



PROJECT MUSE®

Aunt(y) Jemima in Spiritual Baptist Experience in Toronto:
Spiritual Mother or Servile Woman?

Carol B. Duncan

Small Axe, Number 9 (Volume 5, Number 1), March 2001, pp. 97-122 (Article)

Published by Duke University Press

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.1353/smx.2001.0003>



➔ *For additional information about this article*

<https://muse.jhu.edu/article/31818>

Aunt(y) Jemima in Spiritual Baptist Experience in Toronto: Spiritual Mother or Servile Woman?

Carol B. Duncan

And he called the name of the first, Jemima . . .

– Job 42:14

Aunt Jemima, an extension of the “mammy” stereotype, has emerged from the history of slavery and colonialism in North America as one of the most pervasive images of black womanhood and black motherhood. Though clearly an invention, since scholarly examination and personal narratives and biographies of black women in historical and contemporary eras fail to find women who conform to this image of servility, the stereotype is nevertheless powerful in its impact on hegemonic images *and* public policy concerning contemporary black women.¹ Aunt

1 See Sue K. Jewell, *From Mammy to Miss America and Beyond: Cultural Images and the Shaping of US Social Policy* (London: Routledge, 1993); and Marlon T. Riggs, *Ethnic Notions* (Video recording, United States, KQED in association with M. Riggs, 1986).

Jemima is at once a commercial brand name for the Quaker Oats Company pancake mix – one of the most recognizable commercial brand names – and racial icon. Advertising for the product between the early decades of the twentieth century to the late 1960s focused on nostalgic images of the Old South mammy in print advertising and personal appearances by black women hired to impersonate her. The image was further developed through Hollywood movies such as *Gone With the Wind* (1939), which featured a depiction of mammy by African American actor Hattie McDaniel that was rewarded with an Oscar, the first ever won by a black actor. In this way, mammy/Aunt Jemima has almost always been associated with the bodies of real black women, even if only in the world of commercial advertising, entrenching her familiarity as a brand name product.

While analysis and strategies that emerge from antiracist, antisexist and anticolonialist discourses have tended to focus on ways in which stereotypical images are debunked and subsequently “erased”, a consideration of processes in which these images are “reappropriated” by the stereotyped group through a so-called reclamation and implied transformation is also important. These processes walk a potentially contradictory and explosive cultural, psychic and political terrain. They are crucial in understanding the construction/reconstruction of gendered, sexed, classed and raced categories as historically based and dynamic power relations. In this context, I am particularly interested in the ways in which contemporary black women who have emigrated from the Caribbean have encountered and grappled with this image in their everyday lives.

The ideas for this article came out of ongoing research on the Spiritual Baptist Church in Toronto. They also emerged from reflections on my own experiences of encountering Aunt Jemima shortly after emigrating to Toronto in 1973 after having lived in England and Antigua. As a girl-child in the 1970s, I first met Aunt Jemima and mammy as the name of the Quaker Oats Company’s mass-marketed pancake mix, an iconic stereotypical image in the form of shiny ceramic cookie jars and as a racial epithet. It became apparent through in-depth interviews with women in the church and through my critical ethnographic research on church services and other rituals that symbolic physical, psychological and emotional characteristics often associated with “negative” images of black motherhood, such as Aunt Jemima and mammy, not only impacted on these women’s everyday lives as domestic workers in Toronto but that these same characteristics had been reworked and re-invented in the religious symbols of the church and in the religious lives of individual women to provide an empowering image of black motherhood contrary to the servility implied by the stereotype. These

characteristics include wearing attire such as headties, long skirts and dresses, and an ethic of maternal care that extends beyond biological children.² They serve as the basis of a self-defined and affirming image of black motherhood even in the face of continued economic exploitation which is justified, in part, by stereotypic images of black motherhood.

In my interviews with black Caribbean women in the Spiritual Baptist Church in Toronto, conducted between 1992 and 1995, as well as conversations with other black Caribbean women who work in a variety of occupations, most recounted an experience of one sort or the other with Aunt Jemima, either by name or, more commonly, through an externally defined association with her stereotypical physical and emotional-affective characteristics. Her large body, especially her large breasts, dark complexion, ever-present smile and head kerchief are the quintessential signs of the mammy. Dionne Brand, in fact, notes that the mammy stereotype played a part in the targeting of black women from the Caribbean as potential recruits for the domestic work schemes in Canada.³ Most of the women whom I interviewed in the Spiritual Baptist Church in Toronto had had experiences as domestic workers. Many continue to be employed as domestic workers. Of these women, several had stories to tell of co-workers and supervisors who expected them to be all-nurturing, servile, caring and non-complaining under the most arduous and poorly paid of work situations. More telling still, were their stories of how they recognized Aunt Jemima's presence in their work relationships and her continuing effect on images of black women as workers not only in kitchens in private homes or those in commercial settings but also in hospitals, retail stores, classrooms, offices and on factory floors.

My objectives here are threefold: first, to explore the ways in which the symbolic reinvention of Aunt Jemima strips away the veneer of sameness and subsequent voiceless anonymity imposed by stereotyping to reveal the varied textures of African Caribbean women's lives that have been obscured by this image; second, and relatedly, to discuss a re-invented Aunt Jemima and her symbolic connection to the role of the

2 Patricia Hill Collins, drawing on the work of Rosalie Riegle Troester ("Turbulence and Tenderness: Mothers, Daughters and 'Othermothers' in Paule Marshall's *Brown Girl, Brownstones*", *Sage: A Scholarly Journal on Black Women* 1, no. 2 [1984]: 13–16) describes this practice as "othermothering", part of a continuum of mothering relationships, in which black women share the responsibility of mothering work with biological or "bloodmothers". See Patricia Hill Collins, *Black Feminist Thought: Knowledge, Consciousness and Power* (London: Routledge, 1991), 119.

3 Dionne Brand, "Black Women and Work: The Impact of Racially Constructed Gender Roles on the Sexual Division of Labour, Part Two", *Fireweed: A Feminist Quarterly* 26 (Winter–Spring 1988): 87–92.

“mothers of the church” and so point to one of the sources of an indigenous Afrisporic feminist consciousness forged in the crucible of these women’s everyday lives;⁴ and last, to locate the discussion of “syncretism” and symbolic reinterpretation within the everyday lives of contemporary immigrant African Caribbean women in Toronto. In so doing, the discussion and analysis point to the role of the cultural imaginations of contemporary Spiritual Baptist women in meeting their spiritual, emotional and political needs, as well as the continued dynamism of African Caribbean religious traditions in the diaspora.

“SEEING” AUNT JEMIMA

Please put the Aunt Jemima in that corner. I had “noticed” the Aunt Jemima figurine in the church several times before that service one afternoon in the summer of 1994. I had “noticed” and “noted” her in my journal on my very first visit to a Spiritual Baptist Church in Toronto nearly two years earlier on 27 September 1992:

There are 6 altars in the church. Four mini altars. One in each corner; a centre pole at which water, flowers, libations, meal, flour and peas are kept in calabashes; a main altar at the front of the church. *The altar in the back left corner of the church had a statue of a black woman in head dress and skirts like the women of the church.*

I had “noticed” her and refused to “see” her until one summer afternoon in 1994 when she was called her name by the bishop, the male leader of the church. “Please put the Aunt Jemima in that corner,” he said. Aunt Jemima was the *black woman in head dress and skirts like the women of the church*.

