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Mammy and la Madama:

Altar Egos

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Mammy and la Madama:

Altar Egos

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Thesis
Presented to the Faculty of the Graduate School of
The University of Texas at Austin
in Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements
for the Degree of

Master of Arts

The University of Texas at Austin
December 2021

Acknowledgements

I owe gratitude, first, to my parents, Ramon and Rachel, who have always offered me their support and love. Secondly, I'm grateful to the friends who have given me not only an intellectual community of brilliant collaborators, but who have also become my second family: Dr. kihana miraya ross, Kendyll Gross, Christopher Ndubuizu, and Kiyomi and Landon Sandy-Beach. Lastly, this project would not be possible without my committee: Dr. Lyndon Gill, Dr. Monica Jimenez, and Dr. Eddie Chambers.

Abstract

Mammy and la Madama:

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The University of Texas at Austin, 2021

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This project considers the spiritual dimensions of the mammy figure through the lens of the material religious practices of Puerto Rican espiritismo. Additionally, this paper traces the history of the mammy in United States minstrel traditions toward continuing aesthetics in the espiritismo altar and spiritual figure, la Madama.

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Introduction

We came together on a Sunday with our offerings: votive candles, teddy bears, candies, flowers, and butterfly hair clips. On that sticky, Southern afternoon, we placed the kind of things we thought she might like near her photos and wrote down our prayers for her--Ma'Khia Bryant--and little girls like her. At sixteen, moments after a verdict was reached in George Floyd's case on April 20, 2021 and just as the more hopeful among us were beginning to breathe easier and release the tension in our shoulders, she became another Black victim of the State. Like the one we came together to build in Ma'Khia's memory that Sunday, these makeshift altars honoring the lives that have been stolen by the State are what Shauna J. Sweeney terms, "a metaphysical response to the material realities of state violence (police and prison) and predatory financial capitalism."[1] Though during the construction of these ephemeral sites state critique is not the primary consideration, videos of officers destroying these small public relics (for example, videos of California police breaking votive candles and throwing away bouquets set on the sidewalk to honor another child-victim of the state, Adam Toledo, in late March 2021) demonstrate these material practices are already read across philosophical divides as protests against the State.

Sweeney looks toward these public markers of memory and veneration and traces them back to insurgencies organized by the enslaved in their faith spaces, arguing that the

Black radical tradition cannot be divorced from its spiritual dimensions.[2] Moreover, Sweeney proposes that attempts to "hermetically seal off" the spiritual and political-economic realms of the Black radical tradition would not only confound previous generations of working class and enslaved Black people, but would be ahistorical.[3] Similarly, Michael Taussig's experimental text, *The Magic of the State*, argues that magical ritual and tradition are politicized and function as responses to state power, a power that is itself predicated on magical thinking.[4] For example, when describing the kind of magical thinking required to legitimize and sustain the nation, Benedict Anderson uses language like "invent" and "imagine."[5] Taken together, Taussig and Anderson establish that the State relies, from the outset of its creation, on mystical logic. Sweeney carries these ideas forward, pushing for a reading of Black resistances to capitalism and the State which reveals an ever-present heretical tradition at work within. Building off of these scholars, I maintain that so, too, should we read capitalist and State critique into (some) Black faith spaces and their traditions.

Particularly, as we gathered around our transient altar to Ma'Khia Bryant, I considered the continuity between this altar--and its function as a space to both, honor the deceased (real and abstract) and critique the State--and altars constructed as parts of faith-based rituals across the Black Atlantic and their similar functions. Born out of a blending of West African, European, and Indigenous practices, syncretic faiths throughout the Black Atlantic have utilized altar construction to contemplate

practitioners' relationships with their ancestors and to the State. In this way, Jason R. Young asserts that Afro-diasporic faiths of the Black Atlantic each exist at the crossroads between political resistance and cultural expression.[6] According to Young, the rituals of the enslaved and their descendents reflect a desire to create religious practices that acted "as resistance not only against the system of slavery but against the ideological underpinnings that supported slavery in the first place."[7]

Beyond giving the enslaved and descendants of the enslaved the opportunity to practice political resistance, syncretic faiths have also evolved in-step with the State. For instance, after the Haitian revolution, imperial leaders across the Caribbean and Latin America who believed Vodou traditions were the source of Haiti's liberating power quickly criminalized syncretic African faith practices.[8] This criminalization necessitated that syncretic West African faith practitioners conceal their rituals by adopting the symbols and icons of the dominant culture. In this way, such religious rituals were able to critique power outside of the purview of the masterclass and create an "infrapolitics of the powerless."[9] These opaque practices weren't obscure for the sake of opacity, but were fugitive methods of cultural and literal survival.

One such avenue for these infrapolitics (and the focus of this paper) is Puerto Rican Espiritismo. When Vodou was credited with the success of the Haitian Revolution, Spain feared the potential of African rituals becoming a threat to its political hegemony in Puerto Rico. Spain issued government laws to regulate Puerto Rico's enslaved

population's worship practices and leisure time.[10] In response, African orishas (gods of the Yoruba faith) were designated Catholic saint counterparts to represent them on the Espiritismo altar. Through Espiritismo altars, 19th century practitioners in Puerto Rico were able to subvert the Catholic Church (who politically supported imperial Spain over the archipelago's autonomy) not only by subterfuge, but through the very practice of altar making, transforming their homes into sites of worship away from the church.[11]

Aside from concealing orishas behind Catholic saint counterparts, another illustration of espiritismo transforming in relation to state power can be seen in espiritismo's spiritual suites. After the United States seized control of Puerto Rico in 1898, thereby making the archipelago a territorial holding, Espiritismo iconography began to more prominently feature spiritual suites that referenced the island's multi-racial (Spanish, Indigenous, and Black) ancestry. Raquel Romberg argues that this creolization in espiritismo is directly related to the lack of sovereignty under Puerto Rico's Commonwealth status.[12]

Notably, the suites of Indigenous people and enslaved African people (vernacularly called Indios and Kongos, respectively) are operating on Espiritismo altars as both a nod to practitioners' ancestors, but moreover allegorically. Through Black and Indigenous spirits, espiritismo practitioners claim descent from Puerto Rico's true owners, regardless of who holds the political power. Elizabeth Perez has noted that in a velada, an espiritismo séance, the spirits are called to the event in an order that reflects

the island's patterns of immigration: indigenous people are called first, then the spirits related to Spain and Europe, followed by the Kongos, and continuing through spirits of Middle Eastern, Chinese, and South Asian descent.[13]

All of this to say that the State (and critique of the State) is an inherent, if disguised, element of the Espiritismo altar. In fact, Michael Taussig argues that each altar object reflects part of the State's mythmaking:

> [The altar] was a beautiful shrine, a diorama of the state as a work of art, condensing its magic into one explosive montage. A bucolic North American plains Indian in war bonnet stood astride a toy theater of the state complete with the national flag, a bronze-colored bust of the Liberator and the split head of the spirit queen, crown intact. A crumpled image of the wounded and (hence) blessed Hand of Jesus with a saint emerging from each fingertip completed this toy-theater tableau over all of which, in stirring color and the vigor of youth, presided yet another portrait of the Liberator painted into the national flag to form a magnificent backdrop. I thought of the medallions, the Indian on front, Christ behind, for here too, as a gateway to magical powers, the Indian serenity dwarfed the sacred hand of the Nation-State in its crypt below.[14]

While I believe each object on an Espiritista's altar has the capacity to function allegorically as a metacommentary on the State, I'm particularly interested in a character within the Kongo suite (the suite representing enslaved ancestors from Africa), la madama. Visualized most often as a Black woman in domestic clothing, la madama bears more than a passing resemblance to the United States (and more generally, Western) trope of the mammy. This paper will explore what the visual relationship between la madama and the mammy could mean, first through a close aesthetic reading and secondly, through

a reading of the objects' functions in these differing contexts. Through this analysis, I hope to better understand the use of plantation imagery toward remembering, memorializing, and invoking Black women throughout the Afro-Atlantic's syncretic faith spaces, and more importantly, provide a lens through which we might examine the spiritual potential of the mammy figure as well as Black women's uses of the mammy as a refusal of the State's grammars.

