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PAST PERIPHERY

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Thesis

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Past Periphery: Examining Mammy

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Past Periphery examines a contemporary manifestation of the mammy archetype. The common threads between the works presented in the thesis exhibition are erasure, invisibility, and projection. The flattening of a person into icon is the equivalent of the One standing in for the Many. The One embodies surface qualities only and ultimately provides an inadequate summary of the individual or the group. This misrepresentation is the face offered up for public consumption and becomes the foundation for commodity as well as identity. We label, package, sell, and consume this icon as true and correct. But it becomes impossible to define the cultural or ethnic breadth of our so-called inclusive cultural consciousness. The three-dimensional becomes two-dimensional.

Iconic representations of racial identity, like mammy, supplant the need for inclusive perspectives that embrace difference. Nationalistic systems that tout Identity as shared experiences effectively deny the role of the individual as shaper of collective awareness. The disembodied individual is left with a fragmented history. *Past Periphery* examines the fragments, allowing them to function as a lens.

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Past Periphery

Introduction

Addressing politics of difference through representations of the mammy stereotype is the culmination of personal experience, current events and my conflicted responses to these encounters. The work in *Past Periphery* represents a search for *self* in the context of a society in which the dominant culture perceives me as *other*. My decision to align my work with identity and power politics has become increasingly important as the gulf between my perceived sense of the world and the worldview perpetuated by mass media continues to widen. Moreover, the paradoxical nature of the American Dream has caused me to question the authenticity of the glancing history we encounter in public education. I am not present in the versions tailored for mass consumption. Yet I retain no knowledge of family beyond these borders. I am asked to categorize my race or ethnicity on a daily basis. I am described first and foremost as “the black girl.” Standardized tests still ask me to classify my ethnicity, providing a small oval for “other” whenever the most common categories do not adequately describe my heritage. My birthright entitles me to a “card” that I can play when any situation seems unjust. There is the expectation that I will make art about my *otherness* simply because I am shaped by this experience.

My interest in the power and history of racially charged imagery in pop culture is not driven by these mundane observations as isolated events, but by the overwhelming inability of the dominant culture to acknowledge how contemporary these issues really are. Not only do these issues have contemporary resonance, many of them have contemporary equivalents. For example, in 2006 the Montana Human Rights Network in conjunction with the Holter Museum of Art in Helena posted an exhibition call to artists to transform Ben Klassen’s white supremacist writings from 1984 into thought provoking works of art. While the existence of race-based hate propaganda is common knowledge, I was taken aback by the 1984 copyright date. In 1992 a black midget billed as “Tiny Teesha, the Island Princess” was a human spectacle exhibited in a cage at the Minnesota State Fair.¹ During the 2008 presidential election, boxes of Obama Waffles appeared for sale on the internet. In 2009 L’Oreal was accused of lightening the skin color of

¹ Coco Fusco, *English is broken here: notes on cultural fusion in the Americas*. (New York, NY: New Press, 1995), 43.

singer/songwriter Beyonce Knowles in magazine ads appearing in publications marketed toward a predominately white audience.

In 2007 I began working with contemporary and historical images of “blackness” to bridge the cognitive gap between past and present; between the history I was taught and the pictures I was culling via personal research. Looking to artists like Adrian Piper, Ellen Gallagher, and Lorna Simpson I began work on the print series *Token (You’re Black Enough When...)*. The prints were presented in a thirty two panel grid to evoke the transparent quality of oppression that allows misguided representations to persist, unchecked (Figure 1). Integrating a linear wrapped form from an earlier group of drawings entitled *Fear*, the print series *Token...* overtly considers race. Graphic icons of black Americans—historic, fictional, and contemporary—are linked to the limitations imposed by the linear form in two distinct grids. Repetition, as a method of accounting and accountability, is of primary concern in this work. Working in a medium historically imbued with the power to reach the masses through media I began to consider the power of repetition in shaping cultural consciousness.



