Re-membering the Mammy in Betye Saar's Works

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Fig. 1: Hattie McDaniel as Mammy in *Gone with the Wind* (1939). Getty Images free access

Stereotyping Black Women as Aunt Jemima/ Mammy/ Domestic Help

The Mammy has been enshrined as the paragon of domesticity, loyalty and subservience in the popular American cultural imagination. The Mammy in Margaret Mitchell's *Gone with the Wind* (1936) and Hattie McDaniel's (1895-1952) immaculate performance in David O. Selznick's adaptation of it (1939, fig. 1) are some of the more memorable and resounding instances of this figuration. Scores of advertisements such as those of pancake flours and maple syrups along with commonplace objects such as cookie jars, bells, and/or salt shakers in the post-Emancipation era further entrenched the stereotype of Black women as maternal, selfless figures who are perennially grinning. Visually Mammy/Aunt Jemima[1] is codified as a soot black, obese

1 Although the Mammy figure is associated more with the nursery and child rearing and Aunt Jemima with the kitchen and is known for her exquisite culinary skills, I have used the two terms interchangeably in this article. Both these figures operate within networks of domesticity and the difference between these two can be considered to be negligible. My arguments about stereotyping of Black women are applicable to the figures of both Aunt Jemima and the Mammy.

woman who is dressed in a (red) bandana, oversized dress, and an apron. Belying common assumptions and expectations that anti-Black racist memorabilia are a thing of the past, Chico Colvard in his recent documentary, *Black Memorabilia* (2017), makes a shocking discovery: in order to cater to the steady (global) demand, "Black collectibles" such as Mammy cookie jars, bells, Jolly Nigger Banks, continue to be freshly produced, rather mass--produced. Moreover, these newly manufactured racially charged objects are often marketed as antiques.

The Mammy stereotype has been deployed as a tool by the white heteropatriarchal capitalist society to camouflage, maintain and justify the oppression of Black women on account of their race, gender and class in ante and postbellum American society.[2] Hazel Carby maintains that the objective of stereotypes is "not to reflect or represent a reality but to function as a disguise, or mystification, of objective social relations". These "controlling images" make "racism, sexism, poverty and the other forms of social injustice appear to be natural and inevitable parts of everyday life" (Carby in Collins 2000: 69). Furthermore, anti-Black racist ideology negates the reality of Black women's intellectualism, aspirations for upward mobility and competence to excel in jobs other than low paid domestic work. These result in the overrepresentation of Black women in the domestic work and service industry from post Emancipation to current times.

While there has been an uptick in the demand for anti-Black memorabilia, Black artists and intellectuals have made sustained efforts to counter the demeaning visual iconography. In June 2020, America's 130 years old prominent food brand, Quaker Oats,[3] decided to dispense with the brand name, Aunt Jemima that was deployed to market pancakes and syrups. They issued a public statement underscoring that "Aunt Jemima's origins are based on a racial stereotype" (cited in Kessler 2020). Even though this might be a step in the right direction, much needs to be done. I examine the enduring legacy of this demeaning anti-Black stereotype in addition to tracing how Saar deploys a plethora of found objects, anti-Black collectibles, vintage photographs and textual components to realize her goal of turning insidious images into tools of empowerment. I also unravel how Betye Saar's (*1926) treatment of these images has changed or evolved over the years. Saar's invention of the gun-toting Aunt Jemima in her iconic work *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* (1972) inspired later Black women artists such as Renee Cox. Saar resumed work on the Aunt Jemima stereotype in 1998 and 2000 with her two exhibitions, *Workers + Warriors: The Return of Aunt Jemima* (1998) and *In Service: A Version of Survival* (2000). In addition to dismantling the anti-Black stereotypes, Saar excavates the harrowing memories of the Middle Passage, enslavement, and Jim Crow. She uses the assemblage to commemorate the stories of Black women's labour, struggles, and resilience that are usually expunged from the dominant discourse.

2 For a detailed discussion on the issue see Shaweta Nanda 2014: 291- 304.
3 For details see https://www.nbcnews.com/news/us-news/aunt-jemima-brand-will-change-name-remove-image-quaker-says-n1231260.

The Advent of the Gun-toting Mammy

Fig. 2: Betye Saar: *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* (1972), assemblage, 11,75 x 8 x 2,75 inch.

Picture not available, for viewing please click on: https://revolution.berkeley.edu/liberation-aunt-jemima/

Geared at collating community responses to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.'s (1929-68) assassination in 1968, *Rainbow Sign*,[4] a cultural center, rolled out a call for artists to showcase their works on "Black Heroes". Devastated and enraged at Dr King's demise, Saar utilized this opportunity to create *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* (1972, fig. 2), which she designated her first openly political art work. Saar's choice of subject and the manner in which she chooses to respond to the call to commemorate Black heroes is pertinent.[5] Celebration of Dr. King's life and his legacy of non-violent direct action would have been an obvious choice. However, in *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*, Saar repurposes quotidian household objects. Contrary to their usual ends of inscribing and perpetuating the humiliating stereotypes, Saar deploys them to draw attention to the unsung labor, toils and experiences of otherwise forgotten Black women.