Mammy: Mythic and Powerful

In her essay, "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book," Hortense Spillers theorized the Middle Passage as a fracture where abducted Africans entered as people and came out unto the otherside, into the new world, as captive Black flesh--resulting in their total objectification.[15] Similarly in the article, "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage," Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley borrowes from the ocean's attributes toward theorizing the slaveship and the Middle Passage as sites where Black selfhood ("woman-hood, economic status, motherhood, Yorubaness") are disrupted, dissolved, and liquidated--an involuntary social liquidation which renders the captive African people on board gender fluid.[16]

Both excluded from and judged by the West's gendered hierarchy, Black men and Black women became illegible as men and women in the West where the rigid gender structure dictated that a man is someone who leads a household consisting of a wife and

children who bare his name; who supports this household with his income; and who is able-bodied. What do we make, then, of someone who, though sharing the anatomical position of a "man" is unable to build the kinship structures necessary to lead a household--unable to formally have a wife or claim ownership of his wife and children; unable to earn an income because his labor is stolen; and who is expected to perform his labor under conditions that give rise to disability? Similarly, if being a woman in the West meant having a husband and children, keeping a home, being chaste, and not performing labor--what do we make of enslaved Black women who were unable to claim and raise their children; who's sexual availability was presumed; and who were forced to labor at the same pace as men?[17] I believe it's important to keep these questions at the front of our minds as we consider both altar objects and contemptible collectibles (tangible objects displaying Black people in demeaning ways, often borrowing from minstrel stereotypes and styles)--in other words, the objects themselves prompt such questions.

Particularly, when we consider the mammy, we are thinking through the various ways slavery is remembered throughout the United States and globally.[18] In the case of the characterizations housed under the umbrella of contemptible collectibles, it's imperative that we distinguish between the way slavery is remembered and the way those who were enslaved are remembered. In other words, it's critical that we distinguish between the romanticized and fictionalized portraits of plantation life popularized during the "white reconstruction" period[19] and the realities of enslaved people. Rather than

reflecting what enslaved people were really like, contemptible collectibles offer instead a "a catalogue of the many characters Western nations devised to communicate their dominance over the 'other' during empire building" and operated to soothe white anxieties by imagining Black Americans as too innocent, loathsome, and dull to overcome the caste structure.[20]

In her book, *Mammy: A Century of Race, Gender, and Southern Memory,* Kimberly Wallace-Sanders adopts Focault's theory of the body as a site struggle toward the assertion that the plantation trope of the mammy's body is a "site where fiction, history, autobiography, memoir, and pop culture meet in battle over the dominant representation of Black womanhood and motherhood, more specifically."[21] Even as we understand that the mammy is a caricature and invention, our duty isn't to discard the mammy completely, but rather to challenge the idea of the mammy without dismissing the image's real power.[22]

The earliest use of the word "mammy" to describe an enslaved woman occured in an 1810 travel narrative about the Southern United States. By 1820 the word was almost exclusively utilized as a short-hand for Black women serving as wet nurses (or otherwise caretakers) for white children.[23] In the period between 1906 and 1912, southern memoirs mentioned mammies the most, and as the word continued to be used into the 1920's, the usage shifted away from describing specific individuals and toward depicting the virtues associated with the mammy figure in abstract.[24]

This shift toward describing the ideal behaviors of mammies in abstract is important: it marks the moment when "mammy" became a "shorthand for a set of behaviors used to explain diverse concepts such as slavery, love, service, motherhood. When so much meaning can be bundled into a single term, the word itself is inherently imprecise, subject to new interpretations each time it is used, depending on who is using it."[25] The trend of literary mammies and the shift toward using the word to describe virtues (rather than people) also coincided with an early twentieth century rise in Black women domestic workers to the extent that, for the first time in U.S. history, Black women domestics replaced white immigrant women nationally as the primary domestic workforce.[26]

Where one might assume that the word's newfound literary prominence can be explained by this surge of Black women in domestic roles, the opposite is likely true; Black women were compelled to take these roles because of the expectation that white families should have mammies. Not only were there limited employment opportunities for Black women beyond the domestic sphere[27] but vagrancy laws passed after the Reconstruction period provided the basis for sentencing Black women for banal and nonsensical offenses (like having a child out of wedlock, cohabitating with "too many people," or being unemployed).[28] Once sentenced, many Black women were funnelled to reformatory programs and prisons where, as a condition of their parole, they were forced into domestic work in private white homes.[29]

This domestic carceral sphere did not require that the Black women paroled into white homes be paid for their work and those who were could have the costs associated with housing and other essentials deducted from their wages.[30] If found to be less than tireless and devoted workers, many of the Black women paroled into domestic labor risked being sent back to prisons where they could be relegated to chain gangs.[31] In these ways, the increase of Black women performing domestic labor after the Reconstruction is an extension of the terms of slavery.

There are still valences of this relationship today: during the early 1900's, incorrigible Black women could be assigned social workers to ensure their progress at risk of returning to the prison or reformatory. On April 20, 2021, when Ma'Khia Bryant was slain by officers of Columbus, Ohio Police Department, she was a ward of the state living and attending a birthday party at her foster placement. Though Black women were coerced into domestic roles by limited employment opportunities and the carceral system, these women were not mammies. And yet, the mammy character was created[32] and became solidified in the American memory during this same period through and against Black women who were considered wayward or deviant.

A word that is contemporarily loaded with specific associations, "mammy" (and the character conjured by this word) has not held onto a stable meaning over time. Instead, representations of the mammy in plantation literature as well as visualizations of the mammy became less malleable than the versions of the mammy which existed prior

to *Uncle Tom's Cabin.*[33] Which is to say that the mammy's image became more solidified after the Union won the Civil War (and as she came to stand for the white, Southern perception of a perfectly organized society).[34]

Whatever iterations of the mammy existed prior to the Civil War, she arrived in the Reconstruction period United States marked by extreme excess and incongruity: the consonant mammy became that of a typically older and overweight woman who was also very tall and broad shouldered with preternaturally black skin (I use the word preternaturally here as the skin shade is notably unlike the actual skin tones of Black people, as pointed out by Michael Ray Charles in his works[35]). Though she sometimes wore bright-colored and ornately tied scarves over her hair, her clothes were otherwise austere--tending toward domestic habits. So, too, did the mammy become known for exaggerated behaviors after the Civil War--though she performed her work with pleasure (so much so that she was known to sing) she was also a strict disciplinarian. One reason for the mammy's post-Civil War uniformity is the rise in Aunt Jemima's popularity:

> "For representations of the pancake imagery icon Aunt Jemima, excess layers the discursive contours of her imagined flesh--repeatedly. As one of the most enduring figures from the dominant narrative of North American slavery, the mammy and her consumerist counterpart Aunt Jemima symbolized servitude and obedience and was the epitom of the happy slave. The layers--her layers--are essential to the cultural impetus: the conflation of asexuality and maternity, imbued with an intense physicality. Corporeally, as recent scholarship has pointed out, it was important that the persona embodied by Aunt Jemima had all the attributes of asexuality that the slavocracy might necessitate.[36] This included most often an imagistic portrayal of obesity, confounded by drk, invulnerable

