AMERICAN@ ISSN:1695-7814
Vol. II. Issue 1

Mammy

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Abstract

Resumen

Key Words: Stereotypical racial markers, Mammy, slavery, Black women
Palabras Clave: Marcadores de estereotipos raciales, Mammy, esclavitud, mujeres negras.

"A stereotype is an already read text"
Barbara Johnson, *A World of Difference*.

Racial markers in American literature are a microcosm of the macrocosm of the body as a site (sight) of profound struggle within complex systems of oppression and hegemony:

> There is still much national solace in the continuing dreams of democratic egalitarianism available by hiding class conflict, rage, and impotence in figurations of race. And there is quite a lot of juice to be extracted from plumy reminiscences of 'individualism' and 'freedom' if the tree upon which such fruit hangs is a black population forced to serve as freedom's polar opposite: individualism is foregrounded (and believed in) when its background is stereotypified, enforced dependency. (*Playing in The Dark* 64)

The Mammy figure is a stereotypical figuration used as background to foreground the pre-eminence of White womanhood. The lack of discussion about Mammy is treacherous because the lack of interrogation indicates that there is nothing to interrogate. Mammy has taken on the cloak of benignity.

Mammy, the large, smiling, Black woman usually depicted clad in an apron and head-rag is one of the best know stereotypes in American culture. Whether she is called Mammy, Auntie,

Dinah, Sapphire, or Beulah, she is the loyal, nurturing, all-loving, all-giving, slave character from America's mythical Old South: The ultimate colonized subject. Her race is the vehicle through which her position as gatekeeper, a border guard of class is based. Paradoxically, she is characterized as inferior and yet god-like in her ability to solve the problems of her White folks; female but not a woman, she is asexual; motherly, but without children of her own; Black, but not a part of the Black community, and yet she is repeated portrayed as a spokesperson for her race. Her capacity as native informant is directly related to her as a racalized body.[1]

As bell hooks says,

> The mammy image was portrayed with affection by whites because it epitomized the ultimate sexist-racist vision of ideal black womanhood--complete submission to the will of whites. In a sense whites created in the mammy figure a black woman who embodied solely those characteristics they as colonizers wished to exploit. They saw her as the embodiment of woman as passive nurturer, a mother figure who gave all without expectation of return, who not only acknowledged her inferiority to whites but who loved them. (84-85)

Patricia Hill Collins tackles these issues in the opening chapter of her book, *Black Feminist Thought*,

> Maria Stewart challenged African-American women to reject the negative images of Black womanhood so prominent in her times, pointing out that racial and sexual oppression were the fundamental causes of Black women's poverty. In an 1833 speech she proclaimed, "like King Solomon, who put neither nail nor hammer to the temple, yet received the praise; so also have the white Americans

> gained themselves a name . . . while in reality we have been their principal foundation and support."
>
> Maria Stewart was not content to point out the source of Black women's oppression. She urged Black women to forge self-definitions of self-reliance and independence [. . .] To Stewart the power of self-definition was essential, for Black women's survival was at stake. (3-4)

The need for self-definition is imperative in counteracting what Collins calls, controlling images of Black women that originated during the slave era [which] attest to the ideological dimension of Black women's oppression: Ideology represents the process by which certain assumed qualities are attached to Black women and how those qualities are used to justify oppression. From the mammies, Jezebels, and breeder women of slavery to the smiling Aunt Jemimas on pancake mix boxes, ubiquitous Black prostitutes, and ever-present welfare mothers of contemporary popular culture, the nexus of negative stereotypical images applied to African-American women has been fundamental to Black women's oppression. (7)[2]

James Sneed, in *Figures of Division: William Faulkner's Major Novels*, says that racial divisions "show their flaws best in written form": "Racism might be considered a normative recipe for domination created by speakers using rhetorical tactics. The characteristic figures of racial division repeat on the level of phoneme, sentence, and story" (x). In most American literature written by the dominant culture in which racalized characters appear, racial makers of Otherness reconfirm the superiority of the dominant group by reconfirming the dominant group's own self-image.[3] The Mammy figure, as a pin ultimate racalized character, has been used as a foil for the lady, (here read White woman) in the American literature:[4] James Paulding's 1831

The Dutchman's Fireside in which Paulding spends four pages identifying the cook Aunt Nauntje, has one of the earliest literary representations of the Mammy figure,[5]

> There reigned in the kitchen of Mr. Vancour an African queen, whose authority by virtue of long and vigorous assertion, was paramount to that of the mistress of the establishment. . . . It was gratifying in those days to see the interest which these old and faithful retainers took in the affairs of their master. . . (72-76)

John Pendleton Kennedy's 1832 *Swallow Barn*; Harriet Beecher Stowe's 1851 *Uncle Tom's Cabin*[6]; Mary H. Eastman's *Aunt Phillis' Cabin*[7], Fannie Hurst's 1933 *Imitation of Life*, Margaret Mitchell's 1936 *Gone With The Wind*, all have at least one Mammy figure.