“The eye,” as Dionne Brand notes in her essay “Seeing”, “is a curious thing: it is not passive, not merely a piece of physiology, practical and utilitarian; it is not just a hunk of living matter, gristle, tendon, blood. It *sees*.”⁵ In “seeing”, the eye uses its

4 It has also been suggested that community othermothering plays an important role in fostering the development of community activism among African American women. See Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, “‘Holding Back the Ocean with a Broom’: Black Women and Community Work”, in *The Black Woman*, ed. La Frances Rodgers-Rose (Beverly Hills: Sage, 1980), 217–32; Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, “Successful Rebellious Professionals: The Black Woman’s Professional Identity and Community Commitment”, *Psychology of Women Quarterly* 6, no. 3 (1982): 289–311; Cheryl Townsend Gilkes, “Going Up for the Oppressed: The Career Mobility of Black Women Community Workers”, *Journal of Social Issues* 39, no. 3 (1983): 115–39, as cited by Collins, *Black Feminist Thought*, 131.

5 Dionne Brand, *Bread Out of Stone: Recollections, Sex, Recognitions, Race, Dreaming, Politics* (Toronto: Coach House Press, 1994), 169; my emphasis.

recollected memories and history to situate and conceptualize. As Brand continues in her analysis, “The eye has purpose and goes where it wants to in order to clarify itself. Or to repeat. It has fancies. Or to regulate. It is very precise as to how it wants to see the world.”⁶ I had decided after the experiences of my school days never to “see” Aunt Jemima as a person. I would “note” her presence with the explicit intention of challenging stereotypical assumptions but I would not “see” her; and in so doing, until that day in church, I did not “see” that there could be people, including myself, behind that image in a way that belied and subverted the stereotypic associations.

And yet, here she was within the “homeplace”,⁷ a supposedly “safe” space for black folks – here she was in one of the most significant “homeplaces” – the black church, and occupying her own place within this “sacred” space. What was she doing here? *Who* had invited *her* in here in a church filled predominantly with black women? Aunt Jemima had come to represent all that I and many a girl-child I knew in the 1970s had desired to flee as we grew into womanhood: servility, acquiescence and undesirability, even though we knew that she continued to shape societal definitions of black women not only as mothers but also as workers. In my nascent feminist consciousness that summer, I saw Aunt Jemima as a woman who participated, actively, in her own oppression. In my mind, Aunt Jemima was not a feminist and she was definitely not my mother!

*Aunt Jemima was ceramic. Shiny. Her billowing skirt, red head kerchief and not-people-coloured black skin gleamed from the fire. Cast in a mould and fired in a kiln, Aunt Jemima did not have any parents or family. She was a “ready-made” woman.*⁸

The bishop’s words cut a swath through my thoughts when he said “Please put the Aunt Jemima in that corner” as a part of the preparation of the church for a service on that summer afternoon. She was being called by name and placed in one of the corners of the church. Aunt Jemima had been brought home. Initially, before the bishop’s naming, I had “seen” Aunt Jemima as a stand-in, a substitution for someone

6 Ibid., 171.

7 bell hooks, “Homeplace: A Site of Resistance”, in *Yearning, Race, Gender and Cultural Politics* (Boston: South End Press, 1990), 41–49.

8 My grandmother Dorothy Sebastian Prince (1902–1994) would often use the term “ready-made” to distinguish those items which were manufactured and purchased in a store from those which were fashioned by hand. More than this seemingly simple distinction about the process of labour, the term “ready-made” also implied class divisions and aesthetics as those who preferred and could afford “ready-made” goods aspired to, or had already attained, middle-class status. In addition, in the context of Caribbean economies in which, historically, the black poor and working class had to produce their own subsistence, the emergence of this term “ready-made” goods, goods shipped from “overseas”, signalled a shift in the domestic political economy of subsistence. Thus, Aunt Jemima was “ready-made” not only as a mass-produced symbol but she was “ready-made” seemingly without the roots and family history that “home-made” would imply.

else “more important”, surely, to black, Caribbean people in our sacred lives. I had rationalized her presence as the use of a figurine in the absence of finances to commission a religious artefact. She was another example of the “syncretic” use of symbols within religions of the African diaspora. Surely, her name would start with “Saint” or “Mother” but not “Aunt”.

In analysing the location of Aunt Jemima in the church, two explanatory modes were pursued. On the one hand, I wondered whether the use of Aunt Jemima was an inadvertent reinscription of racist iconography fostered through the use of the symbol as a substitution for another figure. This reinscription would come about through the sheer historical weight of the image which would make it difficult for any other meaning to be read. On the other hand, Aunt Jemima in the church can be considered a reclaimed figure representing black motherhood in terms of the church member’s own experiences. Indeed, based on the reverence held for the figure symbolized by her placement within the geography of the church, the latter explanation is relevant. However, it is necessary to place the church within its larger sociocultural context of contemporary Toronto in which stereotypes of black women as mammy and Aunt Jemima impact not only every day personal experiences of racism but have also shaped public policy, as Silvera’s analysis of the institution of both the First and Second Domestic Work Scheme in Canada indicates.⁹

To understand the ambivalence (for me) of Aunt Jemima’s place within the church, it is necessary to revisit the “seen” as “scene”, the physical location, of that initial encounter with Aunt Jemima at church. The outside world, is demarcated as separate and apart from the church environs. This demarcation is symbolized through the ritual of “surveying” the church in which the female members, usually the mothers of the church, ritually purify the four corners and centre pole of the church through prayers and offerings of grain, honey, milk and water. Within this sanctified space, “this spot of ground”, in the “spiritual nation language”¹⁰ of the church, Aunt Jemima is something other than the racialized construct that she occupies in the everyday

9 Makeda Silvera, *Silenced: Makeda Silvera Talks with Working-Class Caribbean Women About Their Lives and Struggles as Domestic Workers in Canada* (Toronto: Sister Vision Press, 1989).

10 This term draws on Edward Kamau Brathwaite’s notion of “nation language”, used to denote the languages created by Africans and their descendants during and after slavery in the Caribbean. It is characterized by its orality and its ability to express ideas from the unique perspective of African Caribbean people. It is a “language of the people” in a way that the “standardized” and mainstreamed forms of English and other European languages are not. “Spiritual nation language” points to the use of Creole to discuss and convey ideas related to spirituality. In this sense, the language expresses fundamental ideas about world view and cosmology. See Edward Brathwaite, *History of the Voice: The Development of Nation Language in Anglophone Caribbean Poetry* (London: New Beacon Books, 1984).

world outside of the church. However, by her very naming as Aunt Jemima that outside world is evoked with the attendant stereotypical visual as well as emotional/affective characteristics.

Kenneth W. Goings, in discussing the continued symbolic importance of racial collectibles, notes that it is the emotional content of the words “aunt” and “uncle” even when used in the context of racialized stereotypes that “symbolizes the power of these collectibles”.¹¹ As I will discuss in greater detail, the addition of the “y” by Sister Maria, a Spiritual Baptist woman in Toronto, signifies a shift in this emotional connection to an Aunt(y) Jemima imbued with meaning other than the stereotypic assumptions which have their basis in American Old South mythology.