> skin tones. The corpulence of Aunt Jemima worked toward eroding the historical body of unprotection by making reference to her physical overpresence, while her skin color signaled the absence of sexual exploitation. And as the antithesis of the plantation mistress, this woman was not fragile; she could not break, and her body size, fictional or not, envisioned power and force to a willing audience. It is through the method of Black Atlantic protectionism--the 'slave mother' as cultural shield against which almost any trauma can be mediated--that we must explore mammy's longevity."[37]

In the United States today, our associations with the idea of mammy most notoriously conjure up the image of Aunt Jemima.[38] From the outset of her creation, Aunt Jemima was a part of the tapestry of Blackface minstrelsy in the United States. Her discoverer, Chriss Rutt, was working on a self-rising flour recipe in late 1889 when he attended a minstrel show in St. Joseph, Missouri.[39] Rutt found his "Southern hospitality personified" muse during a musical number where a white man, dressed in Blackface and drag as a woman domestic, sang a song with the name Aunt Jemima in the chorus.[40] Rutt only held onto the brand for a year before it was sold to R.T. Davis who, recognizing the brand's appeal, understood that authenticity would be key to the brand's success.[41] In time for the 1893 Chicago World's Fair, Davis hired Nancy Green, a fifty-nine year old domestic to a Kentucky judge and a formerly enslaved woman, to play Aunt Jemima at his booth and sketched out the character's biography.[42]

Though Aunt Jemima's biography was purely fictionalized by Davis, it proved to have real staying power--even as the brand changed owners and took on new living

trademark actresses (an Aunt Jemima brand tradition that lasted into the early 1960's), the fictionalized biography continued to be held out as at least partially based off of Nancy Green's own life. (For example, in February 2021, Women's Health magazine published a story online claiming Aunt Jemima was based on Nancy Green and in late June 2020, a speaker at a rally for former President Trump claimed that Aunt Jemima was once a real entrepreneur.)[43]

In the story retold throughout her one-hundred-and-twenty-seven years of branding, Aunt Jemima was the beloved cook for the Confederacy's own Colonel Higbee and she interceded on his behalf, saving him from Union soldiers by offering the northerners her pancakes. The northerners are so taken with these pancakes that after the war, and only after everyone has left Higbee's Landing, they return for Aunt Jemima and bring her and her recipe to the rest of the nation.[44] Though a specific character, Aunt Jemima falls within the shift of the word's usage signifying virtues, as a large part of her brand appeal was dependent on her--like any good contemptible collectible--personifying a romanticized vision of the Old South's racial and gendered order. For example, in the Aunt Jemima myth, she remained on the plantation long after the Civil War and long after Colonel Higbee's passing--this is an imperative piece of her story as it demonstrates her happy commitment to the Old South's rigid hierarchy, but also that she was loyal.[45]

As a product specifically speaking to (particularly white) women, Aunt Jemima proved seductive in the product's promise to not only make the consumer the mistress of

an estate, but in its promise to make her more feminine.[46] "The idea of Aunt Jemima worked because of its appeal to existing white female needs in a time of revolutionary changes in the household, because of general white perceptions of self relative to [Black people], and mostly because of white male power sufficient to define images of whiteness and femininity."[47] In fact, the Aunt Jemima trademark was so successful that between the 1930's and 1950's, deliberate copies of Aunt Jemima became film and radio archetypes.[48]

Where the Civil War represented a fracture in the nation, some suggest that mammies and representations like her acted as a bridge between the Antebellum Northern and Southern United States. Manring draws an arc between a growing interest in the United States for minstrelsy (performances and advertisements that longed for a Confederate racial and gendered hierarchy and which proffered that even Black Americans enjoyed the world as it was structured in the Antebellum United States) and emancipation. Of minstrelsy within U.S. marketing after the Civil War, Manring holds:

> ...one of the trends in American advertising which has largely escaped [public] notice was the power of the South--in particular, the plantation South--as a symbol of white leisure, abundance, and sexual order. The utility of such an image is that it directly addressed the dilemma that white households faced as the overall servant population decreased and, simultaneously, the percentage of black domestics increased. America's long-standing "servant problem" was becoming a "black problem." In several advertising campaigns...the South was connected with a product and portrayed as a place in which elite white men and women were above laboring for their sustenance. They were instead depicted as feasting, dancing, and celebrating their (white) culture as black servants handled the service that made all the revelry possible...images of black labor and white leisure [were skillfully employed] not only to persuade white

> consumers--both men and women--to try new products but to make national brands synonymous with national reconciliation after the Civil War. White southerners knew how to eat and celebrate; Yankees knew how to manufacture and distribute. Both could live in harmony as long African Americans waited tables and fed the kitchen stoves. A "southern" ideal of racial order and leisure was married to "northern" enterprise.[49]

As objects and visualizations, the mammy reflects the legal processes that have helped shape our notions of race and gender. For example, even as Aunt Jemima has been a stabilizing force over the image of the mammy, her own image has been beholden to the United States' shifting ideas about race. This pliancy is demonstrated not only in the way Black artists like Renee Cox and Betye Saar have allowed Aunt Jemima's image to perform (where, beginning in the Civil Rights era, she is characteristically portrayed as a militant[50] or a liberating force for other contemptible brand figures) but in the ways the brand of Aunt Jemima, itself, has had to change in step with the political tide.[51] In 1968, on the heels of Martin Luther King's assassination, the passage of the Civil Rights Act, and ensuing civil unrest, Quaker Oats gave Aunt Jemima a make-over, trading her headscarf out for a headband, slimming her down, and making her younger.[52] Aunt Jemima underwent another physical change in 1989--the same year that five Black and Latino teenagers were wrongly convicted of assaulting Trisha Meili in Central Park--this time losing her headband, and gaining greying hair and earrings.[53] Most recently, Aunt Jemima was retired altogether in June 2020, after a wave of high profile extrajudicial

murders of Black men and women, and in particular, the deaths of Ahmaud Arbery, Breonna Taylor, and George Floyd.

Though in the case of Aunt Jemima and the mammy, contemptible collectibles adapt and respond to the United States' perceptions of race, it would be wrong to conclude that these objects are changing in step with how Black people are perceived within the United States. Instead, these objects have always reflected fragile ideas about whiteness. Manring proposes the post-Civil War rise in mammies and otherwise contemptible collectibles and brands importantly fed two consumer anxieties: the troubling of a racialized and gendered hierarchy and a perceived loss of property.[54] Manring is describing a perceived loss of property that white citizens of the United States believed they were entitled to in much the same way that France demanded Haiti repay the empire for property loss in 1825, after enslaved insurrectionists successfully liberated themselves from France. However, rather than a loss of enslaved labor, I believe the property that was truly troubled, and perhaps even devalued after the emancipation of enslaved people in the United States, was the property value of whiteness.

