

ENGLISH SUMMARY

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BLACK MIRROR. „YOU’VE COME A LONG WAY, BABY”

In 1982, Michelle Cliff (1946-2016) published "Object into Subject: Some Thoughts on the Work of Black Women Artists" in the fifteenth issue of *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics* dedicated to racism. Her article examines the construction of racist and sexist imaginations in the United States, as well as writings and artworks by Black women that deconstruct these mythologies through self-definition. In what ways does Cliff's article bring to light the relationship between art and politics from a feminist perspective within the context of its publication? Drawing primarily on Cliff's text, Black feminist thought and activism, research on Black women's history, exhibitions, and analyses of artworks, I explore the links between art, visual and material culture, historiography, and feminisms. My reading of this text leads me to question the relationship between

representations and mythologies, as well as the role of fiction in recovering history. Finally, I put into perspective the work of Betye Saar, and particularly the assemblage *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* (1972) reproduced in Cliff's article.

Cliff introduced her article by describing a postcard of Danese Cattaneo's sculpture *Black Venus* (mid-16th century). Holding a hand-mirror in which she looks at herself, the nude figure seems frozen in a contemplative attitude, as if trapped by an outside gaze. Cliff stressed how, by giving the impression of sanity to the process of oppression, objectification is central to racism. She discussed several forms of the objectification of Black women which deny them their right to self-definition and identity, such as the stereotypical mammy. The various incarnations of the mammy figure have had a profound influence on US culture. In advertisements, novels, movies, or objects, this figure of the domestic servant is portrayed as docile and devoted to her White employers. Kimberly Wallace-Sanders pointed out that the mammy stereotype was invented after the Civil War (1861-1865) as part of the Lost Cause mythology, in order to maintain an idyllic image of the Southern plantation. The mammy figure is part of the repertoire of the Antebellum South mythology designed to portray the slave system and its legacies as benevolent institutions through promoting the stereotype of Black people with supposedly innate qualities for service. Cliff reminds us that the figure of the mammy was invented by White society, reflecting its need to maintain its privileges and, in fact, having more to do with the construction of whiteness than with the history of Black people. However, if they are part of mythology, these images permeate our consciousness, affecting perceptions of the self or of the "other."

Indeed, Cliff highlighted that images are never neutral, thus impacting our positions in society. As Angela Davis explained in *Women, Race and Class* (1981), the stereotypical mammy supports the fact that domestic work is not simply a remnant of slavery that will disappear over time, but which intends to last. In this regard, in *Black Woman's Manifesto* (1970), Maxine Williams insists that many Black women in

the 1960s continue to work in households as underpaid domestics. These stereotypical images obscure reality, distort historiography, and veil the struggles of Black people for their rights. This recognition would indeed counter the stereotypical trait of the docile mammy.

The Black women writers and artists discussed by Cliff responded to gaps in systems of representation and historiography, filling in their erasures, particularly those of Black women's acts of resistance, by making visible their role in the struggle for their rights and social justice. In her article, Cliff described a portrait of Harriet Tubman (1975) by Elizabeth Catlett (1915-2012): the abolitionist and feminist activist, who led more than three hundred people through the Underground Rail, is depicted in the foreground, with a rifle in one hand, guiding the people behind her to their liberation with the other. Eleven years after this article was published, Cliff published the novel *Free Enterprise* (1993). Drawing on archival material, she traced acts of resistance by Black people who have remained invisible in mainstream historiography. The central character is Mary Ellen Pleasant, inspired by the African-American entrepreneur of the same name, a nineteenth-century San Francisco hotel owner and one of the supporters and organizers of the Harpers Ferry abolitionist uprising (1859). However, this historical figure is often referred to as Mammy Pleasant, a name that aims to keep her in the image of the Black servant, thus veiling her commitment to the rights of Black people. Catlett's portrait of Harriet Tubman reflects more historical facts than mythologies. As Cliff pointed out, these representations are essential for the construction of self.

From the late 1960s, Betye Saar began collecting images and objects that reproduced stereotypes of Black people that she considered important as documentation of how White people have historically perceived African-Americans. She then reused these caricatures in her work, creating what she has called "revolutionary art." She has explained that this *Exploding the Myth* series is not only a reminder of the pain associated with the violence of racism, but also an explanation of contemporary anger, as the artist was particularly

affected by the 1968 assassination of civil rights activist Martin Luther King Jr. It was in this series that Saar created artworks using the figure of Aunt Jemima, including *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima* (1972) and *Liberation of Aunt Jemima: Cocktail* (1973).