Especially significant for this discussion is what Goings calls the “personification” of the collectibles.¹² By personifying these objects, Goings points to his personal relationship in light of his placement of them as subjects within the context of the struggles of African Americans for dignity, equality and justice in the United States. He describes seeing Aunt Jemima and Uncle Mose, her male counterpart, as dignified people beyond the stereotypes, who are actively engaged in the movement for social justice in the United States. Goings’s imaginary transgression of the boundaries of the stereotypes is countered by his realization that in the America of the 1990s, “Aunt Jemima would probably still be cooking and Uncle Mose serving – living their lives, as we all do, with dignity and self-respect.”¹³ Nevertheless, Goings pleads the following to explain his “personification” of the objects:

I hope the reader will not think that I have completely lost my sense of reality when I personify the collectibles in the way I have. After all, I have been studying these objects of the last seven years, and they do now seem like people, like friends. Moreover, I am not the only one who feels this way. When two collectors were asked recently why they are preserving and studying black memorabilia, they replied, “If we don’t portray it, people won’t know how far we’ve come.” They continued, “Precisely by possessing these objects, black people rob them of their power. Silly and crude these things may have been, but . . . generations of black people lived in their shadow. The souls of millions of black people were trapped in these heaps of mass-produced junk. Now at last they are being set free.”¹⁴

11 Kenneth W. Goings, *Mammy and Uncle Mose: Black Collectibles and American Stereotyping* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1994), xiii.

12 Ibid., xxiv.

13 Ibid.

14 Ibid.; my emphasis. Quotations from collectors cited in “Cookie Jars of Oppression: Shades of Jim Crow Make It Big as Collectible”, *Newsweek*, 16 May 1987, 75–76.

The observations of Goings and the other collectors are significant here for they point to the subversively imaginative engagement of Aunt Jemima and Uncle Mose, her male counterpart, as figures that encompass the hidden (from the stereotypic vantage point) dimension of the actual and possible lives of black men and women who laboured in domestic service. The “gaze” of these collectors is one that subverts the hegemonic positioning of Aunt Jemima and Uncle Mose as representations of inferiority and servility.

I posit that the presence of Aunt Jemima in a Toronto Spiritual Baptist Church is similarly subversive in that through her presence in the church Aunt Jemima, this most “profane” and devalued of stereotypic representations of black womanhood, is made “sacred” and brought “home”. This transformation is achieved through her imagined possibilities based on the lives of both historical and contemporary black women who performed the work of mothering in domestic service but also in a variety of black community contexts.

(RE)TURNING THE GAZE ON AUNT(Y) JEMIMA

The image of Aunt Jemima is an ambivalent symbolic entry point for a discussion of the experiences of black Caribbean women in Canada. Its ambivalence lies in the fact that it is the dominant image of the presence of black women as workers in Canada and yet, in that particular Spiritual Baptist Church in Toronto, a subversive rereading of the image is the symbolic point of entry for another status, “mother of the home”, one which is valued and cherished within the church community.

One way of “reading” Aunt Jemima in the context of the church is as a representation of a historical, “archetypal black mother”: the mother who endured through the period of slavery and who lives on to encourage and console in dreams and through the spiritual journeying of “mourning”. In the following, Sister Maria, a Vincentian Spiritual Baptist woman in her late thirties, discusses her meeting with “Aunty Jemima” and its significance in helping her to decide to participate in the ritual of mourning:

And, um . . . again before I went and mourn again, I used to be always in a valley. Always down there. And this woman used to come to me and she – I used to wash clothes and hang clothes out. You know, she used to tell me the clothes them dry, time to pick them up. Right? And then, I used to really go in deep manifestation and that will tell me that yes, Maria, I’m ready to pass, you’re ready to mourn, okay. They’re calling you, come, let’s go.

One day, I see dis woman, black like jet, girl. And she says her headtie like Auntie Jemima. And her apron – only her head tie-up I coulda see and her eyes and her apron and she calling me up this hill and she said to me, “You’re ready. Come out. It’s time for you to learn these things.” Okay? And these things that happen all of a sudden. They just happen, girl. And I strongly believe that if you’re in Christ, your light is going to shine. You have to come out of darkness. Okay? Sometimes I used to start to go places and I went out to go to parties and stuff like that . . . Carol, and it just not me. It’s just that I don’t feel that I should be there, eh? You know if you don’t feel right, you know this is not for you, get out?¹⁵

Sister Maria’s meeting with the woman in the valley whom she identified in reference to Aunt Jemima is indicative of the way in which this racial signifier has been subverted. The same features which are the quintessential signs of the mammy and Aunt Jemima, the skin “black like jet”, her “head tie-up” and her “apron” are symbolic of this Auntie Jemima. The addition of the “y” shifts aunt to a personalized term of endearment – aunty – which signals a transformation of Aunt Jemima from the realm of racial iconography and static, immovable figure to an active and engaging subject in this woman’s life. Her positioning in the valley “signifies” on Psalm 23 in the King James version of the Old Testament. In the black church tradition, the “valley” is interpreted as symbolic of a place of despair.

Sister Maria’s encounter with Auntie Jemima in the “valley” suggests a radical intervention in the interpretation of this psalm. In “signifyin” on Psalm 23, Sister Maria interjects a black, female, ancestral presence in the “valley” along with the presence of God. An even more radical interpretation would be that Auntie Jemima *herself* is a feminine divine presence. It is significant to note that Jemima is the first daughter of Job, whose story of suffering in the Hebrew Bible, forms a part of the core of black theological interpretations of the Bible:

So the Lord blessed the latter end of Job more than his beginning: for he had fourteen thousand sheep, and six thousand camels, and a thousand yoke of oxen, and a thousand she asses. He had also seven sons and three daughters. And he called the name of the first, Jemima; and the name of the second, Kezia; and the name of the third, Kerenhappuch. And in all the land were no women found so fair as the daughters of Job; and their father gave them inheritance among their brethren.¹⁶

15 Sister Maria, personal interview, Toronto, Canada, August 1995. All quotations from Sister Maria are taken from this interview.

16 Job 42:12–15.

Sister Maria's interpretation also suggests that the text is "alive" in her interpretive approach to the Bible. Sister Maria's reading of the Bible inhabits the text as a lived experience imbued with personalized meanings from her own autobiography as well as black women's collective historical experience in the Americas. It suggests that her relationship to the Bible as written text is one in which the book is not only a "talking book", as Gates suggests in pointing to the significance of the oral tradition in influencing black American literature,¹⁷ but that the text is a "lived *and* living book" which can be entered into and transformed by the reader/speaker. The prime means through which this lived reading is facilitated is the ritual of mourning, a period of prayer and fasting in which the "pilgrim" travels in the spirit.

REREADING AUNT(Y) JEMIMA AND THE CREOLE WOMAN IN THE ATTIRE OF SPIRITUAL BAPTIST WOMEN

As Sister Maria's comments indicate, Aunt Jemima's attire, including her headtie, neck scarf, apron and long skirt, and her large body size receive an entirely different interpretation than the dominant one of servility and inferiority when they are positioned as signs of black feminine power. From the perspective of Spiritual Baptist experiences in Toronto and the symbolic culture of African Caribbean communities of the enslaved and their descendants, Aunt Jemima's clothing is representative of ancestral black women whose attire included both European and African elements: from Europe, the long full skirt, petticoats and apron and, from Africa, the neck scarf or *fula* and the headtie. We also see this image in the "creole" woman attire in a Caribbean context.