A popular pancake advertisement depicting Aunt Jemima wearing her classic red bandana forms the background of the assemblage. An Aunt Jemima figurine, meant for holding a pen and a notepad, forms the foreground of the work. Saar replaces the notepad with three things. First, is the postcard that depicts a Black Mammy in the conventional dress of the house servant. However, challenging the popular representations that present Black women taking care of their white wards, this postcard shows, what Saar describes as, "a mammy with a mulatto child, which is another way Black women were exploited during slavery" (*Berkeley Revolution*).[6] Thus, Saar visually foregrounds the

4 For detailed information on the history and legacy of the *Rainbow Sign* and how it hosted prominent Black artists such as Romare Bearden, Elizabeth Catlett, Betye Saar, Maya Angelou, and James Baldwin, refer to Max Lopez and Tessa Rissacher's "*The Rainbow Sign*." https://revolution.berkeley.edu/projects/rainbow-sign/. Saar spoke at length about the creation of Aunt Jemima: "I'm the kind of person who recycles materials but I also recycle emotions and feelings.... And I had a great deal of anger about the segregation and the racism in this country." (http://www.artnet.com/artists/betye-saar/)

5 Saar details how and why she created *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*: "I created *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* in 1972 for the exhibition "Black Heroes" at the *Rainbow Sign* Cultural Center, Berkeley, CA (1972). The show was organized around community responses to the 1968 Martin Luther King Jr. assassination. This work allowed me to channel my righteous anger at not only the great loss of MLK Jr., but at the lack of representation of black artists, especially black women artists. I transformed the derogatory image of Aunt Jemima into a female warrior figure, fighting for Black liberation and women's rights. Fifty years later she has finally been liberated herself. And, yet more work still needs to be done."

6 In an interview cited at the *Berkeley Revolution*, digital archive, Saar explains different components of the assemblage: "For many years, I had collected derogatory images: postcards, a cigar-box label, an ad for beans, Darkie toothpaste. I found a little Aunt Jemima mammy figure, a caricature of a Black slave, like those later used to advertise pancakes. She had a broom in one hand and, on the other side, I gave her a rifle. In front of her, I placed a little postcard, of a mammy with a mulatto child, which is another way Black women were exploited during slavery".

oft hidden history of sexual exploitation and rape of the enslaved Black women by white men. Simultaneously, Saar bursts the myth of asexuality of the Black Mammy and also undermines the narrative of the purported sexual unattractiveness of Black women.

Second, the lower half of the postcard is covered with a white sheet. The sheet represents her domestic duties. Beyond this obvious symbolism, the white sheet is also reminiscent of the Ku-Klux-Klan,[7] a white supremacist group which has been described by many as an exemplum of homegrown white terrorism.[8] Klan members were often dressed (and pictured in Hollywood) in white gowns and white pointed hoods especially when conducting their night raids wherein they terrorized and/or lynched Blacks. The organization was formulated with the explicit aim to reinstate white supremacy and reverse the gains made during Reconstruction.

Third, references to the enslavement are littered in the form of the cotton that is strewn in front of the Aunt Jemima figurine because Africans were enslaved primarily to work as bonded, unpaid workers on the US-American plantations. Within the space of an assemblage, Saar deftly overturns the visual regime of servitude, servility and disempowerment by superimposing a Black fist (emblematic of the Black Power Movement), on the white sheet. Moreover, Black Power fist is hoisted around the band that has colours of the Black Nationalist Flag that is red, yellow, black and green.[9] The flag symbolizes Black political activism and struggle against racism and oppression. Saar further strengthens the militant iconography of the work by arming Aunt Jemima with a black rifle in one hand and a huge broom in the other. The broom transforms into a weapon of self-defense and/or attack instead of simply depicting Jemima's domesticated status. These three elements- the Black fist, hues of the Black liberation flag and the gun- indicate to the spectator that Black people, instead of being subjugated, will now retaliate against the violence that has been committed against them with ferocity. Saar deploys irony and sarcasm to underscore the subversiveness of this reconfigured stereotype. She juxtaposes the gun- an obvious emblem of her militant disposition- with the broom and naive grinning of the Mammy that are indicative not only of her servitude as they are now reconfigured as instruments of power.[10]

The Liberation of Aunt Jemima is a groundbreaking work for two reasons. First, Saar flips the script on the derogatory Mammy stereotype and recasts her as a militant icon for Black liberation. Second, in the conflation of the worlds of art and politics, the work showcases the influence of Black Arts movement, the artistic wing of the Black Power Movement. Both movements derive their intellectual synergies from Black Nationalist leader Malcolm X's (1929-1965) vision. Stressing the significance of the cultural arena for attaining Black empowerment, Malcolm X argued that Black people "must launch a cultural revolution to *unbrainwash* an entire people" (Robson 2008: 9).[11] It

7 In *I'll Bend but Not Break*, Saar uses a similar white sheet and stitches KKK on the sheet to make the connection between the two explicit.

8 Finlay Greig in his report for *The Scotsman* reports that more than 140,000 people have signed the petition for KKK to be "officially labeled as a terrorist organization." The petition states: "Black Americans have suffered the most under this terror group. Terrorism is the use of violence and intimidation in pursuit of political aims... We ask if ISIS or ISIL is labeled a terrorist group for their acts, then surely the KKK fit the clear description of a terrorist." https://www.scotsman.com/news/world/ku-klux-klan-terrorist-organisation-white-supremacist-hisotory-ex plained-kkk-leader-attacks-black-lives-matter-protesters-2879382

9 The Pan-African Flag which is also known as Afro-American Flag or the Black Liberation Flag was formally adopted by UNAI -ACL (Universal Negro Improvement Association and African Communities League) on August 13, 1920.

