



by Antwann Michael

“Mammy serves to stabilize the racial and gender order, and therefore the order of the State.”

-Melissa Harris-Perry, *Sister Citizen*

Mammy. Her position and reputation in the United States is well known. Political Scientist, Melissa Harris-Perry writes of Mammy, “she was a trusted adviser and confidante whose skills were used exclusively in service of the white families to which she was attached. Mammy was not a protector or defender of black children or communities. She represented a maternal ideal, but not in caring for her own children. Her love, doting, advice, correction, and supervision were reserved exclusively for white women and children. Her loyal affection to white men, women, and children...”

While Harris-Perry’s assessment of Mammy may be problematicized in a number of ways, this blog post focuses on Harris-Perry’s assertion that Mammy, or the work of Black women, was beneficial to white women during the American Colonial period. What I wish to lay out here is the continuance of white women conjuring up the spirit of Mammy to come to their rescue. Particularly in the 2016 election season this fact should not be lost. Indeed the most recent hashtag on twitter, #Blackwomendidthat, should not be taken as a mere recognition of Black women’s work, but should also, in fact, point to the ways in which Black women’s present labor and the appropriation of it is a continuum of the ways in which the work of their ancestors was used toward the stabilization of white women—who are largely seen as sympathetic subjects within the larger eye of the US polity.

Before Melania Trump, the wife of Republican presidential nominee Donald Trump, took the stage at the recent Republican convention, there was an appeal made to the spirit of Mammy to come to the rescue of the then presumptive democratic nominee Hillary Rodham Clinton. The Federal Bureau of Investigation turned to the Department of Justice headed by Loretta Lynch, a Black woman, to maintain the innocence of Hillary Clinton. For the FBI, Clinton exercised “extreme carelessness” but also stated that it was not “intentional misconduct.” In so many words, that while Clinton broke the law in an extremely careless fashion, she did not intend to do so. Regardless of Clinton’s actions her intentions were taken into to consideration, a luxury

rarely afforded Black women in contestation with the law (see Corrine Brown of Florida). FBI Director James Comey asserted “our judgement is that no reasonable prosecutor would bring...a case.” While Comey recognized Clinton’s violation of the law, his mission was clear: that Hillary Clinton should not suffer harm as a result of violating law, and that Loretta Lynch as Attorney General was to see to it that Clinton experience no legal turmoil or ramifications—the process itself was deemed sufficient as punishment for Hillary. A question to ask here is: who are the “our” Comey is referring to? Comey strategically saying “our judgement” set Lynch up (via DOJ). If Clinton’s email scandal would have went another way Lynch would have been depicted as counter normative, irrational, and unreasonable—ill-suited for public service. However, Lynch went with the legal reasoning of Comey, permitting her to be seen as being complicit in a white supremacist system. Either way, white womanhood is protected, as Black womanhood and labor was used in the name of a white woman's protection and her right to it. The spirit of Mammy was called upon to rescue white womanhood.

Fast Forward. A great number of eyes and minds were set on the Republican National Convention on the night of July 18, 2016. Melania Trump, the wife of Donald Trump was set to speak. Many were eager to hear what the normally quiet and seemingly reserved wife of the New York multimillionaire would say. What words would she use to portray the character of her husband? What words would she use to represent herself and her values? Before long that question was answered:

Yet again, a white woman, regardless of national origin, called upon the work of a Black woman to aid her through unknown territory. In an effort to protect Melania’s fragility, the writer of her speech was quickly identified as Meredith McIver—despite Melania stating she wrote the speech on her own with little help. While McIver in some pictures appears to be a Black woman and in others racially ambiguous she does not escape a gendered-racial narrative. If Black, she was used as a scapegoat to protect Melania; if White she was used as a scapegoat, yet her job remained preserved in recognition of her fragility. What is clear is that yet again, the spirit of Mammy, this time via Michelle Obama for sure, was called upon to rescue white womanhood.

The next week after Melania’s blatant act of plagiarism was identified, democrats faced a crisis. Emails, by way of a hacker, were leaked. The emails showed DNC bias for Hillary Clinton and identified Latino(a)/Chicano(a) voters as “taco bowls” and made fun of a black woman’s name LeQueenia. Immediately Debbie Schultz was presented as the problem. However, Schultz’s white womanhood came to the rescue: not only did Hillary Clinton assign her an honorary position on her campaign staff, but Black women were then enlisted to clean up the mess a white woman made. For certain, Schultz’s white womanhood was protected with both a job and a cleaning crew. Assigned at the helm of the cleaning crew was US Representative Marcia Fudge and trusted democratic strategist and analyst Donna Brazile; both women are Black. These women were charged with rescuing the DNC from certain demise. In the blink of an eye, the mess (and its resulting damage) Schultz had caused became the burden of Black women. If the DNC went well then, at minimum, Fudge and Brazile did their jobs as told and protected the order of the Democratic Party; however if the DNC could not recover then it would be Fudge and Brazile who would have to answer for the convention’s underperformance.

In the midst of this Michelle Obama was called on to perform a duty for Hillary Clinton: persuade potential voters of her character. Yet again, a Black woman was called upon to rescue the troubled, yet socially-crafted sympathetic being of a white woman. However, there may be a hint of resistance in Michelle Obama's oratory, as Hillary Clinton was referred to as "our friend." It is worthwhile to note that the First (Black) Lady of the United States did not say 'my friend' or 'Barack and I's friend', rather she referred to Hillary Clinton as a 'friend' by means of another source. While this analysis may seem minute, in Black culture the reference of relationship holds significant value. There is a strong difference between "get ya friend" and "she is my friend" (please see your local Black representative for a detailed explanation). Michelle was not alone in her labor for Clinton. She was joined by Mothers of the Movement—women who have lost their sons to either State police violence or acts of racial hatred. To say that this moment upset me is an understatement. While I do not question the motives of the mothers to make known their cause, I do question the motivation of Hillary's political team who intentionally sought out mothers, their pain, and Black death as a means of garnering votes. One thing is clear: Hillary has no shame and will do whatever it takes to get one vote. However, the presence of Michelle Obama and Mothers of the Movement make one thing clear: yet again a white woman called upon the spirit of Mammy to rescue her.

Trump, Schultz, and Clinton are emblematic of a dangerous and well documented history in the United States: when White women are leaders, Black women not only become further marginalized and invisible, but their labor is appropriated and they are not thought about in the process of constructing/adjusting laws and public policy. What does it mean to be potentially the first woman president, and what does this historic possibility mean for Black women, and women of color at large? It is not enough to have representation on the platform if specific plans and policies do not address their needs. What is Hillary Clinton to the Black trans woman and other trans women of color? What are the specific policies that Hillary Clinton will layout to protect their lives? These are the questions we must ask. Just as white power is still white supremacy in Black hands, so too is patriarchal power still that in the hands of women—particularly white women.

I end this blog posting with the words of historian Thavolia Glymph who wrote at length about plantation mistresses in her work *Out of the House of Bondage*. Indeed womanhood, by means of a white subject, becomes threatened if failure is present—hence the need for a convenient other, or in this case Mammy. Furthermore, Glymph states "we have paid less attention to power relations between women." If Glymph's assertions hold true in her assessment of white womanhood, particularly plantation white womanhood, then we are able to map these findings in our present time and identify a continuum. Interestingly in Glymph's text are these words: "to function and to meet the standards of domesticity (read whiteness), the plantation household required the labor of enslaved women—to beautify, clean, order, and thus civilize it. How might this be representative of Brazile, Fudge, Obama, and Lynch in conversation with Trump, Schultz and Clinton?"