The Honourable Louise Bennett Coverley, affectionately known as Miss Lou to her legions of fans in Jamaica, the Caribbean and others elsewhere in the world, successfully utilized the visual image of the long-time Creole woman in presenting her poetry and monologues in Jamaica language or patois. A pioneer in the use and valorizing of patois as a "legitimate" language of critical reflection and significant creation of Jamaican culture, Miss Lou has appeared before Jamaican national and international audiences wearing the costume of the Caribbean creole woman, complete with headtie, long, full overskirt and petticoats. She used this image, which is so often

17 Henry Louis Gates, Jr, *The Signifying Monkey: A Theory of Afro-American Literary Criticism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988).

regarded as a figure of comedy, to issue cogent critiques and reflections on various aspects of Jamaican culture, politics and society in her role as a media figure on radio and in her publications and live performances.¹⁸ It should be noted that it was only in the context of cultural and political decolonization that Miss Lou's subversive use of the mammy stereotype became apparent to a broader spectrum of the Jamaican and wider Caribbean audience in the diaspora. As Miss Lou herself observed in her interview with Dennis Scott, she was perceived by the Jamaican middle class in comedic terms.¹⁹

While many of Miss Lou's presentations are in a humorous and entertaining vein, the seriousness of her critique has registered within Jamaica and the Caribbean diaspora abroad. In her presentations and her writings, Miss Lou employs the narrative strategy in which she "tek bad sinting mek laugh".²⁰ The impact of her contributions to the legacy of Jamaican nation language and, by extension, the creative expressions of African Caribbean people has bestowed upon Bennett the authorial stance of Mother in the sense of community mother. As such, her wearing of the attire signals this authorial power and subverts the dominant gaze which would relegate Miss Lou and her Aunt Roachy to a marginal status.²¹

Aunt Jemima's attire, including her full long skirt, apron, neck scarf or *fula* and headtie, is identical to the clothing worn by some Spiritual Baptist women who don this attire as a sign of their church role as mother or nurse, for example, as well as a sign of their "spiritual gifts". These clothes are not only a symbolic representation of their position within the church's leadership but also serve as a visible sign of their identity as Spiritual Baptist women within the wider framework of Toronto's diverse black and Caribbean communities.

Mother Ruth's introduction to the Baptist Church in Toronto was facilitated through a Trinidadian friend's identification of a Spiritual Baptist woman by virtue of

18 See, for example, the image of Bennett on the cover of her *Jamaica Labrish* (Kingston, Jamaica: Sangster's Book Stores, 1966) and *Aunty Roachy Seh* (Kingston, Jamaica: Sangster's Book Stores, 1993).

19 Louise Bennett, "Bennett on Bennett" (interview by Dennis Scott), *Caribbean Quarterly* 14 (March-June 1968): 97-101.

20 To "tek bad sinting mek laugh" is Jamaican Creole or Patois which translates literally as "to take a bad thing and make laugh" or to make light of a bad situation. The expression points to a deeper meaning, which is the strategy of addressing difficult topics through the use of humour.

21 In her oral presentations and writings based on those presentations, Miss Lou often prefaces her statements with references to her "Aunty Roachy". Aunty Roachy serves as the authorial voice in Miss Lou's pronouncements and commentary. Aunty Roach represents an older time and the wisdom of elders on which Miss Lou draws in her commentary. Note the similarity in naming between Miss Lou's Aunty Roachy and the Aunty Jemima of Sister Maria's mourning experiences.

her dress on a Toronto street in the late 1980s. Here is the story as told by Mother Ruth:

**SMALL
AXE**

Well, um, when I come up here – because I wondering back from home [Trinidad] if it ha' Baptist Church in Canada! [*Laughter.*] So I didn't really bring no – say well set a' clothes dat I does wear to church. I just bring up, ahm – is only one? Think is only two dress I did walk with, right? But one day, di same guy, I ask him if he ain't know about no Baptist church. And I ask his sister and she say, "No." So one day, he was riding a bicycle going by a garage over . . . by a friend. So when he come back he say, "Well, well, well. Ah find a church fuh you now." So ah say, "Go about yuh business, man! Which part yuh see di church?" He say, "Ah meet a lady dress just like how does dress back home." [*Laughter.*] So ah say, "Suppose di woman just feel to dress like that!" He say, "No man. I talk to di lady and she tell me – look di number here. She say call she and she going tell yuh where di church is." Well da was Mother Y.

So I call but she wasn't home and I call back di evening and ah talk wid she and ting. And tell she well ah from Trinidad and so on and so on. And ah want to go in a church. Ah tell she Spiritual Baptist. So she say, "Well, I am a Spiritual Baptist too and I go to a church so if you want to go with me is fine." So di Sunday, ah get up and go early and we had one joke di Sunday now. Now she say meet her quarter to six, right in – right in my street where I live. Yuh just go across di next street an come up to di bus stop.

I was living at Eglinton. And she living on Eglinton too. But di – ah coulda come up on Eglinton by di bus stop dere but she say come on di next bus stop which is on Marlee Avenue. So I hustling up di road now, because she say quarter to six di bus passing. So I hurry up di road to reach to di bus stop. When I reach there now, I see di bus coming. As soon as di bus coming now, di bus break down. So I wait, I wait, I wait. Ah looking to see if ah see anybody in headtie. Ah ain't seeing nobody in no tie head coming from nowhey! So it had a friend was by me dat same Sunday so I went back home, but ah did ask her for di address, eh. And she tell me . . .²²

In the following, Mother Ruth, describes her relationship to her "spiritual clothes" as empowering symbols and in so doing, points to a rereading and reinscription of the attire which, from the dominant cultural perspective in North America, is synonymous with servility and, by extension, inferiority. Mother Ruth's comments also respond to the "read" of the headtie and "Baptist clothes" by other Caribbean people in public spaces in Toronto as signs of suspicion of doing "devil work" or "obeah" – a reading which has its basis in a Caribbean context. For Mother Ruth, her church clothes

22 Mother Ruth, personal interview, Toronto, Canada, July 1995. All quotations from Mother Ruth are taken from this interview.

signify her role as a mother and convey a special feeling of celebration and connection with the Spirit.

Carol Duncan: How you feel – I remember earlier when you were talking how some people does look at Baptist in a certain way, you know? And say, “Oh they tie their head.” You know, “They dealing with the devil” and stuff like that. How do you feel about that? How other people look at Baptists?

**CAROL B.
DUNCAN**

Mother Ruth: Well, sometimes, at first I used to get angry. But I don’t get angry anymore because I only figure more or less looking at people me of me own self and seeing that di behaviour of dese people sometimes, especially when you dress, going to church. That’s what make di difference. So I don’t really – it don’t really matter me again. Up to now, it still have people like they going to church and they don’t tie they head from home. Like – you know – they just dress like ordinary and when they reach in church you see they go and tie they head. I don’t do that.

I figure, you leaving your home and you going to church, you leave from your house with your headtie, you go to di church. Don’t walk through di street or yuh ride di train, yuh ride di bus bare head and yuh dress up and when you reach in church your headtie high up in the air. Don’t care where I living, and you see me, I like – you see like when – I don’t know – when Sunday time come like I does feel a special, special joy in my heart. You know why? Just to put on me clothes to go to church here.

Just to put on my clothes to go to church, Sister Carol. Because you see I don’t like my clothes short for church. I may go anywhere else in a short ting, but you see when I going to church, I always like my clothes long down there! . . . But I just like it to wear long and sometime I does say, the fact I don’t wear all my clothes long, I like long clothes [*hand clap*]. Yeah. I love long clothes. Dat’s di way I like to dress! My dress long and my headtie tie nice! . . . I minding more dan reach di church di church close! [*Laughter.*]

Yeah, ah feel good going to church! Because you know some people like you going to church, yuh put up di apron, yuh put di belt, yuh put all in a bag and they headtie. And they gone bare head! And then when they reach in church now you see they come back upstairs [*hand clap*]. Ah say, well if God was to meet yuh on di road, yuh in di bare head. So I – if I live – where di place name, Alberta – ah coming to church and ah ain’t coming without my headtie tie, you know?

I don’t care who want to watch me on di train. I ain’t want to know who want to watch me on di bus. But ah comin’ just as from out di bus, into di church. Right in my seat. I ain’t want to go downstairs. Di time it take to go downstairs, wha’ happen?