10 I am indebted to Christoph Singler for this argument.

11 Robson proclaims that Black Arts movement was born the day Malcolm X was assassinated.

aims at achieving the goals of self-determination, self-reliance, empowerment and reconnection with the (African) cultural past, and heritage for the Black people. The Arts were conceived as central to the political upliftment of the Black people. Saar integrates these concerns in *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* (1972).

Furthermore, while Saar creates *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* in order to vent her indignation at King's murder, the work exhibits Malcolm X's (1925-1965) influence ideologically. In opposition to King's praxis of non-violence, Malcolm X championed "revolutionary violence" and armed self-defense as the means of securing equality, independence and civil and political rights for Black people. Inspired by Malcolm X, Huey Newton (1942-1989) motivated Blacks to arm themselves for fighting against racialized oppression and police brutality. He argued, "With weapons in our hands, we were no longer their subjects, but their equals".[12] In addition to self-protection, guns played a pivotal role in challenging the contours of racial hierarchy in optical terms too. Eric Baker contends that guns in American culture are signifiers of white supremacy.[13] Thus, the image of Black Panthers (mostly men) openly carrying firearms in public served to challenge white supremacy and conveyed the message of Black empowerment in visual terms. Guns, thus, became props that foregrounded the message of Black empowerment. The convergence between Black Panthers, who were called "gun-toting militants" by their detractors (Morrison 2021[14]), and Saar's gun-toting Jemima allows me to argue that Saar challenges both racial and gender hierarchies.

In addition to re-envisioning the subservient Mammy as a heroic warrior, Saar launches a crusade against demeaning anti-Black stereotypes. She clarifies her mission to "transform and empower negative images into positive information" in a statement cited in LeFalle-Collins (2000: 5).[15] Found objects and advertisements that are often dismissed as trivial, play a crucial role in shaping popular cultural discourse. Trudier Harris observes that in most conventional representations Mammy is associated with kitchen. Kitchen in this case is not only a physical space but also has connotations of tractability, conformity and genuflection (Harris 1982: 172). Saar engages with three diverse representations of Black women in this assemblage using pancake advertisements, the Mammy figurine, and a postcard portraying a Mammy with a mulatto child. However, the Black woman is not located inside the house or pictured in her usual haunts that is the kitchen or nursery, in any of these images. Harris further contends that while the traditional maid is obsequious, reticent and identifies with the status quo, direct political activism is the defining feature of the "Militant" Mammy (Harris 1982: 24). The Militant Mammy has no qualms about resorting to violence overtly in order to fight for rights or to resist oppression. Saar's representation of Aunt Jemima fits in with Harris's delineation of the characteristics of the Militant Mammy. Laced with arms, Saar's Aunt Jemima emerges as a powerful Black heroine and warrior who would dismantle white supremacy. Thus, Saar

12 For details refer to https://humanities.byu.edu/the-black-panthers-performances-of-gun-ownership/.
13 Please see https://humanities.byu.edu/the-black-panthers-performances-of-gun-ownership/.
14 For details refer to https://whyy.org/articles/decades-later-a-new-look-at-black-panthers-and-their-legacy/.
15 Saar writes, "In the late 1960s, I began to collect the derogatory images of African Americans, now called Black Collectibles. I feel these images were important as documentation of how whites have historically perceived African American and how we have been portrayed as caricatures, as objects, as less-than-human. These are manufactured images and objects often were in many cases the only source of how we saw ourselves. The Civil Rights Movement and the murder of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. motivated me to use these images in my art. I began to recycle and transform Sambos, Toms and Mammies in my assemblages. The Mammy, a character invented by whites to portray a female servant, is depicted as obese with exaggerated features.... The "mammy" knew and stayed in her place. In 1972, I attempted to change that "place" by creating the series *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*. My intent was to transform a negative, demeaning figure into a positive, empowered woman who stands confrontational with one hand holding a broom and the other armed for battle. A warrior ready to combat servitude and racism" (Saar 1998: 249).

deploys anti-Black racist images coupled with "contemptible collectibles" (Patricia Turner's term 2002: 5) that have been used by the dominant white capitalist economy and ideological set up to popularize stereotypes.

Legacy of *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*

The Liberation of Aunt Jemima soon became popular. Black intellectual and activist, Angela Davis, famously credited the piece for marking the beginning of the Black women's movement (Sayej 2018). It influenced generations of Black artists such as Jamaican-American artist Renee Cox (*1960). Cox admits that Saar's work propelled her to create *The Liberation of Lady J. and U.B.* (1998, fig. 3).[16] Cox pays homage to Saar's work by using the title of Saar's assemblage as part of the title of her own photomontage. Cox continues Saar's crusade against popular food brands such as *Uncle Ben's Brown Rice* and *Aunt Jemima Pancakes* that ridicule Black bodies and identities for reaping economic benefits. The food boxes of both the items that display the derogatory labels and images form the backdrop of Cox's photographic work. This proceeding unravels how politics, economic abuse, racism, anti-Black stereotypes intersect in commercial advertisements, a crucial component of popular culture. The foreground of the work is occupied by Cox's own incarnation as a superhero named Rajé. Rajé is seen holding the hands of a newer liberated avatar of Aunt Jemima on one side and Uncle Ben on the other. The determined and somber expressions of the three figures along with the manner in which they are striding forward arm-in-arm lend dignity to them. Their upturned and outward gaze also suggests that they are embarking upon a monumental endeavor.