Figure 1. *Token (You're Black Enough When...)*



Figure 2. Mammy Vacuum Cleaner Pattern Cover

Discussion

Last year I purchased the Sewing Centipede pattern for the Mammy Vacuum Cleaner Cover (copyright 1992) at the Missoula, Montana, YWCA Secret Seconds store for a twenty-five cents (Figure 2). While I do not believe that the YWCA of Missoula is consciously trying to perpetuate the mammy archetype, the irony is notable. As I was preparing to pay for my item at the YWCA, an employee cheerfully inquired about my sewing project. Her demeanor changed when she saw the prominent mammy pictured on the pattern's cover. After wishing me luck with my project she abruptly returned to her rounds. Tension was palpable, though the exchange was not unpleasant. Neither of us broached the complex history of the mammy and its overt stereotyping of the black “nurturer” figure. Rather, we simply chose not to engage.

This lack of engagement—a sort of silent communication—is representative of how ideas of race and its perceived implications are often approached in contemporary American society. We as a nation often express an inability to engage (even in small ways) across supposed barriers of difference.

What could an older white woman have said to me, a young black woman purchasing a contemporary artifact entrenched in racist ideologies? What might I have said to her? How did her “whiteness” or my “blackness” enter into our mutual contract of silence? Indeed, how can we come to a greater understanding in the absence of discourse—if we do not engage? This body of work is my response. To this end *Past Periphery* is based on my personal discourse on race, wherein I wish to emphasize the identity of *black woman* as distinct from *black* or *woman*.

The thesis exhibition is comprised of five prominent pieces that directly relate to the histories and ideologies embodied by the mammy stereotype. Working in a variety of media and modalities to highlight the complexities of black/white race relations in “post-racial” America, the works gain currency in a culture that prides itself on electing the first black president to office in 2008. (The inaccuracy of the term “black” in categorizing Barack Obama is a powerful example of contemporary misperceptions surrounding race.) Moreover, the tendency to rely on perceived race as a qualifier is telling. The DuBoisian sentiment for the twentieth century as “the

problem of the color line” continues to assert itself in the Twenty First. The souls of black folk continue to entertain a “double-consciousness” in an America where “one ever feels his two-ness; ... two warring ideals in one dark body.”²



Figure 3. Installation view of Mammy Vacuum Cleaner Sculptures

The first series of eighteen Mammy Vacuum Cleaner Covers examine the mammy as an historical archetype (Figure 3). The majority of the sculptures are named after mammy characters in early American film. While they are closely related to the Sewing Centipede pattern in design and suggested presentation, each sculpture represents mammy as an individual, thus humanizing this iconic representation of blackness. The bodices and aprons utilize material and image to tell a story of the role that living mammies played in American homes, on stage, and on screen while reflecting the distorted image of self that can only be the result of such subjugation. The physical layering of fabric, stitching, and imagery visually reinforces the complexity of the debate. The sculpture entitled *Tola/Tolu* bespeaks the importance of perspective in contemporary constructions of race (Figure 4). Her face, a split panel dividing black and white clothing labels, appears dark (black) from one side and light (white) from the other. Though the black/white schism of racial discourse are represented as extremes, the issues of race addressed in this

² W.E. Burghardt DuBois, *The Souls of Black Folk*. (New York, NY: Fawcett Publications, Inc., 1964), 16-17.

piece—and throughout the show—reflect the polarization in American views of race, which are founded on this model. Her skirt is sewn to the antique brown vacuum cleaner bag upon which she is mounted. The worn vacuum base stands in sharp contrast to the apron’s pristine white “no-see-um” netting that contains distorted silkscreens of Condleeza Rice on starched cheesecloth.

Tola/Tolu is conceptually based on an African folk tale wherein the characters, Tola and Tolu, disagree about the color of a hat. Moyo Okediji outlines the African folk tale in her introduction to Michael Harris’s *Colored Pictures: Race & Visual Representation*. The hat in question is worn by Esu, the Yoruba divinity of interpretations. Esu reveals that the hat is simultaneously black and white; the color is contingent upon location: where Tola or Tolu stands.³ Okediji suggests the importance of a both/and perspective—the hat is *both* black *and* white. However, she fails to question why neither character changes position to discover this dichotomy. The hat must reposition itself to alter its subjectivity.