This same use of Mammy as a racial maker to reconfirm Otherness is present in antislavery fiction. According to Carolyn L. Karcher, "Antislavery fiction [. . .] [a]s a genre largely shaped by middle-class white women, it reflect the complex relationship between the patriarchal system that victimized women and the racial slave system that victimized blacks" (81). She goes on to say, "by imposing a white middle-class code of values as the ideal toward which all were to aspire, antislavery fiction reproduces and may well have reinforced the ideological assumptions that marginalized the masses of American blacks and circumscribed the freedom of white women" (81).[8]

Mammy was antithetical of the ideal White woman. The implied juxtaposition of these mythical characters set the Mammy figure up as gatekeeper of the role of White womanhood. In literature Mammy was the foil for the White female character. Harriet Beecher Stowe's best-selling novel *Uncle Tom's Cabin*, published in 1852 features both a cook named Aunt Chloe and a nursemaid call Mammy.[9] Aunt Chloe is described as,

> A round, black, shining face is hers, so glossy as to suggest the idea that she might have been washed over with white of egg, like one of her own tea rusks. Her whole plump countenance beams with satisfaction and contentment from under her well-starched checked turban. (22)

In Stowe's narrative, Aunt Chloe not only know her place, she also has to remind her mistress of a lady's place,

> Says I, 'Now, Missis, do jist look at dem beautiful white hands o' yourn, with long fingers, and all a sparkling with rings, like my white lilies when de dew's on 'em; and look at my great black stumpin hands. Now, don't ye think dat de Lord must have meant *me* to make de pie-crust, and you to stay in de parlor?' (39)

In this passage, Aunt Chloe teaches her White mistress and the readers that God demonstrates through racial markers that Black women were created to serve White women so that White women could pursue lady-like activities.[10] Stowe's novel was designed an anti-slavery texts, and yet within her story, Stowe uses the Black female, Mammy, as a demarcation of cultural norms that exclude that same Black body. Stowe, and others like her, with the use of Mammy, implies that Blacks were not equal to, as in the same as Whites; rather, in their ideal state Blacks were naturally subservient and therefore deserving of freedom.

While *Uncle Tom's Cabin* is anti-slavery, it is pro-paternalism therefore while it is against the institution of slavery it is not pro-Black.[11] Rather while it tries to decry the injustices of slavery, it upholds the status quo of the dominant culture's social hierarchy,

> by imposing a white middle-class code of values as the ideal toward which all were to aspire, antislavery fiction reproduces and may well have reinforced the

> ideological assumptions that marginalized the masses of American blacks and circumscribed the freedom of white women. (Karcher, 81)

White female authors were not alone in their pursuit to uphold the status quo.[12] Paul Laurence Dunbar's "Mammy Peggy's Pride" in *The Strength of Gideon and Other Stories* is another example of Mammy. Dunbar begins his tale with,

> In the failing light of the midsummer evening, two women sat upon the broad veranda that ran round three sides of the old Virginia mansion. One was young and slender with the slightness of delicate girlhood. The other was old, black and ample,--a typical mammy of the old south. (27)[13]

The juxtaposition of these two characters is telling. The language used to describe the young girl is soft, and "feminine." The words, "young" "slender" "slight" and "delicate" all connote femininity and beauty while "old" "black" and "ample" do not. It is also apparent from the description of these characters that the "young girl" is White because the young girl is not given a racial designation, while Mammy's race is obvious. It is not until the second paragraph that the reader is told, indirectly that indeed the "young girl" is White. The reader is informed that the young girl is the daughter of a plantation owner and Mammy Peggy is her servant. Dunbar's Mammy's physical description, much like Stowe's Aunt Chloe, distinguishes her as un-womanly and yet motherly, "Mammy Peggy took the brown head in her lap and let her big hands wander softly over the girl's pale face" (28). Mammy Peggy's mothering is directed at her White ward.

In contrast to Mammy Peggy, a little later in the story, Dunbar writes,

> [T]he door opened, and Miss Mima stood before him, proud, cold, white, and beautiful [. . .] He found his feet, and went forward to meet her. "Mr.

> Northcope," she said, and offered her hand daintily, hesitatingly. He took it, and thought, even in that flash of a second, what a soft, tiny hand it was. (32)

Dunbar, a Black man whose parents had been slaves, and who "At the beginning of the twentieth century . . .was one of American's most popular poets," opted to write sentimental stories steeped in the Myth of the Old South (i).[14] Ruth Miller, in *Blackamerican Literature*, quotes the preface William Dean Howells wrote for Dunbar's, 1892 *Lyrics of Lowly Life*,

> Paul Dunbar was the only man of pure African blood and of American civilization to feel the Negro life aesthetically and express it lyrically . . . and to have represented [the Blackamerica] as he found him to be, with humor, with sympathy, and yet with what the reader must instinctively feel to be entire truthfulness.
>
> It was that humorous and sympathetic view of the Blackamerican that won Dunbar such acclaim in his lifetime, for it fit very well the sentimentalized portrait of the old plantation retainer that many white readers still clung to, and few Blackamericans were ready publicly to deny. (298)[15]

Dunbar has been criticized for his use of dialect in his poetry,

> Much of the controversy surrounding Paul Laurence Dunbar concerns his dialect poetry, wherein some scholars, such as the late Charles T. Davis, felt that Dunbar showed the greatest glimmers of genius. Sterling A. Brown writing in *Negro Poetry and Drama* in 1937, asserted that Dunbar was the first American poet to "handle Negro folk life with any degree of fullness" but he also found Dunbar guilty of cruelly "misreading" black history . . .. He was not able to transcend completely the racist plantation tradition made popular by Joel Chandler Harris,

> Thomas Nelson Page, Irwin Russell, and other white writers who made use of African American folk materials and who showed the "old time Negro" as if he were satisfied serving the master on the antebellum plantation. (Braxton 241)

While Joanne M. Braxton is correct in her evaluation, she does not go far enough. Yes Dunbar's use of dialect is problematic, but only insofar as its connection to stereotypical characters. The intersection of these two aspects of Dunbar's work is the nexus of the issue. The critiques of Dunbar, for the most part, do not examine this link, nor do they examine Dunbar's use of the Mammy figure.