Mother Ruth also indicated that she made a distinction between the clothes she wore to church, her “spiritual garment” and the clothes that she wore to work, her “working clothes”:

Well, because, you see, you’re going to church and that come as your spiritual garment, right? Well, other things you wearing all about, it ain’t worthwhile that you wearing it to –

to church, you know? You church clothes, must be your church clothes. Because I don't wash my church clothes neither with my working clothes . . . Me nah work wid it neither . . . I wash them separately.

**SMALL
AXE** Mother Ruth's "spiritual garments" are imbued with the sacred. As she notes in the following, these garments can serve as the conduit of the "blessing" received from a particular service. As such, the garments serve as a crucial link between the spiritual and material worlds.

[B]ecause the guy that I mourn and ting with,²³ he tell me he say, "Sometimes when you go home from church you must sleep in yuh clothes, you know?" When your blessing – if di service was nice to you and you feel you enjoy di service, sleep in yuh clothes, leh di blessing stay wid you. So sometime I does sleep. [*Laughter.*] [CD: So you sleep in your clothes sometimes? Your headtie too, Mother Ruth?] Yes. And I does wake up just like how you see yuh coming church? Is so I does wake up, yuh know. Just like if I lie dung here and sleep, yuh wouldn't believe somebody sleep here, you know?

TIEHEAD WOMAN

In doing research on the Spiritual Baptist Church in Toronto, especially in conversations with Spiritual Baptist women such as Mother Ruth, I revisited my relationship to clothing and my perception of "spiritual garments". My viewpoint of the latter, as a child and adolescent, had been dually shaped by my internalizing of racial stereotypes that denigrated the headtie and long skirts as symbols of inferiority and "mammification" of black women along with deeply held feelings of respect for elder women and church women I knew who tied their heads. I was certainly not unique in learning how to manage these contradictions. My experiences mirrored Patricia Hill Collins's notes in commenting on black women's socialization of black daughters in the United States: "[A] key part of Black girls' socialization involves incorporating the critical posture that allows Black women to cope with contradictions. For example, Black girls have long had to learn how to do domestic work while rejecting definitions of themselves as Mammies."²⁴

23 Mourning is a ritual consisting of prayer and fasting for a period lasting anywhere from three to as many fourteen days, in which the "pilgrim", as the mourner is known, seeks spiritual guidance. It is through this process that spiritual "gifts", which often correspond with specific leadership roles within the church, are bestowed.

24 Patricia Hill Collins, "The Meaning of Motherhood in Black Culture and Black Mother-Daughter Relationships", in *Double Stitch: Black Women Write about Mothers and Daughters*, ed. Patricia Bell-Scott, et al. (New York: Harper Perennial, 1993), 53.

As I went to church services during the process of conducting field research, my headtie visibly marked me as “different” in public spaces such as Toronto buses and subways. While I am not a Spiritual Baptist, in attending church services and while conducting some interviews, I covered my hair out of respect for the community. Indeed, there were numerous occasions in which I carried my headtie in my bag, quickly went down to the church’s basement and transformed myself through wearing it, as Mother Ruth astutely observed. On other occasions that I wore the headtie in public spaces, I was acutely aware of its signification marking me as a “tiehead woman”, a “churchwoman”, a “Baptist”, a “Christian”, a “rasta woman” in the meanings imbued by these terms in the Caribbean community and as culturally different and “exotic” within the wider North American discourse of fashion and self-presentation, femininity and “race”.

Attending Spiritual Baptist church services as a researcher in Toronto was not the first time I had worn a headtie. I associated the headtie with “private” life because I had spent almost every night of my life since girlhood wearing a headtie. Like many black, Caribbean girls I grew up tying my head at night as a bedtime ritual. With the busy work lives of our mothers and othermothers, our hair was braided in small cornrows or “plain plaits” with the expectation that the hairstyle would last a couple of days if it were tied at night in order to prevent the mussing of the hair. I also associated the headtie as a sign of elderhood in African Caribbean women, as my own grandmother tied her head during her elder years. In conducting research on the Spiritual Baptist Church, I was afforded the opportunity to re-examine the headtie in both my own personal practices of appearance as well as its wider significance within the Spiritual Baptist Church and within a variety of North American popular cultural contexts.

Black people’s hair has been one of the sites of the construction of racial difference in the Americas. Racial stereotyping of black people has focused on hair as much as skin colour as evidence of “racial difference”. Talk of “good hair” and “bad hair” in the colour/caste systems of black communities in the Caribbean and North America is linked to the salience of hair as a sign of “race” or “colour”. As an extension of this signification on hair as racial difference, dominant cultural readings also position the headtie as a sign of racial difference, which in this case is also gender-specific to black women. The head kerchief became one of the quintessential signs of the Old South mammy along with her large breasts.²⁵ This association of the headtie with servility is

25 Goings, *Mammy and Uncle Mose*, 65.

indeed “ironic” since the headtie initially signified a connection with an African past for the enslaved where the wearing of a head covering originated.²⁶

SMALL
AXE

Upon arrival in America, enslaved women were provided with a few items of clothing.²⁷ These included two striped cotton dresses, three shifts, two pairs of shoes and handkerchiefs. The handkerchiefs were worn by some men and nearly all women.²⁸ Both women and men engaged in outdoor field agricultural labour as well as domestic work wore head kerchiefs. While the head kerchief was a link to Africa, it also became symbolic of the “happy ducky” – a figure of docile, uncritical and even thankful acceptance of the conditions of enslavement – and especially the mammy in the mythology of the Old South created in the post–Civil War years.²⁹

The headtie is seen as a sign of inferiority from the hegemonic standpoint of racist constructions, and from within African American communities themselves, it is a sign of devaluation. It signifies a black person who is acquiescent and servile to the desires of white Europeans, often at the expense of their own personal desires, as well as those of their black community. This person may also act in ways that are counter to the political initiatives to eradicate racial inequality of black people. Geneva Smitherman, in *Black Talk: Words and Phrases from the Hood to the Amen Corner*, notes that the term “handkerchief head” is indicative of this standpoint in African American English (AAE).³⁰ A “handkerchief head” is defined as “[a]n Uncle Tom-type person who defers to European Americans and their authority; may also act against the interests of Black people. Also *Tom*, *Uncle Tom*, *Uncle Thomas*, *Aunt Thomasina*, *Aunt Jane* . . .”³¹ The headtie was also “read” within black communities as a sign of the conjurer or “doctor” of the spirit – those women who could “work” in order to intervene in matters of the spirit on behalf of the those in the material world. This particular reading is ambivalent, for it could be regarded as either a positive or negative valuation.

Spiritual Baptist women with whom I spoke in Toronto mentioned their awareness of the ambivalent stereotype of being associated with “obeah” and “devil work” within black community environs while at the same time also being seen as a resource for addressing personal problems when conventional means, frequently

26 Ibid., 66.

27 H. Wish, *Slavery in the South* (New York: Noon Day Press, 1968), cited by Jewell, *From Mammy to Miss America*, 39.

28 Ibid.

29 Goings, *Mammy and Uncle Mose*, 66.

30 Geneva Smitherman, *Black Talk: Words and Phrases from the Hood to the Amen Corner* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1994), 131.

