Mammy: A Century of Race, Gender, and Southern Memory
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The University of Michigan Press

INTRODUCTION

The "Mammification" of the Nation: Mammy and the American Imagination

> *Nostalgia is best defined as a yearning for that*
> *which we know we have destroyed.*
> —DAVID BLIGHT

The various incarnations of the mammy figure have had a profound influence on American culture. There is virtually no medium that has not paid homage to the mammy in some form or another. In his series "American Myths," for example, artist Andy Warhol included both the mammy *and* Aunt Jemima, along with Howdy Doody, Uncle Sam, Dracula, and the Wicked Witch of the West (figs. 1 and 2).[1] In the late 1980s, Italian photographer Olivero Toscani created an advertisement for Benetton featuring a close-up of a white infant nursing at the breast of a headless, dark-skinned black woman wearing a red Shetland sweater (fig. 3). The advertisement was met with unbridled criticism from African Americans, yet it won more advertising awards than any other image in Benetton's advertising history.[2] Today, tourists visiting Lancaster, Kentucky, can tour the former slave plantation of Governor William Owsley, ironically called Pleasant Retreat. The restored home features many remnants of the Old South, including a "charming mammy bench," a combination rocking chair and cradle designed to allow mammies to nurse an infant and rock an additional baby at the same time.[3] Diminutive mammy "nipple dolls" made in the 1920s from rubber bottle nipples with tiny white baby dolls cradled in their arms are both a "well-kept secret" and an excellent investment by collectors of southern Americana (fig. 4).[4]

This book probes these images and themes as they proliferated between the 1820s and 1935.

The most recognizable mammy, the one immortalized in 1930s films by African American actresses Hattie McDaniel, Ethel Waters, Louise Beavers, and Butterfly McQueen, marks a pivotal moment in the history of the stereotype, but the success of their portrayals was predicated upon its being deeply embedded within the popular imagination long before *Gone with the Wind* opened in Atlanta in 1936.[5]

"Mammy" is part of the lexicon of antebellum mythology that continues to have a provocative and tenacious hold on the American psyche. Her large dark body and her round smiling face tower over our imaginations, causing more accurate representations of African American women to wither in her shadow. The mammy's stereotypical attributes—her deeply sonorous and effortlessly soothing voice, her infinite patience, her raucous laugh, her self-deprecating wit, her implicit understanding and acceptance of her inferiority and her devotion to whites—all point to a long-lasting and troubled marriage of racial and gender essentialism, mythology, and southern nostalgia.

This wedding took place between the 1820s and the mid–twentieth century as the mammy became the most widely recognized representation of an African American woman, putting her at the center of a dynamic interracial debate over constructions of loyalty, maternal devotion, and southern memory. There is a rich and unmined history of responses by African American artists to the mammy stereotype. They range from Frederick Douglass's revised portrait of his mother in his autobiography, *My Bondage and My Freedom* (1855), to an early-twentieth-century tale of a mammy who kills a white baby. The range of responses and appropriations reflects the contradictions inherent in the original image.

Who created this mammy-mother, and what does she reveal about race and American culture? Why do so many portraits of her insist that she preferred white children to her own? How did her size and shape, her color, and her wardrobe contribute to this representation of her as the other mother, as über-nanny, as the ultimate symbol of maternal devotion? How did she become so crucial to our understanding of slavery, gender, motherhood, and memory in the American South?

This book treats the mammy figure as one example of how myth, biography, fiction, history, and material culture merge in a dispute about race, about motherhood, and about southern nostalgia in American culture. In addition to famous literary representations of mammy characters, this study highlights visual images and cultural artifacts as integral to the mammy figure. As we broaden our ability to interpret cultural forces by reading relevant material culture, we can better understand how objects function in tandem with words. This is crucial because both the historic and the contemporary interpretations of the mammy too often isolate the image within narrow categories: as a literary stereotype, or as a historic reality, or as an advertising trademark, or as a visual subject. These approaches reduce the complexity of the mammy's powerful presence in American consciousness. This book examines the mammy figure as a signpost pointing to concepts and ideals extending far beyond the stereotype; the wide-ranging representations of the mammy figure reflect the various ways in which this image has shaped and continues to influence American concepts of race and gender. My work is informed by Foucault's theory of the body as a site of struggle; with that lens in place, the representation of the mammy's body is the site where fiction, history, autobiography, memoir, and popular culture meet in battle over the dominant representation of African American womanhood, and African American motherhood more specifically.