To highlight the importance of shifting perspective, the installation of the mammy vacuum cleaner sculptures requires viewers to consider their physical location in respect to the works. While repetition of the bust and apron form is consistent across the series, asymmetry in bust and apron surface design is critical to inviting the viewer to reposition *self* to more fully consider *other*. The pieces are situated to imply a relationship or conversation between each of the mummies. By their proximity a dialogue is established that is further enhanced by lighting. Within the context of the installation light functions as form and content. The selective spotlighting of specific sculptures creates a distinctive line of sight across the gallery, often providing a visual cue for links to other pieces in the exhibit. *Juris Prudence*’s chalky bust features hash marks that directly relate to the streaked marks in the drawing, *Answer to Your Questions*. More importantly, relative lightness (and by implication, darkness) becomes a metaphor for difference in this presentation.



Figure 4.
Tola/Tolu

³ Michael D. Harris, *Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representation*. (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), vii.

Difference implies polarity by degree: dialogue surrounding “blackness” is dependent on assumed definitions of “whiteness.” Similarly, contemporary stereotypes call upon historical precedents for comparison. *Holla Yemalla* embodies past and present. This hybrid title fuses traditions of call and response in African American culture with deities from West African culture. “Holla,” belonging to the realm of modern black vernacular, is juxtaposed with the ancient Yoruba goddess, Yemalla, who gives and nurtures life but—like the sea—retains terrible power. The sculpture fuses contemporary materials (metallic threads and screen) and traditional media (achote dyed cheesecloth and linen) to mirror the present’s strong link to the past. Rather than reference “whiteness” in opposition to “blackness,” *Holla Yemalla* limits her range to degrees of “blackness” across time to comment on the present. The human hair stitched into her cheesecloth headscarf becomes a signifier of this relationship (Figures 5 and 6).

The implications of material choice in *Holla Yemalla* are consistent with the series of mammy vacuum cleaner sculptures as a whole. In fact, material itself becomes a lexicon that can be used to outline the major themes addressed by the work: propagation of stereotypes and the creation and persistence of such archetypes in a society that considers itself beyond racial definitions. As a material choice cheesecloth suggests traditional printmaking processes and domesticity. The critical role that printmaking played in the creation and dissemination of racist satire in the early part of the twentieth century should not be overlooked.



Figure 5. Holla Yemalla



Figure 6. Detail of Holla Yemalla Headwrap (rear)



Figure 7.
1867 ad for Minstrel Show troupe at Wood's Theater.
Scan from *Blacking Up: The Minstrel Show in
Nineteenth-Century America* by Robert Toll.



Figure 8.
1885 Darktown Fire Brigade: The Foreman on Parade
<http://www.albion.edu/library/specialcollections/exhibits/currier&ives.asp>

The *Darktown Comics* series illustrates this point. Published by Currier and Ives in 1880, *Darktown* accounted for more than one third of the firm's lithographs by 1884. The series was notorious for depictions of blacks engaged in failed attempts to assimilate into middle class "white" culture (Figure 8). Prefigured by minstrelsy in the early nineteenth century, the images relied on exaggerated features and expressions of apparent ignorance to reinforce notions of black inferiority in relationship to the white middle class. The text that accompanied the images in *Darktown* were portrayed in an exaggerated dialect designed to intensify the supposed differences between blacks and whites: savage versus civilized.⁴ While the incorporation of cheesecloth into the mammy vacuum cleaner sculptures has historical implications—including *Tola/Tolu* and *Holla Yemalla*—the domestic associations are similarly rich. Its primary functions are utilitarian, used to strain, clarify, and separate.

Perhaps the most important quality of this material is its transparency. The ability to reveal additional information beneath its tawdry surface allows visual interaction between multiple layers of fabric and base. The visual interaction that transparency affords the viewer is a metaphor for the multilayered experience of becoming and being "black." Netting, chiffon, and lace share similar properties including domestic and gender-specific connotations. The aprons created from these materials become containers for recording and signifying different facets of the black experience. *Phyllis Saves* dons a long white apron peppered with clumps of hair and channels of stones with a hand dyed cheesecloth head wrap. Her apron becomes a literal container for memories laced to her black past. The hair, carefully attached with "x" stitches between layers of netting, suggests her attempt to maintain a physical connection to personal history and family.