Just as Dunbar failed in his attempt to give negative stereotypical characters a positive perspective, so did Charlotte Hawkins Brown.[16] According to Carolyn C. Denard, "Charlotte Hawkins Brown always worked on two fronts—within the black community, in order to improve the knowledge and opportunities of her people; and outside the community, in order to change the hearts and minds of those who oppressed blacks" (xv). In her attempt to "change the hearts and minds of those who oppressed blacks" Brown wrote, *Mammy: An Appeal to the Heart of the South* in 1919.[17]

Brown was an educated African American women who like her contemporary Booker T. Washington, felt that Blacks just one generation from slavery needed to uplift themselves though education, economics, and social movement. She also felt that "there was a debt that whites owed to blacks for their loyal and unremunerated service during slavery" (xvi). She believed that,

> Generous philanthropy born from a fair sense of *nobles oblige* on the part of whites [. . .] combined with earnest, individual efforts in academic education and social refinement on the parts of blacks was the formula for breaking down the

> racial oppression which blacks suffered and for achieving harmony between the races. (xvi)

She decided to use a Mammy figure of the Old South as her standard bearer in her quest to achieve "harmony between the races" (xvi). Brown's story is simplistically sentimental and her Mammy a stock character,

On the other hand, William Faulkner uses the Mammy figure in *The Sound and The Fury* (1929) to complicate notions of the Mythical Old South.[18] Faulkner's Dilsey is not a stock character.[19] She is not simply a plot devise used to move the story along or a salve to sooth a troubled American psyche. Faulkner's Dilsey differs from the "standard" Mammy figure from her appearance to her inimitability.[20] Like other Mammys, Dilsey does wear a "turban" (265) and she works as a domestic for a White Southern family, but she is also described as,

> She wore a stiff black straw hat perched upon her turban, and a maroon velvet cape with a border of mangy and anonymous fur above a dress of purple silk, and she stood in the door for a while with her myriad and sunken face lifted to the weather, and one gaunt hand flac-soled as the belly of a fish, then she move the cape aside and examined the bosom of her gown. (265)

Faulkner's Dilsey is a far cry from the analogues Mammys of Stowe, Dunbar, and Brown: she is given a detailed physical description; further, Faulkner's description individualizes Dilsey. Faulkner writes,

> The gown fell gauntly from her shoulders, across her fallen breasts, then tightened upon her paunch and fell again, ballooning a little above the nether garments. . . . She had been a big woman once but now her skeleton rose, draped loosely in unpadded skin that tightened again upon a paunch almost dropsical, as though

> muscle and tissue had been courage or fortitude which the days or the years had consumed until only the indomitable skeleton was left rising like a ruin or a landmark above the somnolent and impervious guts and above that collapsed face that gave the impression of the bones themselves being outside the flesh, lifted into the driving day with an expression at once fatalistic and of a child's astonished disappointment. (265-266)

Faulkner's Mammy is not simplistic. She does not love her White folks with unfailing devotion. Dilsey's love for the Compsons is complex; she loves them because of and in spite of their faults.[21] Dilsey's difference is not only emotional: she is not the big robust woman of the Mammy tradition, and she is not the isolated Black female living in the shadow of her White family. Dilsey has a family of her own and she has a life with that family independent of her "White" family. The reader is introduced to her children and her husband and we are allowed enough information to understand them as individuals.[22] Dilsey's children, Black children whom she mothers, individualizes her and removers her from the realm of Traditional Mammy-hood. They also demonstrate by they obedience to their mother's wishes Dilsey's power within the Compson family. In the first chapter of *Sound and the Fury* Luster and Versh are trying to control Benjy, the mentally impaired Compson and when Benjy becomes disruptive, Mrs. Compson wants to send him to the kitchen (the traditional dwelling place of Mammy). Dilsey's son, Versh says, "Mammy say keep him out the kitchen today" (5) and with that, it is decided that Benjy will be kept out of the kitchen. This short passage is interesting because Versh, rather than deferring to what his "masters" tell him to do, informs his "masters" of his mother's dictates.

Dilsey further deviates from the Mammy norm because her character is part of the story, rather than just a plot devise, or evidence used to "authenticate" a placating lie.[23] Dilsey, while distinctive, is still a Mammy. While she wants and tries to save the remnants of a crumbling Southern aristocratic family, she becomes aware that she, unlike her predecessors, cannot "lay her horny hands on the troubled waters of this family's lives and soothe them":[24] she cannot hold this family together.

Just at the point in the story when the tension reaches its climax, when traditionally the Mammy figure smoothes over all the problems, Dilsey realizes the futility in even trying to mend the lives of the Compsons. In "Dilsey's chapter" titled "April Eighth, 1928" she becomes aware of the inevitable decline of the Compsons and the years she has wasted trying to stop the inevitable.[25] After Jason has discovered the broken window, and he has snatched the key to Quentin's room from his mother, Mrs Compson begins to cry and Dilsey comforts her saying, ""Now, now,". . . . Whut kin happen? I right here. I aint gwine let him hurt her. Quentin," she said, raising her voice, "dont you be skeered, honey, I'se right here" (282), but Dilsey cannot fix this.