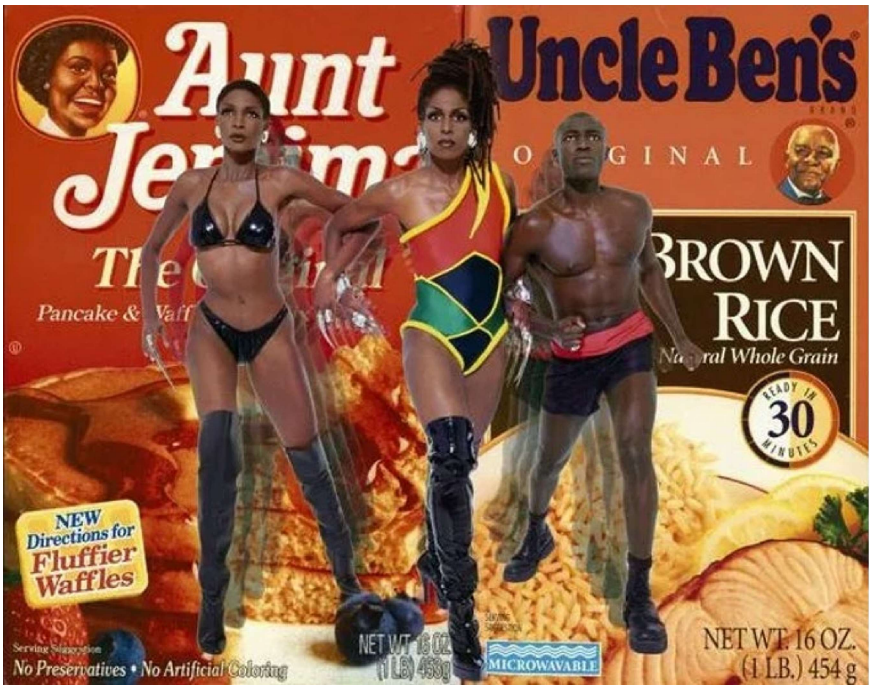

Fig. 3 Renée Cox, *The Liberation of Lady J. and U.B.*, 1998. Cibachrome print, 48 x 60 inch (121,9 x 152,4 cm). Courtesy Renée Cox

16 Cox in her interview with Artress Bethany White (1998: 55).

Rajé has Afro-braids and sports black leather boots that place her in the tradition of Black political resistance because Afro hairstyles, Black berets and leather attire (including boots, and jackets) and Black sunglasses are the pivotal elements of the visual legacy of the Black Panthers in the cultural arena. Moreover, Rajé's superhero bodysuit is black and has other hues (red, yellow and green) associated with Pan-Africanism and the Jamaican national flag. Thus, like Saar's use of the Black fist, Cox also makes her political stand explicit by foregrounding Rajé's braids and colors of Black nationalism in her version of *the liberation of Aunt Jemima*.

Despite their similarities, the manner in which Cox and Saar liberate Aunt Jemima from stereotypical boxes is different. Cox breaks the mold and re-imagines Black supermodel, Roshumba Williams, and actor Rodney Charles as the liberated Aunt Jemima and Uncle Ben, respectively. Cox dresses up these avatars in Black leather clothing associated with the Black Panthers and releases them from the prison of servile smiles and the red bandanas. Released from the age-old boxes of brown rice and maple syrups, Uncle Ben and Aunt Jemima exude strength and youth, appearing younger, muscular, self-possessed and commanding - a far cry from their subservient, older, weaker stereotypical counterparts. Like Saar, Cox also dismantles their (mis)representation as asexual figures. Cox's models exude virility, glamour and pulchritude. In contrast, Saar's empowered Aunt Jemima retains her stereotypical physical characteristics like the obese body, soot black skin, trademark kerchief and sheepish grin, for Saar primarily focusses on the attitudinal shift. Moreover, Cox's rendition of liberation doesn't feature arms or bombs. Instead, she depicts a Black superheroine, Rajé, liberating Lady J. and Uncle B. With sharp protruding nails, all three figures certainly strike a defiant pose. While here they are liberated by another Black figure, Saar underscores Jemima's self-empowerment. Saar chooses to fully arm her Jemima with a pistol, rifle, and her usual broom. Thus, a victim no more, Saar's Aunt Jemima seeks retribution, and becomes a heroine who exercises her agency.