The links between each of the aforementioned themes and materials are signaled by the unity of the repeated mammy form. The variety of palette, material, and execution belie the pattern's intent to propagate iconic representations of racial identity that supplant the need for inclusive perspectives that embrace difference. My ability to identify and project *self* through the work is best described as a conversation initiated by engagement with these materials, their

⁴ Michael D. Harris, *Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representation*. (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 62-65.

malleability often reflecting my attempt to filter the complex history of mammy to formulate a more complete understanding of the way racial paradigms continue to function in American society. The materials became an attempt to manipulate both the icon and its underlying power structure, ultimately functioning as my voice in the work. As a metaphor for manipulation, materiality (and my engagement with it) points to the limits of addressing surface quality to alter core content. The mammy sculptures visually relocate themselves within a larger discourse by engaging and exploiting material-specific associations.

The importance of materials to *Past Periphery* is, perhaps, best understood by way of comparison. *How Far We've Come: Acknowledging, Affirming, Endorsing, Ratifying, Complying, Instituting* consciously limits material choice to recontextualize the mammy for contemporary consideration (Figure 9). Opposition and movement are the conceptual underpinnings. The relative simplicity of the composition polarizes the dominant/subordinate hierarchy that summarizes race relations in our society. The disproportionate strokes of black and white, painted directly on the wall, are sporadically broken by gestural strokes of black paint that gracefully traverse the seemingly concrete divisions. These black strokes mimic the way subordinate cultures exist and move within dominant cultural identities while maintaining links to their own. The mammy icon becomes less prominent when stripped of cultural cues like the head wrap and the vacuum cleaner. Her vestige remains and functions as a remembrance. Six identical muslin busts feature a glossy coat of carbon black paint on the right side and thus share similarities with early blackface minstrel performers (who were typically white). Mounted above eye-level, with bands of value expanding to the full height of the wall, viewers must look up (or back up) to fully engage with the work.

In *How Far We've Come...* transparency is addressed in the aprons by the introduction of wire mesh. At once soft and hard, the wire skirts become the only signifiers of the individual. While the wire mesh embodies characteristics similar to



Figure 9. *How Far We've Come: Acknowledging, Affirming, Endorsing, Ratifying, Complying, Instituting.* (Installation view)

the cheesecloth, netting, and other fabrics used in the vacuum cleaner sculptures, the primary distinction is its intended use. The industrial nature of the gutter screen acknowledges gender relationships from a masculine perspective that counters the domestic feminine. The utility of the material is engaged by reconfiguring it into a feminine garment that allows viewers greater access to the form of the Mammy Vacuum Cleaner Cover as an object. The phallic nature of the form is revealed through the skirt. The object is a phallus shaped “female” part impaled upon a male protrusion, which keeps her head erect. Power to maintain an upright position is retained by the masculine, without which the feminine cannot function. The properties inherent to metal—memory and conductivity—speak volumes for the female/male dichotomy that is the mammy stereotype. Each skirt becomes a complex container that retains links to history and expectations of gender roles as they relate to race. Rather than reveal additional layers of content to the viewer, like the transparent layers of material in the vacuum-mounted sculptures, the wire skirts define opposing characteristics on another level. The material defies expectation, appearing stiff and fixed. In actuality they are soft and malleable. The way the object appears to feel and the way the object actually feels can only be reconciled by interaction. The wire mesh helps shift the viewpoint to contemporary considerations born of past experience. Also in this piece light continues to function both formally and conceptually: the apron wall shadows complete the work and allow color to be interpreted in more relative terms when contrasted with the painted backdrop. They provide a third value, a middle ground between black and white. The sense of motion suggested by the gestural strokes of black paint stands in sharp contrast to the figures that

initially appear to remain is a sort of stasis when the individuals are viewed as a group. The mounted sculptures are in a state of perpetual motion as are the progressive verb forms reflected in the titles. Ideas of motion, crossing borders, and of shifting perspectives across time seek a visual parallel in this work. The interplay between light, dark, and halftone are each initiated by movement—real or imagined. The subtext to this work is power and the unseen force that initiates motion.