31 Ibid.

spiritual and medical, were deemed ineffective or needed “boosting”. In the following, Mother Ruth discusses this ambivalent position and its relationship to being identified by attire and the headtie, in particular:

Sister, if your husband gi’ing yuh problem, kneel down and pray to God. ’Cause sometimes people only come to you, the Christian person, or the Converted person in a church because they now meeting trouble! Without trouble they ain’t coming by you ’tall! Right? Because some people might say, “Them Baptist people they’s devil people, me ain’t business with them because they does tie they head!” Right [*hand clap*]? But when they start meeting presha and trouble is you-self they come – they doesn’t study how you dress, if you burn a candle, if you ring a bell! They ain’t business that. They coming.

**CAROL B.
DUNCAN**

While there is a negative valuation of the tied head as symbolic of a “sell out” or a demonic presence within black communities, a competing meaning coexisted which positively valued the headtie as one of the tangible signs, in this case, cloth, of ties to an African cultural past and as a symbol of feminine power.

In the 1960s and early 1970s, civil rights and Black Power years, there was a reclaiming of the headtie in North America as evidenced through photographs of young, black women, in particular, during those years. Along with the wearing of the Afro, cornrows and other Afrocentric styles, the headtie resurfaced at this time as a harkening back to its meaning as a cultural tie to an African meaning during the slavery and colonial era. This reclamation can be linked to the an aspect of the Black Power movement, which sought to put aesthetics as an important part of a revolutionary political agenda. This initiative is epitomized by singer James Brown’s chart-topping soul music hit “Say It Loud, I’m Black and I’m Proud” in the late 1960s.

The reclaiming of the headtie has also been made public through contemporary African American women celebrities such as Maya Angelou, celebrated poet, writer, teacher and actor, who appears from time to time on national televised broadcasts in a headtie. Although her headtie is not referenced directly in her televised comments, the visual image that Angelou presents is one that situates her as a mother of the community. The headtie is not Angelou’s usual style of dress and when she is wearing it, it has been on occasions when she is speaking from a place of moral authority.

In the 1990s, particularly in association with hip hop culture, there has been a resurgence of the headtie as a sign of cultural pride and affirmation of ties to a valued African identity. Hip hop, the predominant youth culture which originated amongst inner-city, urban black Americans in the late 1970s, is now international in its effects on the music, fashion, linguistic patterns and consumer choices of youth. The resurgence of what have been referred to as Afrocentric fashions in the last decade,

particularly among some sectors of urban African American youth culture including hip hop, is also another instance in which the headtie makes an appearance.

SMALL
AXE

African American woman singer and rapper Erykah Badu, a major star in hip hop, came to prominence in the entertainment industry with her debut album *Baduizm* (1994). Badu frequently wears a headwrap, an extended visual riff on the headtie, which in its length and height draws considerable attention. Badu's reputation as a singer is closely associated with her visual representation of an ancestral past, as signified by the headwrap and her wearing of pieces of jewellery such as the pharonic Egyptian religion-inspired *ankh* which signify her presence as a "roots" woman – an "Afrocentric diva" who is tapped into a pipeline directly connected with an African/black American and African past.

The headtie worn by Spiritual Baptist women in Toronto is likely to be subject to a number of cultural "reads" including those that arise out of North American, African American and African Canadian experiences and those from Caribbean as well as African cultural contexts. With regard to the latter, the increased presence of women from continental African countries, such as Ghana and Nigeria in West Africa and Ethiopia and Somalia in East Africa, due to immigration in the last two decades has contributed to the fashion varieties of black women in Toronto. Many of these black women are observed on Toronto streets wearing head coverings such as headscarves and headties for both reasons of religious observance (amongst those women who are Muslim) and as fashion statements. A renewed influence of the style and fashions of African women and men is evident in a number of the Spiritual Baptist women and men whom I met who often wore "African" and "African-inspired" clothing to church or to social functions such as Christmas dinners and teas. Some of these clothes were purchased from clothing stores and independent vendors who specialized in the importation of clothing and fabrics from African countries such as Nigeria and Ghana. These outfits almost always featured a matching headtie to complement the ensemble. The importance of this New World African stylization was noted, for example, in the staging of a fashion show featuring African fashions at events such as the annual Christmas dinner party of a Toronto-area Spiritual Baptist Church.

THE MEANING OF THE HEADTIE FOR WOMEN IN THE SPIRITUAL BAPTIST CHURCH IN TORONTO

The headtie has a variety of significations amongst Spiritual Baptist women in Toronto. The most obvious, it would seem, is its signalling of an adherence to Jewish,

Christian and Muslim practice of women covering their hair as a sign of religious observance and modesty. While this particular meaning is important, the headtie also signifies – in many cases, simultaneously – several meanings that connect contemporary Spiritual Baptist women with an African Caribbean archetype in the form of the “creole woman”, their own individual female ancestors and the legacy they fashioned in cloth. The headtie also serves as a visible sign of identity as a Spiritual Baptist woman. It is also a marker of spiritual gifts within the Spiritual Baptist Church hierarchy of offices and roles occupied by women. In conversations with me, Mother Ruth discussed the significance of styles of headties among Spiritual Baptist women, pointing out that the “fancy” headties, the ones wrapped “high”, signify the rank of church mother whereas the more modestly tied headties signify that the woman is a “sister” or “baptismal candidate” rather than a “mother”. For some, colours also signify the “powers” under which individual women “work” spiritually as well as church office. Additionally, the headtie also functions ritually in ways which are curative and restorative.

What I am pointing to here specifically, in the last instance, is the use of the headtie to signify a binding of the head as a securing of the woman’s consciousness. This practice is reminiscent of black American spiritual counsellor and Yoruba priestess Iyanla Vanzant’s entreaty to “save yourself” by holding the head with one hand on the forehead and the other at the back of the head during a potentially consciousness-changing moment. Vanzant, who has gained international recognition and celebrity status through the sales of her books³² and her frequent appearances on the long-running American talk show *Oprah*, can often be observed leading the host Oprah Winfrey and the studio audience in this gesture of holding the head to “save themselves”. I interpret this gesture as a symbolic act of “holding the head”, which is akin to use of the headtie to, quite literally, “keep it together” in potentially “mind-blowing” situations.

In the following story, Mother Dee, a Jamaican woman in her late forties, recounts the series of events that led to her becoming a Spiritual Baptist in Toronto in the 1970s. She used her headtie to “save her head” on numerous occasions. Significantly, these were situations in which Mother Dee notes that she was perceived, in some contexts, as someone who had “lost her head”, from a Western medical, psychiatric model. The headtie enabled her to “save her head” in light of the

32 See, for example, Iyanla Vanzant, *Faith in the Valley: Lessons for Women on the Journey Toward Peace* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1996) and *Tapping the Power Within: A Path to Self-Empowerment for Black Women* (New York: Harlem River Press, 1992).

significant, and sometimes debilitating, shifts and changes that she experienced in her spiritual call to the religion. What is apparent in the following, which took place in Toronto in 1972, is that the headtie was one of the means that enabled Mother Dee to literally keep her “head” in the material world when the Spirit called her:

So, I started going back to Anglican Church. It was nothing new to me and it was fine. But I was going to a lot of parties in the nights but by one o’ clock, twelve o’ clock in the nights, I don’t know. I dance, I went into the spirit or whatever . . . but at dance I took very sick, I collapse and I always end up in hospital; I never forget. Every Sat’day night before the party was just getting hot . . . and all you had to do was give me a glass of water and wrap my head. And I was fine.

So I met this lady, she was Guyanese, and she said, “Dee, you’re crazy.” And I was getting sicker and sicker and sicker. And she said Dee, “You’re really, really crazy. You don’t know what’s happening to you?” And I said, “Kind of, but I’m not too sure.” She said, “You’re one of those people!” I said, “What do you – those people?” She said, “Those guys that wrap they head and give messages and do different things. You are!” I said, “Me? No way! I’m not doing that. Uh-uh, forget it.” She said, “Dee you have to.”