Where Manring suggests that the desire for mammy-objects and other contemptible collectibles rose first out of a fear that the United States' gender hierarchy was disturbed by emancipation and secondly that white USians felt deprived of their property, these anxieties are not so simply disentangled from one another. Instead "sexuality fundamentally underlies racial logics, but, more to the point, racial identity

itself is conceived, regulated, and disciplined through sexuality."[55] Put another way, I'm suggesting that when we talk about whiteness as property, we are particularly and actually describing the expectation of property privileges accorded to white men, the greatest benefactors of the racial and gendered hierarchy. As we consider the mammy's longevity in the U.S. memory, we must keep site of how her gender and race propel her image: "If the concept of corporeal power is registered through [the mammy's] particular corpus, all of the burdens (literal and metaphoric) of race, gender, and class exist here as well. In the cultural elasticity of this icon we have multiple deployments of national desire."[56]

In her 1993 article, "Whiteness as Property" Cheryl I. Harris outlines that though intangible, whiteness--in a society predicated on racial caste--shares the critical characteristics of property and comes to stand for the "protection and demarcation from the threat of commodification; the characteristic, the attribute, the property of free human beings."[57] In "Whiteness as Property," Harris lays out how captive Black people came to be seen as the United States' answer to the social crisis produced by the eroding capacity of the landed class to control the white labor population.[58]

Though the laws in the United States regarding property typically protect that which is tangible and physical, Harris notes that whiteness came to hold the same privileges and benefits as other types of property: exclusive rights to possession, use, and enjoyment, and the right to exclude.[59] Material forms of property must be open to

dispossession or transfer by the holder, and if that which is inalienable is not property, it would follow then, that whiteness is not property. Harris holds, however, that the inability to dispossess from, or transfer, whiteness speaks rather to whiteness' enhanced property value rather than disqualifying it.[60] Though whiteness is abstract rather than material, Harris states that the expectation of a privilege can be property if that expectation has value and is protected by the law.[61] Of the legally-protected privileges attendant to whiteness, Harris writes:

> Because the law recognized and protected the expectations grounded in white privilege (albeit not explicitly in all instances), these expectations became tantamount to property that could not permissibly be intruded upon without consent. As the law explicitly ratified those expectations in continued privilege or extended ongoing protection to those illegitimate expectations by failing to expose or to radically disturb them, the dominant and subordinate positions within the racial hierarchy were reified in law. When the law recognizes, either implicitly or explicitly, the settled expectations of whites built on the privileges and benefits produced by white supremacy, it acknowledges and reinforces a property interest in whiteness that reproduces Black subordination.[62]

In the world of the material, the benefits of whiteness for the landed class are clear. However, the white planter class was still able to use and enjoy the privileges and expectations associated with their whiteness in the form of higher wages (and in fact, in the expectation of a wage, at all), but more importantly in a public & psychological wage.[63] Of the Faustian bargain associated with the psychological wage of whiteness, Harris states that in the U.S. whiteness became key to the formation of an "American"

identity and the basis for citizenship, as well as the ability to self-determine.[64] The psychological benefits of whiteness proved to be so paramount to the white working class so as to stifle tensions between the white working class and the white bourgeoisie.

As the United States crystallized its ideas about race and Blackness, Black women and their bodies were made especially vulnerable to total commodification. Though all enslaved people were market alienable--property that could be transferred, assigned, inherited, utilized as collateral or currency--the law appreciated in Black women the ability to reproduce a captive labor force.[65] Harris cites this moment as a critical juncture in the development of racial capitalism within the United States: "'Black' racial identity marked who was subject to enslavement, and 'white' racial identity marked who was 'free' or, at a minimum, not a slave. The ideological and rhetorical move from 'slave' and 'free' to 'Black' and 'white' as polar constructs marked an important step in the social construction of race."[66]

From that point forward, race became the basis for economic domination and in turn, the foundation for property rights under U.S. law which moved from excluding Black people from birthright citizenship (and moreover from full personhood, as demonstrated by the ⅗ Clause of the U.S. constitution)[67] toward reifying hypodescent--the belief that race is blood born.[68] Unlike previous forms of slavery where the enslaved's debts were eventually discharged, Black servitude came to extend for the full course of a person's life and for the full duration of their children's lives.[69] Black women's

positions--in places as disparate as Cuba, Barbados, Virginia, and South Carolina--as both reproductive and productive forces was further marked as unique by codification of the Roman livestock principle *partus sequitur ventrem* or "offspring follows belly."[70] Which is to say that unlike other families in the West where children inherited their father's name and were thought of as extending the family patrilineally, children born to Black women could only be measured matrilineally for the purpose of tracking property. This unique ability to labor and produce children who could increase a plantation's profits through sale or with their eventual labor abilities created a tension between Black women and virtually everyone else caught in the "multifaceted struggle to determine who would control black women's productive and reproductive capacities and their sexuality."[71] Manring goes as far to suggest that it was the ability to self-soothe through "a symbolic taking of a Black female body" that made mammy figures popular within the Blackface minstrel tradition.[72]

Perhaps it's the mammy's mythic understanding and acceptance of her station within the plantation south memory that lends itself to her durability. As evidence that the mammy figure was popular because she held out the possibility of how Black women could "[behave] under proper white control," Manring compared her to the slightly less popular and less enduring archetype of the Jezebel.[73] Unlike the mammy figure, the caricature of the Jezebel was a force of sexual chaos "turned loose on southern white men now that they no longer owned her" with the goal of luring white men into interracial

sex.[74] If interracial sex and the children from these unions signified a disordered society, it reasons that the mammy--often pictured caring for white children--would represent a gendered and racialized harmony.[75] Though the Jezebel served as a prevailing scapegoat, explaining why white men might bear children with enslaved women, the mammy was not spared blame.[76] Scholars at the time theorized that were it not for the sentimentality white men felt toward their mammies who raised and sometimes breastfed them, they would not stray from white women.[77]

Vitally, the sweetness and care the mammy figure lavished upon the white family who employed her was only further underscored by her own derision toward her biological family and children.[78] Of mammy's capacity to properly raise white children, Manring states, "White children supplied all the proof needed of the mammy's exalted position...She was, in other words, a racial property acceptable because the prize of motherhood--nurturing, receiving, and returning love--was really the thing owned."[79] Though usual descriptions of the mammy figure critically distill her down to her physical characters and her behavior, Wallace-Sanders emphasizes this preference for the mammy's white employer (and his children) over her own family because this devotion signified the mammy's understanding and acceptance of her own racial inferiority.[80] Thus motherhood, and specifically poor motherhood, came to be associated with the mammy and became key to her ubiquity after the Civil War.

It's imperative to keep in the front of our minds that the mammy was not a real person or even an amalgamation of many women--she's a fiction created to advance arguments about whiteness and slavery. The dimensions of the mammy that speak to her capacity as a mother do heavy lifting toward justifying keeping enslaved women and later Black women domestic workers from their own children while simultaneously defending the plantation hierarchy as necessary. The specter of the mammy looms over still popular ideas about Black mothers as neglectful and abusive parents. These ideas about Black mothers were carried forward from stories about enslaved mothers and after the Civil War, became solidified through scholarly opinion. For example, in 1889 (the same year that Aunt Jemima pancake mix first went on the market), Philip Alexander Bruce published *The Plantation Negro as a Freeman* in which he argued that neglectful Black mothers were chiefly responsible for the degradation of marriage.[81]

Conversely, a Black mother who was too present could also lead to societal ruin, now that her "once-magical mothering ability [was] somehow no longer restrained and somehow overwhelming the badly needed 'fatherhood.'"[82] In 1965, sociologist and then-Assistant of Labor within President Johnson's administration published *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* blaming Black matriarchy, by way of depriving Black children of "normal" gender relations, for societal ills such as Black juvenile deliquency, poor educational outcomes for Black children, antisocial behavior among Black children, and Black populations' over-all dependency on substances and welfare.[83]

In the same ways that the mammy image has adapted to and reflected attitudes in the United States about whiteness, I believe that we can read these legal processes of gendered and racial othering into contemptible collectibles. By which I mean that the process of caricature creation is congruent with the very processes that made captive flesh of Black people. Harris states, "whiteness became the quintessential property for personhood" such that personhood was predicated on the ability to hold ownership over one's body (and Blackness came to signify who was market-alienable property).[84] Keguro Macharia writes about the processes by which whiteness came to stand for "generic human, while the common sense experience of Blackness is as defect in relation to whiteness, which is, then, defect in relation to humanness."[85] As objects, contemptible collectibles made laws and attitudes about Black people tangible and justified the continued subjection of Black people, both, in the United States as well as globally through the imperialist domination of Africans and African societies.[86] Emerging from the "culture of commercial modernity," the function of these objects is to produce caricatured bodies for commercial consumption.[87]