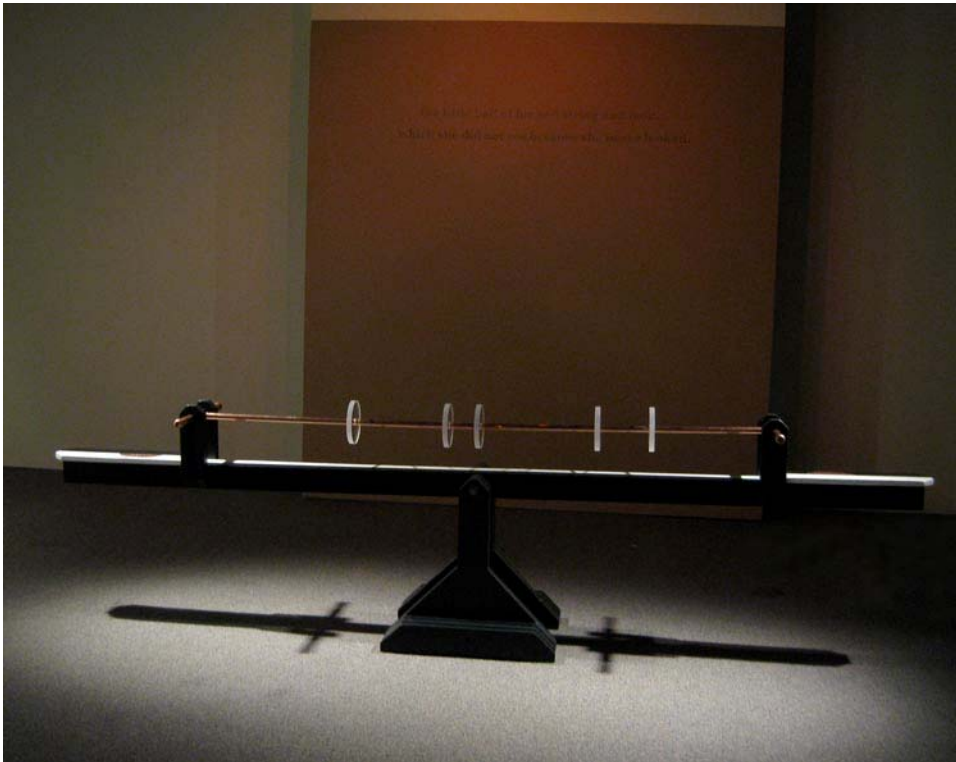


Figure 10. *Actual Potential* in front of *In the Dark* (Installation view)

Actual Potential uses motion as a point of departure in acknowledging the viewer's complicity in perpetuating racially constructed difference (Figure 10). The ability of the individual to position oneself in the work is essential. Copper plates attached to the seats are etched with the words "actual" and "potential" respectively, and function as surrogates for *self* in the work. Like the cheesecloth and silkscreen prints in the mammy vacuum cleaner sculptures, the etched copper plates reinforce the reference to printmaking processes and their role in spreading derogatory stereotypes through popular culture via mass media. The sliding plexi glass discs skewered by the copper tube are reminiscent of an abacus. Occupying varying locations between

would-be participants the plexi glass discs signal that something difficult to locate and name is shifting or hanging in the balance. The clarity of the discs suggests the fragility of glass while their thickness implies something more substantial. Additionally, The teeter totter allows one to occupy the position of *self* in a direct line of sight with *other* while contemplating the power modifiers inherent in either position. Whereas racial hierarchies are often described in terms of dominant versus subordinate, implying an above/below relationship, the teeter totter reveals that power (or the greatest potential for power) exists when either participant is situated at the low end. In his critical essay, *The Subject and Power*, Foucault examines contingency as fundamental to such relationships:

Every power relationship implies, at least *in potentia*, a strategy of struggle, in which the two forces are not super-imposed, do not lose their specific nature, or do not finally become confused. Each constitutes for the other a kind of permanent limit, a point of possible reversal...