The reader is given a foreshadowing of Dilsey's awakening with the conversation that takes place on the way to church:

> Luster and his mother overtook them. Frony wore a dress of bright blue silk and a flowered hat. She is a thin woman, with a flat, pleasant face.
>
> "You got six weeks' work right dar on yo back," Dilsey said. "Whut you gwine do ef hit rain?"
>
> "Git wet, I reckon," Frony said. "I aint never stopped no rain yit" (289-290).

Just as Dilsey cannot stop the disintegration of the Compson family, Frony knows that some things are unstoppable. Dilsey soon comes to the realization that the Compson family is finished. She also comes to realize that her life's work of trying to stop the inevitable is both foolish and prideful: she cannot "stop the rain." That she comes to this realization while attending an Easter sermon is powerful. The visiting preacher tells the congregations, "I tells you, breddren, en I tells you, sistuhn, dey'll come a time. Po sinner sayin Let me lay down wid de Lawd, lemme lay down my load" (295). Dilsey knows her load, the Compson family, is too heavy for her to bear and it is time to lay it down.

When Dilsey is walking home from the service with tears steaming down her face and her daughter Frony says "Whyn't you quit dat, mammy?" Dilsey replies,

> "I've seed de first en de last,". . .. "Never you mind me."
>
> "First en last whut?" Frony said.
>
> "Never you mind," Dilsey said. "I sed de beginning, en now I sees de endin."
>
> Before they reached the street though she stopped and lifted her skirt and dried her eyes on the hem of her top-most underskirt" (297).

While Dilsey's tears are for the Compsons, they are also for her. She has given her life in a lost cause. She now sees that her part in the tragedy is that rather than stopping the unavoidable she just prolonged the torment.

Faulkner's Dilsey is a Mammy, but she is also one of the earliest of the examples of the possibility of complexities inherent in accepting the simplistic notion of the Mammy figure of the Mythological Old South.[26] Although the Mammy figure was still present in her "traditional" mode, after Faulkner, a professed son of the South, the interpretation of Mammy as a stock figure had to be questioned. This questioning rather than producing other interesting and

complicated Mammys in literary texts seems to have had the opposite effect. It was almost as if Faulkner's Dilsey had "troubled the waters" and therefore the traditional Mammy of the Old South was needed once again to smooth things over.

Not until contemporary Black women began to write about being Black and female does, the Mammy figure become something more than a stock figure. Sherley Anne Williams, in *Dessa Rose*, take the Mammy tradition back to slavery. Williams writes a post-slavery slave tale. According to the "Author's Note,"

> *Dessa Rose* is based on two historical incidents. A pregnant black woman helped to lead an uprising on a coffle (a group of slaves chained together and herded, usually to market) in 1829 in Kentucky. Caught and convicted, she was sentenced to death; her hanging, however, vas delayed until after the birth of her baby. In North Carolina in 1830, a white woman living on an isolated farm was reported t have given sanctuary to runaway slaves . . . . How sad, I thought . . . that these two women never met. (ix).

Williams, purposely bases her fictional story on history because,

> I loved history as a child, until some clear-eyed young Negro pointed out, quite rightly, that there was no place in the American past I could go and be free. I now know that slavery eliminated neither heroism nor love; it provided occasions for their expressions. . . .
>
> This novel, then, is fiction; all the characters, even the country they travel through, while based on fact, are inventions . . . . Maybe it is only metaphor, but I now own a summer in the 19th century. And this is for the children . . . who will share it in the 21st. (ix-x)

Williams revisits the site of Mammy's creation: American history. Williams re-vision of the history of Black female slaves must be connected with the Mammy figure because she has been so profound that her mark has blemish much of what was written and believed about Black women. Williams also revisits the relationships between Southern White women and Black women.

The story begins with an acknowledgement of the estrangement between Black and White women,

> Was I white, I might woulda fainted when Emmalina told me Masa done gone upside Kaine head, nelly bout kilt him iff'n he wa'n't dead already. Fainted and not come to myself till it was ova; least ways all of it that could git ova. I guess when you faints, you be out the world. That how Kaine say it be. Say that how Mist's act up at the House when Masa or jes any lil thang don't be goin to suit her. Faint, else cry and heave em all. . .. runnin and fannin and car;in on, askin, what wrong? who done it? (9).

Black women slaves know the way "ladies" act and they feel superior and jealous: Superior because they are strong and not like that "one lil sickly white woman" and jealous because she, and not they can "turn that big house upside down" (9).

In *Dessa Rose,* this dichotomy between the standards and practices of Black and White women reaches a crisis with the Mammy figure as the catalysis. Williams tells the story of Rufel, a White slave mistress who loved her "Mammy, her treasured 'weddin gif'" (112). Rufel is so immersed in the traditions of the South that she does not see that her Mammy is helping runaway slave. Mammy talked Rufel into using runaway slaves to harvest the crops. When Rufel worries about what her long-lost husband might think of this arrangement when he gets back, Mammy soothes the troubled waters, "Mammy laughed, sure that Bertie [the missing

husband] would see the joke they played on the neighbors, and Rufel herself thought it funny after a while" (116). What Rufel doe not see is that Mammy is not the all-loving, all-giving slave she appears to be; rather, she is a freedom fighter on the battlefield for her people.