To borrow once again from Spillers, Black women are marked--their bodies operate as canvases onto which the West paints a multitude of racial and sexual significations, making them "metonymic figure[s] for an entire repertoire of human and social arrangements."[88] Contemptible collectibles turn these metonymic figures into objects, making tangible the Southern United States' "grammar of racial stereotype" (for

example, the pickaninny, Uncle Moses, and the mammy, Aunt Jemima).[89] As objects, contemptible collectibles evince existing power dynamics and emerge at the intersection of the United States' material history of slavery and a Westernized production of the chimerical Black body.[90] The mythical body on display and at work through contemptible collectibles is what Christina Sharpe describes as the still body:

> "In the movement in the United States from slave law to black codes, to Jim Crow, to what will come after, this projection into the future is an attempt to submit Black inheritance to a patriarchal order that will then be seen to fail to take hold after the date of formal emancipation, thereby marking blackness as pathology through to future generations. Despite all its transformative power, blackness, here, will be seen to fail to be transformed. Put another way, in and out of the United States this ethnographic gaze will be put into practice across time and administrative process, and the injury will then be seen to slip from the conditions of slavery, colonialism, segregation, lynching, touristic display, ethnographic display, incarceration, vigilantism, gentrification, 'immigrant camps and detention centers,' and state murder, to social and other 'scientific claims' about blackness, about Black being, itself."[91]

After the American Civil War, contemptible collectibles gained popularity within and outside of the United States, not only for their ability to communicate Black stillness, but because the objects' everyday household uses further allowed white Southerners to retain some of their pre-Civil War prominence through the "ownership of smiling Black servants who again worked in their kitchens or became willing objects of humor and derision."[92] Representations of the *other* always seek to locate the self and so, rather than faithful renderings, contemptible collectibles yield truths about the West and Western

anxieties.[93] Through this lens, we come to understand that contemptible collectibles express a yearning for the racialized and gendered order of the Confederacy and American South; they respond to Western tensions about the new mobility of people long presumed to be still.[94] This idea of stillness, while used to explain a lack of progress through time, also dictates why, "History has held Aunt Jemima, Harriet Tubman, Nanny of the Maroons, and even Blessed Anastácia stagnant within the realm of rigid memory--disallowing the necessary evolution of imagery."[95]

Mammy speaks to the aesthetic logic of anti-Blackness and the contradictions therein; she is both a denial and a defense of the sexual violence imposed upon enslaved Black women: "the 'Mammy' figure was also intended to demonstrate how happy blacks were as slaves. Loyal, docile, but fiercely protective of her white folks, she exalted in her servitude. Representing the antithesis of white womanhood, she was strong, coarse, unattractive, and always asexual so as to present no threat to the mistress's position in the household."[96] Mammy is, in the fractured aesthetics of colonial modernity, defective and non-human against white womanhood, all the while representing the perceived sexual threat white women felt about the accessibility white men had to the bodies of enslaved Black women.

Heading into the next section of this paper, I want to return to my earlier assertion that the mammy figure has spiritual dimensions. Though it may feel difficult to reconcile ideas of property, and law and policy with the sacred, even Harris claims that though we

think of property in terms of what is tangible, "Property is a right, not a thing, characterized as metaphysical, not physical."[97] Particularly, as we consider the legal processes that have shaped the mammy as a figure and object, we should keep in mind that these same processes bound Black women. As these legal frameworks are challenged, the mammy undergoes changes as well--her ability to change and embody multiple contradictions at once (for example, that she was a good nurturer to white children while despising her own biological children; her lack of sexual appeal and that she was blameworthy for interracial sex) are themselves fantastical. Through these embodied contradictions, we see that "The truth about mammy turns out not to have been one truth at all but a variety of truths and lies told by different people in different circumstances at different times for different reasons."[98]

Black women are among those who may have used the mammy to their own ends, and some enslaved women and Black women domestics played the role of the mammy "to suit their own purposes."[99] In her chapter on the inner lives of enslaved women, Darlene Clark Hine argues that many enslaved women learned to live with dissemblance, understanding the racist and sexist persona assigned to them and utilizing this persona to negotiate their own image.[100] Manring points to the ways the enslaveds' spiritual songs, already imbued with a certain doublespeak ("as a testament to the Christian experience but also, on the other, as a way to articulate a resistance to slavery")[101] were co-opted into minstrel shows and utilized toward supporting the claim that the enslaved enjoyed their

work so much, they sang while laboring. The meaning Black viewers (and the rare Black minstrel performer) may have taken from these moments as instances where Blackface minstrelsy, caricature, and contemptible collectibles were able to communicate something unique to Black viewers.[102] I contend that like the Black spiritual, espiritismo altars engage in doublespeak when they put the mammy figure to use as la madama and like the Black spiritual, espiritismo altars "are meditations on the triumph of the metaphysical over the physical realities of slavery."[103] In this next section, we'll consider the spiritual dimensions of the mammy when descendants of enslaved people make use of this image within Puerto Rican espiritismo rituals.

La Madama: the Mammy's Nkisi Altar Ego

We have to be careful here: while we're considering how espiritismo practitioners in Puerto Rico have made use of the mammy in their faith practices, we cannot honestly claim that all uses of the mammy in Puerto Rico are sacramental. In 2019, for example, the since-ousted Governor of Puerto Rico, Ricardo Roselló, shared a meme of a mammy to make fun of residents of Yauco--a town once largely connected to Puerto Rico's plantation culture and which still produces coffee, sugar, and cotton.[104] When we consider the broader Caribbean's use of the mammy character as an altar object, we are also probing the "discourses that emerged within the cauldron of spatiotemporal triangular

trades in coffee, tea, sugar, and human flesh of new world slavery necessitated a theology and philosophy of race and, consequently, the racializing of aesthetic practices."[105]

The art historian told Don Flores that she'd come straight off of her flight from San Juan, driven an hour in her rental car with her translator, and then walked another three hours on foot all throughout Guayama. The people of Guayama still remember the times when what goes on in el Centro had to be kept secret.[106] People went to Don Flores with the urgent calamities of their lives--their wayward lovers, their unshakeable ailments, their court cases--and so they were reluctant to tell this stranger or her interpreter anything about how to find Don Miguel Flores' Centro de Espiritismo. And still, just after dusk, she found him.

When Don Flores brought the art historian into el Centro, she took pictures of his altars. She focused her attention on the Indian court and then on the Kongos. In her notebook, she wrote down labels: "left to right: Buddha (black), Buddha (red), madama and her children, Rey Melchior, a camel…" Though the camel made her smile, she paused, "This is the first camel I've seen on an altar" she whispered to her translator and the two muttered in voices so low that Don Flores couldn't hear them. But the translator asked Don Flores about "these figurines" and he told her that they are from Three Kings Day--each of them and their steeds (the camel included) representing a different ancestral line for Puerto Rican people.

During this trip to Puerto Rico, the art historian, Judith Bettelheim, collected newspaper clippings and a children's coloring book about vejigante masks (another Caribbean tradition with roots in West and Central African ritual), about twenty or so photographs of Don Flores' altar figures, and some scant notations taken down in a small notepad.[107] When she arrived in Guayama and found Don Flores' Centro, Bettelheim's notebook makes mention of it through a single note: the aforementioned sketch wherein a straight line represents a shelf and along the line, she's written the names of altar figures, to later compare her against her photos. Beyond this notebook, Bettelheim's archive silences the Puerto Ricans she spoke with on this trip: there is no mention of her conducting interviews or otherwise collecting ethnographic information.