Aunt Jemima is the most popular image of the mammy. In 1889, Charles Rutt and Chris Underwood, two White men, founded the Pearl Milling Company (then Aunt Jemima Mills Company). They created the first ready-mixed pancake flour and chose Aunt Jemima as advertising's first living trademark. As Kimberly Wallace-Sanders explained, the brand exploited the national nostalgia of the Antebellum South in an effort to reunify the country after the Civil War. In *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima*, Betye Saar calls for the power of self-definition. The assemblage is an open box, the inside of which is lined with the duplicated image of Aunt Jemima's face. In front of this background, a figurine of Aunt Jemima stands on cotton, a material evoking the slavery past of the United States. The figure was found at a flea market by Saar, and the apron of its skirt was a notepad, which could be used to write down errands. If the figurine holds a broom in one hand, but Saar endowed her with two attributes that do not conform to the stereotypical docile mammy: a rifle and a pistol, transforming her from a servant to a freedom fighter, and positioning her in the genealogies of Black women's activism, such as Harriet Tubman. Aunt Jemima's smile is thus resignified: contrasting with the weapons she carries, it creates a form of distancing from the stereotype, rendering it obsolete and able to express the pleasure of breaking free from mythologies. At the same time that this work is part of a healing process for the artist, Aunt Jemima has rid herself of the mirror as a reflection of the external gaze, turning it inside out, moving from contemplation to action, from object to subject.

In 1973, Betye Saar organized the exhibition *Black Mirror* at the feminist cooperative gallery Womanspace (Los Angeles). It brought together some of her works, including *The Liberation of Aunt Jemima: Measure for Measure* (1973), alongside works by Gloria Bohanon, Marie Johnson Calloway, Samella Lewis and Suzanne

Jackson. As Betye Saar pointed out, *Black Mirror* is about Black women's own reflections of themselves. On the exhibition poster, above dancers evoking the French cancan, Aunt Jemima says, "You've Come a Long Way, Baby." This subtitle of the exhibition inscribes these artists in the genealogies of Black women and emphasizes their capacities for resilience. "You've Come a Long Way, Baby" was at that time the slogan of an advertising campaign for Virginia Slims cigarettes that recovers feminist ideas in order to seduce new customers. This appropriation by Saar resonates with the montage of the advertising poster published in *Black Woman's Manifesto*: under the photograph of a young Black woman smoking a cigarette, the question "But Is This Where You Want to Go?" alludes to the instrumentalizations of Black women's bodies. As Julianne Malveaux explained, this image propagates the new myth of Black women having conquered the job market while having the lowest incomes and being the most vulnerable to unemployment.

Three years earlier, Saar participated in the *Sapphire Show* organized by Suzanne Jackson at Gallery 32, the first group exhibition in Los Angeles devoted exclusively to Black women artists. This exhibition made their voices heard in the face of their exclusion from the dominant art scene, but also from the Black Arts Movement, mostly led by Black men, and from the Feminist Art Movement, represented essentially by White women. In this regard, at the *Black Mirror* opening, Saar noted that there were few White women in the audience, and questioned their interest in the works of Black artists. As a member of the Womanspace board, she recalled discussions about event fees that did not take into account the economic hardships of Black people. In relation to the context of the article's publication, it is important to recall that women's liberation movements in the United States have been plagued by issues of racism, including the campaigns for women's suffrage in the 19th century. In addition, as discussed in the editorial of this fifteenth issue, the debates over *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics* reveal the difficulties and limits of the journal's functioning in moving beyond tokenism

to the involvement of racialized women within it.

In 1998, as her work moved in different directions, Saar reconnected with Aunt Jemima with a series of assemblages presented in the exhibition *Workers+Warriors. The Return of Aunt Jemima* at the Michael Rosenfeld Gallery (New York). The artist wished to respond to the persistence of racism. Finally, after making some changes to the Aunt Jemima image, it wasn't until 2020 that Quaker Oats, which had purchased the Aunt Jemima Mills Company, announced that the brand would no longer exist in this way, recognizing that the Aunt Jemima persona relied on racist stereotypes. However, as Saar pointed out, while Aunt Jemima has finally been released, there is still work to be done.

What do images do? In what ways do they act in society? How are they perceived according to one's position? In her text, Cliff brings answers by examining the role of representations in the process of racism and sexism while also discussing the transformative power of art. She cautions against the ideologies behind representations and considers artworks as prisms for interrogating societal issues. Her analysis of the relationship between art and politics questions the construction of the historical narrative and highlights the role of Black women, both in activism and in art. In this issue of *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics*, her article is crucial to understanding that racism is not a side issue of feminist movements. It is an intrinsic issue, as sexism cannot be separated from other power relations in the perspective of intersectional feminisms. Cliff emphasizes that feminism must be multivocal as much as art history, going beyond tokenism for deep transformations, to rethink the underpinnings.