The difference in Saar and Cox's approaches are further reflected in the titles of their works. Unlike Saar who retains Aunt Jemima's name, Cox not only demolishes the stereotypes visually but also transforms their names. She addresses Aunt Jemima as Lady J. It appears that Cox wishes to dissociate her newly empowered figure from the world of servitude. The term "lady" signifies a woman of the upper class, usually a white woman. Thus, Cox underscores Black women's upward mobility. I, however, suggest that the term "lady", especially when used in reference to a Black woman, could be contentious owing to its complex history. Lisa Thompson argues, "conservative sexual behavior is the foundation of the performance of middle-class womanhood" (Lee 2010: vii). The Black Lady model is predicated on emphasizing women's morality or purity while diminishing Black women's sexuality. It adheres to the Victorian view of female sexuality as negative and that of Black female sexuality as the dark, abhorrent, undesirable 'Other' that needs to be restrained and/or decimated. As a result, the respectable Black Lady paradigm, like the stereotype of the Mammy, continues to repress Black female sexuality by upholding the Black woman as an asexual entity. The conception of the "Black Lady" also functions as another "controlling image" (Collins 2000: 69) for it serves to further subjugate Black women instead of liberating them (Patricia Hill Collins 2000: 80, Lisa Thompson 2009: 3 and Shayne Lee 2010). Thus, the new supposedly liberated role model of Lady B. and the anti-Black

stereotypes seem to converge awkwardly instead of being diametrically opposite. Moreover, this new model appears to be more menacing because unlike the Mammy/Aunt Jemima stereotypes that were created by the white heteropatriarchal capitalist order, the Black Lady model emerges from the Black community -the Black bourgeoisie- itself.

The work lends itself to multiple, often contradictory, meanings owing to Cox's use of humor and irony. Richard J. Powell observes Cox stages a "fantastic escape" of two fashion models from the food packages and showcases the "thin line" between stereotypic characterizations and idealized depictions." Cox responds with "humor and ambiguity rather than a solemn denunciation" in order to examine if Black people can truly achieve liberation from the internalized racism (Powell 2002: 231). Cox represents the emancipated avatars of Jemima and Ben as models and/or athletes. Although they get rid from one kind of stereotype (signified by the pancake advertisements), Cox propels the viewer to question if they have attained liberation in this age of cultural commodification of the Black bodies. Thus, these idealized escapes allow space only for limited kinds of alternate possibilities such as sports and fashion industry and preclude the progression of Blacks in scores of other fields such as science, technology, politics, academia, corporate, among others.

Saar's Return to the "Unfinished Business of Aunt Jemima"

One cannot deny the political and legal gains made during the Civil Rights Movement that resulted in desegregation of educational institutions and public facilities along with the prohibition of discrimination in the hiring practices and employment on the basis of race, gender, religion or nationality.[17] Despite the advancement, Saar returns to the subject of contemptible *Black memorabilia* in her works in the late 1990s. She contends that *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* remains an "unfinished business" owing to the "persistent racism" in the United States.[18] Anti-black stereotypes, discrimination in hiring and housing coupled with police brutality, mass incarceration and systematic racism are some of the ways in which Black people continue to experience discrimination and injustice. I argue that Saar's choices concerning the art form and materials are intricately linked with her threefold intellectual project of excavating and honoring her African roots; critiquing European colonization and enslavement of Africans and foregrounding Black women's stories of labor and work that are often expunged and/or denigrated by both capitalist white patriarchy and dominant Black bourgeoisie. I now turn to *Lest We Forget, The Strength Of Tears, The Fragility of Smiles, The Fierceness of Love*, from *Workers + Warriors: The Return of Aunt Jemima* (1998).

17 Civil Rights activism also paved way for Voting Rights Acts of 1965 and Fair Housing Act of 1968 that made discrimination in voting rights and buying and selling of property illegal.

18 Saar explains that incessant racism in the USA in different hues propelled her to return to the subject: "Now at the end of the millennium, I am even more aware of the persistence of racism, especially in the arts, and specifically the current trend of the reinvention of the negative black stereotypical images. I interpret this trend as surfacing the subconscious plantation mentality and a form of controlling black art. In response, I began a new series of assemblages which comprise this exhibition Workers and Warriors: The Return of Aunt Jemima" (Saar 2000).

Black Women's Palimpsest

Lest We Forget (fig. 4) is composed of three ragged and worn-out washboards that have been stacked horizontally. Saar visually traces the dreadful history of the Middle Passage by enlarging the image of the (in) famous British slave ship, Brookes, in the central panel. The image depicts hundreds of Black captives who were fettered and shoehorned in the ship. Raped, abused, beaten, starved, stripped, and their bodies distorted, many of the captives died painful deaths during the arduous journey of the Middle Passage. While the ship represented trade, prosperity, and glory for the English colonizers and imperialist masters, for the Blacks, it meant death, dehumanization, and entombment in a life of endless slavery. Saar's rifle-toting Aunt Jemima returns in this artwork in the panel on the right. The washboard on the left carries a blurry photograph that depicts a Black woman bending over a sink and scrubbing clothes. While the panel on the extreme right instantiates the subversive humor of the first *Aunt Jemima*, the one on the left deploys a vintage photograph to celebrate Black women's labor and resilience.

Fig. 4 Betye Saar, *Lest We Forget, The Strength of Tears, The Fragility of Smiles, The Fierceness of Love*, 1998, Mixed media and wood figure on three vintage boards, 22 ¾ x 30 ¼ x 2 in. (57.8 x 76.8 x 5.1 cm). Courtesy Norton Museum of Art, West Palm Beach, Florida, Purchase, R. H. Norton Trust, 2006.32, Courtesy of Michael Rosenfeld Gallery, LLC, New York, NY. Photo Credit: N/A

This work follows the tradition of the triptych, a format frequently used for religious subjects in Christian churches. Tatty Martin (n.d.) explains that it is used by the artist to present varied perspectives on a subject matter or to narrate a sequence. Since a triptych enables the artist to construct a visual narrative, Saar appropriates this classical art form to create a narrative of Black women's *herstories* in America. She exhumes the traumatic memories, visceral pain and dehumanization endured by

her African ancestors during different points in history including the Middle Passage, enslavement, segregation and the post-civil rights world too. The three interconnected panels of the triptych showcase not only the ridicule and stereotype heaped on Black women in America but also the agony of enslavement and the unending backbreaking labor performed by Black women in menial underpaid jobs.