Rufel's Mammy is also running the plantation,

> She paid little attention to the preparations for spring planting until Mammy began to talk of it. They should marl the cotton fields and put manure on them; they should rotate the crops, putting corn where Bertie had always planted corn; put in oats or hay or peas; expand the potato field. Plant less cotton altogether. Rufel had been uneasy as the suggestions diverged more and more from Bertie's practices, but Mammy, citing as justification the experience of new darky, Harker, who had wandered into the Glen sometime during the winter, who had easily quieted Rufel hesitant questions. (117)

While Rufel is unaware, the reader is not. We are shown a Mammy who uses the mask of Mammy as a weapon against slavery.

When Mammy dies Rufel is lost, "Nothing in the days and weeks since Mammy's death had filled the silence where her voice used to live" (118). Before her death Mammy brought a new runaway, Dessa Rose to Rufel's plantation. Dessa Rose has been beaten, and she is pregnant and sick. She gives birth to her baby and while convalescing in the big house overhears Rufel's conversation, "The white woman was sewing this time, setting big, careless stitches in a white cloth. . . ." Against her will Dessa listened. ". . . night of the Saint Cecilia dinner and of course Mammy had to dress mother for that" (123).

The first salvo in the war over Mammy is fired with this "innocent" utterance, "No white woman like this has ever figured in mammy's conversations, Dessa thought drowsily. And this

would have been something to talk about: dinner and gowns—not just plain dresses" (123). Dessa is referring to her mammy—her mother. She is not aware that Rufel is talking about her wedding gift—her slave.

Finally, after Rufel has prattled on about Mammy and parties, Dessa says,

> "Wasn't no 'mammy' to it." The words burst from Dessa. She knew even as she said it what the white woman meant. "Mammy" was a servant, a slave . . . who had nursed the white woman . . .. But, goaded by the white woman's open-mouth stare, she continued, "Mammy ain't made you nothing!"
>
> "Why she—" The white woman stopped, confused. Hurt seemed to spread like a red stain across her face.
>
> Seeing it, Dessa lashed out again. "You don't even know Mammy."
>
> "I do so," the white woman said indignantly, "Pappa give her—"
>
> "Mammy live on the Vaugham plantation near Simeon . . . .
>
> "My, my—*My* Mammy--" the white woman sputtered.
>
> The words exploded inside Dessa. "*Your* 'mammy'--" . . ..
>
> "Your 'mammy,'!" No *white* girl could ever have taken *her* place in mammy's bosom; no one. "You ain't got no 'mammy,' she snapped. (125)

Dessa's declaration rocks the literary world. Her cry reverberates through all of those novels depicting happy slaves, contented in their slavery. She, in just a few lines, realigns the cosmos of America's historical myth of the Old South. She unveils Mammy. She shows Rufel, and the reading audience that Mammy is not a thing, she is a woman, a Black woman who has been silenced and erased by her so-called White "chile."

When Rufel tries to defend herself by claiming *her* Mammy with, “I do—I did so.” Dessa fires back with, “All you know about is this kinda sleeve and that kinda bonnet; some party here--Didn’t you have no peoples where you lived? ‘Mammy’ ain’t nobody name, not they real one.” When Rufel tries to walk out on the discussion Dessa will not let her escape, either literally or figuratively:

> The white woman’s baby started to cry and the white woman made as if to rise and go to it. Dessa’ voice overrode the tearful wail, seeming to pin the white woman in the chair. “See! See! You don’t even not know ‘mammy’s’ name. Mammy have a name, have children”
>
> “She didn’t.” The white woman, finger stabbing toward her own heart, finally rose. “She just had me! I was like her child.”
>
> “What was her name then?” Dessa taunted. “Child don’t even know its own mammy’s name. What was mammy’s name? What--”
>
> “Mammy,” the white woman yelled. “That was her name.”
>
> “Her name was Rose,” Dessa shouted back, struggling to sit up. “That’s a flower so red it look black. When mammy was a girl they teased her bout her breath caused she worked around the dairy; said it smelled like cow milk and her mouth was slick as butter. (125-125)

Dessa forces Rufel to *see* Mammy as a slave and as women.

Later Rufel remembers Mammy’s name,

> Dorcus. Pappa had not given her Mammy as a birthday present as Rufel sometimes claimed. Dorcus was a lady’s maid extraordinaire [. . .] They called her Mammy because Mrs. Carson thought the title made her seem as if she had

> been with the family for a long time [. . .]"Dorcus" was neat as a pin: Her long, narrow white apron was spotless, pinned under the bust rather than tied at the waist of her dark gown; a white kerchief was arranged in precise folds over her broad bosom; a cream colored bandanna—No, Rufel corrected herself. The silky-looking cloth on the darky's head bore little resemblance to the gaudy-colored swatches most darkies tied about their heads. (130-131)

At first Rufel's reminiscing allows her some comfort. She remembers the good-old-days, but her memories begin to haunt her. She wants to hold on to the idea that she was like Mammy's child and yet she now sees that this can not be, "She treated me just like, just like--," She stuttered and could have wept again seeing with an almost palpable lucidity how absurd it was to think of herself as Mammy's child, a darky's child. And shuddered. A pickaninny."

Rufel cannot go back to the good-old-days. She can never again claim Mammy as *her* Mammy, "Dorcus. She mouthed the name, seeing Mammy's face now, but finding no comfort in the familiar image. It was as if the wench had taken her Mammy and put a stranger in her place. Had Mammy had children, Rufel wondered . . .. And how had Mammy borne it when they were taken away--That's if she had any . . . . But Mammy might have had children and it bothered Rufel that she did not know" (136).