In effect, between a relationship of power and a strategy of struggle there is a reciprocal appeal, a perpetual linking and a perpetual reversal. At every moment the relationship of power may become a confrontation between two adversaries. Equally, the relationship between adversaries in society may, at every moment, give place to the putting into operation of mechanisms of power. The consequence of this instability is the ability to decipher the same events and the same transformations either from inside the history of struggle or from the standpoint of the power relationships. The interpretations which result will not consist of the same elements of meaning or the same links or the same types of intelligibility, although they refer to the same historical fabric, and each of the two analyses must have reference to the other. In fact, it is precisely the disparities between the two readings which make visible those fundamental phenomena of "domination" which are present in a large number of human societies.⁵

⁵ Michel Foucault, "The Subject and Power," *Critical Inquiry*, Vol. 8, No. 4 (Summer, 1982), 777-795, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/1343197> (accessed April 29, 2009).

In *Actual Potential* the physical sensation of moving up or down is only realized when two polarized forces, in this case black versus white, are directly engaged in an activity disguised as child’s play. Situated within the context of play, the work also functions as commentary on how ideas of domination



Figure 11. *Answer to Your Questions* (Installation View)

and privilege are perpetuated in

contemporary society. As the backdrop to *Actual Potential*, the graphite text piece *In the Dark* establishes a broader context within which to view the work. Excerpted from Toni Morrison’s novel, *Sula*, it reads, “the little ball of fur and string and hair...which she did not see because she never looked.” The title references her literary analyses in *Playing in the Dark*. Morrison examines the importance of a glaring “Africanist” presence in American literature, emphasizing the innumerable texts that use this presence to measure and, among other goals, define “Americanness.”⁶ If we accept, as

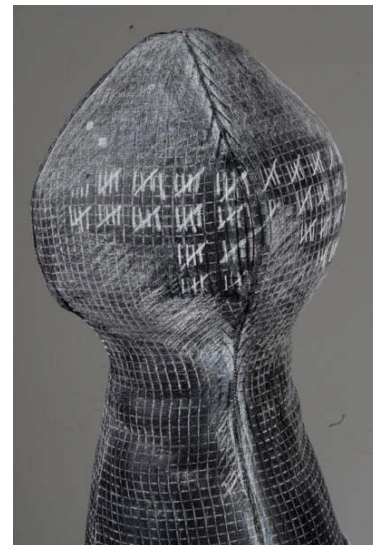


Figure 12. *Juris Prudence* (detail of bust)

Morrison does, that examining the “Africanist” presence in American literature—and by extension its art—reveals much about the formation of identity as a reaction to *other*, the thread linking *In the Dark* and *Actual Potential* becomes self evident. The excerpt selected for display suggests blindness that can be alleviated through inquiry, by simply shifting our gaze in search of what exists beyond the periphery.

On a personal level, this shift takes visual form in *Answer to Your Questions* (Figure 11). The chalk and water drawing, executed onsite, speaks about carrying the weight of history in

⁶ Toni Morrison, *Playing in the Dark: Whiteness and the Literary Imagination*. (New York, NY: Vintage Books, 1993), 5.

establishing self identity. By suggesting that answers are being offered, the viewer must acknowledge that questions are being raised; dialogue is being initiated. The pattern of silence that I encountered and enabled when purchasing the Mammy Vacuum Cleaner Cover pattern is broken. The call. The response. Both accounting and accountability are suggested by recontextualizing the layered hash marks encountered on *Juris Prudence*'s bust (Figure 12). Pattern is referenced by their inclusion in conjunction with the large polka dots that are reminiscent of a stereotypical mammy wardrobe. Peering from behind the veil of symbols is a mammy figure from Newcomb's 1867 Eccentricities performance poster (Figure 7). Her profile belies her direct gaze. Her history is one that lurks in the periphery, nameless and unacknowledged, ready to be erased.