Composed of both verbal and visual elements, each washboard appears complete in itself. The visual dimension is supported by the corresponding textual elements such as titles or short quotations that Saar adds to the washboards. I contend that Saar re-visits the 'sites of trauma', as it were, and wages a battle against 'forgetting' and erasure of Black women's experiences.[19] My reading is bolstered by an analysis of the textual elements that accompany the visual ones in this triptych.

"Lest We Forget" is embossed on the central panel and is meant to be read with three other texts that are written on the three washboards. The central panel reads, "Lest we forget the fragility of smiles of strangers lost at sea". Saar exhorts the future Black generations to remember the traumatic journey of the Middle Passage. Despite the horrors of enslavement, the slave ships were also the sites of rebellion and survival. Thus, Saar issues a warning that the smiles one witnesses on the slave ships are fragile, for not only death, but insurgency is also always bubbling under the surface. The panel on the left that showcases Black woman's labor reads "Lest we forget the strength of tears of those who toiled". Saar overturns the usual connotation of tears as a sign of weakness and associates tears with strength. Saar accords dignity to these Black women workers whose jobs were often considered to be inconsequential. Arlene Raven designates this triptych as a "memorial portrait" where memories and tears merge with each other (1998: 8). Thus, Saar excavates, celebrates, and consecrates the memories and labor of her unnamed, often unarmed, battered but undefeated, dignified, and resilient ancestors "upon whose shoulders [we] now stand" (title of another of Saar's assemblages).

The washboard that appropriates an anti-Black collectible is accompanied by three texts. Linking her art and quest for political action, Saar creates a campaign slogan. On the right panel, linking her art and quest for political action, Saar creates a campaign slogan. "Liberate Aunt Jemima" is stitched in red on Jemima's apron. The second quote, "Extreme times, calls for extreme heroines", is embossed on the lower end of the washboard. While the re-conceptualization of Aunt Jemima as a Black "heroine" was implied in *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*, Saar now overtly declares that the armed Jemima is an "extreme heroine" who would play a pivotal role in attaining Black liberation. Saar critiques the socio-political times as not being egalitarian, inclusive and conducive for Black people's growth for she terms them as "extreme times." Underscoring the relevance of such texts and props such as guns in Saar's work, LeFalle-Collins observes, "whether working with dignifying or degrading images of Blacks, Saar manipulates their historical contexts by giving these people voices through a slyly twisted text and subversive gestures" (2000:6). The inscription at the top of this washboard reads, "Lest we forget; the fierceness of love." Saar challenges one's hackneyed understanding of love wherein love is conceived of in terms of peace and nonviolence primarily. For Saar, love is intricately linked to political activism, fierceness and the creation of alternate radical possibilities. The

19 Saar maintains that "her concerns are the struggles of memory against forgetting" (1998: 249).

Mammy in her artwork is driven by that same love to strive for justice for Black people and the eradication of systemic inequalities.

Assemblage draws its name from the act of orchestrating together found objects to create three-dimensional art works. Created out of a variety of materials such as the washboards, vintage photographs, etchings and derogatory collectibles, this assemblage not only indicates a diversity of materials but also a multiplicity of artistic influences. Saar was fascinated by white artist Joseph Cornell's (1903-72) use of wooden boxes as framing devices.[20] Saar's use of washboards in this triptych as framing apparatuses reflects Cornell's influence.[21] Saar also sought inspiration from the works of Black assemblage artist Noah Purifoy (1917-2004). Purifoy was part of the group of artists who organized 66 *Signs of Neon*, an exhibition created out of the debris of the Watts Rebellion (1965) that wrecked Black neighborhood of Watts in Los Angeles.[22] Purifoy created an assemblage called Sir Watts (1966) by using found objects that were rescued from the debris of the Watts towers. Purifoy's influence is palpable in Saar's propensity to deploy assemblage art to commemorate Black history.

The washboard does not function merely as a framing device or an inert object meant for aesthetic purposes. Washboard, the central motif in this triptych, is a "signifier of labor, especially women's labor" (LeFalle-Collins 2000: 5). It enables Saar to weave a narrative about Black women's labors. The ragged surfaces of these washboards are evocative of the visceral and sensory memories of the ways in which Black women suffered, ranging from painful hunched backs, bruised hands and sore legs (Kaplan 2021: 198). By foregrounding the opposition between the manner in which Black women in service are viewed by those they serve and how their legacy could be re-viewed by Black women visual artists such Saar herself, she accords dignity, respect, and recognition to these unnamed, underpaid and undervalued Black women workers.