So one day I left work and I was down at the Eaton Centre [a large shopping centre in downtown Toronto]. And while I was at the Eaton Centre, I was frazzled out. I started fainting. I hold on and everything. And then it came back to me, Dee, get your head wrap, get some water and get out of Eaton Centre. But in my purse, in detail, I’m telling you, was only my Eaton’s account card. The only thing I had – I had no money! So, I take the Eaton’s [card] and I go to the material store at Eaton’s and they cut me a piece of blue cloth, yellow. And they hand it to me. And I stand up in there, say “The Lord is my shepherd” and wrap my head and I was fine. Then I walked up the road and from that day I just – but people were just staring at me with this wrap on my head.³³

Following this incident, Mother Dee spoke to a woman friend who suggested that she speak with an “old spiritual woman” in the United States who recommended that Mother Dee attend a church where “you could wrap your head”. Mother Dee, however, was resistant to the idea at first because she saw head-wrapping as antithetical to her aims as a “career woman”:

So, I told my girlfriend . . . what was happening to me. And she said, “Dee, you gotta – you gotta check this thing out.” So she took me to the States. There was a old lady named Mrs G. And she was a old spiritual woman. She said, “You’ll never get better because the spirit of the Lord need to use you. You’re too proud. You’re too –” I really never want to

33 Mother Dee, personal interview, Toronto, Canada, November 1996. All quotations from Mother Dee are taken from this interview.

get into this. If I had a choice, I would not do anything. But I said to her, “Okay, fine. If that’s what you want me to do,” and stuff like that, “I will go back and I will do it.” She said, “You gotta go find that church where you could wrap your head, where you could do stuff. Where you could wrap your head, where you could do stuff, and you could do anything you want.” And she says, “You gotta go back and do that ’cause you’d never get better.” And my ’termination is that I could do it. But I don’t have to wrap my head. You don’t have to do it. I still was stubborn.

However, um, I took sick meanwhile. Doctors didn’t know what were happening to me. And somebody took me to this Jamaican lady and she was a revivalist. And her name was Mother B. ’Cause I mention – I think that was in ’74 . . . but . . . that was in ’74, yeah . . . about ’73, ’74. Suffering for a year and a half or two. And she look on me and she said to me. “Wow, this is ripe! She’s just ready to work. She’s young, she’s vibrant. She have the spirit. But you don’t want to go into it.” And I said, “No. I’m not wrapping my head. I’m not gonna be crazy like these people. I’m going to be a career woman and I’m not getting involved with this, period.” And she say, “You gonna have no choice, dear. Else you gonna lose everything.” I had a fancy car, I had an apartment. I had everything. I was a spoil child. And so I make myself spoil. So it was materialistic.

Mother Yvonne, another woman leader of a church, also expressed a similar reluctance and resistance to wearing a headtie in describing her first visit to a Spiritual Baptist Church in Toronto. In the following excerpt from an interview I conducted with Mother Yvonne, she describes her transformation through the wearing of a headtie:

Maybe I should go and visit the Baptist Church. It’s not as if I didn’t want to get involved. And the Saturday, I got home – I know you have to tie your head so I was gonna go buy something to tie my head and I didn’t bother. You know? And I didn’t bother to go and I thought that I wouldn’t go. So, anyway, Sunday morning, Tony said to me, you better go to church. We got up early and cooked and everything. She told me what time service starts and I decide I was gonna go. And I was a very particular person. My high shoes. Heels was this high. [*Indicates a four-inch pump heel height with her fingers.*] Everybody knows me by my hat and my gloves. You understand? And that was the type of person I am. Everybody think I am. But a little more down to earth, perfect. [*Laughter.*] You know? And, um, always well-dressed, always well-groomed. Go to the hairdresser every week. Wouldn’t miss the Thursday hairdresser. You know? You know that type? Right? [*Laughter.*] Who is going to tie their head? [*Laughter.*] You understand?

I got in the car and I drove. I had the number . . . And Carol, . . . I saw the number of the church and I sat in the car. Oh, I’m not gonna get involved in the Baptist Church in Toronto! I’m going home! That’s how confident I was. Then I decided. I just turn the car around and go back to Brampton.

I knew I said that to myself but when I catch myself again I was right at the church door. Don’t ask me how I got there. And when the service finish, I had to stand up in

front of that church door and think which direction I came from. But anyway, when I stood in front of this door – I heard it too. And I never forget that voice, when I grew up. They used to pray sweet. You really have Baptist in Toronto! I never involve in it. You know? And he [her husband] say, “Yes.” Listen to the prayers. And I open di door and went into di church – the church is different now because they pray at the front – now, right? And I started for the back and Mother was looking for me because she’s really hoping that I would come. And her daughter – I had my nice black felt hat, my high heel boots. [*Laughter.*] And I took a scarf, a silk scarf and put it in my purse and when I get there I put that over my head and I’ll put my hat back on. ‘Cause I wasn’t into Baptist, you know? And nobody could tell me I am, you know? Unconsciously. [The daughter] came to me and tells me, “Are you gonna come and sit with me?” And I says, “Why? I’m gonna sit right there.” She say, “Sister, I have a seat over there for you.”

Then she turn around and she says, “How dare you come here without the headtie. You come with a hat.” And I says, to her, “How dare you tell me that! I’m not a Baptist!” [*Laughter.*] “Why would I tie my head? I have a scarf, if it would please you, I’ll put it on my head.”

So, I open my purse, take out the scarf, put it over my head, tie it with this, put my hat back on – Can you see it? – and then followed her back to my seat. And Carol, I was not in my seat for five minutes there and I saw the bishop coming up from the altar. And then I realized that he was coming to me. And he came to me and he made the sign of the cross on my forehead. I took off my hat and he gave it to J. and he turn around to someone and he said, “Get me a red something.” And I don’t know what they got; they brought something and they fold it. And he did like this and I went wild! . . . That was it! They had to hold me down to tie the head. [*Whispering*] And I went down . . . And jump and shout and take the whole service! [*Upvarious belly laugh with CD.*]

When I finish, I went, What’s wrong with me? You know? J. say to me, “I thought you said you wasn’t a Baptist.” [*Belly laugh.*] It was like my spirit was just bursting to come out.³⁴

In Mother Yvonne’s final statement, “It was like my spirit was just bursting to come out”, she alludes to the significance of wearing the headtie which singles a shift and change in consciousness and the beginning of her religious life within the church. Mother Yvonne further attests to this signification of the red headtie in describing her visit to her spiritual mother and father in Trinidad following her introduction to the Spiritual Baptist Church in Toronto:

And, I told them what was happening and she laughed and she said, “My little red rose. The rose is finally going to bloom.” And I didn’t even understand what she meant when

34 Mother Yvonne, personal interview, Toronto, Canada, October 1995. All quotations from Mother Yvonne are taken from this interview.

she said that. And I stayed with her. Then I had this red headtie. Tie my head. I spent two weeks in Trinidad and I couldn't take it off. I practically got on to the plane with it! [*Belly laugh with CD.*] I had to put another on my head. I couldn't open my head. Once my spiritual mother tie my head, I couldn't untie it. And that was part taking my shame away. I went all over Trinidad with this big, red headtie on my head. Everywhere. You know?