Judith Bettelheim's article about this 1998 visit to Don Flores' espiritismo center makes passing mention in the article's footnotes about this camel conversation and in the same footnote, Bettelheim dismisses Don Miguel Flores' and Doña Rafaella Santell's understanding of the object's use in favor of advancing her own theory.[108] In disregarding their own accounts of how the objects operate on their altar, Bettelheim abandoned an opportunity to examine altar objects as methods through which Puerto Rico's enslaved and their descendants "called upon, remembered, and engaged Africa as part of the critically important work of cultural resistance?"[109] She uses the word "kitsch"--characterized by "[stolen] motifs and materials at random, regardless of the original ascription of the sources"--to describe Don Flores' altar practice.[110] Kitsch is a

loaded word; often used in ways that suggest that the maker is unaware of the practices they borrow from toward creating cluttered assemblages of little artistic value. A word that might be substituted for kitsch in this case is improvisational: to borrow from Donald J. Cosentino, altars are improvisational like jazz, and every jazz song is an altar.[111]

In *Rituals of Resistance: African Atlantic Religion in Kongo and the Lowcountry South in the Era of Slavery,* Jason R. Young traces the non-linear but syncretic ritual practices in the Black Southern United States back toward their West African origins. Chief among Young's assertions is that across the Black Atlantic rim, "change, innovation, and creativity were crucial to the development of Black cultures."[112] This tendency toward improvisation, which Young terms dynamism, or "the readiness to extrapolate new forms from old," Young argues, "constitutes one of the most striking features of the West and Central African cultural systems."[113] Additionally, Young's research finds that Black American religious rituals were not mimetic but were put to use toward remembering and reimagining Africa, as well as critiquing modernity and the violences it forced upon African people in the new world.[114]

The Atlantic slave trade did not solely send people throughout the Atlantic rim, but their accompanying cultural meanings, signs, and symbols.[115] Remembering and reimagining Africa required Black cultures in the new world to make use of the objects and symbols available to them: what appears from the outside to be excessive or otherwise "unnecessary because of their purported lack of refinement, discardable

because of their seeming lack of intellectual rationality and rigor"[116] is rather a testimony to the continuum of cultural ingenuity between West and Central Africans and their diasporic descendants.[117] Moreover, these seemingly frenzied visual rituals offer viewers an opportunity to consider the role of such material performances in the construction of our identities.

But can people of the Black diaspora inscribe new meanings over symbols like the mammy with pernicious histories? It is precisely this fantasy and caricature that Uri McMillan and Daphne Brooks offer up as Black performance strategies. Uri McMillan builds upon Hortense Spillers' theoretical work in "Mama's Baby, Papa's Maybe: An American Grammar Book" to postulate a performance strategy based on thingification. Where Spillers wrote that the Middle Passage unmade people into flesh, McMillan states that an awareness of this objecthood can "scramble the dichotomy between objectified bodies or embodied subjects by reimagining objecthood as a performance-based method that disrupts presumptive knowledges of Black subjectivity."[118] McMillan calls this awareness an abjection and states that through leveraging an abject objecthood, Black performers' bodies are capable of subverting the socially constructed rules imposed upon Black bodies.[119] Through performing abject objecthood, McMillan believes Black performers reach the state of embodied avatars wherein they are able to "[morph] social roles from that which purely confines or constricts to the site at which new possibilities for human agency might be explored."[120]

Also drawing upon Spillers and the stillness of the Middle Passage, Daphne A. Brooks advances her theories of afro-alienation through which Black performers can seize upon tropes to "yield alternative racial and gender epistemologies."[121] Both McMillan and Brooks posit that their performance strategies allow Black performers, and particularly Black women performers, to occupy objecthood and through this performance strategy, critique the conditions that create such objecthood and reimagine the self. Brooks adds to this discourse by offering that this playful ontological instability might yield performances that are illegible to viewers who do not share the same objectivity. By indulging in caricatured performances of excess, Brooks believes that two performances can be created--one which is read at the surface as well as a second that is accessible only to viewers who share in the performer's objectification. This second reading points out that the performance's superfluity is a white cultural production rather than a true portrayal. Brooks labels this inaccessibility spectacular opacity.

To accept altars as a type of material performance is to invite a reading of the altar as a spectacularly opaque performance. Spectacular opacity is a performance strategy through which performers are able to enact a refusal of Western subjugations. Spectacular opacities:

> "contest the dominative imposition of transparency systemically willed on to Black figures. Unlike the colonial invention of exotic darkness which has historically been made to envelop bodies and geographical territories in the shadows of global and hegemonic domination, this form of Black performative opacity...has the potential to enable something in excess of the orchestrated amusements of the

> enslaved, or, to instill movements in free yet socially, politically, and culturally circumscribed bodies."[122]

Which is to say that spectacular opacities are intentionally enacted so as to communicate meaning and create community between members of a group, even as they withhold communication and exclude others. As is the case of our art historian, what might be read as kitsch to a Western-trained viewer, might communicate something else, something concealed, to an intended audience. Spectacular opacity is one performance strategy among a larger toolkit of methods that Daphne Brooks referred to as Afro-alienating acts, in which the performer's condition of alterity is converted into cultural performance through the reliance on racialized and gendered tropes that reflect and characterize the performer's marginal cultural position.[123] Brooks posited that Afro-alienating performances might allow the marginalized to seize upon stereotypes and reorder them in the self-making process.[124]

Which brings me back to Bettelheim: she came to study Don Flores' *figurines* (here I use her own emphasis to indicate that the items were commercially mass-produced for altar use.)[125] Though she noted the idiosyncrasies of some of the objects with the court of Kongos--the camel and kings, the red and black Buddhas--something she didn't remark upon is that each figure is an nkisi which embodies the ancestors of Don Flores and those who seek his counsel. Many of these minkisi are vessels that perform racial caricature borrowing from Western tropes, but

projecting something different in espiritismo altar contexts. West and Central African rituals responded to modernity and slavery in the new world through minkisi. Prior to the enslavement of West and Central African people, minkisi were considered living objects that in Kongo tradition served as sites for the broader articulation of certain religious and spiritual beliefs.[126] In the new world, minkisi evolved to respond to the immediate and quotidian needs of enslaved African people.[127] Through the use of minkisi as object agents, enslaved African people were able to theorize their "ritual practices as challenges to modernity or lay claim to the modern world by proclaiming their own theories in the nature of power, the notion of value, the limits of agency, and the importance of ritual resistance."[128]

In Puerto Rican espiritismo practices, minkisi arrive as altar objects representing embodied ancestral vessels who are called upon for guidance and help with everyday concerns. This is critical: in espiritismo (as well as within Afro-diasporic faith practices across the Atlantic rim), altar objects are not solely objects, but are considered vessels containing ancestral spirits with emotions, desires, and vices. Contemptible collectibles create visualizations and objects out of people who, themselves, were once considered property. On espiritismo altars, these objects act as minkisi and are again transformed into living vessels. If espiritismo altar objects are minkisi--that is to say living agents who are exalted, consulted, and called upon for favors--I believe they are performing an abject objecthood or embodied alienation.[129]

In this way, espiritismo altars are afro-alienating performances: those who make espiritismo altars imbue in the objects that adorn the space with new meanings--signaling the altar maker's sense of place and sense of self. In spite of the ways that the aesthetics of espiritismo altar traditions might be viewed by unintended audiences as "discardable or unnecessary," each communicates something important about the ways Puerto Rican espiritismo practitioners put Africa to use in critiquing their relationship with coloniality, the state, and their ancestors.[130] In their subtle critiques of colonial power, espiritismo altars are political performances that reinscribes meaning over objects with loaded meanings.