Saar is lauded as a "visual storyteller" (Carpenter 2004: 98) who excels in the art of "making something out of nothing."[23] Saar uses materials that are mundane, cheap, old, and often discarded as junk. However, unhackneyed meanings are generated when Saar places these along with textual material in fresh permutations and combinations. Raven observes that there are many repetitions and continuities in Saar's assemblages in Workers + Warriors. For instance, Saar uses the same photograph of Brooks, the British slave ship, both in this triptych and in *I'll Bend But I Will Not Break*. Similarly, the vintage photograph of the Black domestic help from the triptych has also been used in *National Racism*. The image of the gun-toting Mammy coupled with the slogan, "Liberate Aunt Jemima" recurs in multiple works. I argue that it is an artistic strategy. Saar recycles repeats and reuses images and slogans to stress the sheer tediousness, repetitiveness and hardship that Black women performed. This incessant repetition is also a way to re-affirm, reclaim and commemorate ordinary

20 Saar remembers that viewing Joseph Cornell's (1903–1972) assemblage art in Pasadena Art Museum in 1967 was a watershed moment in her growth as an artist. Cornell created small wooden boxes that housed his exquisite assemblage art. Olivia Laing observes, box is the primary metaphor of Cornell's life and works.

21 In many of her other works Saar uses window frames, doors and panels as framing devices.

22 The Watts Rebellion is a name given to the series of riots that broke out in the largely Black neighborhood of Watts in Los Angeles in 1965. "The Watts Rebellion lasted for six days, resulting in 34 deaths, 1,032 injuries and 4,000 arrests, involving 34,000 people and ending in the destruction of 1,000 buildings, totaling $40 million in damages" (History.com Editors).https://www.history.com/topics/1960s/watts-riots.

23 Celeste-Marie Bernier and Nicole Wilson (2020) use a similar phrasing within quotes to describe Saar's work.

Black women's hard work, ingenuity and resilience in surviving against all odds. I further argue that Saar's usage of the old material in newer contexts and forms could be likened to a palimpsest, a parchment where an old script is erased and/or overwritten to create a new narrative. Similarly, Saar plucks out her objects from their original contexts and combines them to create a new text. This new narrative is much deeply layered as it is made up of multiplicity of visions. These objects embody the remembrances of their past owners/users and contexts of their production and use which interact with Saar's personal memories and artistic vision, thereby resulting in what Ishmael Reed would term as "communal historical artifact." Reed maintains that these works could be seen as an act of "historical documentation" where the communal fuses with the personal and is woven into a work of art (Reed cited in Carpenter 2004: 94).

From Outward Militancy to Covert Subversion

In *Power* Saar uses four washboards to form a table.[24] She pastes a baking powder tin advertisement that showcases a classic derogatory image of Black women as Mammies and Black children as Pickaninnies.[25] Since Black women, especially in the South, were known for their cooking and exquisite recipes, many advertisements commercially exploited the stereotypical images of the Black bodies to sell their products. The Black woman in the advertisement here ticks all stereotypical characteristics associated with the Mammy. The Black boy next to her also appears to be taken out of the visual archive of the racialized Jim Crow representations of the Black children with thick red lips, a broad nose, dark skin coupled with ghoulish eyes and dancing gait. The Mammy is located in her usual haunt, which is the kitchen, with the black boy and a cat. She is gazing at the cake (which she appears to have baked) that is placed on a wooden table and is seen rising from the batter.

Sharon F. Patton maintains that postmodernist works often lend themselves to a method of analysis where contradictory meanings are conveyed by words and pictographs in the given piece (1998: 234). Patton's observations apply to Saar's combination of visual and verbal elements. The apparent optical conformity of the scene is severely undermined by the textual narrative of the work. Saar eschews the inclusion of an armed mammy, focusing on symbols of servitude. She subverts the racialized iconography of this work, however, by working the signifiers of dissent and rebellion into the same seemingly conformist scene. I would examine three details to support my argument.

First, Saar obfuscates the letter 'D' from "POWDER" so that the spectator watches the word "POWER" pop up from the rising cake. The kitchen which is the epicenter of servitude is then transformed into an arena of activism and change, where the Mammy is both demanding and asserting her power. Her sheepish grin emblematic

24 Power (1998-99) has been published in the collection of Saar's work, namely *In Service: A Version of Survival* (2000). Image not available.

25 Visual representations of Black children caricaturize them as Pickaninnies. They are portrayed as being unkempt and shabbily dressed. They are ordinarily depicted as stuffing watermelon in their large mouths. While their eyes are characteristically painted as being bulging, their skin is ebony in colour and lips are overtly red. "They were routinely shown on postcards, posters, and other ephemera as nameless, shiftless natural buffoons running from alligators and toward fried chicken (Pilgrim 2000). https://www.ferris.edu/HTMLS/news/jimcrow/antiblack/picaninny/homepage.htm.

of her supposed simple-mindedness is replaced with somber expressions while she carefully eyes the cake. The cake rising from the depth of the batter creates a visual image of the upheaval and insurgency that has and would continue to erupt from the very depth of the white households and conventional kitchens. Saar refrains from deploying a weapon or any other external object such as a broom or an iron. It is insinuated that the Mammy's empowerment, instead, would emerge from the same flour and baking powder that seem to have shackled her over the decades.