Moreover, Rufel now understands her own part in the erasure of Mammy, and that Mammy may have retaliated, "Had Mammy minded when the family no longer called her name? Was that why she changed mine? Rufel thought fearfully. Was what she had always thought loving and cute only revenge, a small reprisal for all they'd taken from her? How old *had* Mammy been? Why had they gone to France? Rufel had never asked. Had she any children?"

(137). And, “She, Rufel had been Mammy’s friend and she was chagrined by her own ignorance” (147).

Dessa has forced Rufel to see slavery for what it was. She had also forced Rufel to understand the she is complicit as a slave mistress. Rufel had been comfortable, even happy in her ignorance, but all that is gone. Now Rufel must deal with the reality of Mammy’s life and the reality of her own, “Almost she felt personally responsible for Mammy’s pain, personally connected to it, not as the soother of hurt as Mammy had always been for her, but as a source of that pain” (147).

Sherley Anne Williams, in *Dessa Rose*, takes the reader on a tour of “Tara” and makes us look beyond the myth, off the veranda and into the slave quarters. The cloying scent of magnolias can no longer mask the blood and sweat of the slaves and Williams does all this by unmasking Mammy.

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[1] The Mammy figure is not the intellectual colonized subject who is usually described as the native informant, rather Mammy is purposefully portrayed as ignorant and unable to assimilate into the colonizer’s culture. She is depicted as the civilized version of her uncivilized people. In America, the aim of the colonizer was not to lift the native to the perfection of the colonizer, but rather to lift the colonized to a point where they realized that they were inferior and beholding to the superior colonizer. Mammy became the native informant by informing the colonizers that they were correct in their assumptions of their superiority. Just as Spivak says of the Frankenstein monster, “the sheer social reasonableness of the mundane voice of Shelley’s ‘Genevan magistrate’ reminds us that the absolutely Other cannot be selfed, that the monster has ‘properties’ which can not be contained by ‘proper’ measures” (277) the Mammy cannot be selfed, she can not be the colonizer and though she wants to be colonized, she is always a figure of excess and can never be truly assimilated. But rather than “the mundane voice of Shelley’s ‘Genevan magistrate’ giving out this information, the Mammy herself is the bearer of this knowledge.

[2] See also, Elizabeth Brooks Higginbotham and Sarah Watts, “New Scholarship on Afro-American Women.” *Women’s Studies Quarterly* 1691-20: 12-21; Gloria Hull and Barbara Smith, “The Politics of Black Women’s Studies” in *But Some of Us Are Brave*. Gloria T. Hull, Patricia Bell Scott, and Barbara Smith, Eds.

[3] See Toni Morrison’s *Playing in The Dark*.

[4] “Caroline Howard Gilman, founded *Rose Bud* in 1832. She later transformed the children’s magazine into *Southern Rose* (1835), a magazine for adults. Gilman wrote both poetry and prose, including stories and novels, which tended to assert themselves as “real life” experiences; for example, *Recollections of a Housekeeper* (1835) and *Recollections of a Southern Matron* (1837) both privilege representations of Southern customs and manners in the experiences of a young girl growing up on a plantation, and were as Craig Werner points out, the first Southern fiction on that popular and enduring theme that comes into maturity in the Civil War period (87), as *Gone With the Wind* (1936) by Margaret Mitchell” (qtd. in Davis, “Women’s Art and Authorship” 22). Gilman’s texts inevitably

included a Mammy figure whose presences reinforced and validated the "ladyship" of the White female heroines of the texts.

[5] There were Black women authors who were trying to allow Black women to tell their own stories, but they were given little or no notice: "In 1892, Anna Julia Cooper, a black woman from North Carolina, recognized what she called the "muffled strain" in literature, the "mute . . . voiceless Black Woman of America." Cooper's book, *A Voice from the South by a Black Woman of the South*, identified the historical and social causes of the black woman's silence, and it attempts to rectify the condition by giving voice to the black woman's ideas and perspectives. At the end of the nineteenth century, Anna Julia Cooper did not receive attention; her message, though delivered in clear, intelligent, and forceful terms, did little to awaken interest in the lives and work of black women" (Davis, T. 26).

[6] See Carolyn L. Karcher's "Lydia Maria Child's *A Romance of the Republic*" in *Slavery and the Literary Imagination* (81-103) for an examination of antislavery fiction.

[7] Eastman's book was written as refutation of Stowe's *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and both novels have at least one Mammy figure. Caroline Lee Whiting Hentz's (1854) *The Planter's Northern Bride* was also considered an effective response and refutation to *Uncle Tom's Cabin*.

[8] "In her 1970 study, *The Southern Lady*, Anne Firor Scott delineated the image of the nineteenth-century lady as she emerged from the sermons, newspapers, commencement address, diaries, literary journals, and novels of the period. Exorbitantly praised, the antebellum Southern white woman of the upper class would have been the happiest and most nearly perfect specimen of womanhood ever seen on this earth, Scott notes, if words could have made her so (4) . . ..