Like the mammy figure, la madama is a creation representing no one in particular but pulling from multiple sources, myths (for example, la madama can be invoked when an espiritista is attempting to reach real historical figures like Nanny of the Maroons), and legal processes. Also like the mammy, la madama represents a type of woman, rather than a specific individual. Though scholarly sources on la madama are rare, those who go online to find la madama objects for purchase will typically find a description of her that follows along similar grammars as the mammy: " Historically las Madamas or Las Negras where the Mammys, the Mamei, Mama Mei or Mai, the house slave servant...responsible for the caring and well-being of a master's family. They where [*sic*] the matriarch, the eldest and wisest of the Masters slaves, and where [*sic*] loved and respected by the family."[131]

Beyond these mythic similarities, la madama is nearly physically indistinguishable from the mammy--she is visualized as an older woman wearing a domestic habit, with onyx skin and a large body. Where the mammy's visualizations imagine her prepared to work--in a kitchen or elsewhere--la madama, because she is an nkisi figure, is often seen with tools to her assist her as she puts her talents to use for the espiritista who is claiming descent from her: a knife, a broom, playing cards, and a cauldron (or some other deep dish). While, to the untrained eye, these objects seem ordinary, they are actually sacred: each represents one of the elements. For example, the knife represents fire and protects the espiritista; the cauldron represents water and allows la madama to concoct cures on behalf of the espiritista; the cards represent the earth and allow her to divinate on the espiritista's behalf; and the broom represents air, allowing la madama to cleanse and sweep trouble away from the espiritista.

More important than her sacred items, the physical traits that made the mammy so appealing as validations of white supremacy in the West become protective and powerful traits in the context of la madama and figures like her. In la madama, the mammy's excess is translated into abundance:

> "Harriet Tubman's and Aunt Jemima's representational asexuality allows for a discourse around slave women's sexual vulnerabilities to be discussed with the tentative qualities of projected shame. According to Hazel Carby, in the relative silence of generational miscegenation during slavery, 'delicacy, shame, blushing, and being disconcerted were not the conventions governing patriarchal behavior.'[132] Instead, 'The image of the strong, nonsubmissive Black female head of household...became a figure

> of oppressive proportions with unnatural attributes of masculine power.'[133] For the Jamaican historical figure of Nanny of the Maroons, it is precisely her hypersexualized yet impenetrable body that centers her 'masculine power' as aimed and dutiful--directed toward slave subjectivity... 'Nanny belonged to a period of Caribbean history that presented the possibility for a Black woman to have greater authority than even male warriors and to assume a leadership role.'[134] This possibility is rendered through figurations of excessive agency, sorcery, and a body that is literally bulletproof… Nanny's powers emphasize her mystical corporeal invulnerability."[135]

This abundance is also channelled into la madama's relationship to her children. Unlike the mammy who had an aversion to her own children in favor of the white children in her care, la madama is often visualized on altars with multiple Black children (presumably her own) surrounding her. Important, too, is that espiritismo faith practitioners calling on la madama do so as her descendants. When espiritistas approach la madama as a mother figure and claim descent from her, they refuse the State's grammars that typically associate these images with bad mothering.

Espiritismo altars are afro-alienating performances that map the ancestral figure of la madama over the Western stereotype of the mammy. Through the material performances of espiritismo altars, descendents of Puerto Rico's enslaved have been able to create their own infra-political discussions and practices that subvert government regulation, build community, and assert their own futurity. Beneath the persistence of these objects are relationships between racialized imagery and our cultural memory that reveal processes of meaning-making, deconstruction, and re-making.

The creation of spiritual rituals often arrive as a response to the processes of thingification and beneath ritual performances, there is a rebuttal to colonization and racist gendered hierarchies.[136] It follows, then, that rituals which rely on summoning the spirits of the enslaved are especially pronounced where slavery took the longest to abolish: Puerto Rico, who did not abolish slavery until 1873; Cuba, who abolished slavery in 1880; and Brazil, who became the last country of the Americas to abolish slavery in 1888.[137] Those whose bodies are meant to be represented by contemptible collectibles will have a radically different reaction to them than those who are not represented by the objects.[138] In spite of what Mammy caricatures were meant to communicate and for whom that intended communication was meant, we in espiritismo practice that these meanings and communications aren't stable. The uses of mammies in the African Atlantic demonstrate that descendants of the enslaved were able to reinscribe new meanings onto these symbols through ritual performance and leverage the objects as a way of identifying themselves.[139]

Which isn't to say that new world espiritismo practitioners don't come to altars with a sense of the West's uses for caricature. Throughout the African Atlantic, the various cultures created by the enslaved were aware of the ways they were marginalized.[140] In the court of the Kongos, la madama embodies the spirit of an enslaved Puerto Rican woman and belongs to a suite of Kongos called madamas. Engaging with

the madama suite regularly prompts and requires practitioners of syncretic faiths in the Caribbean to accept reorientations and revisions of Western meanings:

> "To comprehend the extent to which productive engagement with the Madama requires a reorientation and revision of everyday North American assumptions, one need only consider the common error made when turbaned Madama statuettes displayed in botànicas or practitioners' homes are mistaken for images of 'Aunt Jemima', the advertising face of the commodified 'mammy' stereotype in the United States. By lending the Madama some of the attributes associated with the 'Big Momma' figure honored within Black communities, the members of Ilé Laroye made the Madama relevant to their experience despite her exotic provenance, and broadened her availability as a resource, especially for bodily healing."[141]

But perhaps, we can consider the uses of the West's mammy in espiritismo ritual as a choice by descendants of the enslaved to resist the urge to humanize them and in doing so, avoid the reality that the enslaved were flesh commodities.[142] Of that shift from African person to Caribbean flesh, Omise'eke Natasha Tinsley wrote in her article, "Black Atlantic, Queer Atlantic: Queer Imaginings of the Middle Passage" that

> "regardless of whether intimate sexual contact took place between enslaved Africans in the Atlantic or after landing, relationships between shipmates read as queer relation-ships. Queer not in the sense of a "gay" or same-sex loving identity waiting to be excavated from the ocean floor but as a praxis of resistance. Queer in the sense of marking disruption to the violence of normative order and powerfully so: connect-ing in ways that commodified flesh was never supposed to, loving your own kind when your kind was supposed to cease to exist, forging interpersonal connections that counteract imperial desires for Africans' living deaths. Reading for shipmates does not offer to clarify, to tell a documentable story of Atlantic, Caribbean, immi-grant, or "gay" pasts. Instead it

> disrupts provocatively. Fomented in Atlantic cross-currents, black queerness itself becomes a crosscurrent through which to view hybrid, resistant subjectivities — opaquely, not transparently."[143]

We can choose to read espiritismo's embrace of the mammy as a reflection of the ways that the enslaved, having lost their own legibilities during the Middle Passage, might have put thinghood to use in the formation of new identities.[144] Particularly, as we consider the use of contemptible collectibles on altars which already have the double meanings associated with ancestry and objecthood, we might think of espiritismo altars as material and "radical [refusals] of private property that resonates with the Black radical tradition."[145]

In the Kongo, the crossroads were revered places of sacrifice and prayer.[146] So it's fitting that the rituals of the enslaved and their descendents across the African Atlantic are duly crossed practices: making use of various visual languages and reinscribing their own meanings onto them. Espiritismo altars, themselves, are just such a "cruzado practice"; borrowing iconography from across a wide-host of religious and ethnic practices and inventing a new language.[147] These practices of wide borrowing are not dissimilar from the ways those descended from the enslaved "held out the possibility of piecing together the disparate events and seemingly random details of their individual pasts into a coherent narrative, a story in which continuity and community triumphed over rupture and dislocation."[148]

This desire to triumph over rupture and dislocation is a primary consideration for Puerto Rican practitioners: espiritismo is essentially about ancestor worship and community. Embodied altar objects take the place of direct ancestors for people of the Black Atlantic; people with uncertain histories. One reason why the spirits from the madama suite are represented so thoroughly on espiritismo altars is because they resonate. In them, practitioners see themselves--many of them, like enslaved women, survived traumatic experiences to become domestic laborers.[149] Additionally, espiritismo is a site of family-building; allowing those who have survived the Middle Passage and brutal conquests and colonialisms with their equally brutal hierarchies, to attend to Black identity and to curb state attempts to control the meaning of religious practices and symbols.[150]