For example, when we reimagine the antebellum plantation as the body politic, we see how the mammy's body serves as a tendon between the races, connecting the muscle of African American slave labor with the skeletal power structure of white southern aristocracy. Her body nurtured both African American slave children and their future owners—sometimes simultaneously. Focusing on the mammy's body, and by extension her maternity, means seeing the body in a metonymic relationship to personhood, an essential component of recasting the mammy as more than a turban and a smile—as a transitional object for a nation moving from one developmental stage to another. This emphasis pushes us to better understand why sentimental southern representations of black corporeality, like the mammy, continue to be both provocative and evocative.

One significant point to establish is the difference between the literary character and stereotype of the mammy, or the famous advertising trademark of Aunt Jemima, and the actual African American women whose names were lost when they became "Mammy."

Where No One Knows Your Name

> *Every border in that big house knows mammy, but I doubt if one of them knows her name; I do not.*
>
> —ELIZA M. RIPLEY

The words *mammy, Auntie,* and *Negro nurse* or *colored nurse* are all used in antebellum fiction to describe both a person and a role within the antebellum plantation home; she serves as baby nurse, cook, and all-around domestic help. Many historians have argued that she was "invented" after the Civil War as part of the Lost Cause mythology, an excellent point of departure for this study, which is strictly speaking neither historical nor sociological but interdisciplinary.

The earliest use of the word *mammy* in reference to slave women caring for white children occurs in 1810 in a travel narrative about the American South. The *American Dictionary of Regional English* traces the etymological roots of the word to a blending of *ma'am* and *mamma.*[6] There is evidence that the term was first used as a more common southern term for mother. The term *mammy* is not consistently linked to specific patterns of behavior before 1850, but by 1820 the word was almost exclusively associated with African American women serving as wet nurses and caretakers of white children.

Mammy and *Aunt Jemima* are often used interchangeably today, but it is significant that the former predates the latter by almost a century. Aunt Jemima was introduced to the world at the 1893 Chicago World's Fair as a Reconstructionist alter ego to the mammy; the mammy's domain is the nursery, while Aunt Jemima's is the kitchen. Aunt Jemima offered northerners the southern antebellum experience of having a mammy, without actually participating in slavery. In this way, her popularity bolstered the romantic mythology of the southern plantation.

As I discuss in chapter 3, in the texts of Aunt Jemima advertisements the terms *Old South, old time,* and *plantation home* appear as incantations invoking the spirit of the antebellum South.[7] Aunt Jemima was created as a trademark that tapped into the national longing for an established and mythological Old South. This romanticized mythology of the plantation as a utopia was transferred into the commercial and marketing arena as an effort to reunite the country after the Civil War. The comprehensive history of Aunt Jemima as an advertising trademark is well documented in M. M. Manning's

Slave in a Box: The Strange Career of Aunt Jemima.[8] This book evaluates her role as a healing balm intended to reconcile a shattered nation.

In another excellent analysis of the mammy's role in visual culture, "Mammy the Huckster," JoAnn Morgan explains, "Not only did Mammy and scores like her promote consumer goods but more importantly, they sold the public a bill of goods about the old south."[9] In addition to serving as a symbol of reconciliation and redemption, the mammy became a "requisite fantasy for any southerner seeking to establish his or her pedigree" (96). By extension, one of the ways to interpret the body of the mammy figure is to consider how it has been used to *reify* racial purity for white southerners. Like the one drop of "black dope"—the chemical that makes Liberty white paint "whiter than white" (the company motto is "Keep America Pure with Liberty Paints") in Ralph Ellison's *Invisible Man*—the mammy body produced the milk that made white southerners more *purely white* and therefore more genteel than their less affluent counterparts.[10] The existing analyses of the mammy, however, don't focus explicitly on her maternity.

The image of a large, dark, powerful body with a small, white vulnerable one was enormously appealing, first in the South, and later on a national level. Figure 5 is a reproduction of an imprint that appeared on decorative envelopes during the Civil War. An African American woman's exposed breast served as a "return address" for the U.S. Postal Service. Her body is arranged to hold an enormous white baby as a sarcastic reminder that the South has grown fat on slave labor and owes its wealth to African Americans.

Consider as well a quotation from Isabel Drysdale's popular book *Scenes in Georgia* (1827): "Perhaps a more interesting picture is seldom seen, than that which was often exhibited by Aunt Chloe and her little nursling, its fair face pillowed in her faithful bosom, contrasting the sable but loving countenance bent above it."[11] By placing an aesthetic value on the image of a dark-skinned woman holding a white child, the author makes Aunt Chloe's slave status more innocuous and benign. She hardly seems to be describing a slave at all but rather a dark-skinned Madonna, holding a Sacred Child to her breast. Aunt Chloe offers a classic image of the mammy stereotype, but the standard type reflects specific characteristics.