In, "Dixie's Diadem," the opening chapter of her book *Tomorrow Is Another Day*, Jones [Anne Goodwyn Jones] notes that "as an image, southern womanhood has been the crown of Dixie at least since the early nineteenth century . . .. southern womanhood was born in the imaginations of white slaveholding men." Jones views the image of the lady as having served two key historical roles, as the central embodiment of "the values by which southerners have defined the region's character though Civil War and Reconstruction, New South and modernism," and as a compelling pattern of behavior that has exerted incalculable influence upon the daily lives of actual women (8-9)" (qtd. in Prenshaw 73).

[9] According to Sterling Brown in *The Negro in American Fiction*, "In the three years following the appearance of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* . . . there were at least fourteen proslavery novels published . . ." (21). One such "response" to Stowe's novel was "Mrs. Eastman's *Aunt Phyllis' Cabin* . . . . Aunt Phyllis is one of the first to appear of the mighty race of 'mammies.'" (23).

[10] See bell hooks, *Ain't I A Woman*, 130-132, 138-143, 153-155; *Deborah* Gray White, *Ar'n't I a Woman*, 56-60 for more on the Victorian ideal of womanhood and Mammy as gate keeper.

[11] According to Carolyn L. Karcher, in "Lydia Maria Child's *A Romance of the Republic*: An Abolitionist Vision of American's Racial Destiny,"

> Antislavery fiction furnishes a particularly illuminating perspective on the constraints that prevented abolitionists from envisioning viable solutions to the problem they grappled with for five decades: how to create a truly egalitarian America. As a genre largely shaped by middle-class white women, it reflects the complex relationship between the patriarchal system that victimized women and the racial slave system that victimized blacks. (81)

[12] Charles Chestnutt is an example of a Black man writing about a Mammy figure. In Chestnutt's "Her Virginia Mammy,"(1899) "A Negro mother denies her octoroon daughter in order for her to marry a New Englander of Mayflower lineage" (*The Negro in American Fiction* 79). While Chestnutt complicates the issues of the Mammy figure, his attempt to use stereotypes to contradict the stereotypes of the plantation tradition fails,

> [Chestnutt's] characters are generally unbelievable models in behavior. Although attacking the color line within the race, he makes great use of the hero or heroine of mixed blood, and at times seems to accept the traditional concepts of Negro character. (*The Negro in American Fiction* 81)

An attempt to draw attention to the complexities inherent in the Mammy figure is evident in *Mamba's Daughter* (1925). In this story, by DuBose Heyward, two women, Mamba and Hagar are devoted to Lissa, all female and all Black. Mamba is an untraditional Mammy, she is in fact an inversion of the traditional Mammy: she is ambitious, ironic, and sly. Her most un-Mammy like attribute is that she is devoted to Lissa, the Black female singer in the story. Heywood's use of Mamba as Mammy is interesting because he does not rely on a type, rather his story is moved forward by the character.

[13] Dunbar's story is much like Joel Chandler Harris' Uncle Remus, and Mark Twain's "A True Story" in that the Black character in the story is telling a tale to her/his White ward for her/his edification and entertainment.

[14] See Sterling Brown's *The Negro in American Fiction* 77-78 for an assessment of Dunbar's work. Also see *Slavery & Race in American Popular Culture* by William L. Van Deburg, 99-100.

[15] It is interesting to note the number of times in bibliographical information about Dunbar the fact of his "pure" African blood is mentioned. I am not sure why this bit of information is relevant, but it is almost always one of the first bits of information given about Dunbar.

[16] For more on Charlotte Hawkins Brown see, Constance Marteena, *The Lengthening Shadow of a Woman: A Biography of Charlotte Hawkins Brown*; Kathleen Thompson, "Charlotte Hawkins Brown," in *Black Women in American history: The Twentieth Century* 172-174; and Marsha Vick, "Charlotte Hawkins Brown," in *Notable Black American Women*, 109-114.

[17] *"Mammy": An Appeal to the Heart of the South* and Brown's *The Correct Thing To Do—To Say—To Wear* are reprinted in a volume edited by Denard. These two texts are symbolic of Brown's approach to the solutions for the problems facing the newly freed Black person. Brown told White women patrons that at Palmer Institute, Black girls were taught to serve as domestics in the service to White women, "Black women educated at Palmer, she claimed could learn to become 'fine clean mothers and good homemakers for themselves and others'" (Tera Hunter, "The Correct Thing: Charlotte Hawkins Brown and the Palmer Institute." *Southern Exposures* 11, no 5 (Sept/Oct 1983): 37-43) (*"Mammy"* xx). Brown, when asked to find more money for the institute by attracting Southern donors wrote *"Mammy": An Appeal to the Heart of the South*, "Brown wanted to appeal to what she considered the "Christian spirit" of potential Southern white donors . . .. The unrewarded loyal servant, she believed, was the best point of departure for her entreaty" (xx-xxi).

Brown's misguided thinking is evident in her approaches to what she sees as the Negro problem. The fact that she believes that Southern Whites have "a fair sense of *noblesse oblige*" (xxvi), that the people who enslaved a race could be benevolent and have honorable behavior is to misunderstand the institution of slavery these people created. Then to think that Black women needed to be taught to be "fine clean mothers and good homemakers" demonstrates a complete lack of understanding of the Black female as a human being. It dishonors those Black women who made a way out of no way, and implies their complicity in the foundation of slavery.

[18] Faulkner dedicated *Go Down Moses* (1940) to his Mammy: "Caroline Barr, Mississippi (1840-1940) who was born in slavery and gave to my family a fidelity without stint or calculation of recompense and to my childhood an immeasurable devotion and love."

