

PREFACE

Gathering the Stories

Behind This Book

I teach at Emory University, a large, predominately white, southern research institution. Many of my African American colleagues have relatives who worked for white families, and many of my white southern colleagues grew up in families that hired African American women as domestic servants or to do “day work.” We do not talk about this past that both binds us together and drives a wedge between us. Yet the reality of this history is palpable when the subject of the southern “mammy” is raised. Language seems to fail us at these moments—shadows fall across faces, eyes become moist, bodies shift nervously. The moment I say the words “black mammy,” a disruptive presence enters the room; we all know it, we all feel it, but even with our advanced degrees and our penchant for academic discourse, we cannot speak about it.

My colleagues and friends who hire African American or Afro Caribbean women as caregivers for their children worry that they are replicating a troubled and troubling relationship for yet another generation. They are caught in a conundrum that is not unusual for thoughtful and well-intentioned parents: they want to provide financial opportunities for black women, but they don’t want to be insensitive to the stereotype.

Whenever I appear at conferences and invited lectures to present material from this book, there are always several people in the audience who want to share a secret with me about the black women in their lives called “Mammy,” “Auntie,” or known only by a first name. Sometimes white people confess to me that they loved this woman more than their own mother.

Sometimes black people confess that they hated the white children associated with their mother's job, hated the hand-me-down clothes and leftover food, hated losing their mothers to children who already had so much.

While researching this book I learned that my subject matter was much more controversial than I had originally imagined. It seems that everyone has an opinion about the mammy, about who she was, what she meant, opinions sometimes based upon real and personal experiences, and at other times based upon a written history that remains incomplete and one-sided. In writing the book, I focused on the cultural representations of the stereotypic mammy, instead of collecting the biographies and personal narratives of African American women working as housekeepers and childcare workers. I made that choice because I wanted to better understand the curious power behind the image of a large black mother with a small white child.

I have been researching cultural representations of the mammy figure for the past fifteen years. In December 1991, while I was still working on my dissertation on the subject, Howell Raines's essay "Grady's Gift" appeared in the *New York Times Magazine*. The essay was an account of the author's childhood relationship and adult reunion with Grady Williams Hutchinson, who worked as a housekeeper for his family in Birmingham, Alabama, during the George Wallace years. Grady's picture appeared on the cover; it was the first time I had ever seen an African American woman on the cover of that venerable publication. Comparing her to other women in his family, Raines describes Grady's appearance this way:

Most of the women in my family ran from slender to boxy. Grady was buxom. She wore a blue uniform and walked around our house on stout brown calves. Her skin was smooth. She had a gap between her front teeth, and so did I. One of the first things I remember Grady telling me was that as soon as she had enough money she was going to get a diamond set in her gap and it would drive the men wild.¹

As seen through the eyes of a young boy, Grady is more like himself than like the other women in his family. In that one sentence about her teeth Grady establishes herself as a woman with self-awareness, with plans for the future, and with an appreciation for her own romantic and sexual possibilities. These are not qualities typically assigned to the mammy figure. Raines tries to confront the sticky issue of how relations between

black and white may have distorted his memories and therefore the history told through memory:

There is no trickier subject for a writer from the South than that of affection between a black person and a white one in the unequal world of segregation. For the dishonesty upon which such a society is founded makes every emotion suspect, makes it impossible to know whether what flowed between two people was honest feeling or pity or pragmatism. Indeed, for the black person, the feigning of an expected emotion could be the very coinage of survival. (90)

Raines admits, “I can only tell you how it seemed to me at the time. I was 7 and Grady was 16 and I adored her and I believed she was crazy about me. She became the weather in which my childhood was lived.” This is a beautifully evocative phrase—she was “the weather in which my childhood was lived.” The idea is wonderful to me: a young black woman working in segregated Alabama who is allowed to express herself as cloudy, stormy, or sunny, and perhaps even allowed to rain on her employers occasionally.

Raines tells us that although Grady attended nursing school at Dillard University, she had to drop out after one semester and return to work cleaning his family’s home. During the family reunion he arranged some thirty-seven years later, his sister and his mother have a conversation about whether or not the family could have helped her complete her education. His mother says wistfully, “If only we had known . . .” To which his sister wisely adds, “How could we not know?”