Drawing Boundaries: Mapping Mammy

I define the standard, most recognizable mammy character as a creative combination of extreme behavior and exaggerated features. Mammy's body is grotesquely marked by excess: she is usually extremely overweight, very tall, broad-shouldered; her skin is nearly black. She manages to be a jolly presence—she often sings or tells stories while she works—and a strict disciplinarian at the same time. First as slave, then as a free woman, the mammy is largely associated with the care of white children or depicted with noticeable attachment to white children. Her unprecedented devotion to her white family reflects her racial inferiority. *Mammy* is often both her title and the only name she has ever been given. She may also be a cook or personal maid to her mistress—a classic southern belle—whom she infantilizes. Her clothes are typical of a domestic: headscarf and apron, but she is especially attracted to brightly colored, elaborately tied scarves. Mammy speaks the ungrammatical "plantation dialect" made famous in the 1890s by popular white southern authors like Joel Chandler Harris and by subsequent minstrel shows.[12] Her own children are usually dirty and ill mannered, yet they serve as suitable playmates for her white charges. She is typically depicted as impatient or brusque (sometimes even violent or abusive) with her own children, in contrast to her lavish, affectionate patience for her white charges. Mammy wields considerable authority within the plantation household and consequently retains a measure of dubious, unreliable respect in the slave quarters; many slaves consider her untrustworthy because she allegedly identifies so completely with the culture that oppresses them.

The fundamental elements of the standard mammy fall into two categories: appearance and behavior. Because her identity as a mother supplies rich nuances that have not been adequately addressed by scholars, her maternal status constitutes a third category here. Mammy's relationship to her biological children is crucial to my study. I base my analysis upon the character's relationship with both black and white children, isolating those provocative indications that the mammy character prefers the latter. The constants and variables in the patterns of her appearance are also examined.

Some scholars speculate that the term *black mammy* was developed to draw boundaries between the various maternal figures on the plantation. One scholar writes, "She is referred to as the 'Black Mammy,' a name probably given to distinguish her from the real mother and also from the elderly slave woman, 'Mammy,' who took care of slave children while their mothers worked in the fields or in master's home."[13] The term *black mammy* appears in both historic and fictional accounts of plantation life, often as a uniquely southern term of endearment. More often it served as a generic name for all slave women who served as a wet nurse or baby nurse for white children. Historian Deborah Gray White writes that the mammy was the "perfect slave for the antebellum south."[14] She became the center of white southern perception of the perfectly organized society. The word *Mammy* eventually replaced the woman's own name; it is not unusual for white southerners to describe her as the most influential force in their childhood, and yet not know her real name. This is true of little Eva's Mammy and Scarlett's Mammy, well-known literary characters in *Uncle Tom's Cabin* and *Gone with the Wind,* respectively.

In her description of the mammy prototype, the late feminist literary critic Barbara Christian equates the earliest mammy characters with the stereotype established later. Christian sees the mammy as "a normal part of the Southern fabric. Enduring, strong and calm, her physical characteristics remain the same."[15]

This study corrects the assumption that the mammy we now recognize has always been such, a static figure over the decades. It is not the case that her form, speech, and behavior remained unchanged from the figure's original incarnation. Chapter 1 traces the inconsistency in the physicality of the earliest mammy characters; there is more heterogeneity in the mammy characters in antebellum plantation fiction than in those that appear after *Uncle Tom's Cabin.* My method of literary archaeology begins with close readings of both abolitionist and proslavery fiction and plantation memoirs that reflect genuine efforts to convey individual differences in African American women's appearances. In fact, not one of the mammy characters is described as large or overweight before the publication of *Uncle Tom's Cabin* in 1852.

The complexity of the mammy image goes unappreciated by scholars who for the past two decades have focused on uncovering more obscure representations of African American women. As a result, the implications of this stereotype's influence as the most widely recognized symbol of African American maternity have been overlooked. Few scholars separate the mammy from the long list of stereotypical images that developed in the nineteenth century, and as a result, much of the criticism is as reductive as the type itself. Most previous attempts to deconstruct the contented mammy have focused on her role as loyal servant, rather than her dual role as surrogate and biological mother, and leading scholars have made exceptional contributions with these examinations of the controlling image of the faithful, obedient domestic servant. Unlike other plantation characters, the mammy is distinguished by her maternal role for both enslaved and slave-holding families.[16] In these characterizations her devotion for the children she cares for is best illustrated by her disregard for her own children. African Americans have historically dismissed such stereotypes as racist propaganda; the mammy figure was so painful that it warranted a continuum of fierce opposition. Counterefforts to return this mother to her *own* family are sporadic but have not died out in African American literature, art, and material culture. My aim here is to redefine the mammy's significance by exploring her maternity more fully through several kinds of creative expression, and by detailing the insights to which this innovative emphasis on maternity lends itself.