Conclusion

On the surface *Past Periphery* appears to function from a fixed perspective: a femme black lens that examines racial, ethnic, and cultural disparity between dominant and subordinate groups. However, the mammy archetype is historically coupled with an equally derogatory representation of black American womanhood, the Jezebel stereotype. The extreme notions of the physically unattractive asexual mother figure imposed on mammy are viable only when her opposite can also be located in the larger culture. Bearing the namesake of the Judeo-Christian icon of the manipulative, power crazed, and immoral woman, the Jezebel stereotype burdens black women that do not fulfill the mammy role with the label "whore." Either extreme functions effectively within the dominant paradigm by the reductive marginalization of individual identities and roles of black women. Both mammy and Jezebel position the black American woman as opposite of and subordinate to the idealized (white) woman. If, as Morrison posits, "the subject of the dream is the dreamer,"⁷ then the more formidable task is acknowledging the origin of these stereotypes as antiquated male constructions of female identities as a means of brokering power. More importantly, these stereotypes became a way to conceal in plain sight the brutality of the sexual liaisons between white men and black women that could only have been initiated by masters in the antebellum and Reconstruction eras, where the black womb was the

⁷ Ibid., 17.

means to economic gain and complexion revealed paternity. Taking these stereotypes to task in contemporary American culture requires both an understanding of how they are packaged for present-day consumption and awareness of their antecedents.

This inequitable relationship has caused me to examine these stereotypes from the literary “Africanist” presence that Morrison locates in *Playing in the Dark*. Gender roles and power relationships are at the center of this discursive body of work, wherein the larger question becomes how this presence provides context and reflection for the larger American identity, read “whiteness.” Moving beyond the mammy and Jezebel, toward an examination of individual women who are too often categorized by these labels certainly reveals nuances of power relationships required to maintain “blackness” and “whiteness” as opposing forces. Shifting the examination of this presence to provide the same recontextualization within black communities reveals much about the pervasiveness of these stereotypes. The effects of this polarity are far reaching and have come to define relationships within subordinate groups where relative lightness and darkness become meaningful and function similarly to the white/black paradigm. Terms like: blue-black, mulatto, mixed-race, half-caste, half-black, light-skinned, yellow, oreo, quadroon, and octoroon suggests a deeper division within black communities. *Other* is not only in opposition to “whiteness” but also to “blackness.” It has come to define proximity to “blackness” or distance from “whiteness” based on degrees of complexion, hair texture, vernacular, or zip code. These notions are continually reinforced by mass media and pop culture in the Twenty-First century, particularly when we look to this arena as a reflection of how the larger culture envisions beautiful black women.

According to Michael D. Harris, the “question that must be asked...” about work that appropriates and recontextualizes historically derogatory images of blackness...is, whose past is being remembered here and what benefit is there in reviving it to critique the present?”⁸ *Past Periphery* suggests that embedded in these stereotypical representations of blackness is a history that has not been examined to capacity. Erasure is an enduring phenomenon in expressions of ethnicity that is perpetuated by putting these objects to bed without examination. In this exhibition the refiguring of the Mammy Vacuum Cleaner Cover asks viewers to understand the

⁸ Michael D. Harris, *Colored Pictures: Race and Visual Representation*. (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 2003), 197.

present as an extension of history. The simple fact that the pattern belongs to contemporary culture belies arguments of a “post-racial” America, wherein racial identity no longer functions as it has in the past and the individual is no longer seen as representative of the group. The shaping of an American identity that does not overemphasize race or ethnicity is dependent upon our collective understanding of the histories, languages, and art forms surrounding “blackness,” “whiteness” and their interdependence over time. The “past that is being remembered here”⁹ does not solely belong to the dominant culture from which the mammy stereotype originated; to varying degrees it also embodies aspects of the lived experiences of many (if not most) black American women of the diaspora. While historical and contemporary manifestations of the mammy may certainly be categorized as “white” representations of “blackness,” recent trends of collecting Black Americana “memorabilia” by members of both groups suggests a renewed interest in artifacts as containers of cultural experience. It is only by identifying and examining a full spectrum of experience that we are able to understand *self* in a manner that denies the label *other*.

⁹ Ibid.

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