Second, the presence of a Black child is another noteworthy element in this kitchen. In other works of the series, such as *Lullaby* (1999), Saar expresses the pain of Black mothers who have to take care of their white wards while their own children lie in the grass, unattended. As opposed to Saar's representation, Toni Morrison's *The Bluest Eye* (1970)[26] and popular advertisements featuring the stereotypical Mammy demonstrate that it is only whites who are the consumers of the exquisite dishes that are prepared by Black women. Saar seems to be dismantling this conventional expectation. The presence of the Black child who is happily looking at the prospect of eating the cake (usually denied to him) could be seen as Saar's challenge to the visual legacy of Blacks in servitude and not as consumers, especially of the products of their own labor. Furthermore, the rising batter visually indicates not only culinary delight and satiety of desire, but also signifies the hope of more empowering and fulfilling possibilities for Blacks in the future.

Third, the presence of a cat in the kitchen could be read as a sign of subversion within the master's household. While dogs represent loyalty, cats are associated with independence and intelligence in popular culture; in the iconography of Western art, they are symbolic of sensuality and lust.[27] Moffitt explains that the cat motif usually has negative implications as it is identified with a lubricious woman (Moffitt 1994: 24). Kitty Jackson avers that it also evokes the "mystical feminine energy" coupled with "images of witches", "darkness and black magic" (2019: 2). I, however, wish to argue that even within the safe confines of a home, the cat is not a domesticated animal, but a hunter. In Saar's work its pose is also relevant; it is not sleeping or resting but is standing alert on all fours under the table where the cake sits. She also appears to be growling while staring back at the spectator directly. Thus, like the Mammy in Alice Randall's *The Wind Done Gone: An Unauthorized Parody* (2001),[28] who would murder the master's sons to reinstate her own power inside the household, the presence of an upright, growling cat within Saar's assemblage signifies a similar subversion.

My reading of *Power* acquires further credence if one examines the context in which the work was first showcased. One possible reason for the shift from an overt call to arms to a more subdued call for dissent and subversion would be the white capitalist government's bogus "war on drugs". Starting in the 1980s, this crack-down resulted in surveillance, racialized social control, and "legally punitive measures" that

26 Toni Morrison's first novel, *The Bluest Eye* (1970) showcases the story of Pauline, a Black woman who works at a white household, and her daughter, Pecola. Pauline prepares her signature dish, the Blueberry Pie, for her white ward and white employers and never for her own kids.

27 For instance, although Manet modeled Olympia (1865) on Titian's *Venus of Urbino* (1534) which featured a dog, he chooses to paint "an upright, aroused, and spitting black cat" (Moffitt 1994: 22). Here, cat signifies female sexuality for it is associated with a prostitute.

28 *Wind Done Gone* parodies the Southern Romance, *Gone with the Wind* (1939). It could be placed in the category of, what Susan Donaldson names as, anti-plantation tradition novels for they undermine the manner in which novels like *Gone with the Wind* represent the antebellum South, enslaved Black people and the one-sided representation of the Civil War (1861-65).

eventually augured in an age of "mass incarceration in America".[29] The crackdown on Black communities had increased by the criminal justice system along with "a larger web of laws, rules, policies, and customs that control those labeled criminals both in and out of prison" (Alexander 2010: 13). Saar created both of these series at a time (1998 and 2000) when Bill Clinton was President. Alexander counters the misconception that it was only the conservative Republican politicians who waged this war on drugs. She examines how Democrats including Bill Clinton and Barack Obama continued or rather fought the proxy war on drugs with much ferocity. The number of Black women who were incarcerated during President Clinton's time touched a record high. The draconian "three strikes law" was also enacted under Clinton's presidency.[30] Thus, Saar's decision to foreground oblique methodologies of subversion and resistance against white capitalism can be seen in the light of the precarious lives of Black Communities in the age of mass incarceration, police brutality and proliferation of anti-Black racism.

Conclusion

I wish to underscore that Saar's artistic intention is threefold. First, Saar, like other Black feminists such as Alice Walker In *Search of Our Mothers' Gardens* (1983), is keen to re-member her Black foremothers. Second, Saar bears witness to the onerous and almost Sisyphean labors that Black women performed with dignity to survive the system that was not conducive for their growth. Third, her choice of found objects and her methodic repetition are intricately linked with her ideological and political agenda of Black women's liberation.

Saar's assemblages conduct a re-reading and re-interpretation of available histories. Her works are built out of carefully selected materials like washboards and elements of *Black memorabilia*. Saar not only reflects on the time and period of their usage but actively seeks to make space for stories that were unsung, forgotten and/or lost. Overwriting objects entrenched in histories of violence and discrimination against Black people allows her to draw attention to history and acts of historicizing in addition to the absences and erasures through which narrative coherence is achieved. In repurposing materials that were otherwise part of racist politics, Saar lets forgotten memories speak. The repetition and juxtaposition of materials in Saar's works function as a palimpsest forging interconnections and draw attention to the embedded and shifting layers of memories and meanings.

29 Angela Davis was among the first thinkers to draw attention to the "state of emergency" (Davis's term) and prison-industrial complex in America. For a detailed examination of "mass incarceration" of Blacks in America refer to Michelle Alexander (2010). Alexander furthers the discourse that was already gaining currency with many black thinkers such as Manning Marable, Angela Davis, Michael Eric Dyson and Tony Platt among others who represent what Plant designates as "a very long black tradition in anti-racist criminological praxis" (Tony Platt 2014: 5).

30 The law penalizes a person to a life imprisonment if one is caught three times for a drug offense which again is a non-violent crime. Also, not only did Clinton adopt a "tough on crime" approach, he also slashed public assistance and public funds in a major fashion.

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