This study engages questions that demand a reconceptualization of the mammy as a quintessential interdisciplinary topic. How do we begin to develop new theories about this pervasive image that will push us toward a greater understanding of the intersectionality of race and gender?

Rethinking slavery and motherhood as institutions deeply influenced by patriarchy, we shift our understanding of how the mammy's role was both experienced and imagined in nineteenth-century American culture. For example, because of widespread theories of nineteenth-century racial essentialism, African American women were thought to be innately superior in their abilities as caretakers of white children. As late as 1924, a retrospective study of southern plantation life insisted: "There can be no doubt that with the *peculiar African capacity for devotion,* the old mammy dearly loved her charges."[17] As a result, the mammy emerges as a mother who frequently displaces white mothers and has ambiguous relationships with her own children.

Over the past two decades, the institution of motherhood and the experience of mothering have been investigated with care, urgency, and insight by feminist scholars like Patricia Hill Collins, Julia Kristeva, Hortense Spillers, Adrienne Rich, Nancy Chodorow, and Deborah Gray White. These feminist scholars push us toward the complex task of remaking and re-viewing motherhood as a kind of cultural landscape with complicated terrain that is constantly shifting and evolving. These theories have influenced my understanding of the mammy's maternity, as inextricably linked to and shaped by patriarchy.

To that end, this study examines the mammy's characterization as both a biological *and* a surrogate mother.[18] I address the literary evolution of the mammy and material culture as it produces and responds to this evolution during three periods between the nineteenth and twentieth centuries. Each period represents a principal phase in America's racial consciousness. When texts are integrated with visual images and material culture for analysis, each era comes to life and we are able to better understand what the mammy symbolized at different historical moments.

This book both begins and concludes with the premise that the mammy figure looms over the American imagination as a cultural influence so pervasive that only a comprehensive approach will do it justice. This look at the mammy stereotypes uses a wide range of mediums to assess the figure's complex manipulation by both African American and Euro-American audiences. The literary and visual expressions explored here construct a unique layering of texts, visual images, and cultural artifacts. Having insisted on a more critical look at this American icon, I conclude that the mammy type is transformational because it both shapes and is shaped by a consciousness that is uniquely American and uniquely southern. This is necessarily a selective and synthetic approach to a vast topic.

Several new works on the mammy or Aunt Jemima testify to a rising interest in the subject I have been studying for nearly fifteen years. Each work has merit, yet none presents an integrated approach to the mammy figure as a cultural icon of African American maternity. Most often they obscure the most provocative issues: motherhood, sexuality, and the aesthetic value placed on images of dark women cradling white babies.

In chapter 1, I focus on examples of the earliest and the most popular re-creations of the southern plantation in fiction, memoir, and religious propaganda as a way to more accurately contextualize the character's origins. Comparing the complexion, dialect, and size of six mammy characters, I argue that the early mammy character between 1820 and 1852 reflected greater heterogeneity than later models that appear about 1890. For proslavery authors, her appearance is secondary to her unique relationship with white children. Mammy became part of the vocabulary of plantation literature, and as a prop she lends authenticity to the antebellum plantation household. Her behavior was codified well before *Uncle Tom's Cabin* (1852) was published, since nearly all of the mammy characters in this period are commended for their extraordinary ability to put their charges before their own children.

