

EARLY MAINSTREAM USES OF ETHNIC IMAGES IN ADVERTISING

The history of ethnic imagery in mainstream advertising follows a quite different path than that of ethnic media. With the rapid proliferation of mainstream print media throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries came an accompanying rise in cartoons featuring distorted and demeaning depictions of Hispanics, African Americans, and Asian Americans. As ethnic populations grew in major cities, public fear and outcry against these groups was reflected in editorialized caricatures. Since slavery did not officially end until 1865 with the passage of the Thirteenth Amendment, the White mainstream in the last decades of the nineteenth century shared a peculiar relationship with Blacks—a relationship steeped in institutional oppression, objectification, and abuse, but also complicated by the intimacy of domestic servitude. For this reason, it is not surprising that in the late 1800s, African American images began to be co-opted in the branding, packaging, and advertising of products of that era. Advertising scholar Marilyn Kern-Foxworth describes the White mainstream's attraction to the stereotypical Black image during the antebellum years in her book *Aunt Jemima, Uncle Ben, and Rastus*:

Subsequently, manufacturers, advertisers, companies, and entrepreneurs who had to relinquish their rights to their “black mammies” and “black Sambos” declined to eradicate such images of blacks completely and very subtly had these caricatures resurface on advertising trade cards, bottles, tins, dolls, and the like—thus reinforcing the stereotypes that had been forged during slavery and offering comfort to those whites who had exonerated slavery as a necessary trade.¹⁰

In the 1880s and 1890s, tobacco brands like Nigger Head and Nigger Hair co-opted Black imagery in the most derogatory and offensive ways, featuring characters with exaggerated African hair and lips on their packaging. Throughout the last decade of the nineteenth century, household brands like Alden Fruit Vinegar, Rising Sun Stove Polish, and Durkee's Salad Dressing ran ads in such publications as *Harper's Magazine* that featured demeaning lifestyle snapshots of Blacks, with the accompanying captions written in crudely caricatured slave vernacular.

The use of Black caricatures was common, even among companies that are today household names. In the 1880s, Charles Rutt, one of the founders of Aunt Jemima pancake batter, decided to trademark the image of a portly, servile "Black mammy" character for his brand after watching a minstrel show that featured the then popular song "Old Aunt Jemima."¹¹ Although the company was acquired by Quaker Oats in 1926 and the image of Aunt Jemima has evolved throughout the decades, she remains on the product's packaging and in its advertising to this day.

In 1890, a year after the Aunt Jemima logo was trademarked, Emery Mapes, an owner of the Diamond Milling Company of North Dakota, introduced the character of Rastus (a derogatory name for older Blacks at the time) on his Cream of Wheat boxes in the form of a smiling chef posing with a bowl of the product, which he appeared eager to dish up. Throughout the following decades, the brand's ads depicted Rastus in a number of ignoble roles, including several scenarios where he is subservient to young white children. Incredibly, like Aunt Jemima, Rastus too remains on the brand's contemporary packaging.

Similar scenarios of mainstream brands co-opting stereotypical African American characters and vernacular continued through the first half of the twentieth century, with dozens of now-familiar brands like Uncle Ben's, General Electric, Listerine, Pillsbury, Pabst Blue Ribbon, Bass Ale, and others featuring unsavory depictions of Blacks in their ads directed toward a White audience.

Hispanics and Asian Americans faced an altogether different problem in that they were largely unrepresented in the advertising of the early 1900s. Their relatively lower proportions in mainstream society—driven by a number of factors related to geographic immigration patterns, endemic racism, and the natural formation of concentrated ethnic communities—rendered them virtually invisible. In the case of Asians, the government labored to keep them that way. As Marye C. Tharpe notes, “Waves of immigration from China and Japan in the nineteenth century were reduced to a trickle by strict quotas set forth early in the twentieth century that gave priority to European immigrants.”¹² While fewer numbers may have resulted in fewer racist depictions of these two groups in American media, the lack of representation in mainstream media wouldn’t be reversed until 1980 for Hispanics and 2000 for Asian Americans.

THE FIRST ETHNIC MARKETING COMMUNICATION AGENCIES

In the tense years leading up to America’s civil rights movement of the 1950s and ’60s, the earliest ethnic marketers were preparing to breach their own barriers—first by entering the advertising industry, a groundbreaking move in its own right, given the *Mad Men* milieu of White male dominance that permeated the industry—and then by rising within its ranks. Representation of minorities in advertising had grown significantly, yet there remained a stark contrast between two types of ethnic imagery—the mostly demeaning minority images in mainstream marketing, versus the far more positive ethnic advertising placed by ethnic business owners, hoping to appeal to their own communities. It was not until African American, Hispanic and, later, Asian American marketers formed the first ad agencies dedicated to reaching their respective ethnic audiences that the wheels of change were truly set in motion.