**CAROL B.
DUNCAN**

Sister Asha, unlike Mother Dee and Mother Yvonne grew up as a young girl in Trinidad who liked to tie her head. Though she was a member of the Roman Catholic Church at that time, her liking for headties and long, “modest” clothing was seen by people who knew her as a sign that she was destined to become a Spiritual Baptist in the future:

But back home, my mom used to say you know, “You would become a Baptist.” They used to say it because like my head is always tied the way they tie their heads and you know long skirts and you know what have you. I never used to get involve or get caught up with the short mini and the shorts and exposin’ my body. No never, you know. So, as my mom says, you know, it’s there but just time would tell, right.³⁵

For Spiritual Baptist women like Sister Asha, the headtie is a crucial component of a visible sign of her identity as a Spiritual Baptist woman. Her comments suggest that she was “marked” or “predestined” to become a Spiritual Baptist as signalled by her clothing preference at a young age. She also suggests, implicitly, that choosing “modest dress” stood in radical contrast to expected norms of young women’s dress. In addition, like the stories of Mothers Dee, Ruth and Yvonne, the clothing in this scenario is not a sign of repression, control or inferiority associated with mammy and Aunt Jemima but of a self-conscious and empowering construction of identity.

CONCLUSION

Thus far, I have discussed the ways in which the signs of Auntie Jemima and the mammy associated in popular racial iconography with black, female servility have been recast by some Toronto Spiritual Baptist women as signs of an empowering feminine identity linked to the status of church mother. I have suggested, based on the women’s experiences, that her representation in the form of a figurine in a church and her

³⁵ Sister Asha, personal interview, Toronto, Canada, September 1994. All quotations from Sister Asha are taken from this interview.

appearance in dreams and trance point to an interactive relationship with biblical narratives and popular cultural images. This engagement is the source of the syncretic incorporation of signs associated with Aunt Jemima into the symbolic system of the religious experiences of some Spiritual Baptist women. I will now return to some of the conceptual questions raised at the outset concerning the significance of black women subverting an image imbued with the weight of sexist-racist assumptions such as Aunt Jemima.

In answering the question posed in the subtitle, “Spiritual Mother or Servile Woman?”, concerning the figure of Aunt Jemima in Spiritual Baptist women’s experiences, this exploration has shown that she is situated within the church as a mother figure worthy of respect. As Aunt(y) Jemima, however, she is not Aunt Jemima, the “slave in a box”³⁶ However, the unequal “race”, class and gender power relations that structure labour in North America and the continuing impact of stereotypes which have their origins in a mythic Old South continue to impact on Spiritual Baptist women in their work lives even north of the US border. The continued use of the Aunt Jemima brand name by Quaker Oats, in the face of criticism and activist campaigns in the United States that have spanned nearly the entire twentieth century, keeps the mammy image, however transformed, in circulation. North of the border, in Canada, consumers also purchase the pancake mix and other food products that bear her image. Thus, even Aunt(y) Jemima is not a neutral image, depending on the perspective of the viewer.

While Aunt Jemima, the Quaker Oats pancake mix symbol, has undergone significant physical transformation in the post-civil rights era – most notably through the abandonment of the head kerchief, a lightening of her complexion, the addition of earrings and slimming down of her body – the name “Aunt Jemima” still persists. She has effectively gone from the veritable “slave in a box”, conjuring images of an Old South in which a white leisure class enjoyed “perpetual servitude of blacks”,³⁷ to her recent incarnation as a “working black grandmother”.³⁸ What, then, some have asked, is all the fuss about? Is the product just an innocuous or embarrassing and humiliating relic of another time? Are consumers not just responding to “brand name recognition” for pancakes (rather than underlying racial stereotypes) in the same way that Coca

36 M.M. Manring, *The Slave in a Box: The Strange Career of Aunt Jemima* (Charlottesville: University of Virginia Press, 1998).

37 Ibid., 150.

38 Ibid., 177.

Cola has become synonymous with carbonated beverages and the distinctive “Dynamic Ribbon” typeface is recognizable? Clearly the case is not that simple as “[t]he mammy continues to do for Quaker Oats what she has always done, marrying racial nostalgia with changing lifestyles”.³⁹ The old messages of black, female servility are still not-so-subtly conveyed under the guise of neutrality in order to make the product marketable in a post-civil rights era to both black and white consumers.⁴⁰ In this regard, Manning suggests that Aunt Jemima, the congenial mammy figure, effectively still “tell[s] white consumers that they can have their pancakes and eat them, too”.⁴¹

But we are not just talking about pancakes when we talk about Aunt Jemima! Into this “mix” (pun fully intended), black women immigrants from the Caribbean and their daughters have landed. These women continue to face the complex challenges of negotiating their identities in the face of stereotypic media representations that emerge from cultural reference points that resonate in some crucial ways with the Caribbean’s colonial history. How then should Spiritual Baptist women’s reference to Aunt(y) Jemima be considered in the context of anti-racist strategies that focus on the significance of mass media images and other forms of cultural representation in tandem with a critique of institutionalized forms of discrimination? The discussion suggests that it is necessary to consider alternative ways of seeing (using Brands’s notion of “seeing”) that emerge from black people’s experiences of interpreting symbols associated with blackness – even those that have a long history of negative associations. It also suggests that in discussions that link black, cultural aesthetics as a crucial component of an antiracist politic,⁴² the valuation of styles of self-presentation and dress that are denigrated in the wider culture – and, indeed, within black communities themselves, albeit for differing reasons – should be more clearly examined. Additionally, this examination points out that there are moments of black women’s self-definition that are defined in terms of standards that may be at odds with both those of the dominant culture as well as middle-class black community standards of style and beauty.

Thus, the attire of Toronto Spiritual Baptist women, the iconic presence of Aunt Jemima in a Spiritual Baptist church in Toronto and her appearances in some of the

39 Ibid., 180.

40 Ibid.

41 Ibid.

42 bell hooks, “Black Beauty and Black Power: Internalized Racism”, *Killing Rage: Ending Racism* (Toronto: Between the Lines Press, 1995), 119–32.

women's dreams and mourning experiences are interpreted as not only a recasting of Aunt(y) Jemima and the stereotypic image of mammy but also as a way of connecting the present life of contemporary black women with black women ancestors. Though the discussion is beyond the scope of this paper, these ancestors span not only the women's biological ancestors but also include biblical women such as St Anne, mother of Mary; Mary, mother of Jesus; and Roman Catholic saints such as St Catherine of Siena and St Filomena and female orishas such as Oya, Oshun and Yemaya. Aunt(y) Jemima, referenced by name, is also included in this pantheon of female religious figures in the lives of some Toronto Spiritual Baptist women.

Throughout a history in the Americas in which black women were largely barred from literacy, either through law and custom during plantation slavery or later through class, gender and "colour" oppression within post/colonial societies, Spiritual Baptist Church women were able to fashion, through cloth and thread, a rich symbolic system in which they wrote the past, both their own personal histories and that of their relationship to biblical women and men, through clothing that created their own iconic images of themselves.

Importantly, the clothing – long skirts and dresses, aprons and headties – provides a tangible link between the world of the spirit and the world of the living in the cloth and colours that symbolize the women's spiritual gifts and roles in the church. The garments also provide a link between an ancestral past shared by women in the Caribbean with other diasporic African women in the Americas. This affirmative valuation of the attire associated with the dominant culture's images of black women as servile and acquiescent accomplishes the miracle that Goings articulated earlier in this paper: the ability to "see" the real people trapped by the "junk" of the Aunt Jemima stereotype. In continuing to embrace the clothing and image that became associated, historically, with one of the most pervasive stereotypic images of black women in North America, the women church members are able to celebrate their lives and the lives of other Spiritual Baptist women by breaking the mould of a stereotype fired in the kiln of sexist-racist iconography.