-century dressmaker. Susan Shannon's artistry and craftsmanship, despite the oppressive conditions of slavery, laid the foundation for the family's enduring connection to sewing and textile arts. Her skill and ingenuity served as a testament to the creativity and resilience of Black women throughout history. For Ringgold, quilting became a medium through which she could honor this heritage while also challenging societal norms and stereotypes. Historically, quilt-making was one of the few artistic outlets permitted to Black slaves, as quilts were considered practical items that could be sold. They also have deep roots in African American history. During slavery, quilts were often used as a means of communication and storytelling. They served to pass down stories and preserve cultural heritage in a form that was both functional and artistic. Quilting is also strongly associated with women, who were the primary producers of this utilitarian art. By incorporating quilt-making into her work, Ringgold connected her art to the feminist movement, highlighting the importance of women's contributions to both art and culture. By embracing this medium, Ringgold paid homage to an art form deeply rooted in the experiences of Black and feminist communities.

*Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima?* measures 90 x 80 inches in total, complete with 56 square panels arranged in a grid-like structure. Each panel tells a part of the story, with specific sections dedicated to paintings, patterned fabric, and text. The 28 panels that contain paintings of people are detailed and expressive, capturing a range of emotions among the characters. There are a mix of these portraits featured in the narrative: characters from the story, as well as African American women adorned in beautiful dresses lining the border. These figures are rendered in a stiff frontal pose, with a touch of folk art, reflecting the quilt's storytelling roots. The figures from the story pop against a bright yellow background, while Aunt Jemima and her parents stand against a black background. The figures not featured in the story stand against a brown background, a similar shade to their skin tone. Women are depicted in unique, colorful dresses with headpieces and jewelry, contrasting with the simpler attire of the girls. Each dress has a unique pattern, adding to the piece. The 18 panels with patterned fabric designs add texture and visual variety. These patterns include traditional African American quilting motifs, connecting the piece to its cultural heritage. It is split into eight sections, each section having a different pattern. Many of these panels have the same eight patterns but in different orders. There is a mix of reds, blues, and greens. The crisp lines separating the designs reinforce the quilt design. The 10 text panels, including the central title panel, feature Ringgold's handwritten narrative. The handwriting adds a personal and intimate feel to the quilt, inviting viewers to engage closely with the story. The text depicting the story is black against a pure white background. The text panels are numbered in a way where the viewer must read the

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story from the top right to the bottom, then the top left to bottom. This way, it allows you to fully take in the beautiful designs and see each character as you make your way through the narrative. The title panel stands out with colorful highlights in blue, pink, and orange.

Through her artwork, Ringgold turns Aunt Jemima, the well-known “mammy” stereotype, into a successful African American businesswoman. The story of Jemima Blakey's life as a business owner, independent thinker, and strong matriarch starkly contrasts the maligned Aunt Jemima character, often seen as the most degrading Black female stereotype. She is now portrayed with a family, hopes, and dreams, illustrating that she is a woman of power, not one to be ridiculed or stereotyped. By reclaiming Aunt Jemima's narrative and reshaping it into one of strength and dignity, Ringgold invites viewers to reconsider and appreciate the complexity of Black female identity. Ringgold masterfully employs ambiguity to challenge and recontextualize the stereotype of Aunt Jemima. The title itself is ironic and provocative, suggesting a threat while simultaneously questioning the fear rooted in racist perceptions. Ringgold's depiction of Aunt Jemima diverges from the traditional, subservient image and instead presents her as an independent and multifaceted character. This transformation is both a direct threat to racist Southern views and a subtle affirmation of Jemima's strong family values, creating a layered ambiguity. Jemima's portrayal as a businesswoman and matriarch who supports her family undercuts the notion that she is merely a domestic servant, infusing her with dignity and complexity. The juxtaposition of Jemima's nurturing role with her new identity as an empowered, self-sufficient woman disrupts the viewer's expectations, creating an unsettling, thought-provoking experience. This ambiguity and redefinition compel the viewer to confront their own preconceptions and the historical context of Aunt Jemima, transforming her from a caricature into a symbol of strength and resilience.

*Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima?* stands as a complex reinterpretation of racial stereotypes within the socio-political framework of the neoliberal era. The title of the work cleverly references Edward Albee's play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* itself an exploration of the dissonance between reality and illusion. This reference suggests a deeper interrogation of identity and societal roles, mirroring how Ringgold challenges the simplistic caricature of Aunt Jemima by presenting her as a multidimensional character. During the 1980s, neoliberal policies emphasized individualism, economic self-sufficiency, and the dismantling of collective welfare systems. In this context, Ringgold reimagines Aunt Jemima as an entrepreneur, subverting her historical role as a domestic servant by granting her agency and success in the business world. This transformation reflects the neoliberal ideal of self-reliance while simultaneously critiquing the era's limited opportunities for marginalized groups. Ringgold's use of narrative quilting weaves together personal and communal histories, drawing attention to the complexities and contradictions of Black identity within a capitalist society. The ambiguity in her work arises from this interplay between empowerment and critique, inviting viewers to question the validity of the stereotypes and explore the potential for redefinition. By invoking the title *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?* Ringgold underscores

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the challenge of confronting uncomfortable truths and the potential for artistic expression to disrupt entrenched narratives. This title suggests an artistic and intellectual liberation akin to the themes explored by Virginia Woolf, calling for a reevaluation of how history and identity are constructed and understood in the context of both personal and collective experiences. Ringgold's work not only reclaims the Aunt Jemima figure but also highlights the ongoing struggle to navigate identity and empowerment in a rapidly changing socio-economic landscape.