“Grady’s Gift,” the most eloquent and moving piece I have ever read about a white family’s relationship with the African American woman who worked for them, is built upon Raines’s memories of the long talks about race and segregation in Alabama that he and Grady had. Yet it is oddly silent on one topic. Grady and her husband had three children; in 1991 their ages were thirty-seven, thirty-three, and twenty-nine. Since Grady worked for his family from the time she was sixteen until she was twenty-three, she would have given birth to two children during that time (unless they were adopted or brought into the marriage by her husband), but Raines does not mention these events. At a question-and-answer session at a book signing in Atlanta, I asked him about these births, and he said that he could not remember. When he thought ahead to the implications of his answer, Raines became embarrassed and moved quickly to take another

question. He had suddenly realized that although the essay regales us with his appreciation for her “gift to him” and says that his well-known oral history of the Civil Rights movement, *My Soul is Rested: Movement Days In The Deep South Remembered* (1977), is really “her book,” he did not know whether or not Grady’s children were biological or adopted, and that Grady, a woman who worked in his family’s home nearly every day for seven years might have been pregnant without his remembering it.

I wasn’t trying to embarrass Raines. I was impressed with his essay (which went on to win a Pulitzer Prize) and I wanted to learn something about Grady’s children and about Raines’s relationship to them. I found myself hoping with all my heart that his sister’s question, “How could we not know?” rang like a chime in his ears when he left that book signing. I hope that he cared enough to call his beloved Grady (who was still alive) and ask her questions about her own children until they became real to him, real children that Grady might have left at home in order to go to work and tell him the stories about segregated racism that changed his life and helped him to win a Pulitzer Prize.

The unnamed tension surrounding this account of Raines, Grady, and Grady’s children is not unique to their story; it has come to the forefront whenever I have talked with people about my work on this book. I want to recount some of these conversations here.

After I delivered a lecture to a women’s studies class, a young African American man, a colleague of mine, told me that he worried that people would think of his grandmother as a mammy because she is a large woman who takes care of white children for a living. He said, “It’s what she *does* and she gets paid for it. But I don’t want people to think that this stereotype that you’ve described, where they prefer white children to black children—I don’t want people to think that’s who she *is*.”

After the same lecture, a fifty-something white woman told me that she was raised by a mammy and that she’s always been embarrassed about it even though this woman was the most important person in her childhood. She recounted several incidents from her childhood, some in great detail. “What was her name?” I asked her gently. Relief flooded her voice as she said, “Katie. We called her Katie.” I told her, “You should try to refer to her by name, that’s what we do for people who are important to us.”

On another occasion a student told me that she had never forgiven her parents for making their black housekeeper, Alice, eat in the kitchen, even though they often told people that Alice was a like member of the family.

"I thought this was terrible," she admitted. "We're Jewish and we know what it meant to be mistreated for stupid reasons."

Recently an African American graduate student told me that her grandmother worked for four different white families in rural Georgia before being disabled by a stroke that left her with physical and mental impairments. The families had rallied around her, paying for her hospital bills and bringing her food and bags of used clothing. Despite this kindness, the student was shocked one day to see her disoriented grandmother wearing an old "I love the KKK" T-shirt. The student was furious about this disrespectful treatment, but she did not know how to approach her grandmother's neighbors for an explanation.

During a university-sponsored program on race and gender, a white colleague introduced herself by describing the African American woman who raised her and left her a large inheritance. This money financed her graduate school education and allowed her to become a well-established professor of theology. She said that she felt guilty that *she* was given this money when this woman, "Aunt Mary," had other relatives who needed it.

In the 1990s I visited the president of a small liberal arts college in New England who displayed a picture of an African American woman on his desk along with pictures of his family. In the picture she wears a light blue uniform and small white cap. When I asked him about the photograph, he seemed delighted to talk about her, saying that it was a picture of "Sadie," who helped raise him and his brothers. His father had left them, and his mother was often drunk and abusive. "Sadie," he said reverently, "saved my life. I will never forget her." "Where does she live now?" I asked. He looked surprised and shrugged, admitting that he had no idea.

Not long after this, a dean from an Ivy League school and I attended the same formal dinner party. After hearing the subject of my research, he suddenly began to sing a haunting lullaby he said he learned from his "Mammy." The attendees seemed startled to see this playful side of their dean and even more surprised when he ended the song and then abruptly changed the subject. (He actually said: "I know a song my Mammy taught me," before he started to sing.)

Over the years I have kept these tales, these secrets, and these confessions in my pocket like worry stones. They are significant simply because they provide vivid evidence of how provocative and inexhaustible the subject of the mammy continues to be for us Americans, as we struggle to reconcile our realities with our histories, our truths with our memories.