Directions:

1. Mark your confusion.

2. Show evidence of a close reading. Mark up the text with questions and/or comments.

3. Write a one-page reflection on your own sheet of paper.

**Do Aunt Jemima, Uncle Ben Promote Racist Stereotypes?**

Renee Graham - Boston Globe

She is simply one of the oldest and most recognizable advertising images in American history, a cultural mainstay since Benjamin Harrison called 1600 Pennsylvania Ave. home.

She has undergone several subtle style changes - a red kerchief removed, cheeks slimmed - but her trademark wide, jolly grin has gone untouched. For 100 years, the smiling face of Aunt Jemima has been synonymous with breakfast.

And for some, she has also been synonymous with racism in America.

''Such images reinforce a racist undertone that's there, and that shouldn't be anymore,'' says Alan Holliday, an assistant professor at Boston University's College of Communications.

Ethnic images in advertising have existed for more than a century, pitching everything from butter to rice to breakfast cereal. Some of those images - Aunt Jemima, Rastus, the Cream of Wheat chef Uncle Ben, he of the parboiled rice - were created in less enlightened times, but have woven themselves into this nation's popular culture.

In an age of sensitivity to diversity, some are re-examining these figures that may be promoting more than just household products.

''These symbols are so ingrained in the society and culture that most people don't even notice them anymore. But ask 10 people to describe what Aunt Jemima looks likes or who's on the Cream of Wheat box, and 10 people will describe them perfectly,'' says Craig R. Neville, a Washington advertising analyst.

''These are symbols that are as recognizable as Uncle Sam or the bald eagle, and I think it says some unpleasant things about us as a society that such symbols are now considered normal,'' he says.

For generations, derogatory images of African Americans have appeared on everything from soap flakes to vegetables to flour. Many of the advertisements have featured black minstrel or mammy characters with grossly exaggerated features, speaking in fractured dialect. Rastus, the always-smiling Cream of Wheat chef, has appeared on the Nabisco Brands cereal for 120 years.

To be sure, Aunt Jemima has come a long way since she declared her pancakes ''Happifyin' Light'' in 1948. In his book, White on Black: Images of Africa and Blacks in Western Culture, Jan Nederveen Pieterse, a Dutch sociologist, examines social culture through graphic images, many of them advertisements depicting African Americans as subservient. Pieterse concludes that such images in advertising reinforce subliminal messages about the inferiority of racial or ethnic groups.

Of course, African Americans are not the only ethnic group targeted on products. A kneeling Native American woman appears on Land O' Lakes butter. Lucky the Leprechaun, with his shamrocks and Irish brogue, has been jigging through commercials for Lucky Charms breakfast cereal for decades.

Holliday says that while many people see Lucky the Leprechaun as ''fun, kind of goofy and neutral,'' the same cannot be said for other advertising images with racial undertones.

''When I see a box of Uncle Ben's, you can't help reading Uncle Tom, but they keep doing it,'' he says.

But John Philip Jones, an advertising professor at Syracuse University downplays the societal effects of advertising.

''Advertising has little effect on the wider society,'' he says. ''I don't think anyone today could get away with symbols so obviously racist, but these are very old symbols created during a less enlightened time. In any event, these symbols help brand recognition,'' he says.

Which is why the folks at the Illinois-based Quaker Oats Co. have updated Aunt Jemima's image over the years, but have never removed her broad, grinning face from their products, which include pancakes, waffles and syrup. Her most recent make-over came three years ago when her red bandanna was removed. She now sports a soft, gray-streaked perm and pearl earrings.

Jim Harding, vice president of personnel and organization for Houston-based Uncle Ben's Inc., says his company hears complaints ''every once in a while'' about the image of Uncle Ben, a smiling grandfatherly black man who has been pitching rice for a half-century. In the 1980s, the company removed renderings of Uncle Ben from its rice products for two years. But Harding says his removal was not a result of consumer pressure.

''It was a marketing question - could we get into other products with a logo that was synonymous with rice? Eventually we put the logo back because it's a tradition.'' he says.

At Quaker Oats, removing Aunt Jemima's face from products is not under consideration. But it is exactly that warm, smiling face that works the last nerve of some African Americans.

''I remember when I was growing up, white kids in my school would say things to me like, 'Hey, Aunt Jemima, make me some pancakes,' says Gaynelle Grant, a New York sociologist who has researched the effects of advertising on popular culture. ''They equated Aunt Jemima with every black female they saw.''

How the culture began to regard Hispanics prompted Frito-Lay Inc. to cease its most successful product promotion more than 20 years ago. In 1969 the Plano, Texas, company that markets such products as Lay's Potato Chips, created the Frito Bandito to promote its corn chips. The campaign was ''wildly successful,'' says Lynn Markley, Frito-Lay's public relations manager.

Yet at the height of the campaign's popularity in 1971, the mustachioed, sombrero-wearing character was banished to pitchman purgatory after complaints that he was offensive to Hispanics.

Still, no one should expect Aunt Jemima or Uncle Ben to go the way of the Frito Bandito. These are figures connected to multimillion-dollar products, and companies would rather field the occasional complaint of racial insensitivity than tinker with advertising images that have succeeded for decades.

Perhaps, Grant says, such images remain as a constant reminder of this nation's painful racial past - and as a lesson to other companies and advertisers that what may have been acceptable 100 years ago is no longer acceptable today.

''You do not create advertising to offend anyone. That's not the point,'' Frito-Lay's Markley says. ''It's a matter of responsibility. You have to be sensitive to your audience.''

**Reflection Prompt:**

Do you agree more with Pieterse or Jones about the impact of these advertisements?

We discussed the history of the hurtful minstrel stereotypes in preparation for *The Adventures of Huckleberry Finn*. Given what you learned in class, how could you expand on the argument made here that these advertisements are potentially offensive?