La madama's presence on the espiritismo altar allows practitioners to enter a temporal break from the present and engage with Puerto Rico's plantation past. Because ancestry and the past are primary considerations on the espiritismo altar, we should conceptualize espiritismo altar time as trans*Atlantic time or palimpsestic time. Christina Sharpe's oceanic time posits that through the nutrient cycles taking place within the sea, everything is recycled in the ocean.[151] These nutrient cycles contain "the past, present, and future; indeed, in the cycle of things, the distinctions between these humanly defined temporal categories become blurred. Time does not seem linear--if anything it is cyclical, experiential, lined with the processes of living, dying, and decomposing of various life

forms."[152] This interplay between oceanic lifeforms, their nutrient cycle, and the time it takes for a substance to cycle out of the ocean is called residence time.[153] The residence time for human blood, largely composed of sodium, is 260 million years, "And what happens to the energy that is produced in the waters? It continues cycling like atoms in residence time. We, Black people, exist in the residence time of the wake, a time in which 'everything is now. It is all now.'"[154]

A palimpsest is a piece of writing where earlier writing is washed away or removed, leaving a trace of what came before. M. Jacqui Alexander's theory of time as a palimpsest, then, encourages a way of thinking about a present time in conversation with the past.[155] The espiritismo altar's use of trans*Atlantic time or time as a palimpsest is not one which considers the past as an ever-present position, but which emphasizes the ways the past and the present coincide, "thus, in no way can we identify the past as *past*."[156] To interpret the time in which we are living as an ideological traffic[157] with what has come before is a repudiation of the "hegemonic death grip"[158] which insists on isolating the past from the present for the purpose of measuring progress (and, particularly, Black progress).

Within espiritismo, la madama utilizes the mammy as an nkisi. As la madama, the caricature is able to refuse the racial logics she was dealt and reinterpret the mammy's characteristic excess as plenitude. By making new meanings of the symbol of the mammy, espiritistas lean into a rich history of Black performance strategies that play with

trope and stereotype. In many cases, as with espiritismo, these aren't performance for the aim of performing but methods of survival. Upon the espiritismo altar, la madama is a material performance that reveals a transnational dialogue about how diasporic people imagine motherhood during slavery, and connects contemporary practitioners to an ancestral past, creating a temporal break where people in the present can commune with their foremothers.

Conclusion

A heretical tradition that is inherently anticapitalist permeates Black spiritual practices such that the Black radical tradition cannot be divorced from its spiritual dimensions.[159] Though we consider the State and the law to be intrinsically non-fantastical, the State relies, from the outset of its creation, on mystical logic. Being that people of the Black diaspora globally have unique experiences with and as property, our most sacred spaces and traditions are also spaces which contain capitalist and State critique.

Jason R. Young's assertions that Afro-diasporic faiths of the Black Atlantic each exist at the crossroads between political resistance and cultural expression[160] hold true for the syncretic faiths practices prevalent throughout the Black Atlantic. As a ritual, syncretic faiths construct altars that allow them to subvert State holy institutions and contemplate practitioners' relationships with their ancestors and to the State. Oftentimes,

as we see in espiritismo, these material practices borrow across a wide range of symbols and meanings, making them opaque to outsiders. Espiritismo altars don't obscure for the simple delight of opacity, but were historically fugitive methods of cultural and literal survival; disguised within each spiritismo altar is a critique of State power.

The mammy is a figure who we know well within the United States' memories of slavery and plantation order[161] and she appears as an altar ego within espiritismo practice. Rather than reflecting what enslaved women and Black domestics within the United States were really like, the mammy operates as a "site where fiction, history, autobiography, memoir, and pop culture meet in battle over the dominant representation of Black womanhood and motherhood, more specifically."[162] And still, our duty isn't to discard the mammy completely, but to challenge the mammy's tropes without dismissing the image's real power.[163]

The mammy has not held a stable characterization over time but became more uniform in step with the liberation of Black people within the United States. And while the conventional wisdom suggests the mammy caricature reflected Black women's station within the plantation caste, evidence suggests that the mammy character has actually done more to bind Black women than it ever did reflect them. Rather than the realities of Black women domestics and enslaved women, mammies reflect white U.S. anxieties about the loss of racialized and gendered hierarchy and their perceived loss of status and property. In the same ways that the mammy image has adapted to and reflected attitudes

in the United States about whiteness, I believe that we can read these legal processes of gendered and racial othering into the mammy and contemptible collectibles: the processes of caricature creation are congruent with the very processes that made captive flesh of Black people.

Where some are seduced into describing the use of mammy objects on espiritismo altars as kitsch, we might retrain ourselves to see them as improvisational assemblages. In *Rituals of Resistance: African Atlantic Religion in Kongo and the Lowcountry South in the Era of Slavery,* Jason R. Young traces syncretic ritual practices in the Black Southern United States back toward their West African origins and asserts that across the Black Atlantic rim, dynamism, or ”the readiness to extrapolate new forms from old, constitutes one of the most striking features of the West and Central African cultural systems.”[164]

La madama within espiritismo practice acts as an nkisi who refuses the racial and gendered logics of her alter ego, the mammy. Instead, la madama reinterprets the mammy’s characteristic excess as plenitude. By making new meanings of the symbol of the mammy, espiritistas lean into a rich history of Black performance strategies that play with trope and stereotype. In many cases, as with espiritismo, these aren’t performance for performance sake but methods of survival. The espiritismo altar is a material performance that reveals a transnational dialogue about how diasporic people imagine motherhood during slavery. Opaque dynamism, as theory of the material performances of espiritismo and particularly the doublespeak attendant to la madama and the mammy,

adapts Brooks' concept of spectacular opacity toward performances wherein an object, rather than a person, is leveraging its objecthood in the service of critiquing modernity and its corresponding racial delusions. La madama on the espiritismo altar also connects contemporary practitioners to an ancestral past, creating a temporal break where people in the present can commune with their foremothers.

This paper examined the visual relationship between la madama and the mammy through a close aesthetic reading and through a reading of the objects' functions in these differing contexts toward interrogating the use of plantation imagery toward remembering, memorializing, and invoking Black women throughout the Afro-Atlantic's syncretic faith spaces. In arguing for the overt spiritual resonances of la madama, the mammy's own spiritual potential for Black women's refusal of the State's grammars became more clear. Though it may feel difficult to reconcile ideas of property, law, and policy with the sacred, property itself is metaphysical rather than purely tangible.[165] When we reflect on Black and Black diasporic people's relationships with and as property, the metaphysical dimensions of property come even more clearly into focus.

On espiritismo altars, minkisi allow practitioners to communicate with and seek help from ancestral spirits in the abstract. Because altars are inherently very personal, they sometimes feature photos of loved ones who have passed on--putting them in spiritual convening with those long gone and with literal gods.[166] The crossed practices of the altars bridge diasporic communities across the Black Atlantic and borrow symbols

from a vast network of visual languages. Ever changing, espiritismo altars respond to the political world the practitioners live in and offer up messages of resistance. In all of these uses, the altars become palimpsests, allowing us to see traces of what came before in our present. By allowing practitioners to conceive of time as a palimpsest, then, they rebuke the modernity-primitivism binary, demonstrating that they have rich histories and continue to transform. As we consider our relationships to the mammy, la madama, our ancestors and the future evolutions of each in relation to espiritismo practice, we are called to imagine how future espiritismo practitioners will utilize their faith rituals toward engaging with the past.

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