There is increasing evidence that black dolls provide some of the earliest creative expressions of African American slave women. We know from

Jean Fagin Yellin's biography that Harriet Jacobs made black dolls for the children she cared for while hiding as a fugitive.[19] Twenty years ago curator and American folk doll expert Wendy Lavitt made the bold assertion that topsy-turvy dolls (the top halves of two dolls, joined at the waist, with a black face on one end and a white face on the other) "originated in the antebellum South, where they were made by black women who cared for white children."[20] In chapter 2, I use models of topsy-turvy dolls to frame my discussion of enslaved motherhood, as represented by Harriet Beecher Stowe (*Uncle Tom's Cabin,* 1852), Frederick Douglass (*My Bondage and My Freedom,* 1855), and Harriet Jacobs (*Incidents in the Life of a Slave Girl,* 1861). The dolls provide an unusual metaphor for representations of slave motherhood between 1853 and 1861. In *Uncle Tom's Cabin,* Stowe constructs a fictional version of slave life in which surrogacy is the primary motherhood experience for slave women. Douglass responds to her characterization of the mammy in his revised autobiography, with a recovered memory of this mother, whom he depicts as a heroic antimammy figure. Harriet Jacobs positions herself as an authority on enslaved motherhood, since her narrative represents her lived experience as a slave mother and nursemaid. These texts and examples from material culture provide a picture of mid-nineteenth-century America as a society at once racially segregated and racially interactive.

Chapter 3 discusses the Aunt Jemima trademark introduced in the late nineteenth century, when the mammy figure became a prototype of American commercialism and consumerism. The popular visual image of a heavyset black woman serving food to white families became an updated symbol of racial harmony. This chapter examines Aunt Jemima's initial appearance at the World's Fair Columbian Exposition in 1893, in relation to the simultaneous efforts of an elite group of black women to introduce the black female intelligentsia to the World's Congress of Representative Women. In the same year, the novel *Pudd'nhead Wilson* by Mark Twain, and later, the short story "Her Virginia Mammy" (1899) by Charles Chesnutt feature slave mothers who choose to act as mammies in order to allow their children to pass as white. In his novel *The Marrow of Tradition* (1901), Chesnutt uses a more standard mammy image to define and explore emerging political tensions between "Old Negroes" and the "New Negro" ideology. Chesnutt helps us to see how the mammy became a symbol of voluntary peonage and therefore a pariah among African Americans. Cheryl Thurber's careful review of the *Confederate Veteran* magazine (the official publication of the United Confederate Veterans, the Sons of the Confederacy, and the United Daughters of the Confederacy) finds that "the number of references to mammy increased from about 1906 to 1912, which was the peak time for the glorification of mammy."[21] This rise in visibility of the mammy image is also achieved through the Aunt Jemima trademark and Jemima look-alikes. What are we to make of Chesnutt's and Twain's introduction of African American women who recognize and then use the mammy stereotype as a kind of cloak to be worn to achieve their own goals?

In chapter 4 the emphasis shifts to the ways that the mammy's original symbolism is revised as a neo-Confederate effort to honor her historic role with statues or monuments between 1900 and 1935. Simultaneously, as the Harlem Renaissance or "New Negro Movement" gained momentum, the image is appropriated and subverted by artists who celebrate her as a Madonna figure for African Americans.

The New Negroes' struggle to refashion America's perceptions of African Americans, however, could scarcely compete with the phenomenal success of *Gone with the Wind.* Mammy was triumphantly revived, first in the novel, later in the film and accompanying relics. Through textual analysis of *The Sound and the Fury* (1929) and *Gone with the Wind* (1935), in chapter 5 we see how Mitchell and Faulkner affirm and challenge long-standing assumptions about this character's enduring appeal.

The conclusion asks fundamental questions about why African American artists during the black power movement chose Aunt Jemima and mammy over Uncle Tom and Rastus (The Cream of Wheat Man) as the caricature they most wanted to transform. The answer lies both in the ways that this figure has been intrinsically woven in the fabric of American consciousness and in the power of the Aunt Jemima trademark as one of the most well known and immediately recognizable images of an African American woman. The book's conclusion draws on the most contemporary artistic revisions of Aunt Jemima or Mammy, like novelist Alice Randall's parody of *Gone with the Wind* called *The Wind Done Gone;* Michael Ray Charles's *Untitled* (1993), with its thinner, meaner looking Aunt Jemima withholding her piece of "American pie" from an overgrown white child; and Joyce Ann Scott's black leather sculptures depictng the competition of black and white children over the towering Mammy/Nanny persona.

It may be most useful at this time to think of the mammy as a multifaceted prism used to illuminate a continuous spectrum of American views and attitudes about racial hierarchy. Just as Newton's prism demonstrated that white light was composed of rays of different colors, the prism of scholarship exposes the fragments that constitute the mammy as a whole. Newton's theory that prisms could be used to "see beyond the colors to the shape they were assuming"[22] is instructive for new critical approaches to racial and gender stereotypes, when we are determined not to be distracted by flashes of light but to see the mammy from as many angles as possible. Each new angle tells something about how the mammy survives as a cultural force that influences and reflects a national conscience.