[19] While maintaining the basic characteristics of Mammy, other authors too attempted to individualize the Mammy figure in their text:

Julia Peterkin's Maum Hannah in "Ashes" (1924): while Maum Hannah is subservient, and loves her White folks she at least makes decisions about herself independent of her White folks. She is also fully responsible for her decisions.

Katherine Anne Porter's Nannie in "The Old Order" and "The Last Leaf" (1934). While Nannie is a faithful servant for most of her live, upon the death of her mistress she begins to assert her separate individuality. She leaves the "Big House" and moves into a cabin of her own over the protests of her mistress' children.

Carson McCuller's Berenice in *The Member of the Wedding* (1958) is very much a Mammy in that she cooks and serves as a substitute mother to Frankie, but she also is self-aware. She thinks of herself as beautiful and she has respect for herself.

[20] For some factual insights to the relationships between Black and White women, see Minrose Gwin's *Black and White Women of the Old South*; Gerda Lerner's *Black women in White America*; and Dorothy Sterling's *We are Your Sisters*.

[21] According to Cleanth Brooks in *William Faulkner: The Yoknapatawpha County* Dilsey "is best interpreted by what she [Dilsey] says and does in the novel, but [Faulkner's] description clearly points to something other than mindless cheeriness. Dilsey's essential hopefulness has not been obliterated; she is not an embittered woman, but her optimism has been chastened by hurt and disappointment" (306).

[22] See Nancy M. Tischler's *Black Masks: Negro Characters in Modern Southern Fiction*, 34-35 for a short but interesting discussion of the complexities of Faulkner's Dilsey and page 39 for a discussion of lack of faithful Mammys in Faulkner's other texts.

[23] Sterling Brown does an analysis of Dilsey in *The Negro in American Fiction* (177). Brown's analysis is cursory at best. She is described as, "Aunt Dilsey, hobbling about her kitchen, impudent and bullying, with her temper worn short by the bickering and turmoil. . . ." (177). Brown does not even appear to realize that the kitchen Dilsey works in is not her own. Brown calls the Blacks in *The Sound and the Fury* "an unflattering chorus in this drama of the fall of a family" (177). Traditionally the chorus is used to fill in and move the story along without being part of the story. The Blacks in *The Sound and the Fury* are intricately involved in the story being told.

[24] This is a "traditional" line, used often in literature about the Mammy figure.

[25] It is interesting to note that this chapter also contains a scene similar to the stay-out-of-my-kitchen scene previously mentioned in *Uncle Tom's Cabin*:

> "Haven't you started breakfast yet?"
>
> "I'll tend to dat too," Dilsey said, "You better git back in bed twell Luster make yo fire. Hit cold dis mawning."
>
> "I know it," Mrs Compson said. "My feet are like ice. They were so cold they waked me up." She watched Dilsey mount the stairs. It took her a long while. "You know how it frets Jason when breakfast is late," Mrs Compson said.
>
> "I can't do but one thing at a time," Dilsey said. "You git on back to bed, fo I has you on my hands dis mawnin too."
>
> "If you're going to drop everything to dress Benjamin, I'd better come down and get breakfast. You know as well as I do how Jason acts when it's late."
>
> "En who gwine eat yo messin?" Dilsey said. "Tell me dat. Go on now," she said, toiling upward. Mrs. Compson stood watching her as she mounted, steadying herself against the wall with one hand, holding her skirts up with the other" (271).

In this case, unlike Stowe's Mammy, Dilsey is not being used to mark the boundary between a true lady and a woman, rather Faulkner uses his Mammy as a mirror that reflects the limitation that set up the incompetence inherent in the role played by the Southern lady. This scene, while shedding light on the role of Southern ladyship, also clearly reinforces Dilsey as a Mammy. She is painfully climbing the stairs to mother her White patron's family while the White mistress looks on. Note that Dilsey remains in a subservient position, figuratively and literally: she is at the bottom of the stairs while Mrs Compson stands at the top looking down.

[26] Others who broke with the traditional Mammy figure are:
William March's, *Come in at the Door* (1934) has a mammy who was the mistress to a White aristocrat and the mother of a number of mulatto children. She is not a simplistic stock figure.
William Styron has a very Dilsey-like Mammy named Ella Swan in *Lie Down in Darkness* (1951).
Robert Penn Warren's *Brother to Dragons* (1953), a novel written in verse explores the complexity of the Mammy figure:

> .She was a good old thing

And she'd been Lilburn's nigger Mammy, too,
And gave him tiddy like he was her own
And loved him good, and loved him still,
He Chile.

She loved him, sure
But that's not all, for even love's a weapon,
Or can be weapon. Let's take the situation,
Now anybody raised down home—down South—
Will know in his bones what the situation was.
For all those years Aunt Cat had fought in silence
For Lilburn's love, for possession of her Chile,
With the enemy, the rival, Lucy Lewis.
The rival has all the armaments and power:
The natural mother, warm and kind and white.
The rival whose most effective armament
Is the bland assumption that there is no struggle—
It is a struggle, dark, ferocious, in the dark,
For the power—for power empty and abstract,
But still, in the last analysis, the only
Thing worth the struggle. . . .

Warren's story begins with a stereotypical Mammy, but ends with her "Chile" turning against her and refusing to accept her as his "Mother." According to Tischler, "Warren ripped the mask off the stereotype to show us the raw emotions underneath" (40).

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