Faith Ringgold's "Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima?" and Betye Saar's "Liberation of Aunt Jemima" both subvert the stereotypical image of Aunt Jemima, but they do so through different mediums, each with its own significance and impact. Ringgold's choice of quilting as her medium is deeply rooted in ancestral and personal traditions. Quilting, traditionally a craft passed down through generations of women, particularly in African American communities, carries with it a sense of history, continuity, and domestic artistry. By using this medium, Ringgold connects her work to a lineage of storytelling and cultural preservation, transforming the quilt into a powerful narrative tool. This method allows her to embed personal and collective histories into the fabric of the piece, creating a rich tapestry that speaks to the resilience and creativity of Black women. In contrast, Betye Saar's use of assemblage in "Liberation of Aunt Jemima" reflects a different historical and cultural context. Assemblage, which gained popularity in the 20th century, involves the use of found objects to create new, often politically charged meanings. Saar's incorporation of everyday items—such as the original notepad holder figurine, a rifle, and a vintage postcard—into her artwork creates a jarring juxtaposition that challenges and redefines the viewer's understanding of these objects. Assemblage as a medium allows for a direct confrontation with the past, repurposing and recontextualizing objects to critique societal norms and stereotypes. While quilting connects to ancestral roots and personal history, assemblage taps into a broader cultural dialogue, using the language of modern art to dismantle oppressive imagery and provoke critical reflection.

Faith Ringgold and Betye Saar, while both engaging with themes of racial stereotypes and empowerment, reflect different socio-political contexts in their work. Ringgold's *Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima?* is particularly influenced by the neoliberal era of the 1980s, characterized by the policies of leaders like Margaret Thatcher and Ronald Reagan, which emphasized free-market capitalism, individual entrepreneurship, and reduced government intervention in social welfare. In this context, Ringgold reimagines the Aunt Jemima figure not as a passive symbol of servitude but as an entrepreneur and businesswoman, embodying the ideals of self-reliance and economic empowerment. Her narrative quilt transforms the Mammy stereotype into a story of agency and entrepreneurship, reflecting the neoliberal values of personal success and resilience within a capitalist framework. In contrast, Betye Saar's work, such as *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*, is deeply rooted in the Civil Rights Movement of the 1960s and 1970s, a time of collective struggle for racial equality and social justice. Saar's art reflects the era's focus on dismantling systemic oppression and advocating for civil rights. Her use of the Mammy figure, equipped with symbols of resistance like a rifle,

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highlights the fight against racial stereotypes and the demand for empowerment and liberation. Saar's work emphasizes collective activism and the transformation of oppressive symbols into tools of empowerment, mirroring the Civil Rights Movement's goals of achieving equality and justice through social change.

Faith Ringgold and Betye Saar both use ambiguity in their art to challenge racial stereotypes, yet they do so through distinct methods that reflect their unique artistic visions and socio-political contexts. Ringgold's *Who's Afraid of Aunt Jemima?* employs ambiguity primarily through its title, which references Edward Albee's play *Who's Afraid of Virginia Woolf?*. This allusion invites viewers to consider the complexities and dualities within the narrative. The title suggests a confrontation with fear and societal norms, much like Albee's play explores the tension between appearance and reality. By invoking Virginia Woolf, a symbol of intellectual and feminist liberation, Ringgold prompts a reevaluation of the Aunt Jemima stereotype, transforming her into a multidimensional character with agency and depth. This ambiguity encourages viewers to explore the intersection of personal and cultural identities within the neoliberal emphasis on entrepreneurship and self-sufficiency. In contrast, Betye Saar uses ambiguity in *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* through her choice of materials and symbolic elements. Saar reclaims the Mammy figure by arming her with a rifle and a broom, creating a juxtaposition between domesticity and militancy. This duality disrupts the traditional perception of Aunt Jemima as a submissive, servile figure and instead presents her as a symbol of empowerment and resistance. The rifle represents defiance and the potential for liberation, while the broom signifies the domestic roles historically imposed on Black women. By combining these elements, Saar infuses the work with ambiguity, challenging viewers to confront the contradictions and tensions within the Mammy stereotype and the broader historical narratives of racial oppression.

By reimagining these figures, Faith Ringgold and Betye Saar confront the historical and cultural narratives that have long dehumanized Black women. Their works provide a platform for reclaiming and redefining identities that have been distorted and diminished by racist caricatures. By transforming the mammy figure from a symbol of subservience into one of strength and defiance, they expose the fallacies of the stereotypes and highlight the enduring spirit of resistance against oppression. This act of reclamation is not merely an artistic endeavor but a political statement, emphasizing the necessity of revisiting and revising historical portrayals to foster a more accurate and respectful understanding of Black womanhood.

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